

the
B **r** **i** **e** **o** **n**
and the **D** **a** **n** **e**

THE COMPLETE TRILOGY

MARY ANN BERNAL



Three Complete Novels

Mary Ann Bernal

The Briton and the Dane
The Briton and the Dane: Birthright
The Briton and the Dane: Legacy

The Complete Trilogy was originally published as three separate editions:

The Briton and the Dane

First published in the United States of America by Scéal Books, an Imprint of Canonbridge LLC,

Subsequent publishing in the United States of America in association with The Literary Underground, Yucaipa, California 92399

Copyright © 2011 by Mary Ann Bernal

Cover design by Steven Novak

ISBN: 978-0-9833469-1-3

The Briton and the Dane: Birthright

Published in the United States of America in association with The Literary Underground, Yucaipa, California 92399

Copyright © 2011 by Mary Ann Bernal

Cover design by Steven Novak

ISBN: 978-0-9833469-0-6

The Briton and the Dane: Legacy

Published in the United States of America in association with The Literary Underground, Yucaipa, California 92399

Copyright © 2012 by Mary Ann Bernal

Cover design by Steven Novak

ISBN: 978-0-9833469-2-0

The Complete Trilogy Edition:

Published in the United States of America in association with The Literary Underground, Yucaipa, California 92399

www.litunderground.com

Copyright © 2012 by Mary Ann Bernal

Cover design by Steven Novak

www.novakillustration.com

ISBN: 978-1470118259

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

The
Briem
and the
Dane

For

my son Alex and his wife Kerry
and their children
Alex, Ana and Addy

Dedicated to the memory of

Lance Cpl Drew W. Weaver
and to all the fallen
military and civilian heroes
in the ongoing fight against terror

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my family and friends for their confidence in my ability to realize a lifelong dream.

I am indebted to Diane Boni and Kim Morrison for their continuing support, insightful feedback and enthusiasm as they excitedly read the numerous draft versions of this manuscript.

I wish to acknowledge my graphic designer, Steven Novak, whose creative talent brought to life the cover that I envisioned.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge all my characters who lived through the tumultuous Ninth Century, especially Elizabeth, Jora and David. Their passion and ideals truly transcends time.

Introduction

Alfred the Great, the first King of the West Saxons to be acknowledged as King of the Anglo-Saxons, was responsible for defeating the Danish Viking King Guthrum in battle, near Edington in Wiltshire, in 878 A.D. Under the terms of the "Treaty of Wedmore," King Alfred sponsored King Guthrum's conversion to Christianity and permitted his former enemy to return to his lands in East Anglia, and also recognized the formidable Northman as King of Mercia and Northumbria.

During this time of unsteady peace, King Alfred began a massive undertaking to build up his defenses. He established fortified Burhs along the Wessex coastline where he set up military training camps and founded a well-trained standing army. He also designed a sixty oar longship, which was larger than the typical Viking ship to add to his existing fleet. By increasing the size of his navy, King Alfred was able to prevent many raiding parties from pillaging the land as he engaged the Northman at sea.

King Alfred was inspired by the great Charlemagne when he founded a seat of learning at his court in Winchester. Because he was devoted to education, he created schools and founded universities; he was able to lure scholars from abroad and was also able to persuade his future biographer, the Welshman Bishop Asser, to join his ever-growing circle of learned men.

King Alfred encouraged advanced study amongst the nobility, promoted the translation of religious and ancient texts into English, and made the books readily available to all his subjects.

King Alfred promoted justice and founded a code of law, which was fair and just to rich and poor alike. He assigned penalties for every crime imaginable, and substituted monetary compensation for physical punishment, but treason against one's King and overlord was punishable by death. He also tried to put an end to blood feuds with limited success.

King Alfred eagerly developed diplomatic relationships with foreign countries; he not only sent his ambassadors to the European kingdoms and the Papal court, he also communicated with the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Caliph in Baghdad.

King Alfred ruled by example. His piety was well known throughout all of Christendom. He memorized prayer services and psalms before he taught himself to read and write, and based his code of law upon the Ten Commandments. He was tireless in his efforts to eliminate the ancient ways and reinstate the laws of God's church. He conscientiously followed the ecclesiastical decrees and enthusiastically celebrated the many feast and fast days that were sanctioned by the Pope, and fined anyone who failed to follow the laws of the church, such as not fasting during Lent.

King Alfred's benevolence and magnanimity was again demonstrated when he married his daughter to a Mercian ealdorman and returned the port of London to Mercian rule after defeating the Danes in 886 A.D. He established the border between his kingdom and the territory ruled by King Guthrum, which included East Anglia, Essex and parts of Mercia known as "The Danelaw."

During this time peace prospered, but heathen raids resumed after the death of King Guthrum in 890 A.D. King Alfred was successful in keeping his country free from Viking rule, but continued to be harassed by invading Norsemen until his death in 899 A.D.

King Alfred left a legacy which future Kings of England sought to imitate throughout their reigns; while a number of his descendants may have achieved fame and glory, not one ever surpassed the legend. King Alfred is the only British monarch referred to as great.

Chapter One

The sound of clashing steel could be heard throughout the village, along the beach and well into the forest. Gwyneth knew the men would not stop their training for another hour; darkness did not matter when adrenaline ran through one's veins as young men sought to perfect their fighting skills.

Gwyneth loved to look over the countryside from the top of the Keep. When the sun was high in the sky, she could see the beauty of the land and the wonders of the sea, and could daydream, lost in thought of different lives from different times.

Gwyneth was born into the new Christian religion but wondered about the pagan gods that still demanded blood sacrifices from those who remained faithful to the old ways. Her God preached love, for oneself and one's neighbor, and peace, not war. War was inevitable since the formidable Northman sought not peace but conquest.

Gwyneth loved to relax to the soothing melody of breaking waves as a cool, salty mist caressed her face, and also loved the rich and colorful hues of the darkening sky as the sun disappeared below the horizon. As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she was able to distinguish recognizable forms and shapes. She did not see the figure on the beach in full view but rather from the corner of her eye. She blinked a few times as she adjusted her vision, and believed she saw a shadow heading towards the fortress walls or was the silhouette heading towards the sea?

"That person could be lost," Gwyneth thought.

Gwyneth could not contain her excitement as her curiosity and adventurous spirit took control; she quickly left the protection of the fortress walls for the uncertainty of the exposed beach.

Gwyneth followed the old Roman tunnel to the base of the cliff. It did not take long to cross the rocky terrain for the sandy shore. The starless night and intermittent moonlight did not slow her down, since she had explored every inch of the surrounding countryside when she first came to Wareham and did not need the moon to show her the way.

As Gwyneth ran towards the shoreline, she was well aware that she was alone, in the darkness, without any hope of rescue. If indeed there was a person on this beach, would the encounter be safe? But then, a single person would not pose a threat, not really. She could defend herself if need be, but what if she was overpowered? She did not have a knife or sword. The heathen threat was real but not likely; however it was not prudent to venture out alone at night. She did admit that she acted on impulse once again, and knew that David would not be happy!

But Gwyneth's inquisitiveness and daring nature overpowered any thoughts she might have had to return to the compound. Did not David tell her on more than one occasion that she had more courage and nerve than some of the men who were trained at the citadel?

The gentle northeast wind moved the clouds across the sky; the crystal grains of sand sparkled in the moonlight. Gwyneth heard his labored breathing as he walked towards her; she did not see a shadow but saw instead a man who was of average height and weight.

"He is wounded," Gwyneth thought. *"He is favoring his left side."*

He was close enough to touch when he stumbled and fell to his knees. Gwyneth noticed the arrow in his shoulder as she rushed to his aid; she could only surmise that the shaft had split when he tried to remove the tip.

Gwyneth did not care whether he was Saxon or Dane since she was overcome with compassion as she sought to help the injured stranger.

"Are you awake?" Gwyneth whispered. "The fortress is not far, and there are healers."

Gwyneth sensed the tension and heard the urgency in his voice when he replied.

"Nay! It is not safe! My life is at risk! No one must know my whereabouts!"

"Fear not; you will be hidden," Gwyneth told him.

Gwyneth did not want to speculate as to what his words might imply but she could not control her thoughts.

"What if he is outlawed? Could he be the enemy?"

Surely there was a simple explanation of his plight. What if he had been caught in a tryst with a married woman, or what if he had been banished by his father and sought forgiveness after he had returned home? There were many innocent circumstances to consider, why must her thoughts always focus on the most treacherous?

With a degree of effort, Gwyneth was able to help him to his feet; she put his arm over her shoulder and headed towards the base of the cliff, but found it difficult to maintain a steady pace once they reached the rocky terrain.

"The cave entrance is not far," Gwyneth said as he stumbled upon the loose stones.

Wall sconces placed throughout the hidden corridors securely held the blazing torches; shadows and outlines obscured by the darkness became flesh and blood figures in the soft light. Gwyneth did not feel threatened as she gazed upon a man who was not much older than her brother David.

"This passageway ends near the tower and chapel," Gwyneth told him. "The hidden room is straight ahead."

Gwyneth believed that she was in excellent physical condition but the stranger's weight pushed her endurance over the edge. She took deep breaths as she attempted to conceal her fatigue; her hair and clothes were damp from the exertion.

Gwyneth signed with relief when she finally opened the door; she struggled to keep him upright, but he lunged forward and fell once again. She doubted that she would have been able to place him upon the bed if he had not been able to lift himself off the floor.

Gwyneth was thankful that Father Felix had taught her the healer's craft. She found the needle and thread that she kept in her sewing box and hurriedly searched for her dagger and old clothing, which would be needed to bind the wound.

The tenderness that Gwyneth felt as she removed his shirt surprised her. There was dried blood on his shoulder but the wound did not appear red or inflamed. The sight of his bulging muscles caused her heart to beat faster and her body tingled as she pressed against him. She tried to put aside this unsettling emotion when she softly told him,

"I have nothing to ease your suffering."

"Do what you must," he whispered. "I can withstand the pain."

Gwyneth hoped her soft and soothing words gave him comfort as she inspected the wound. The arrow tip was unbarbed without any shards of wood and was not deeply settled in the tissue; she was relieved when she realized that the tip could be pulled out intact.

"Dear God, guide my hand," Gwyneth silently prayed. *"Spare his life if that is your will."*

Gwyneth washed the tip of the blade before she cut his skin, and was not surprised when he did not cry out since he would not want to appear weak and vulnerable. She gripped the shortened shaft between her fingers as she easily removed the implanted point, and was grateful that blood did not gush from the wound.

Gwyneth kept the dagger in the flame until the metal changed color. She did not warn him when she thrust the searing tip into the gaping hole; the smell of burning flesh was sickening as she suppressed the urge to gag. She sensed his apprehension and heard his stifled cries just before he lost consciousness.

"David will be impressed when my skills are made known," Gwyneth thought as she noticed his muscular build while she gently wrapped the wound.

Gwyneth knew the hour was late as she gazed upon the handsome fighter; she needed to be in the great hall for the night meal before her father noticed her absence.

Gwyneth sighed as she covered the mysterious stranger with a fur-lined blanket before she left. She would need to collect the yarrow and plantain leaves in Father Felix's garden before she returned.

Gwyneth hurried through the old Roman tunnel and thanked God that she was not seen as she entered her chambers. She was relieved when she did not find any blood on her clothing as she hurriedly put on a dress, and was startled when the door was suddenly thrust open as she frantically searched for her cloak.

"Sanctus Deus! Why did you not knock?" Gwyneth yelled at her brother.

"Do not Holy God me!" David yelled back. *"Why were you not at the table...where were you anyway?"*

Gwyneth was well aware that her brother had been quite anxious as to her whereabouts and saw the relief in his eyes when he found her safe and protected within the confines of her room.

"I was atop the Keep," Gwyneth lied.

"I was at the tower," David told her. *"You were not seen!"*

Gwyneth knew that he did not believe her and was grateful that he did not press her to speak the truth.

"Come David," Gwyneth told him as she put her arm through his. *"We must leave before Stephen is sent to find us. Then we really would be obliged to explain away our mischief."*

"Not we little sister, just you," David grinned, *"and I cannot wait to hear your explanation."*

As they made their way towards the great hall, Gwyneth knew that David sensed her excitement just as she sensed his anxiety. She did wish to confide in her brother, but not this night.

Chapter Two

It was a very long night for Gwyneth since it was difficult to sleep when the heat of the day lingered well into the evening. She closed her eyes and prayed for rest, but she could not help but remember how the incredible day began...

...Gwyneth wanted to explore the countryside but came upon Brother Aidan as she tried to leave the compound undetected.

"And just where do you think you are going, young lady?" Brother Aidan asked.

"I was on my way to find you," Gwyneth fibbed.

"I was given a new book to translate," Brother Aidan told her as he proudly displayed the sacred text.

"We need not have lessons then?" Gwyneth hopefully questioned.

"Nay my lady, there is much still to learn!"

Gwyneth sighed as she followed Brother Aidan to the chapel library. She was not able to sit still as she rested her chin upon her hands and stared at the translated words; she was tired of Latin texts and Greek poetry. She was not forewarned when Brother Aidan hit the side of the table with his knotted rope belt.

"You frightened me!" Gwyneth yelled as she jumped in her seat.

"You are fortunate that it was not your father who startled you," Brother Aidan replied.

"It is obvious that your mind is elsewhere, so..."

"You are most kind!" Gwyneth interrupted as she quickly placed the book upon the shelf before she ran out the door.

"Be here after Prime," Brother Aidan shouted as she faded from his view.

Gwyneth could not believe her good fortune. Brother Aidan would be preoccupied with the translation of his new book and she would be preoccupied with the world outside the fortress walls.

Gwyneth made her way across the inner bailey to the postern gate near the edge of the cliff, and was not seen as she disappeared through a concealed opening and headed towards the forgotten tunnel. The old Roman room was her place of solace where she trained with the sword and perfected her archery skills; it was also where she translated the sacred text and ancient manuscripts without interruption.

Gwyneth had thoroughly searched the citadel when she first arrived. The Romans had been clever when they built the secret passages, rooms, and escape routes. The tunnel near her favorite room led to the sea where a boat still lay hidden beneath the rocky cliff.

Gwyneth discovered the forgotten labyrinth by accident. She had been walking along the beach when the pagan god Thor unleashed his fury. As she searched for shelter along the rocky base, she discovered the entrance that a large boulder concealed. The boulder appeared to have been naturally placed but then again there were whispers. She shivered when she remembered what was said of the ancient Druids and their circle of giant stones.

Gwyneth shared many secrets and confidences with David. They were inseparable after the unexpected death of their mother when Gwyneth was quite young. David trained her to proficiently wield a sword and adeptly use a bow since he would have her protect herself in a land ravaged by war. He in turn became quite well known throughout all of Wessex for his exceptional battle skills.

Gwyneth did not know why she was so restless. She was not able to pay attention to any task given her that day and wondered if she was suffering from the effects of the full moon. She hurriedly changed into David's worn clothing before she set out to explore the countryside.

Gwyneth loved to run barefoot on the crystal grains of sand as she followed the coastline to the forest path. She noticed the clouds on the horizon when the sun started its descent, and realized it was too late to walk amid the trees. She avoided the swelling waves that broke upon the sandy shore as she returned to the fortress, and settled for the serenity of the Keep when the sun finally set. She did not know how long she was lost in thought before she noticed the shadow upon the beach...

...Gwyneth awakened from her dreamy state when the rays of the sun warmed her room. She opened her eyes and stretched lazily before she left her bed. She splashed water on her face, and chewed a paste of mint mixed with honey to sweeten her breath before she suddenly remembered the mysterious stranger.

"Gwyneth, what is wrong with you? Why dream of a day already lived when there is a wounded warrior in the Roman room?"

Gwyneth left her quarters without being seen and was thankful that the inner bailey was deserted as life had yet to stir. She hurried to the kitchens where dying embers softly burned in the hearth, and filled a small basket with leftover bread, remnants of roast pig and a few apples. She found two wineskins filled with ale and left through the rear door, and was not seen by the servants.

Gwyneth hurried through the tunnel, but stopped abruptly when she reached the hidden room and carefully opened the door. The room was well lit; everything seemed to be in its proper place, and the man appeared to be asleep.

"It is safe," Gwyneth thought, "but I must be mindful."

Gwyneth did not want to awaken her warrior as she quietly walked towards the bed; she was quite surprised when he pulled her down, flipped her over, and held a dagger to her throat.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Gwyneth, I am the Lady Gwyneth," she stammered. "You were found on the beach...it was I who removed the arrowhead."

Gwyneth felt the strength of his muscles as he released his grip and lowered the blade.

"This is a fine way to repay me," Gwyneth retorted as she stood up and adjusted her clothing. "It was I who saved your life!"

"I beg forgiveness my lady," he replied. "Would you not feel threatened if it were you upon this bed?"

Gwyneth was at a loss for words as thoughts of being enslaved or even slain popped into her head. She refused to believe that she was in any danger as she gently pushed him back onto the bed; she was careful not to aggravate the wound and was genuinely concerned since he did seem warm to the touch.

"Are you famished?" Gwyneth asked as she retrieved the basket.

Gwyneth offered him a cup of cool ale and noticed that he was in pain as he tried to sit. She lifted his head and held the cup against his lips as she stared at his muscular chest and broad shoulders; she did not realize how far she tipped the rim until she heard him gag.

"I beg forgiveness," Gwyneth said as she wiped away the liquid that dripped down his chin. "Are you still in pain?"

"I am well," he whispered, "and most grateful."

Gwyneth realized that he had awakened feelings that she did not know she possessed. She was aware that her father and the King would soon find her a suitable husband; her union might secure a military alliance or assure peace between warring kingdoms. Her privileged station would never permit her to fall in love with this stranger, but she feared that she was already smitten.

"You are warm to the touch," Gwyneth told him. "I must see your wound."

"I am in your debt Lady Gwyneth," he grinned mischievously.

Gwyneth saw the dried blood on the cloth and was thankful that the wound was not red and did not leak.

"I will return with a poultice," Gwyneth told him.

Gwyneth blushed when he noticed her staring at his striking body as she slowly wrapped his chest.

"My lord I do not know your name," Gwyneth whispered.

"Erik," he grinned.

"Erik is a heathen name," Gwyneth replied.

"Does it matter?" Erik asked.

"It should not matter," Gwyneth mumbled.

"Erik is also a Celtic name," he reminded her.

"Aye, but with the raids," Gwyneth stammered.

"There have not been any raids," Erik interrupted.

Gwyneth wanted to believe him because she knew that he was right. The Danish King still honored the terms of the treaty; but King Alfred, with wisdom beyond his years, would still establish fortifications along the Wessex coast and would still train a fighting force that could defend the kingdom from invading marauders at a moment's notice.

Gwyneth was uncomfortable as Erik's gaze seemed to penetrate her very soul. She tried to regain her composure but the excitement she felt affected her better judgment; she also feared that her emotions would ultimately betray her.

Gwyneth could not explain why she felt the way she did for a man that she did not know, and wondered if Elizabeth had similar feelings when she first gazed upon Rufus.

"Lady Gwyneth?" Erik questioned. "You are far away!"

"I beg forgiveness," Gwyneth whispered. "My thoughts are elsewhere."

"Where are we?" Erik asked.

"You are in Wareham," Gwyneth answered. "My father is in command of the fortress."

"Fortress?" Erik asked. "How many are garrisoned here?"

"King Alfred's men are trained here," Gwyneth replied. "My father serves our King."

Gwyneth was aware of the prolonged silence and wondered whether Erik would be truthful or if she would be deceived.

"Erik!" Gwyneth exclaimed. "You are now far away!"

"Now it is I who must beg forgiveness my lady," Erik grinned. "This time my thoughts are elsewhere!"

Gwyneth smiled when she looked at him, and wondered if he saw the sparkle in her eye, and also wondered if he sensed what she was feeling.

Gwyneth tried to imagine how he behaved with other women and wondered if they had always been agreeable. She also wondered if he would take advantage of how she felt and use her love to suit his own purpose.

"My lady," Erik murmured. "Who knows I am here?"

"Only I," Gwyneth told him. "When we were on the beach, you told me that your life would be at risk if your whereabouts were made known."

"I believe you can be trusted," Erik replied. "What you are made privy to this day must not be shared."

Gwyneth tried to control her excitement as many different thoughts ran through her head; she reminded herself not to speculate but...

"I am King Alfred's trusted messenger," Erik whispered. "If I am to protect my homeland, our homeland, I must not be found."

"I am intrigued," Gwyneth excitedly replied as her eyes glowed.

Gwyneth wanted to learn more about this mysterious stranger and prayed that he felt as she did. She would use the time wisely while he mended as she wished to capture his heart.

"I must leave before I am missed," Gwyneth told him. "You are safe here."

Gwyneth thought she saw a twinkle in his eye when he grinned.

"I am already late for my lesson with Brother Aidan," Gwyneth whispered.

Gwyneth saw Erik smile as his eyes followed her every movement and wondered if he could tell that she was truly smitten. She also wondered if other women looked at him the way she did, and if anyone had already captured his heart.

"Rest. I will return soon," Gwyneth murmured.

Gwyneth was unusually happy as she hurried through the tunnel; she managed to arrive at the courtyard undetected and hurried towards the chapel.

"Gwyneth, you are out and about early," David laughed. "Just what are you up to?"

"I am up to nothing," Gwyneth replied.

"Something is not right," David told her. "Do you forget that I know you well?"

"David, it is nothing, really," Gwyneth fibbed. "I found a new tunnel and want to explore the passage, but I must meet Brother Aidan for my instruction."

"All right Gwyn," David replied patiently. "When you are ready to tell me you will. Come, we will walk together."

As they walked arm-in-arm towards the chapel, Gwyneth was afraid to say anything more and was quite aware that David knew that she was not telling the truth.

Chapter Three

"Stephen, wait up!" David shouted.

Stephen smiled as he awaited his younger brother. David and Gwyneth had inherited their fair looks and temperament from their mother, but Stephen was truly his father's son with his dark looks and stoic disposition.

"Why are you up so early David?" Stephen questioned.

"Have you heard about the sighting?" David excitedly asked.

"If you are speaking about the rumors," Stephen replied.

"The village was attacked by heathens," David interrupted.

"David, the truth is not yet known," Stephen told him. "We await word."

"Were not men wounded?" David asked. "Did not some escape to the dragonship?"

"These stories are not proven," Stephen reminded him. "Father is in the Great Hall. Walk with me."

"Stephen, the dragonship was seen on the river. What more proof do you need? Must the heathen stand over your bed with sword in hand before you admit that he has returned?"

"Easy little brother," Stephen grinned. "There will be more fighting soon enough."

"Do you think that King Alfred will send for father?" David questioned.

"Do you wish to be at court then?" Stephen smiled.

"Nay brother, you are mistaken." David gravely replied. "I am not interested in court. I am interested in the defense of our country."

"I beg your forgiveness David," Stephen apologetically said. "It is not my intent to be the cause of your distress."

"Stephen, look around you," David shouted so as to be heard over the turmoil and confusion that surrounded them. "Do you not see the men and women who seek the protection and safety of these walls? Do you not see their fear? Does this not prove that the Northman is raiding again?"

"You are most likely right," Stephen told him. "But my actions are based on truth, not rumor. The scouting party will be back soon. Be patient."

"What proof was needed when you fought with King Ethelred and King Alfred?" David sarcastically asked.

"David," Stephen whispered. "What am I to do with you?"

"I beg forgiveness Stephen," David softly replied. "Your judgment is not questioned. It is just..."

"That you are well-trained but have as yet to prove yourself in battle," Stephen answered.

"I do not know how it feels to see the face of the enemy and slay the heathen before I am slain," David told him, "and I do not know if I have your courage. Am I worthy to be your brother and our father's son?"

"Fair enough David, but do not hurry into battle," Stephen seriously replied. "Men killing men is not sport."

The brothers heard the heated discussion as they reached the Great Hall.

"But my lord, we must find the dragonship before we are again attacked," Thomas said as Lord Richard paced the length of the room.

"We do not have enough trained men," Lord Richard replied. "We must await word from the King."

"Why must we wait on the King?" David exclaimed as he and Stephen joined the two men.

Lord Richard gazed fondly upon his youngest son who resembled his mother, and for a brief moment Lord Richard's eyes depicted his emotional state when he remembered the life that he and Branda once shared, a life taken too soon from the husband she loved and the children she adored. He quickly brushed aside the memories before he answered.

"We do not need the King's permission David."

"Your father commands in the King's stead," Thomas sternly reminded him.

"Father, has there been fighting in the outlying villages?" Stephen interrupted. "Do you think that they are King Guthrum's men?"

"They are just rumors," Lord Richard replied as he beckoned the men to view the map.

"If these raiders are not of King Guthrum's camp, then we must defeat a new enemy," Lord Richard gravely said.

"If they pillage as far as Southampton," Thomas interjected, "then Winchester is at risk."

All eyes were upon the King's messenger as he hurried into the room.

"My lord, his majesty sends his good wishes," Wulfgar said as he handed over the communiqué.

"You must be parched," Stephen told Wulfgar as he handed him a goblet.

Stephen and Thomas waited patiently for Lord Richard to read the King's dispatch. David on the other hand paced back and forth with his hands clasped behind his back. When Lord Richard finished reading the report, he dropped the parchment on the table and said quietly,

"The King is in need of accurate information. Stephen, I would have you ride to Exeter and see if the fortress is ready to withstand an assault. We must know the exact number of men that are garrisoned within its walls, since they will need to move quickly if the threat of invasion is proven true, and also confirm that Bayen has completed his mission."

"What of Chichester and Southampton?" Stephen asked.

"Messengers have been dispatched," Wulfgar interjected.

"Very well then," Stephen said. "I leave posthaste."

"Stephen, take David with you," Lord Richard yelled before his eldest son reached the door.

David could not believe his ears. This was the opportunity he was waiting for; the chance to prove to himself and to those men who would one day fight by his side that he had the courage of a valiant warrior.

Gwyneth found it difficult to pay attention to Brother Aidan's lesson as she kept thinking of Erik and his mysterious mission.

"Gwyneth, are you listening?" Brother Aidan frustratingly asked.

Gwyneth tried to concentrate on Brother Aidan's words and the lessons he expected her to master over the course of the day, but how could she pay attention when so much was going on all around her? She wondered if Brother Aidan was aware of the tension and excitement in the courtyard as farmers from the outlying countryside sought shelter. There was only one reason why they would leave their homes for the protection afforded them within the fortification, and that one reason was the threat of invasion.

"But what of the treaty? Did not the heathen King swear he would leave Wessex? Had he not willingly been baptized?" Gwyneth thought. "But could the heathen be trusted? And Erik, what part did he play in this mystery?"

"Gwyneth!" Brother Aidan shouted in her ear.

"Forgive me Brother Aidan. It is hard to concentrate when there is such mayhem in the courtyard," Gwyneth softly said.

Gwyneth could see that Brother Aidan was irritated by her behavior and was about to lose his self-control.

"What am I to do with you?" Brother Aidan yelled. "You know quite well what is expected of you with your lessons."

Gwyneth tried not to laugh at Brother Aidan's outburst and kept her eyes lowered as he continued with his tirade.

"You are undisciplined and disobedient," Brother Aidan chastised. "Your father has been overly indulgent!"

"I have not been overly indulgent," Gwyneth snapped.

Gwyneth reproached herself for her foolishness since Brother Aidan was infuriated by her interruption.

"You are of the privileged class my lady, yet your behavior is not appropriate for one of your station and sex!" Brother Aidan shouted excitedly.

"I behave according to my station!" Gwyneth yelled.

"I beg to differ!" Brother Aidan exclaimed. "You are impulsive and lack discipline; you fail to hold your tongue; you dress and behave as if you are a boy. Your actions are not those of a lady...your actions are those of a child who is coddled!"

"Enough of this," Father Felix yelled as he walked through the door. "What be amiss Brother Aidan?"

"Father I beg your forgiveness" Brother Aidan humbly said.

Gwyneth was aware that Father Felix understood Brother Aidan's frustration when it came to her behavior in the classroom; they truly believed that her father was overly permissive where she was concerned.

"Gwyneth, my child," Father Felix softly replied. "Where is your mind this day? Why are you not able to pay attention to the tasks at hand?"

"I beg forgiveness Father Felix. There is no disrespect. It is just that..." Gwyneth stammered.

"Very well then Gwyneth," Father Felix said. "I am excusing you from your lessons for the next few days. During that time you are to give considerable thought as to what is expected of you. Mayhap a life of servitude to our Lord is what you seek? I know well the Abbess at Wimborne or mayhap Romsey would be more to your liking?"

"Take the veil, me!" Gwyneth exclaimed. "Father would never allow me to be put away like that! Surely you know that I will one day be wed and..."

"Those who serve the Lord do so willingly; He would never want you put away, as you so call it," Father Felix interrupted harshly.

Gwyneth blushed at the chastisement. She had not meant to be discourteous but she was too much of this world to be shut away from it. She was not concerned about heathen raids; she was concerned about living life; she wanted to fall in love, and be wed, and bear children, and could not fathom a life other than the life she had been given free rein to live.

"I beg forgiveness yet again Father Felix. I did not mean to be insolent. It is just that I am..."

"So young," Brother Aidan interjected.

"Forgive my impertinence, please, Father Felix!" Gwyneth pleaded. "Your words are truthful."

"You are forgiven, Gwyneth, but I am in earnest; you are not a child. You need to know your responsibilities and duties. Do you understand what is expected of you?" Father Felix asked.

Gwyneth nodded meekly and was proud of herself for not speaking her mind.

"I release you from your lessons," Father Felix told her firmly.

Gwyneth looked questioningly at Brother Aidan before she stood to leave.

"Be off Gwyneth. You will be told when your lessons will begin again," Brother Aidan said.

Gwyneth was humbled as she meekly left the room. She hoped her demure behavior was enough to satisfy the Lord's emissaries and also hoped that they would forget her outburst when Father Felix had mentioned taking the veil.

"You were hard on her Father Felix, were you not?" Brother Aidan asked.

"I have learned of her betrothal to Cerdic of Chichester. Remember his father Edward who died at Ashdown?"

"Cerdic?" Brother Aidan asked. "He is a rogue."

"Brother Aidan, you must not listen to rumor," Father Felix reminded him.

"I beg forgiveness. It is just that I feel a responsibility towards Gwyneth."

"We all do," Father Felix interjected. "But enough talk of Gwyneth. It would seem there was a skirmish between local villagers and heathen raiders. What is most distressing is that one of our archers hit his target but the body has yet to be found."

"Did not Lord Richard send out a scouting party?" Brother Aidan asked.

"Aye, but they could not find the invaders, and farmers still arrive from the outlying villages," Father Felix told him. "Our defenses have been tightened and King Alfred is sending messengers to the fortresses along the coast; we will be ready when they next strike."

"Stephen, David, wait for me!" Gwyneth yelled as she left the chapel.

She was playful when she stepped between them and gave each brother a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Tell me then, what are you two up to?" Gwyneth asked as they headed towards the stables.

"We leave posthaste for Exeter," David excitedly replied. "We are to inspect the fortification."

"Why?" Gwyneth questioned.

"To repel the heathen if we are threatened," David told her.

Gwyneth knew that Stephen felt that she should be protected, and that she should not be concerned about the defense of the kingdom, and also knew that David disagreed with Stephen, which was why he was so forthcoming. Gwyneth wondered what Stephen would say if he discovered that she was an experienced archer and how deftly she handled a sword. She also wondered if Stephen and their father would be displeased if they were to learn that David was the person who had taught her those skills.

"Exeter?" Gwyneth repeated. "Exeter is far!"

Gwyneth could not believe her good fortune. If her brothers were gone and her lessons stopped, there would be no one to search for her; she conspiratorially smiled as she thought of Erik.

"Our being away does not give you free rein little sister," Stephen quickly interjected.

Gwyneth knew Stephen did not approve of her impulsive nature. She was aware that he wanted to protect her; to keep her safe and away from the treachery which threatened her world, and only wanted her to see the beauty and not the cruelty.

"I plan on behaving just as you would expect," Gwyneth smiled.

Gwyneth hoped David would not speak his thoughts. She knew he had his suspicions, but had yet to figure out what her secret might be.

"We are in earnest Gwyn. Do not leave the fortification while we are gone. There has been word of a dragonship sailing up the river. You are safe if you stay within these walls," David told her.

"David is right," Stephen gravely said. "Do not leave the compound."

"Are you both trying to frighten me?" Gwyneth asked. "There have not been any raids since the treaty."

Gwyneth did not know what to make of their warning. David did know that she visited the outlying villages but Stephen did not. Did they wish to frighten her so she would not take any undue risks? Whether the reports were true or not, she had no intention to scour the countryside by herself. There was mischief enough within her sanctuary.

"Is there anything you would want from Exeter?" David asked.

"A dagger mayhap?" Gwyneth coyly replied. "For my collection?"

"What collection?" Stephen wanted to know.

"She does not have a collection," David said as he gave Gwyneth a warning look.

"I am teasing you Stephen," Gwyneth jokingly replied.

"I pray you speak the truth," Stephen answered.

Gwyneth was not sure if Stephen believed her, but before he could pursue the matter, she bowed before them both and ran towards the Keep.

"God speed," Gwyneth yelled before she faded from view.

"She will be the death of me," David replied as he shook his head.

"Soon she will not be our responsibility," Stephen told him.

"What do you mean?" David questioned.

"She has been promised to Cerdic," Stephen replied.

"Not Edward's son?" David incredulously asked.

"That is the man," Stephen told him.

"Why now?" David wondered. "When was this decided? Why was I not told?"

"You are being told now," Stephen said. "This match was discussed by father and King Alfred when we were in Winchester a few months back."

David did not know what to say. He could not fathom life without Gwyneth. Chichester was not that far but it was still many days away.

"Gwyneth is not aware that she is promised," David said. "Be that not so?"

"Father thought it best to wait, to prepare her." Stephen replied.

David's first instinct was to warn Gwyneth of her fate, but for the first time he had to put aside his feelings and consider the task he had undertaken. His responsibility was to his Father, to his King, and to his country.

"*But what of my responsibility to Gwyneth?*" David thought.

"David, why are you so troubled?" Stephen asked.

"I do not believe that Gwyneth has been treated fairly," David mumbled.

"David, you know better than that," Stephen softly told him. "Father must have Gwyneth provided for; he would never agree if he felt that the match was not suitable. You must know that she could not remain at Wareham once she was old enough to wed."

"You speak the truth as always Stephen," David whispered. "This was not expected, that is all. I know that Gwyneth must be wed one day, but one day was not to be this soon."

David realized that change could be difficult to accept, but then life could be difficult to live.

"All will be well, David," Stephen told him. "Come, the sooner we leave, the sooner we return."

Chapter Four

Erik tried to rest but could not sleep because of the pain. Random memories of his past blended with images from recent events when he remembered....

...After King Guthrum invaded the shores of Britannia, the frequent raids along its coast ceased, as few dared risk the mighty Gorm's wrath. Erik was disturbed when word of the baptism of the Danish King reached the homeland. He had heard the stories about the Christ God but did not believe the words that were preached. Erik and his men would never deny Odin who held a place in Valhalla for the courageous warriors who died in battle.

But Erik's warriors were restless, and to ease their boredom drank in excess. Erik grew tired of the songs and poems that praised past campaigns; was it not better to die in search of plunder and glory than to waste away on the mead bench?

There was an endless flow of ale and mead on that extremely hot night. Songs which celebrated the successful raids at Lindisfarne and the Aquitaine incited the explosive mood. Erik held up his cup and cried out a toast to victory, a toast to new adventures, where they would sack and plunder for honor, glory and wealth. Rollo tried to reason with him, but Erik was too caught up in the moment.

"The ship awaits; we must sail while we have the tide!" Erik shouted as he left the mead hall.

Rollo tried to stop him but Erik had too much to drink; Brigid also tried to discourage him as she followed him to the beach where she begged him to wait until the effects of the mead faded, but he would not listen. Brigid was grateful that he still wore the Valhalla talisman that she had given him earlier that night, but never believed that he would be in need of its protective powers this soon. She watched as the longboat left the shallow waters for the open sea, and prayed to Odin that the man she loved would not perish in the deep waters of the ocean or upon foreign soil.

The journey across the North Sea was uneventful. Erik's plan was simple; he expected little or no resistance as they pillaged a monastery while the holy men slept, but he was not aware that the longboat was seen when the sail was lowered and the boat moored in shallow waters. Erik and his warriors waited for the clouds to cover the moon before they came ashore, and did not know that they were watched as they made their way through the forest.

There was no forewarning when the arrow released from the archer's bow found its mark. Rollo caught Erik as he fell to his knees and tried to remove the embedded arrow tip, but the wooden shaft snapped in half.

Bloodcurdling war-cries were heard as frenzied villagers appeared amongst the trees while a deadly barrage of arrows interfered with a quick retreat. Rollo hurriedly lifted Erik onto his feet, put his arm across his shoulder, and headed towards the river; he praised Odin when he noticed a partially concealed cave as Erik's strength was waning rapidly.

"Await my return," Rollo said as he propped Erik against a rock-strewn wall.

"Odin be with you," Erik whispered just before he lost consciousness.

The fighting did not last long as Erik's warriors successfully fought off their assailants, made their way to the river, and were already sailing in open waters as the Saxons reached the riverbank.

Erik was unsettled when he awakened since the forest was eerily quiet and could only hope that his men had been able to escape as he viewed the threatening landscape. The cloud cover kept him within the shadows, but the darkness also made it difficult to walk the rugged terrain. He headed towards the coastline where he found himself walking the deserted beach. He had no choice but to trust his instinct, and prayed to Odin that he chose the right path while he awaited Rollo's rescue...

...when he remembered how he came upon Britannia's shores.

Gwyneth bypassed the herb garden and hurriedly approached the chapel sickrooms. Father Felix was an excellent healer and quite knowledgeable about the curing powers of the various plants, herbs and roots that he so lovingly nurtured.

Gwyneth slowly opened the rear door and quietly entered the deserted room; she filled a basket with plantain leaves, bluegrass and yarrow and prayed that Father Felix would not immediately notice that something was amiss when she hurriedly left.

Gwyneth avoided the courtyard as she walked along the shadowed wall; her fears were unfounded as the inhabitants were only concerned about the threat of invasion and paid no heed to a young woman who appeared to have mysteriously vanished within the fortified enclosure.

"One would think that Exeter is readily defensible, since the old Roman fortress still stands," David told Stephen as they mounted their horses.

"Fortifying an existing structure is readily achieved," Stephen replied as they walked their stallions towards the main gate, "but I am concerned about Bridport."

"Is Elizabeth still at Exeter?" David hesitantly asked.

"Aye," Stephen whispered as he dug his heels into his horse and galloped away from the citadel, and away from a past that had long since been buried.

Erik did not know how long he had slept. He managed to sit up without much effort even though his painful shoulder still throbbed, and saw the door move before Gwyneth opened it.

"Erik, are you awake?"

Erik noticed her reddened face as she approached the bed. He watched her intently when she placed her hand on his forehead, and smiled when she told him that he was not fevered. His eyes followed her hands as she removed the cloth, which was not blood stained, and tried not to laugh when she dropped the herb-filled bowl.

"How was the lesson?" Erik asked.

"Ended for now," Gwyneth replied as she mixed a thick paste.

"What be amiss?" Erik questioned.

"I was chastised because I was not attentive to the task at hand!" Gwyneth sarcastically told him. "It was said that my mind was elsewhere!"

Erik covered his mouth as he sought to silence the laughter that escaped his lips; he could imagine where elsewhere her mind had been as he sensed her desire and underlying passion.

"I am finished," Gwyneth told him as she tied the cloth strip.

"Thank you my lady," Erik whispered.

"Are you hungry?" Gwyneth asked.

"Famished," Erik grinned.

"I found apples, roast pig and bread," Gwyneth told him as she pointed to the basket.

"I remain in your debt," Erik said as he grabbed an apple.

Erik stared at Gwyneth as he ate his fill while thoughts of walking the beach as soft waves caressed their feet came to mind. He had to admit that there was something different about her, something that he could not explain, something that made him want to protect her since she had somehow possessed his very soul.

"My lady, has there been word from the King?" Erik asked between bites.

"King Alfred sends his messengers to the fortresses along the coast," Gwyneth told him. "My brothers travel to Exeter."

"Then you are truly free," Erik grinned.

Erik ignored her flushed face as he tried to put her at ease.

"Mayhap we might use this time well," Erik said as he reached for his cup.

"You must remain here while you mend," Gwyneth replied. "Mayhap you might be interested in translating one of these texts?"

"I fear that I have no scholarly skills," Erik whispered. "I cannot read what is written in the dispatches that I carry for the King. Do you consider me simple?"

"Nay!" Gwyneth exclaimed. "Written words are easily learned."

"You are most kind, my lady," Erik whispered as his hand sought hers.

"My name is Gwyneth, but please call me Gwyn."

"Gwyn, mayhap we might begin the lessons this day? I mend because of your healing skills and do not doubt your teaching skills," Erik replied with a mischievous wink.

Elizabeth paced about the room as she contemplated her future since Cerdic had finally made preparations for her return to Chichester. Whenever she thought of her brother, she remembered the virtuous man who shared her childhood and not the unscrupulous man who vied for power and wealth.

Elizabeth did not want to wed Rufus and had hoped that Stephen would defy her brother and their King by requesting her hand, but Stephen never allowed his personal feelings to interfere with his responsibilities and his duty. Stephen's allegiance was to his King, his country and his father.

Elizabeth was with Rufus when he finally succumbed to the wounds that he received when he fought with the King at Edington. Rufus, Edward and Richard were brothers in arms in those early years and had remained loyal friends.

Elizabeth was at the camp where Stephen and Cerdic trained. Branda had treated her like a daughter and often spoke of the day when she and Stephen would be wed, but Branda died before her fate was decided.

Elizabeth prayed that her brother would not insist that she take the veil and devote her life to God. She did not understand why he failed to acknowledge her widow's rights but would not object if she was promised to Stephen.

Elizabeth wondered how Gwyneth felt about her betrothal since she had been disheartened when she first learned of her nuptial arrangement. She remembered taking to her bed and remaining in her chambers for almost a fortnight. When she finally allowed her servants to attend her, word of her frail appearance spread quickly throughout the court. It was feared that she suffered from fever and Cerdic had requested that the King send his most knowledgeable healer to attend to her needs.

She remembered when she and Rufus were at court when Stephen arrived with his father. If she had known that he was called to attend the King, she would have feigned illness and spared them both. She remembered how appropriate his behavior was and how he tried to avoid her; she was not sure if he saw the pain in her eyes but she thought she saw his pain.

The messenger told Lord Bayen that Elizabeth's brother would send an escort to ride with her to Wareham where she would attend to Gwyneth and prepare his betrothed for the nuptial bed. Elizabeth's heart pounded as she thought of Stephen.

Elizabeth climbed the stairs to the wall-walk and stood near the gate tower where she could see for miles when the sun was high in the sky. She enjoyed the beauty of the lush countryside while she took comfort in the tranquil setting, and loved to watch the butterflies and listen to the birds as they chirped their mellow song.

Elizabeth noticed the darkened sky just as a hawk flew below the clouds; she watched it circle above the dense trees in pursuit of its prey. The song birds flapped their wings furiously as they attempted to escape their predator. She held her breath as the hawk swooped down and captured its quarry with its long sharp talons and suddenly felt cold in the heat of the day.

"I do not like this omen," Elizabeth thought. "It foreshadows death."

Rollo managed to return to the longboat unscathed. The men quickly pushed the boat from the shore, manned the oars and rowed towards the safety of open waters before their pursuers could reach them.

Rollo needed time to think; he needed a plan to rescue his prince or negotiate his ransom. He did not understand how the villagers knew they were in the woods and wondered what had changed since their last voyage.

"King Guthrum!" Rollo thought. "King Guthrum is what changed!"

Rollo would wait until rumors of invasion were dispelled and the villagers once again toiled the fields before he returned for his prince. He believed in the protective powers of the amulet Erik wore and prayed that Odin would keep from harm the warrior who served him well.

"The gods protect us," Rollo thought. "Do they not?"

Lord Richard and Thomas quietly talked as they stood before the open fire in the far corner of the hall.

"Have you sent a messenger to Chichester?" Lord Richard asked. "I am not pleased that the nuptials are this soon but we have little choice."

"Aye, my lord," Thomas replied. "My man rode through the gate when Stephen and David left for Exeter."

"There will be no time for merriment," Lord Richard said. "Cerdic must return to Chichester immediately to protect his lands from this new threat. What is his intent for his sister?"

"Do you speak of Elizabeth?" Thomas asked.

Lord Richard nodded.

"He is sending men to escort her to Wareham," Thomas replied as he poked his sword through the dying embers. "Mayhap they might meet up with Stephen and David."

"Elizabeth and Stephen," Lord Richard whispered. "Do you think the wound is healed?"

"May I speak freely my lord?" Thomas hesitantly asked.

"Aye," Lord Richard replied.

"Stephen never speaks of Elizabeth, or Rufus, nor does he speak of days past," Thomas told him. "He is loyal and dutiful in the service of his King."

"He does not desire to wed another," Lord Richard reminded him.

"There is still a spark...it would not take much to ignite the flame," Thomas replied.

"I could not defy our King," Lord Richard whispered.

"My lord," Thomas answered, "It is not my forgiveness but..."

"Stephen's," Lord Richard interrupted, "but it is difficult to speak of this."

"Mayhap you might speak now," Thomas softly replied. "Elizabeth is widowed and free to wed another."

"Wulfgar is speaking of this matter with the King," Lord Richard told him. "King Alfred will give his blessing if they are agreeable."

Thomas walked to the table and grabbed one of the wineskins; he was not sure if he should repeat the rumors since the King favored Cerdic as did Lord Richard. Thomas would need evidence; he would need to prove the accusations and hoped that he could do so before the nuptials, but he would have to tread carefully since Cerdic would be a fearsome enemy.

"Come Thomas, we need to observe the training," Lord Richard told his trusted advisor and friend. "We have had enough talk of love and nuptials for one day."

The two men left the Great Hall, headed towards the courtyard, and paid no heed to the men and women who still sought the protection only a garrisoned citadel could offer.

"Have you had your fill of learning for one day?" Gwyneth asked as she closed her book and placed it upon the shelf.

"Mayhap. But are you not hungry?" Erik asked with a devilish grin.

"I beg forgiveness; I was not aware of the time," Gwyneth answered. "There is much food in the kitchens."

Before Gwyneth left, Erik pulled her towards him and held her tightly in his arms. He felt her body shake when his fingers touched her face as he brushed unruly strands of hair away from her eyes, lifted her chin and gently kissed her lips. Erik knew his kiss aroused a passion that she had yet to share; he knew if he did not stop she would surrender herself to him, and it was because he knew she loved him that he quickly pulled away.

"My lady, I beg forgiveness. I did not mean to be disrespectful, I did not..."

"I know," Gwyneth whispered. "I trust you."

Erik had never seen such unconditional trust and innocence. He knew he had her heart and did not want to admit that she had somehow taken his.

"Gwyn," Erik whispered.

"I...will...fetch food," Gwyneth stuttered. "Mayhap after we satisfy our hunger we might walk the beach? I will not be expected to partake of the night meal."

"That is tempting," Erik softly said. "If we are not seen."

"Rest then," Gwyneth told him. "I will return soon."

"You are a gift from the gods," Erik murmured as he held her hand. "I am grateful that you have been placed in my path."

Erik realized he spoke of his gods and wondered if Gwyneth knew that she sheltered the enemy, and also wondered if she would have behaved logically had she surmised the truth; but then he did not think that Gwyneth ever behaved logically.

The two brothers had been riding hard for most of the day when Stephen raised his hand to stop.

"What be amiss?" David asked.

"I think it is best to visit Bridport so that I can observe firsthand its strengths, and weaknesses," Stephen replied. "Is not sleeping in a bed preferable to sleeping beneath the stars?"

David grinned as they slowed their pace while they traveled through the peaceful countryside. It was obvious that word of a new heathen threat had not reached this far south since there were no frightened villagers seeking shelter behind the citadel's massive walls.

"Stephen, before, when I spoke of Elizabeth, I did not mean..."

"I know David," Stephen whispered.

"Is there anything you wish to tell me?" David hesitantly asked.

"Are you wondering if I still have feelings for her?" Stephen softly answered.

"That is one thought," David mumbled.

"What is the other?" Stephen questioned.

"If father and the King support your union, would you seek her hand?" David asked.

"You speak of days long past," Stephen whispered.

"*Sanctus Deus* Stephen! It has not been that long," David replied.

David was agitated. He did not understand why it was so difficult to speak to his brother, especially since he and Gwyneth were always forthright; he did not know why Stephen was not forthcoming, but he would not relent until he gained his brother's confidence and trust.

"Rufus is not yet cold in his grave and you would have me wed his widow?" Stephen incredulously asked. "Come David, be sensible."

"I am being sensible. I noticed the looks that passed between you both when we were at court," David answered as he tried to control his temper. "I might have been young Stephen, but I was not blind!"

"David, I have not been made privy to Cerdic's plans," Stephen replied. "Why give hope when there is none? It would be too painful to lose her again."

David was startled when Stephen revealed his true feelings when he replied,

"Stephen! We must speak with father; I know he would be willing to petition the King."

"Nay! Elizabeth and I are not destined to wed!" Stephen yelled. "Do you forget that I am not like you and Gwyneth?"

"What do you mean?" David shouted. "What troubles you about me and Gwyn?"

"I beg forgiveness David; I did not mean to offend you," Stephen truthfully replied. "It is just that you and Gwyn do not see the realities of life. You fail to consider the danger, although Gwyneth is more inclined to follow her heart."

"I did not mean to cause you pain," David told his brother, "but if you do not speak of your feelings for Elizabeth, your chance will be lost."

Stephen did not want to remember standing beside his father as Cerdic gave the hand of Elizabeth to Rufus who was twice her age. He did not want to remember their nuptial festivities or the look on her face when she ultimately retired from court as Rufus' wife.

"Look, the gatehouse is straight ahead," Stephen smiled at his brother. "Come, we race!"

Both men dug their heels into their horses' sides and galloped towards the formidable citadel; neither brother would give way to let the other one win.

the Briton and the Dane
Zirkhríght

For

my son Alex and his wife Kerry
and their children
Alex, Ana and Addy

Dedicated to the memory of

Army Staff Sgt. Jack M. Martin III
and
Army Sgt. 1st Class Christopher D. Shaw
and to all the fallen
military and civilian heroes
in the ongoing fight against terror

Acknowledgements

I am forever grateful to my family and friends for their endless love, support and encouragement as I continue to pursue my life-long dream.

I am indebted to Diane Boni, Holliday Franger, Stephanie Matulich and Kim Morrison for their insightful feedback as they eagerly reviewed the draft manuscript. Their unabated excitement and interest in the characters and storyline is truly gratifying.

I wish to thank Sonja Cox for her invaluable assistance with promotional marketing strategies. Her steadfast commitment and support is greatly appreciated.

I also wish to acknowledge Steven Novak whose exceptional artistic talent created the distinctive cover that I visualized.

Lastly, I wish to thank my wonderful reading public for their interest in my work. Because of the remarkable support that I continue to receive from my fans, "The Briton and the Dane" novels will truly transcend time.

Preface

The opulent night sky was ablaze with sparkling stars, and the familiar constellations were easily identified by their various shapes and sizes. The North Star was fixed in the heavens, its light steady, a beacon to follow as one headed home.

The falling star's path was seen for miles as the brilliant white streak of light moved across the evening sky. There were those who believed that the gods were angry and feared the worst but those who followed the new religion did not believe in superstition and omens and often searched for the uncommon metal left at the bottom of the crater after the star had collided with the earth. A sword forged from the heavenly remnants proved to be a formidable weapon; plated armor and shields made from the rare material were thought to be impenetrable.

A slight chill and rising mist created an eerie atmosphere around the Keep at the top of the hill. Fog crept slowly over the valley below the magnificent fortress. Most of the inhabitants had traded the wooden benches in the Great Hall for the comfort of their fur-covered beds while dying embers cast a warm glow for the young couples who still lingered beneath the cloudless sky.

Aurelius walked throughout the valley once the sun had set. He conferred with his men who guarded the secret entrance that kept the sanctuary safe from the heathen who still plundered and pillaged the land, but he willingly traded the camaraderie that he shared with his brothers-in-arms for the love bestowed upon a husband by his wife.

Aurelius crossed the courtyard and headed for the Keep. He gazed upon the open sea as moonbeams bounced along the rippling waves and looked across the starlit heavens in search of the North Star.

Arista added more wood to the dying fire before she lovingly covered her children with a warm fur-lined blanket. She grabbed a cloak to keep the night chill from penetrating her bones as she quietly left the room to join her husband.

"Are the children sleeping?" Aurelius questioned when he embraced his wife.

Arista nodded as Aurelius tenderly kissed her scarred face and held her tightly in his arms. She no longer hid behind a veil nor did she shy away from her husband's touch.

Arista was apprehensive when she rested her head against his shoulder and shivered when she saw the falling star disappear into the darkness of the surrounding mountains.

"Perhaps this night your star will return your memory," she whispered. "Would you want me still when you remember?"

"How could I not want you?" Aurelius quietly replied. "I owe you my life."

"One day the star will take you from me and our children," she murmured. "It beckons you to return to your world."

He held her tightly in a loving embrace and silently watched the flaming celestial bodies race across the horizon.

Elizabeth found her brother Cerdic with Lord Bayen atop the wall-walk. She was thankful for their love and support during the difficult months after word had reached the citadel that the King's envoy to the Welsh court had been attacked.

She clearly remembered the day when the horse that carried the young boy had dropped dead before Lord Bayen and Thomas, Lord Richard's advisor. She remembered her anxiety when the lad had informed them of the carnage and her fear when he spoke of the dead and gravely wounded. She did not deny that her husband had vanished; what she did deny was the presumption that he had been slain.

Tears swelled when she remembered how Lord Bayen and her brother never left her side during her long and difficult birthing. She remembered their concern when she had cried out Stephen's name and begged to die. She remembered the healer's fright when she pointed to the Lord's angel who, she swore, stood before her. She also remembered their obvious relief when the boy that she named Gabriel finally entered the world.

Elizabeth was thankful for their King's benevolence when he pardoned her brother. She was also grateful to Bishop Thurlac when he granted Cerdic a full dispensation to leave the contemplative cloistered life for other worldly pursuits.

Elizabeth could never repay Lord Bayen for his kindness and protection. She was also aware, as were most, of his undying love and devotion. She was grateful for Lord Bayen's friendship and continually prayed that one day he would be able to love another.

The men silently watched the bright colorful fireballs raining upon the earth. Elizabeth did not pay attention to the brilliant particles that lit the evening sky but rather kept her sight upon the steady dim light of the North Star where it remained transfixed in its position.

"Do you think that Stephen gazes upon our star this night?" she asked her brother.

"It has been more than two summers yet you still keep your vigil," Cerdic gently said while he held her in his arms.

"My heart knows that he lives," Elizabeth whispered. "One day he will return to me and our son."

Chapter One

The Burh of Chichester flourished under the leadership of Lord Richard's youngest son David. His unique defense and training programs had set the standard for the daily operation of the fortifications that King Alfred had built along the Wessex coastline to ward off heathen attacks.

David was a proficient warrior who fought alongside his soldiers in the heat of battle. His courage and humility had readily earned him the respect of the men under his command. His charismatic personality had inspired his warriors to fight against insurmountable odds as his tactics and stratagems had turned many impending defeats into remarkable victories.

There remained an unsteady peace after the Danish King Guthrum and his army had returned to East Anglia. The mighty Gorm had carved out the land and ruled as the Christian King Aethelstan. King Guthrum and his Godfather, the Saxon King Alfred, encouraged marital alliances and therefore had blessed the union of David and his Danish wife Helga. Their twin sons, James and John, could grow up in a land devoid of war and conquest if King Guthrum remained on his throne.

King Guthrum also refused to sanction Danish raiding parties against the King of Wessex. Word spread quickly that a large army from the homeland had been forced to camp near London for the winter since King Guthrum would not consent to the pillaging of King Alfred's kingdom. King Guthrum's reputation was further weakened when it was learned that the army had set sail for the Frankish Empire. It was believed that King Guthrum was no longer the formidable warrior who had shown no mercy. The mighty Gorm now followed the teachings of the new Christ God and preached peace. Some believed that King Guthrum was weak, ineffectual and no longer fit to rule.

Chichester was fortunate to have a thriving market town not far from its fortification. Merchants and traders traveled along the coastline on roads that had been made safe because of King Alfred's laws. Market Day was well-attended by the local villagers and inhabitants of the fortress since the heathen threat was considered to be insignificant.

Inga hummed joyful tunes as she helped James and John finish their chores before they left for the market. The boys placed their toys in the chest next to their beds and changed their tunics before they joined their mother and father for the morning meal.

Inga gave each child a bowl of berries and porridge before she sliced the warm bread. David was quite amused that his sons were so well-behaved while they quickly satisfied their hunger.

"You appear to be in good spirits," Helga smiled.

"Dalla's brother returns this day," Inga excitedly replied.

"Loki brings our toy soldiers," James interrupted.

"Dalla said they are made of ivory and were bought in Rome!" John told them.

"I do not know your friends." David reminded her.

"Mayhap you might invite them to share the night meal," Helga interjected. "They are welcome to stay in the guest quarters."

"Or they will be escorted back to town, if they so wish," David said when he refilled his cup.

"You are most kind my lord," Inga replied.

Inga and the boys could not contain their excitement as they left their quarters and headed towards the market town. David was amused when he spoke to his wife.

"Do you think that she fancies this Loki?"

"Mayhap, but I am uneasy," Helga softly said.

"What be amiss my love?" David asked as he embraced his wife and kissed her forehead.

"It is just a feeling," Helga whispered. "I do not really know, but something is not right."

Inga and the boys waved at the guards who stood atop the gatehouse when they left the compound. They would arrive at the market well before the midday heat and welcomed the gentle breeze as they walked the dusty road.

The town was bustling by the time they reached the outskirts. The boys held Inga's hand while she followed the winding street that led to Dalla's dwelling. James and John stared at the various fruits and vegetables that were carefully placed upon the open carts. They pointed impatiently to their favorite foods and pleaded with Inga to permit them to visit the stalls. Flies buzzed around the hanging carcasses of newly slaughtered pigs, which were ultimately quartered and sold.

Dalla waved excitedly when the brothers broke free from Inga's grasp and ran to the top of the hill. She embraced the lively children and laughed when they struggled to set themselves free. James and John shrieked when they saw Loki standing in the doorway with his hands behind his back.

"Have you the soldiers?" Both boys asked. "Let us see!"

Loki held his arms above their heads as the boys sought to grasp the ivory figures that were just out of their reach.

"Loki!" Dalla shouted. "Do not tease them!"

"As you wish dear sister," he replied just as the boys grabbed their precious gift.

Dalla embraced Inga and kissed her cheek before they entered the house. Loki poured ale and wine while Dalla placed a bowl of fruit upon the table.

Inga was delighted when Loki surprised her with a small token and quickly opened the silk pouch that contained an exquisitely-carved bone hair pin.

"This is lovely," Inga whispered. "There are no words."

"It pleases you then?" Loki asked as he held her hand and looked into her eyes.

"Aye," Inga blushed as she averted his gaze.

Dalla led Inga to the table and offered her a goblet. Inga sipped the wine and laughed at the boys' excitement when Loki surprised them with a superb wooden replica of an ancient Roman chariot.

"The wheels move!" John shouted excitedly when he rolled the toy across the bench.

"You are most generous," Inga said as she attempted to stand.

Loki came to her rescue after she leaned unsteadily against the table.

"I fear that I am not well," Inga whispered just before she lost consciousness and fell into his arms.

Loki carried Inga outside and placed her into the back of a cart. The boys were busy playing and had paid no heed to their elders.

"James and John, are you parched?" Dalla smiled when she handed them half-filled goblets.

The boys eagerly drank the sweet wine, emptied their cups in one swallow, and were soon soundly sleeping beside their beloved Inga.

Dalla and Loki rode unhurriedly through the busy streets when they left the market town and headed east.

Helga crossed the inner bailey and headed towards her family's private quarters. The sun would soon set and the main gate closed for the night. She was not able to find Inga and the boys and silently prayed that they were already in their chambers. She shouted their names while she frantically searched the empty dwelling and hurriedly ran to the gatehouse just as the guards were about to shut the gate.

"Inga and the children are not back," Helga yelled while she climbed the stairs. "Do you see them on the main road?"

Helga listened halfheartedly while the soldiers reminded her that the scouting party had already returned and would not set out again until first light. She pushed the men aside as she leaned over the wall and suppressed the urge to scream when she saw the deserted countryside.

Helga held back the tears while she ran to find David who would still be in the Great Hall conferring with his advisors. She hurried through the open door and was out of breath by the time she approached her husband.

"The boys are not in their chambers!" Helga breathlessly exclaimed.

David quickly rushed to his wife's side and held her in his arms.

"You are trembling," David whispered, "why are you troubled?"

"Inga has not returned with the boys," Helga sobbed.

David shouted for his men to bring the horses and requested that Brother Aidan be found to comfort his wife.

It did not take long for David and his men to reach the market town; the soldiers searched the individual dwellings while David spoke with the local merchants. As dusk became night, the men continued their search but were unable to discover Inga and the children's whereabouts.

Brother Aidan and Helga watched from the gatehouse as David and his men galloped towards the main gate.

"David!" Helga yelled as she frantically hurried to meet her husband. "I am fearful."

"There has been mischief," David told her.

"What do you mean?" Helga asked between sobs.

"Dalla and Loki are not known," David whispered. "Our children have been taken."

Chapter Two

Gwyneth stood before the open door while she waited for the religious cleric to bring another manuscript for her to translate, and smiled at the ever-present guard who never left her side since King Alfred's ruling.

Gwyneth admitted that she did not consider the consequences on the night that she had defied her father and her King. Her only concern had been for the safety of her husband and their unborn child.

Gwyneth was grateful that King Alfred was merciful and forgave her once again. She willingly accepted her punishment; the two years confinement was bearable because of the Queen's intercession.

Queen Aethelwitha believed in God and family life. The Queen's pleas did not fall upon deaf ears when she reminded her husband that an oath sworn before the Lord their God was binding; witnesses were irrelevant.

Gwyneth blushed when she recalled how Queen Aethelwitha fell to her knees before her husband and kissed his feet. The entire court noticed the Queen's tears when she implored her husband, the King, to recognize Gwyneth and Erik's union; it was her wish that Erik was to be present at the birthing of his son.

Gwyneth was thankful that the King did not deny his wife. She was grateful for their spacious rooms in the royal living quarters and was indebted to King Alfred for his kindness when he permitted her to translate the various manuscripts and Psalters to help pass the time.

Gwyneth reflected upon the words that her father had spoken on the night that he arrived from Wareham. His eyes depicted his apparent relief when he had held her in his arms. She also remembered how he gently wiped away her tears while he softly praised God for her safe deliverance. She did admit that she never fully understood his fears for her well-being until she gave birth to her precious son.

Erik walked with King Alfred to the Great Hall where preparations were well underway for the greatly anticipated arrival of Brother Martel who had studied under the learned monk Notker at the Abbey of St. Gall.

Both men smiled when they came upon the Queen who was busy overseeing the servants as they hung a tapestry that had been recently procured from Rome. Queen Aethelwitha had commissioned the talented craftsman to create a design depicting Christ with his Apostles. Angelic cherubs encircled the Lord who stood amongst His beloved followers. The workmanship was exquisite; the detailed design and bright colors were breathtaking.

"There you are my love," the Queen said as she joined her husband. "What say you?"

"Quite impressive," King Alfred smiled when he kissed her hand.

"Erik, do you agree? Do you think that Gwyneth will be pleased?"

"When she is once again free, my lady," Erik answered.

"Alfred! Why has Erik not been told?" The Queen gently chided her husband.

"I thought that you might wish to speak to them yourself when we partake of the evening meal," King Alfred quietly replied.

"What mischief has been planned?" Erik laughed.

"Gwyneth's two year confinement will soon be finished," King Alfred said with a twinkle in his eye, "and I am pleased that she has been obedient."

"It is my wish that Gwyneth should partake in the feast," the Queen impatiently interrupted. "She will be forgiven the final thirty days of her punishment."

"My lady, you are most merciful and loving," Erik whispered as he bowed before her.

Their mood was festive when they approached the north wall where they stopped to admire a rare mosaic depiction of Ulysses and his men that had once decorated the home of an ancient Roman villa.

The guards atop the gatehouse tower noticed the three religious servants of God when they left the forest and approached the main road. The soldiers quickly sent word to the King and Bishop that their expected guest would soon be within the citadel.

"Do you think that the rumors are true?" The soldier asked his friend.

"Are you referring to Charlemagne's blood flowing through his body?" The warrior scoffed. "His lineage was never recognized, which is the only reason he still lives."

The warriors laughed as they watched the two monks and holy sister approach the gate.

Erik stayed with the soldiers when the King and Queen greeted Brother Martel and his companions. He stepped into the shadows when he recognized Ulfr and Jora and waited until they were out of sight before he sought Gwyneth.

Gwyneth immediately recognized the holy sister when she entered her quarters. They would not be disturbed since Roland slept and Erik was with the King's son. She beckoned Jora to sit near the fire and offered her a goblet of imported wine.

Jora sipped her drink while she looked about the room; she noticed the ornately-carved pieces of furniture and admired the decorative wall hangings.

Gwyneth appreciated the privacy given by her long-time guard when he discreetly closed the door but was unsettled while she waited for Jora to reveal the reason for her deception.

"Ulfr does not know that I am loyal to Odulf," Jora told her. "He believes that my allegiance is with the prince he serves."

"Have you word of Rollo?" Gwyneth anxiously asked. "I pray that God still protects him."

"Rollo is in Dunwich as was planned," Jora whispered. "It will soon be time but you must be mindful of the danger."

Gwyneth paced the length of the room as she listened to Jora's ominous words.

"Rollo said that you are to be trusted," Gwyneth quietly replied. "You must know that Erik and I are also to be trusted. Speak freely. Tell me why you are so troubled."

Jora finished her drink before she shared with Lord Richard's daughter all that had happened since Gwyneth had been confined at the King's court.

"Those who wear the talisman of Thor serve a warrior called Rigr," Jora told her. "He was sired by King Guthrum with the healer Finna."

Gwyneth gasped at the mention of Finna's name.

"Has Cerdic been made privy to this?" Gwyneth asked. "What of Elizabeth and Helga?"

"Nay, no one has yet to learn the truth," Jora whispered.

"Does Rigr seek then King Guthrum's throne?" Gwyneth questioned.

"Aye," Jora answered, "but Rigr will crush any who stand in his way, which is why he seeks Cerdic's son and Helga's boys."

"James and John!" Gwyneth shrieked as she grabbed Jora's shoulders. "Pray that they are safe at Chichester!"

"Nay, they have been taken," Jora whispered, "but do not be fearful. Rollo will be their protector once they arrive at Rigr's camp."

Gwyneth could not hold back her tears as she shook her head in disbelief; she mumbled her brother's name while Jora consoled her with a comforting embrace.

"Be mindful of the deception at your King's court," she told Gwyneth. "Brother Martel serves many masters."

"What do you mean?" Gwyneth asked just as Roland began to cry.

Gwyneth ran into the room and gently cradled the child in her arms.

"He resembles his father and is truly Erik's son," Jora smiled.

"What of Ulfr and Brigid?" Gwyneth asked.

"Ulfr no longer confides in Brigid," Jora said. "She also does not know that her life may be in peril."

Erik found King Alfred in his private writing room where the King translated the ancient texts. King Alfred had quickly earned Erik's respect and admiration shortly after he arrived at Winchester as the King's hostage.

King Alfred loved his people and his land with a rarely seen passion. The King truly believed in Christ Jesus and followed His teachings. He attempted to bring a lasting peace to his kingdom as he built up his defenses and established a well-trained army.

King Alfred was devoted to learning and established schools in his court and throughout his kingdom; he was also able to entice learned scholars from abroad.

King Alfred promoted justice and established his code of law, which was fair and just, not only to the nobility but to the common people as well.

Erik closed the door and waited for the King to finish his illumination before he lost the light from the sun. He was impressed by the volume of books and manuscripts that had been carefully placed upon the many shelves that adorned the room.

"What be amiss Erik?" the King asked when he moved his treasured manuscript away from the open window.

"The time will be soon," Erik replied. "The usurper has summoned his army."

Candles burned brightly throughout the great hall as a glowing fire warmed the room. Dyed cloth covered the massive tables that were adorned with flower petals and silk ribbons of various lengths and colors.

The cooks proudly displayed their skills as platters of deer and wild boar were set before the King. Roasted birds were put upon plates covered with dill and thyme; savory pies in various shapes were decorated with daisies and lavender flowers. Skewers and kebabs of roasted pork and fish were ceremoniously placed before the Queen and her honored guest while minstrels played their flutes and lyres.

Large casks of mead and ale sat beneath open windows; pitchers of imported wine and flagons filled with cool spring water were placed upon the tables.

Dancers and singers entertained King Alfred's guests while poets recited familiar verses from *Dream of the Rood* and *The Wanderer*.

Gwyneth was excited when she and Erik entered the Great Hall. To meet a person who had studied under the world-renowned poet and author Notker was emotionally overwhelming. Brother Notker was favored by the Bishop of Rome who had been disappointed when the humble monk declined the Holy Father's invitation to leave his beloved abbey and study in the Papal City.

Gwyneth was delighted when the Queen beckoned that she sit beside her and the King's honored guest. No one paid heed to the ring that Brother Martel wore when he raised his goblet to toast his host and lovely wife.

Gwyneth listened intently to Brother Martel while he spoke of his life at the famed abbey and blushed when the King mentioned the many books that she had translated and the beauty of her illuminations.

The Queen was pleased when Gwyneth convinced the learned religious to recite all the verses from *Juliana*, her favorite poem.

Gwyneth finished her wine since the hour was late. She knew that the King would insist that the gaiety continue once he and his Queen had retired for the night, and she was also well aware that the festivities would persist until first light.

"It has been an honor, Brother Martel," Gwyneth told him as she rose from the table. "I pray that we may meet again."

Gwyneth thanked her King and his Queen for their kindness before she returned to her quarters without her husband since Erik was nowhere to be found.

Chapter Three

The mighty King Guthrum had honored the terms of the peace treaty and withdrew from King Alfred's Wessex to East Anglia where he ruled under his baptismal name Aethelstan.

King Guthrum's authority was never questioned when he had returned to his conquered lands. As Christianity replaced the ancient ways, Gorm's conversion had justified his authority in his realm and had firmly secured him his throne.

King Guthrum's subjects were tired of war. His people had rejected Odin and desired the peace that the Christ God offered. The heathen invaders also intermarried as they started to rebuild the war-torn land.

Cities and coastal towns prospered as the raids and skirmishes ceased and new codes of law were enforced. Merchants and traders crossed the North Sea and brought with them luxurious goods from far away empires such as Byzantium and Arabia. Perfume and rare gems were a welcome addition to the silks and ornate pieces of jewelry readily available at the market.

Brigid and her son continued to enjoy the protection of the Danish King. Kylan became a proficient warrior under King Guthrum's tutelage. He was clever and cunning and would become a worthy ruler if he learned to master his anger and control his temper but his seething hatred for the father who had denied him his birthright clouded his judgment. Kylan also attacked his opponents with a vengeance and gave no quarter.

Brigid desired Kylan to rule Northumbria since King Guthrum preferred the pleasant climate of East Anglia with its rich and fertile land. Her son could govern in King Guthrum's stead while he established his authority and control. Kylan would then be in position to claim the crown once King Guthrum was dead.

Odulf carefully watched Kylan's mother as she sought to find favor with his King. Brigid was also manipulative and devious in her attempts to learn the identity of the usurper prince.

Brigid believed that she deserved a life that befitted her station. What better way was there for her to accomplish her desires than to wed the man who would one day bring the mighty King Guthrum to his knees?

But King Guthrum was clever, and was privy to the treachery and treason that surrounded him. Many had died when they sought to take his crown but those men had not been his kin.

King Guthrum had never favored one son over the other, or so it was believed. Finna never judged her King when she comforted the mighty Gorm on the night that his son Odulf's mother had died. Finna had raised the child as her own since she was still in love with Odulf's father. But King Guthrum never acknowledged either son even though there had been whispers. It was also common knowledge that the boys and the healer were under his protection. Why had that not been enough?

The confrontation between Rigr and King Guthrum had taken place on the night that Helga's mother died in childbirth; the night when Odulf failed to acknowledge his newborn daughter.

Finna had tried to reason with Rigr but he failed to heed her words. Her son had been furious, and left the camp that very night. Rigr had told his father that he would one day return with an army and claim his rightful inheritance; Finna's baseborn son would fight his father for the crown since Rigr refused to relinquish his birthright.

Jora was preparing the evening meal when Odulf entered their dwelling. She laughed when he kissed her neck and tightly held her in his arms.

"You were sorely missed," he whispered as he pulled her towards the bed.

"Now is not the time," she firmly told him. "We must speak."

Odulf reluctantly released her and sat on a bench near the fire; she handed him a goblet just as King Guthrum entered the room.

"Where is Ulfr?" King Guthrum bellowed when he snatched the wineskin.

"He seeks Brigid," Jora smiled as she placed a platter of roast pig upon the table.

The men ripped pieces of meat off the carcass and ate their fill while Jora dutifully refilled her lover's goblet before she joined him.

"What word from Rollo?" Jora asked while she sliced the pig with her dagger.

"The boys have arrived safely at Dunwich," King Guthrum said. "They have not been harmed."

"Brother Martel travels to Exeter," Jora replied. "Rhys and his men return with him but I am not certain of Cerdic's loyalties. He has changed since Stephen went missing and has been very protective of his sister and her child."

"Have you spoken to Gwyneth?" Odulf questioned.

"Aye," Jora smiled. "We will meet Erik before he joins Rigr at his encampment."

"Do you know what Ulfr has planned?" King Guthrum asked. "Are you in any danger?"

"Nay, but my brother does not trust Brigid. He would have her slain before the solstice if he gets his way," Jora ominously replied.

"What of Kylan?" Odulf asked his father. "His actions are not predictable."

"Treason is punishable by death, no matter the bloodline," King Guthrum reminded him.

"The boy is not to be faulted," Jora whispered. "He has been poisoned by his mother."

"Fault is of no importance," Odulf gently told her. "He has no claim for the crown he seeks."

Brigid ran to Ulfr as he walked towards her dwelling. She was delighted when he took her in his arms, twirled her around and kissed her gently before he let her go. She wrapped her arm around his waist and headed towards her quarters.

Brigid was radiant when she filled his goblet with mead; the aroma of baked bread and roasting nuts filled the room. She was in high spirits and softly hummed festive tunes when she gave him a bowl of porridge.

"Your mood seems pleasant," Ulfr said as he added berries to his meal. "What say you?"

"I am pleased that you are home, yet I am fearful," Brigid whispered.

"I am not Erik," Ulfr chided. "You will be told when you are no longer fancied."

Brigid silently watched Ulfr finish his meal through moist eyes. She could not explain why she was uneasy each time he left the camp to serve his prince. She had always been privy to the events that affected the lives of the men that she loved. Erik had been forthright while Rollo had been evasive but Ulfr was different. He had changed. He no longer shared his innermost thoughts and secrets and he no longer shared her bed.

Kylan was restless while he quietly watched events unfold as one of King Guthrum's illegitimate sons sought to usurp the throne. He did not trust the men who wore Thor's ring nor was he pleased that Ulfr influenced and controlled his mother.

Kylan was ignored by his elders who considered him still a child. He was fortunately quite astute and remained in the shadows as the conspirators plotted. He watched, listened, learned, and made his own plans.

Kylan was aware that his mother's life was in danger as was his; it did not matter that they were of the same homeland, there were not of King Guthrum's camp; he was also very aware that their lives would not be spared when the time came.

Kylan did not desire to wear a crown but would accept the throne if it were thrust upon him. What he desired was vengeance against the man who had sired him and the Saxon woman who held his father's heart.

Kylan was curious when he followed Ulfr into the forest where his mother's protector met with Rigr and Loki. He was not aware of the third man that walked the clearing until it was too late. There was a blow to his head just before he fell to the ground.

Kylan awakened in a cave and struggled to free himself from his bindings but stopped when he heard soft footsteps; he thanked Odin and Thor when he recognized the man who came to free him.

"I was given no choice," Rollo apologetically said when he cut the rope. "Your life will be forfeit if you are found."

Kylan impulsively embraced Rollo after he was freed.

"My mother was the reason why you left," Kylan stammered as he released his comforting grip. "Be that not so?"

"There were difficulties," Rollo whispered. "There were..."

"Do not spare me my friend. I saw you both that last night," Kylan gravely replied. "Did you know that my mother wept?"

"Why are you here?" Rollo asked as he changed the subject. "What be amiss?"

"Ulfr serves Rigr who seeks King Guthrum's crown," Kylan said.

"How do you know this?" Rollo incredulously asked.

"It does not matter," Kylan told him. "I fear that my mother's life is in peril and would have her find sanctuary."

"Seek the abbey at Wimborne. It is not very far and she will be protected," Rollo told him. "Ask for the novice Cecelia; she will help."

Chapter Four

Rigr and Dalla silently walked the rocky coastline. The pounding surf caressed the rising cliffs while noisy sea gulls hunted for food left by the sea and pelicans foraged for fish. Fishing boats were scattered about the shallow waters while men emptied their catch of herring and shellfish into large barrels that were carted away by the waiting women.

Dunwich was a bustling coastal port town. Its natural harbor protected the ships from high winds and strong waves. Traded goods were easily loaded and unloaded as the ships lay anchored in the calm waters. The slave trade flourished. There was also a menacing influx of seasoned warriors who sold their swords to the highest bidder.

Words were not needed between husband and wife as they leisurely followed the shoreline. They were united by the life they endured and the dangers that they faced.

Rigr was seized by his father's enemies shortly after he had left the protection of King Guthrum's camp, but he hastily sworn fealty to his captor when his life was spared.

Rigr was a cunning warrior and a formidable fighting force whose reputation surpassed that of his father, the Danish King. Tales of his ability to wield a sword after having been gravely wounded were recounted time and again in the mead hall.

Rigr and his overlord also planned to vanquish the mighty Saxon and bring King Alfred to his knees once the mighty Gorm had been defeated.

But there were many who wished to rule the rich land of Britannia. Petty chieftains from the homeland had vied for control of the land but King Guthrum proved to be too powerful.

Rigr and his overlord had been forced to retreat to the flourishing port town where they were betrayed; the small band of warriors was attacked just before they reached the waiting ship. There were no survivors, or so it seemed.

Dalla saw the scavengers as they fed upon the rotting flesh and chased the birds away while she walked amongst the bodies; it would soon be high tide since the waves were rapidly breaking upon the shore. She noticed a man who crawled along the muddy beach to escape the threatening surf and was at his side just as a mighty wave broke upon them.

Dalla had hidden him in the ancient ruins until he regained his strength. She brought him noble garb and had arranged for safe passage aboard a ship that was to have set sail for the Frankish coast before the next full moon.

Dalla was not aware that he had followed her on the night when she returned to her master nor was she aware that he hid in the shadows when she was sold.

Dalla had always been resigned to her fate. She obediently walked behind her new owner while he rode his beautiful black stallion and had been surprised when Rigr unhorsed the lecherous man and cut his throat; they quickly mounted the feisty steed and headed north; never once did they ever look back.

Inga watched James and John while they peacefully slept and feared for their safety while she anxiously considered their fate. She did not know if they were hostages to be ransomed or slaves to be sold at the market.

She could not stem the flow of tears when she remembered Loki's loving gaze just before she lost consciousness. She could still feel his touch when he held her hand.

Inga recalled the day that she and Dalla became friends. They had enjoyed the archery contest and marveled at the number of contenders for the coveted silver arrow. Dalla was from Hastings, or so she said. Inga's newfound friend had also made arrangements for her to meet her brother before he traveled to Rome.

Loki was charming and attentive when they were together and had written poetry and loving messages when they were apart. Dalla played with the boys while her brother pursued a wife, or so Inga thought.

Dalla had continued to meet Inga and the boys on each market day while Loki was in Rome. Inga was comfortable with the woman that she hoped to one day call sister. James and John would soon be occupied with their lessons and warrior training and her services would no longer be needed. She would then be free to wed and have children of her own.

Inga was lost in thought and did not hear the door open, nor did she hear his footsteps as he approached. She saw his shadow upon the wall and trembled when she stood to face her captor. Rollo saw her hope-filled eyes when she gazed upon his face just before she fainted.

Loki rode his pure white stallion along the coastline. The horse trotted through the rippling waves while a sea mist sprayed both horse and rider. Dalla and Rigr waited expectantly for their trusted friend to dismount.

"Ulfr has returned from Winchester," Loki told them.

"What of Brother Martel?" Rigr asked.

"He rides to Exeter," Loki replied.

"Does Rhys know that Cerdic must not be harmed?" Rigr questioned.

"Aye," Loki answered, "but do you know that Cerdic still wears the ring?"

Rigr nodded as they headed towards the dock.

"What word of his son?" Dalla interjected. "Does the boy join his father?"

"Nay, but there have been whispers," Loki told her. "It has been said that he is housed on Finna's lands."

Rigr's demeanor noticeably changed when his mother's name was mentioned. He suddenly remembered his mother's tears on the night that he left the camp and sadly recalled how her pleas had fallen upon deaf ears.

Rigr's neck was rigid and his veins throbbed when he remembered being told that his beloved mother was dead. His eyes were moist when he envisioned her funeral mound and the Cross of the new religion that marked her grave. He still wore the Thor's hammer amulet that he had found slightly buried in the soft ground and still wondered who would dare leave a talisman and thwart the new Christ God.

"Cerdic has not been privy to Finna's life," Dalla gently said. "Mayhap the time is now ripe for him to learn the truth."

"You are right my love," Rigr replied. "What say you Loki? Do you agree?"

"Aye, it can be easily arranged," Loki grinned. "Cerdic should be told that he has a brother."

Erik traveled at night since he wished to avoid the well-known roads. He was grateful for the opportunity to repay King Alfred for the kindness and compassion afforded him while he remained a hostage at the Saxon King's court.

Erik did not wish to leave Gwyneth and Roland but there had been no other options. His motives would not be suspect since he was a prince of the homeland and Rollo would willingly vouch for him.

Feathery clouds moved slowly across the full moon and covered the radiant stars. Erik stopped when he heard the rustling underbrush and remained in the shadows as two figures walked the forest path. The strangers were almost upon him when Erik recognized her voice.

Brigid asked for water and needed to rest. Kylan was concerned when he gently helped his mother sit on a fallen tree; he handed her a wineskin before he offered her some bread.

"The abbey is not far," Kylan reassured her. "Then you will be safe."

"You do not seek sanctuary for yourself," Brigid whispered. "Be that not so?"

"Aye, but do not be troubled," Kylan quietly replied. "I will come for you when our enemies are defeated."

A sudden gust of wind blew the clouds across the dark sky just as mother and son resumed their journey. Erik saw their faces in the bright moonlight and silently watched as they continued on their way. He did not stop them, he could not. He had no words for the son that he never acknowledged and the woman that he no longer loved.

Helga anxiously awaited her father in King Guthrum's dwelling. She ran into Odulf's arms when he and Jora entered the room and was grateful for his comforting embrace.

"The boys have been taken," Helga whispered. "I am fearful."

"They have not been harmed," Odulf gently replied as he wiped away her tears.

"Do you know where they are?" Helga questioned.

"Aye!" King Guthrum bellowed as he joined them. "Is David not with you?"

"David is at Chichester awaiting King Alfred's orders," Helga replied.

Jora filled their cups and placed fruit-laden bowls upon the table. She slowly drank her wine and quietly listened while Helga learned of Rigr's treasonous plans.

"Will you send word to my husband then?" Helga asked.

"Would you not confide in David upon your return?" Jora interjected.

"Aye, if I did return, but I wish to remain here," Helga somberly said. "I will not leave without my sons."

the Briton and the Dane
LEGWELLY

For

my son Alex and his wife Kerry
and their children
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

Acknowledgements

I am forever grateful to my family and friends for their endless love, support and encouragement as I continue to pursue my life-long dream.

I am indebted to Diane Boni, Holliday Franger and Susie Turner for their insightful feedback as they eagerly read the draft manuscript. Their enthusiasm for this lengthy project is truly inspiring.

I wish to thank Sonja Cox for her invaluable assistance with promotional strategies. Her steadfast commitment as the series progressed is greatly appreciated.

I am also deeply indebted to my illustrator, Steven Novak, whose creative interpretation of my envisioned covers accurately depicts the theme of the series.

Lastly, I wish to thank my wonderful reading public for their interest in my work. "The Briton and the Dane" novels will truly transcend time because of the remarkable support that I continue to receive from my fans.

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 and a soft breeze crackled the branches and 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 while noticing 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 as they walked 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.

"Nay, 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, and comforted 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 before falling 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 as he freed his dagger. "You are but one sword."

"Nay! My sword will give you time to flee. Await me in Winchester," Brother Martel replied. "Go! Make haste!"

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. Brother Martel 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 and quickly led her away from the carnage and headed towards the river. Emidus and Concordia screamed as they tried to wiggle free and 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 that echoed 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 gazed upon the large boulders along the riverbed as he scoured the steep and rocky terrain for overgrown trails and hidden caves.

"Do not be foolish," a fearsome horseman said as he pulled on the reins and steadied his steed. "Your choice is simple. Take your chances with me or be enslaved. What say you?"

"We would be in your debt," Sidonius quickly replied while helping Tarren onto the animal's back.

Tarren cradled Concordia and leaned 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 soothingly replied while steadying himself and the child. "We are safe."

Lucian smiled as the well-disciplined animal picked its way carefully along the narrow rock-strewn path that followed the winding river and disappeared quickly 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 and stumbled 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 once again pressed his fingers against the victim's neck and was surprised to learn that the man still lived. Blood trickled from the gaping wound as Brother Gervase deftly removed the formidable weapon. He stopped the bleeding, applied a poultice and covered the gaping hole with a clean cloth before gently turning Brother Martel onto his back; he looked compassionately upon the wounded man's swollen, blood-caked face, and feared that Brother Martel'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 and was relieved when he saw that the wagon was almost upon them.

"Make haste!" The young monk shouted as he hurriedly approached the open cart. "One lives!"

Brother Gervase watched as his skillful apprentices carefully lifted Brother Martel into the wagon and waited impatiently as the dead Pilgrim was reverently placed into the cart. 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; holy men and women stood vigil outside the sickrooms as they awaited the fate of the warrior monk.

"Is he mortally wounded?" One of the women asked Brother Gervase as he ran into the room.

"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 and headed towards the King's private quarters that also housed her chambers.

"Erik!" Gwyneth cried as she burst open the door and headed towards the stairs.

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

"Bishop Asmund has arrived!" Gwyneth replied excitedly 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 grinned as he entered their quarters.

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

"I beg forgiveness," Gwyneth blushed as Erik steadied himself. "It is just that..."

"Your excitement is difficult to control," Erik interrupted as he kissed the top of her head. "That your emotions still rule."

"Nay," Gwyneth teased as she grabbed Erik's hand and headed 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, be that not so?" Gwyneth asked as she stopped abruptly and kissed her husband's hand. "Is not the King and my father pleased with my behavior?"

"You are most wicked," Erik told her mischievously, "but I am grateful that we are wed."

"As am I," Gwyneth softly replied as they quickly 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; but 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 Northman sought 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 that 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 soon found herself in their midst, playfully listening as both men bragged of their prowess and revealed secrets to gain her favor.

Bishop Germanus led the pretty lass towards the private cloistered garden. He identified the diverse flowers and plants by species as he led her to a stone bench serenely nestled beneath carefully kept bushes and waited patiently for the woman to speak; she blushed 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.

"Nay, Your Excellency," the lass said while shaking her head. "I was told that 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 fearful and sought sanctuary in the church; 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?"

"I am hopeful," the young woman nodded as Bishop Germanus rose and offered her his arm. "Do you believe my life to be in peril?"

"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, hoping to be of service to her King, yet ever mindful of the danger.

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 that 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?"

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

"Your words are truthful and I pray that 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," Lord Richard softly said.

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

"What of Marius and Remus then? I know that they have offered their swords to protect you," Lord Richard reminded him.

"Nay, it will be as we discussed; 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.

"Nay, Remus is wise for his years," the Bishop of Rome smiled. "He serves the Lord but lives still in the world, and 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; but 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 that 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 as he sought to fulfill his destiny.

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 to write of the deeds of the famed Charlemagne, and he was also grateful 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; he wanted 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 that plagued 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 that the assassin would ultimately succeed and a new Bishop of Rome would be elected, and he also realized that his life would be readily forfeit once Pope John was found dead.

However King Alfred could use Remus' sword to fight the Northman 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.

Remus smiled as Marius hurried across the courtyard and headed in his direction. 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. "What be amiss?"

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

"What say you?" Remus disbelievingly asked. "Did not the heathen destroy your villa?"

"My father and mother were slain, but I have been told that my brother and sister were spared. It seems that 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 as they entered the kitchens. "We are in need of training."

"Aye," Marius grinned while sitting at a table and graciously accepting a bowl of beef stew. "Mayhap we might 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," Remus whispered while drinking his mead.

"While your words are truthful, it would be best if our warrior skills were not made known. 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 that 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 that 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 that 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 that peace would not last since the heathen still coveted the rich fertile land and the Northman 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 as the soldiers disappeared from view.

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

"Aye, 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," Rollo said. "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 agreeable 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, yet fearing for his safety since she had failed to learn his whereabouts.

Brigid's 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 learned that Kylan had been recognized as Rigr's rightful heir, but she was relieved when she had been told that he had not taken part in the battle but rather 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 that he would be merciful when Kylan stood before him. Brigid was ashamed of the part that 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, putting her life at risk to prove her loyalty as the treachery unfolded.

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

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

But 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 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 knew in her heart that this prince was Kylan. She also heard whispers of a dragonship that sailed the river to meet an invasion fleet and feared the identity of the man who threatened Britannia's shores.

Brigid wanted to seek out the camp; she wanted 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, 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 and pecked 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, and he would willingly escort her to the hidden camp, but the Saxon King still refused to lift Rhys' confinement.

Brigid cried uncontrollably when she reflected upon the dangerous path she had chosen to follow. She would tell her husband that she wished to spend time at the abbey, in prayer with the Lord. She was well aware that she would be permitted to walk freely about the grounds and she would have no difficulty conspiring with Rhys. Rhys could flee and help her search for her son, but would Rhys 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 as she glanced 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-down wine and slowly sipped its contents as she gazed at the fire.

Elizabeth absently felt the likeness of the pagan goddess Freyja that she wore around her neck and thought of her brother Sarlic. She was distraught when she learned that he had been slain on the battlefield, but her heart was tormented because he had not known that 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.

But Elizabeth was unsettled. She did not know how to comfort her husband Stephen since he had regained his memory; she was at a loss for words with Aurelius, the man Stephen had become 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. Elizabeth 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 that tormented 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 be amiss?"

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

"I do not know. Cerdic returns soon from court. Mayhap he is knowledgeable."

"I know you grieve still...but remember I also share your loss," Elizabeth said with a voice barely audible.

"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 that hung upon poles that took four strong warriors to carry upon their shoulders as the beast swung uncontrollably while the men walked rapidly along the stone-strewn path. 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 as he embraced his most favored subject while the hunters followed the women towards the kitchens. She patiently waited to be noticed while Odulf recounted the brave deeds of the morning's chase.

Jora rocked her daughter absently as 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.

Jora was well aware that King Guthrum still searched for the traitors, and it was well known that 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 immediately after the battle but Odulf refused to seek either King's permission. She would have argued the point had she not discovered that she was with child, knowing she would have to wait until the child was weaned before earnestly beginning her search.

Odulf embraced Jora and kissed 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," Jora hesitantly said.

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

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

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

"Nay," Odulf compassionately replied. "Your life was in peril before; it will not be so again. Would you leave our daughter?"

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

Odulf shook his head as he poured himself a cup of mead and slowly sipped his drink while gazing upon his defiant wife. Jora did not flinch under his stare but rather grabbed the flask and filled her own cup with the honeyed brew. The quiet sound of the crackling fire resonated throughout the still room as a cool steady breeze drifted through an open window.

"Have you forgotten about Kylan? Brigid is fearful; you know Kylan's judgment is clouded by his hatred," Jora whispered. "I wager Kylan and Ulfr are with Dalla; do not forget that there is more at stake than my brother's life."

"How do you know this?" Odulf incredulously asked as he refilled his cup. "It is seemly that you are once again caught up in the intrigue and did not seek my counsel."

"I beg forgiveness," Jora blushed as she retrieved a small chest that held her cherished possessions.

Jora opened the lid and removed a pile of letters that had been neatly tied with a silk ribbon, handing 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?" Odulf softly asked while reading the correspondence.

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

"Their fate is deserved then," Odulf sternly said. "This is not our fight."

"My brother is my fight!" Jora shouted while rising from the table and standing defiantly before her husband. "I leave in two days time, whether or not you are agreeable."

"Do not forget that my wrath is as great as my father's!" Odulf yelled as he pulled her towards him. "Do not make me have you confined."

"I seek then our King's counsel," Jora whispered. "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 that King Alfred's men also search?" Jora reminded him. "Yet his enemies cannot be found!"

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

Odulf was surprised when Jora fell to her knees and looked imploringly into his eyes.

"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, then I am agreeable," Odulf whispered, "but I will travel with you and my counsel will be sought. Understood?"

"Aye," Jora whispered as she gently kissed her husband upon his lips. "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 that his mother was no longer in her care, and 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 that led to the private courtyard.

Kylan fondly remembered the young novice who hurried to catch him before he reached the gate. He had been surprised by her apparent boldness when she suddenly came upon him, grasped his hand and pulled him into a shadowed doorway. He smiled longingly when he recalled their brief conversation.

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

"Nay," Kylan replied, somewhat amused. "Are you privy to her whereabouts?"

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

"I am forever in your debt," Kylan replied as he gently held Cecelia's hand and kissed the tip of her fingers.

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

Kylan smiled when he remembered winking at the startled young woman before taking his leave. He recalled glancing back at the abbey as he reached the edge of the forest and being pleasantly surprised when he noticed Cecelia standing beneath the moonlit sky. He also believed that she had not returned to her cell until he disappeared amongst the trees.

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.

Kylan did not believe that 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 that 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. He remembered her kindness and wondered if she had befriended his mother while she remained at the abbey. 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 that she had somehow captured his heart, but he did not share his feelings with anyone, believing 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 garden. 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 that 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.

Cecelia chastised herself because of her uncertainty. Her resolve had been weakened by temptation; she was unsure and frightened; she loved God but doubted her sincerity since her heart somehow 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.

Cecelia remembered the family who sought sanctuary the last night of Gwyneth's confinement, and remembered being 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 and believed that Rhys truly regretted his decision and was truly penitent. Rhys was fortunate that 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, and 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 grinned while walking a horse into its stall. "Have you word from our King?"

"Aye," Bishop Thurlac solemnly replied, "but I fear your confinement has not yet been lifted. It is seemly that you are yet to be trusted."

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

"Be mindful that Lord Bayen is not agreeable even if our King is willing," Bishop Thurlac reminded him, "and remember that I do not have the power to grant what you seek."

"Aye, 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 seeks her brother as Brigid seeks her son. Jora travels with Odulf to Exeter and requests permission to meet."

"Has Lord Bayen sent word to King Alfred?"

"I do not know, but Jora is hopeful that you are sympathetic to her plight," Rhys truthfully replied. "Have I your approval?"

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

Chapter Two

Emidus and Concordia proudly carried an empty bucket as they followed 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, squealed with laughter when spraying water dampened their clothing, and watched in awe 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, and readily 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.

Tarren acknowledged the warrior who headed in her direction and nodded her head approvingly when he took the heavy bucket and led the way to her dwelling. She no longer feared any of the men within the village as she silently followed the young soldier. There were no offenses or misdeeds since the soldiers feared Lucian's fierce wrath.

The children tugged at Tarren's dress when they noticed the other children playing in the field. She smiled while nodding her approval, but waited until Concordia and Emidus joined their friends before heading towards her quarters. Tarren followed the soldier into the main room and waited for him to leave, but became unsettled when he set the bucket upon the floor and firmly closed the door, and was frightened when he walked towards her and brushed loose strands of hair away from her face.

"You are most comely," the warrior said while pulling 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; he became incensed when she bit his face and pinned her arms while forcibly shoving her onto the table. She silently screamed when she felt his weight upon her and was terrified as she gazed into his wild, lust-crazed eyes.

Tarren 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 as he fell against Sidonius. 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 while 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 entered 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."

"Aye, 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 that you were not defiled," Lucian solemnly replied. "Mayhap you both will partake of the noon meal with me on the morrow?"

"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 that adorned the numerous desks, and shadowed silhouettes jumped along the walls as sunbeams competed to illuminate the room.

While Brother Martel was grateful that the Lord had spared his life, he was not grateful that his sight had been taken, that his body was weakened, that he was still unable to return to his abbey, and he was weary of repeating the same stories over and over for the willing scribes who would preserve the legendary tales for ensuing generations.

Brother Martel never learned the fate of the family that 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; but 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 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 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 knowing 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; 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 Northman 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," Brother Gervase grinned. "It is seemly they travel to Rome. Mayhap there might be someone that could be trusted."

"What say you?" Brother Martel asked. "Why would I seek a messenger?"

"I heard your words when you were fevered," Brother Gervase softly 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," Brother Gervase told him truthfully. "I speak now because you have yet to trust me, but I would have you know that 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," Brother Martel whispered. "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 amusedly 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 were 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," Brother Gervase replied, "but all had been taken. Your sword was found beneath a mound of fallen leaves."

"Why now?" Brother Martel questioned.

"It is doubtful that 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. Mayhap 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," Brother Gervase replied. "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," Brother Martel whispered. "If you can be trusted."

"I swear upon my immortal soul," Brother Gervase solemnly replied. "Fear not, you and those you seek will be protected. My word is given."

"Cerdic...Brother Cerdic," Brother Martel softly 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 that his journey had been uneventful. He led his horse down the steep pebbled trail while following the wagon that carried the treasured books and manuscripts that 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 grateful to have 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.

Lord Richard's 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.

Lord Richard 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 but remained faithful to the teachings of Christ Jesus.

Lord Richard had spent his entire life fighting the heathen; he willingly served King Alfred as he had once served King Aethelwulf, Alfred's father, but the countless battles had kept him away from his family.

Lord Richard 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 Aethelswitha, Alfred's Queen, had graciously welcomed Gwyneth and David into the royal household each time his sword was needed to fight the formidable heathen.

Lord Richard 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 there were those who felt that 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 about Cerdic's true lineage would never have been revealed. Lord Richard was surprised when the heathen healer Finna confessed that 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 that the mother was of royal blood, a baseborn sister of Wessex's great King Alfred. It was also said that 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 that 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 that Remus was still being protected by one of his fellow countrymen, and 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 gave 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, remains 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.

Lord Richard 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 and tossed 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 as both men bowed before King Alfred's emissary. "How was your journey?"

Lord Richard dismounted hastily, stood before his newly found kin, and smiled while graciously accepting a cup of wine as was the custom before replying.

“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 as he turned his mount and ordered his men to follow.

“There is food and drink in the kitchens,” Remus told him. “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.

“Nay. There is much to be done; we leave in three day’s time, if arrangements can be quickly made.”

“It shall be as you bid...I do not foresee any difficulties,” Marius told Lord Richard while filling a cup with watered-down wine. “What say His Holiness?”

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

“Partake of food 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 was 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 as the men drank in excess.

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

"Aye," Ulfr smiled while holding out his goblet, "but I am famished."

"We have warm bread...and fish on the griddle," she replied.

"Fish and bread suit me well," Ulfr murmured as he placed his hand over hers. "Leave the pitcher...and bring another cup."

She placed the flagon on the table before returning to the kitchens. Ulfr smiled as he watched her make 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 stood in the doorway while his eyes adjusted to the dimly-lit surroundings. He noticed the lone figure at the far end of the darkened room and smiled as he 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 that Rigr had been defeated and his army vanquished, when everything had been lost because of treachery. He doubted the outcome would have been different had he and Loki been on the battlefield. He also doubted that his life would have been spared had he been captured by the Saxon King's men. King Alfred did have a reputation for being benevolent, and being merciful with his enemies, but the Saxon King would have deferred 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 that sailed 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 that 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 that 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 that 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 that 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 grinned while helping himself to some bread. "What be amiss?"

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

"Mayhap we might visit the market towns," Loki replied. "The alehouses are plentiful and tongues are loosened when men drink overmuch."

"The danger is great," Ulfr reminded him. "Do not forget there are many known to me because of my healing skills."

"Aye," Loki thoughtfully said, "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 yet ready to leave the homeland; there is time still to seek 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 that existed 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.

Sven was familiar with the stories that were 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. Sven believed that the mighty Gorm was no longer fit to rule, believing his power had waned because of his humiliating defeat.

Sven had been aware that 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. Sven was a true prince of the homeland, his lineage above reproach; 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 and believed that 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, knowing she could only achieve victory with an unforeseen invasion force because there would be none to stop the ships since the feared Northman still controlled the seas.

Sven 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 that Dalla would readily swear him fealty once he sat on King Guthrum's throne, but he had accepted her allegiance nonetheless, believing that 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; 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 that you are in need of training," Sven guffawed. "You grow soft!"

"Aye," Runolf blushed while catching his breath, "but you forget the climb is steep!"

"What say you my friend?" Sven laughed, back-slapping his trusted friend. "What word do you bring that cannot wait?"

"The last warship is finished and the fleet is now ready to sail!" Runolf exclaimed. "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 when my throne is secured, not before. I will not endanger their lives."