



TIME
OF THE
BEAST

GEOFF SMITH

Geoff Smith

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Dedalus

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Geoff Smith was born in London and educated in Surrey. He worked in travel, then wrote and performed for theatre, television and radio before starting his own business. He is also a qualified psychotherapist.

Time of the Beast is the result of his longstanding interest in Anglo-Saxon history and literature, along with a fondness for classic horror stories.



Then in the stillness of the night it happened suddenly that there came great hosts of the accursed spirits, and they filled all the house with their coming; and they poured in on every side, from above and from beneath, and everywhere. They were in countenance horrible, and they had great heads, and long neck, and lean visage; they were filthy and squalid in their beards; and they had rough ears, and distorted face, and fierce eyes and foul mouths; and their teeth were like horses' tusks; and their throats were filled with flame, and they were grating in their voice; they had crooked shanks and knees big and great behind, and distorted toes, and shrieked hoarsely with their voices; and they came with such immoderate noises and immense horror, that it seemed to him that all between heaven and earth resounded with their dreadful cries.

From *The Life of St. Guthlac, Hermit of Crowland*, by Felix of Crowland.

Translated by Charles Wycliffe Goodwin.

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Chapter One

Greetings, traveller. You may approach. The night is cold, but my fire is warm and it holds the darkness at bay. Come, you may see that I am an old man who means harm to no one. I will be glad of your company. Settle yourself, eat and drink if you will; find companionship and respite from your journey. My own journey? It is nearly over – in every sense. As I sit here I contemplate the darkness as it stretches before me. I see how the night lives, stirred into motion by the leaping flames until the shadows appear to creep and circle about us like spirits that prowl at the gateway to another world. It brings to my mind images from long ago – a time when I wandered deep into the Otherworld on an expedition whose memory seems to me now like a mad and terrible dream.

You wish to know my story? But you will have guessed by now that it is not a comforting tale. Yet it may serve to instruct you, or at least divert you until the morning comes. Very well. Let us look together deep into the shadows which enclose us, and hope that chaos may come to take on the semblance of order.

It was in the year six hundred and sixty-six of our Christian Age that I, Athwold, a monk, was given leave by my abbot to depart the monastery in the kingdom of East Anglia which had been my home for eleven years, to become at the age of twenty-five a hermit in the great marshland of the Fens. If you have never journeyed in the Fenlands – and I doubt that many ever find cause to do so – it is difficult for me to convey adequately in words just what a forbidding territory that dismal place is. A grim and desolate wasteland of dense high grasses and rushes, a perilous labyrinth with creeping fog that will rise in a moment to close upon the unwary traveller, leaving him to stumble blind and lost through twisting, treacherous pathways amongst black quagmires and sucking pits that will pull him in an instant to his death. There are foul and stagnant pools, streams and rivulets which abound with leeches, stinging flies and all manner of vile parasites; and worst of all are the foul-smelling miasms which float above the tainted waters, creating a poisonous atmosphere of unremitting gloom in a land of misty and near-perpetual twilight. The very gateway to Hell. In short, the ideal place for a religious retreat.

The Fenland is vast, almost a murky kingdom in itself, and its depths stand uncharted and ungoverned beyond every law of man; the natural refuge of outcasts, outlaws and other still worse things of ill omen. I journeyed there first upon a bright, sharp spring day to a settlement situated on the flat grasslands close to the western edge of the Fens, accompanied by my guide, a native man named Wecca, whose services had been arranged for me by the local Christian mission. No man knew these lands better than he, Wecca assured me, and he would lead me deep into the marshes to find some suitable place of refuge for me. He was a man approaching middle-life – I judged him to be about thirty – and he told me how in his youth he had gone to fight for the Christian King Anna of the East Angles in his war against old King Penda, the last pagan ruler of the kingdom of Mercia. Wecca was a handsome man with clear, pale blue eyes which beamed out from the wild tangle of his flaxen hair and beard. He looked to me like an angel peeping through a bush.

The village we approached was a typical farmstead, surrounded by pastures full of grazing cattle and sheep. It was clearly a prosperous place with many timber structures of varying sizes, the thatched roofs visible from miles away as they poured clouds of grey smoke into the open sky. The whole village was encircled by a protective trench and a palisade. I would spend the night at this outpost, then tomorrow begin my search in the Fens for the place of my seclusion.

As we drew near, Wecca blew on the brass horn that hung from his neck to signal our presence. The men of the village soon emerged in a crowd to greet us, clad in their brightly coloured woollen tunics and dark trousers, some with long cloaks held at the shoulders by ornate bronze clasps. They carried spears, but only from habit, it seemed, for our arrival was expected and their faces were welcoming and friendly. These men were of the tribe called Gyrwas, or fen-men, a famously independent people for they knew themselves to inhabit the fringes of a land where no king might assert his rule effectively. But it encouraged me to see that a roughly made wooden shrine to the Cross stood at the gateway to their village. The men treated me with respect and reverence, regarding me as a kind of holy man. And, I learned later, a brave one.

I was taken to a guest hut, a place quite comfortable by the standards of a monk accustomed to only a bare cell. I had learned to distrust comfort, but I consoled myself with the thought that soon I would know little enough of it. The village outside was intolerably noisy with the grunting of pigs, the clucking of hens and the incessant screaming of small children. It would be almost impossible, I concluded sadly, for a man to clear his thoughts sufficiently to reflect upon God in a place of so many distractions. And the stink was abominable.

That evening I was led along a muddy pathway to the village beer hall, where a feast had been prepared in my honour. I would not have wished for such a thing, but I knew that hospitality was regarded as a tradition and a duty by these people, even when it meant that all might starve for it later.

When I entered their hall – dark, smoky and filled with the warm smell of cooking meat – the men rose from their benches out of respect, and were not seated again until I was escorted into the chair of the high guest. This made me feel uneasy. I was not a bishop or a priest, or any Church dignitary, only a humble monk passing through; and in those days I was much concerned with humility, or at least the outward appearance of it. Nevertheless it gratified me that these men honoured the Church through me. They were God-fearing people. So it seemed.

Soon the great iron cooking pot which stood on high trestles above the fire was lowered to the ground by dark-haired Celts, slaves in rough tunics and crude metal neck-bands to denote their lack of status. They carried the food to us on huge wooden platters: venison and fowl, along with sausages and blood puddings, and loaves of freshly baked bread. And there was also much strong drink: the mild ale and the more potent beer. I drank only a cup of the ale mixed with water and ate mostly bread with an occasional mouthful of chicken, for my order prohibited the consumption of red meat. To find the right balance was important, for I must demonstrate my appreciation while appearing to remain appropriately abstemious. Only the village men were present at this banquet: perhaps they considered women unsuitable company for a celibate monk. I thought this view most proper. When we had finished eating, we were subjected to the verses of a *scop* – a bard who plucked with indifferent skill upon a lyre, while reciting some interminable heathen tale about a hero who battled with a monster in a marsh.

As the evening went on, the men about me became increasingly drunk – to my growing concern and disapproval – until at last it seemed that I was the only sober man left in the hall. But with drunkenness they became more bold and outspoken, and some of the distance between us appeared to diminish – until then they had seemed like shy, awkward children who did not know quite how to address me. Yet now they began to overcome their timidity and questioned me openly about my intention to live as a recluse in the Fens. As light from the torches which hung from iron sconces on the flame-blackened walls bathed their bushy, bemused faces, it was clear that the notion was wholly inexplicable to them, even on the part of an inscrutable holy man.

‘Do you know?’ they whispered, crowding about me as their eyes grew wide and their faces

darkened. 'There are bad things. Out in the fen. Bad things in the darkness. In the night.'

Of course it was clear to me that the Fens must contain a multitude of natural perils. This must be obvious to anyone, and it was what made those sparsely populated wastelands the place of solitude sought. But the manner of these men seemed at once guarded and fearful in a way that did not suggest a concern for natural things. To my further questions they did not reply directly, but merely cast ominous glances at each other and mumbled evasively as they shook their heads. None were by no means sober enough to remember to make the sign of the Cross while they muttered darkly, if only as a gesture to please me.

I nodded at them gravely as I began to understand. They would not speak openly of their credulous terrors, fearing a primitive superstition that they might be heard by something outside – something grim and malevolent – and give it power over them. 'To speak of the Devil is to bid him come', as the saying goes.

I felt sudden anger towards these simple-minded men, and in my heart I began to despise them, although I told myself that my feelings were rather those of pity. In my younger days I had turned from the old pagan beliefs of my ancestors to embrace with zeal the new Faith of Christ. I knew with all the certainty of youth that our Church was the shining beacon of the one true God, which would lead men out of darkness and into the light. It would unite the petty scattered kingdoms of Britain under a single discipline and creed, even to make us one with our brother-lands in Europe. I never doubted that the Church would succeed in its holy mission to civilise our world, to foster learning and bring wisdom, to broker peace and lead us beyond the tribal rivalries and wars that so often lay waste to our fragmented lands. It was only a question of how long these things would take. And I had every reason to be optimistic. For I had seen in my own short lifetime the remarkable triumphs of the Church over the dark ways of paganism; and by the time I went into the Fenlands every Angle and Saxon kingdom of Britain, save for the backward South Saxons and the barbarous inhabitants of the island called Wight, had been won over to Christ. Kingdom by kingdom, region by region, we had taken these lands, replacing heathen idols with Christian ideals.

But that night among the Gyrwas I was filled with a sense of weary despair. These people called themselves Christians, but it was quite clear to me they were in truth barely reformed savages who still inhabited a world of squalid primitive superstitions and were ready at any sign of adversity to scurry back to the worship of devils and so damn their souls. Was it for this that the Church had fought so hard to convert them? The preachers from the local mission had clearly been remiss in their duties, for it seemed a miserable achievement. I saw now that these men were misguided and ignorant and their lives were governed by irrational fears. Yet I knew I walked in the light while they stumbled in darkness, and I understood that it was by the conquest of fear that a true Christian set himself apart from other men.

I took a deep breath as I reflected on my position. For I had not come here with any intent to be a preacher or missionary. I sought and longed only for solitude. The truth was that I approached a great crisis in my own life, and while I was not yet certain of its true nature, I had long sensed its coming. Alone upon the fen, I made ready to do battle with my gathering demons. But it seemed to me then to be something more than just coincidence that I stood in that hall, at that moment, facing those men who were so close to the pit of eternal damnation. I felt with certainty that I was the Lord's appointed messenger here, the agent of His Church, sent to correct these people in their ways of error. I must lay aside for the moment my monk's humility.

'Take heed, you men!' I called out. 'Do you think the Devil sends his minions to prowl in the darkness like your imaginary hobgoblins, to attack men without cause? I tell you this is not so. The

Devil seeks not the flesh but the soul of a man. It is sin, and sin alone, that makes us vulnerable to the Unholy One.' I paused, gazing at them fiercely. Then in my anger I tutted loudly and wagged reproachful finger at them. They stood, all rooted to the spot, their drunken eyes at once bulging and fearful. This was good, for I must terrify them more than all their monsters in the mist. 'The Devil ever watchful and ready to tempt men into sin,' I cried, 'for it is by sin that Satan prospers. And one day – *perhaps one day soon* – if the weight of man's sin upon the world grows to become so great that God turns His face from us, then the Devil will be freed from Hell to fall on this world and destroy it to burn it to ashes in a *great burst of fire!*' I flung my arms up wildly as I glowered at them, eliciting gasps and groans of dismay.

I was not certain how much they grasped of this; not even sure to what extent they understood the very concept of sin. It mattered only that they were impressed by my severity. They were simple people. In fact I thought them rather stupid. So I decided to make my message more direct.

'Thus I say to you, do not fear the darkness without, but tremble and look to the darkness within, for there lies the Devil's hunting ground. But the man who overcomes his sinful ways need have no fear of the Devil and his snares.' I threw up my head. 'I will go out into the wilderness and show you that there is nothing there for a righteous man to fear. I will set you a good Christian example.' And I concluded with some lines from one of the psalms, which seemed to me most apt:

Patiently I awaited the Lord;
He turned to me and heard my cry.
He raised me up from the lonely pit,
From out of the miry bog,
And set my feet upon stone,
To make my steps secure.

Then, much pleased with my actions, I bowed my head to them and walked to the doors, where I turned and said:

'Now I must rest. Goodnight to you, my friends. And thank you for a most convivial evening.'
Then I went off to my bed.

That night I was afflicted by the visitation of a terrible dream. I found myself wandering inside a dark woodland, lit only by moonbeams which faintly penetrated, here and there, the thick canopy of leaves and branches above, dappling the forest floor with small patches of faint silvery light. Somewhere nearby a soft voice called my name, and I began to follow it, stumbling over uneven ground, through bushes and around trees. Occasionally I caught the merest glimpse of a figure ahead of me that ran and weaved through the night before me, taunting my senses as I sought to fix my eyes upon it. It was like watching a fish darting in a stream. I was racing hard to catch this fleeting form – for what reason I could not tell – yet however much I strove to increase my pace, I was not able to close the distance between us. But as I went on, I slowly gained the impression of a girl, and my mind was filled with the image of long swishing hair, of firm breasts and slim bare legs beneath a short gown so delicate and flimsy it might have been woven from a spider's web. Then she laughed, a tinkling, intoxicating sound as she raced onward through the wood like a skittish wild creature.

All at once I emerged into what was like a dark glade, but as I ran my foot struck against some small prominence in the earth, and I stumbled and fell, to find myself lying face-down in the high grass. But I did not rest upon the hard ground, for I became suddenly aware, with a sense of profound alarm, that I was sprawled on top of another body, which lay on its back and looked up at me from

amidst shadows which entirely concealed its face. I reached out my hands, attempting to raise myself up, but as I did so my fingers pressed down onto warm, yielding flesh, and there came from under me another peal of that soft, sensuous laughter. I tried to pull my hands away, yet they felt leaden and beyond my control; and then they started to move as if by their own will, as I lay with all the helplessness of the dreamer, unable to break free from the forbidden sensations which were unfolding beneath me. I attempted to speak, but no words would come as my breath rose and fell in feverish gulps. I could hear the deep steady breathing of the other body, as inch by inch my hands crept upward over its firm rounded contours, and came finally to rest on the fleshy mounds of its breasts.

Now the form shuddered slightly, and gave a soft sigh, seeming to take exquisite pleasure from this. And I was becoming lost as I sank down into its warm embrace. Until abruptly, in a single movement the figure sat rigidly upright, bringing its face close to mine, so that finally I could see it clearly in the moonlight. It was the face of my own mother, dead for three years, gazing sternly back at me, her mouth fixed into a crooked rictus.

I awoke with a cry, dry-mouthed and drenched in sweat. It was still dark, and I reached out with my shaking hand to scoop a cup of water from the bucket beside my bed, drinking half of it, then splashing what remained over my face.

The dream had been an alarming one, more so because it seemed vaguely to me in those initial moments of awakening that this was not the first time I had experienced a dream of this kind. But as I became more fully awake this feeling seemed to drift away, and I rose up, then fell to my knees and prayed there fervently until the first light of day crept beneath the door to my hut and the noises from the stirring village began to rise all about me.

By the time I finished my prayers my mind felt less troubled, for I had begun to make sense of my dream. I saw that while its grossly sensual aspects had been deeply disturbing and nightmarish, I had been delivered from these horrors by the salutary image of my dead mother, rising up to drive all such impure urges away. Perhaps, I reflected, these things had been the symbols of a higher truth: that the Devil had sent a succubus to tempt me, and that my own mother had represented the Holy Mother, or the blessed Virgin herself, who had interceded on my behalf. These thoughts brought me much comfort and reassurance as I went out into the daylight with a renewed sense of resolution. The dream felt like a happy omen and a sign that Heaven itself smiled upon my intentions, while the Devil cursed me for them.

Chapter Two

Soon I departed from the village with Wecca. It was my good fortune that the day was dry and mild and the sky was clear. We went on foot, for this was the only practical way to journey through the marshes, although some parts of the Fens are accessible by boat along the rivers and wider streams. On the way I noticed in the distance the crumbling ruins of an ancient Roman fort, and I asked Wecca whether it was true, as I had once been told, that centuries ago the old Romans had attempted to drain parts of the Fens and turn them into arable land, although to truly tame any part of those intractable swamps had proved to be finally beyond the powers of even the Romans. Wecca shrugged, and frowned, then replied in his mangled dialect:

‘It is maybe true. There are some few ruins of old Romans hereabouts. I do not know the purpose they serve, long time ago. My people, we stay away from these places, Brother. Built from stone by dark magic and given over to Roman devils. Evil spirits live in them still.’ He stopped himself abruptly and looked at me uneasily. No doubt he recalled the rebuke I had given to the village men the previous night for their idle superstitions.

‘There is nothing to fear in those old buildings, Wecca,’ I told him, ‘except for lumps of stone that may fall onto your head. The Romans merely possessed the knowledge to build with stone, which our people lack.’

We made good progress at first, and it was only a short time before the open marshlands stretched before us, and the ground grew more boggy and wet. We trudged onward, our feet sinking into soft mud as we waded through shallow pools of dark sludge and fetid weeds, our passage becoming ever harder and slower. High grass and reeds rose to envelop us, while our surroundings grew more bleak and inhospitable. Wecca went before me, finding the safe paths and hacking a way through the thickest patches of vegetation with his *seax* – his long knife. Our destination was an island deep in the marshes in the territory known as the Crowland. Wecca informed me that this island was habitable and safe; others had attempted to settle there in the distant past, but now it was entirely deserted.

The sun was at its height, and we had travelled half the day without stopping when we came to some woodlands that gradually inclined above the sunken marshes, and as we entered them I felt the ground become firmer. These wooded knolls stretched far before us and were the only landmarks for miles around. I turned quickly to survey the terrain behind, which we had traversed that day: a vast expanse of wild, grey and silent monotony. It was as dark and despairing as anything I might have hoped for.

At length we came to a winding stream, and we followed this until we reached a place where numerous other pools and rivulets converged, to create within their midst a collection of small wooded islands, many of them half-concealed by the dense undergrowth. One of these was our destination. It was a good place, Wecca assured me; the water was clean, and there were fish to add to my diet, should I care to catch them. But I had taken a vow that I would allow myself no such luxuries but would be sustained upon plain bread alone. Wecca led me to a place on the bank of a wide stream and told me that this was the shallowest point where we might cross over to the island. Then he threw down his cloak, pulled off his muddy boots, stripped himself of his tunic and trousers, and carrying only his knife he strode quite naked, apart from his array of necklaces and arm rings, into the stream. I stood and watched him wade across, and saw that at the deepest point the water came up to his neck. Then he emerged and clambered through the mud on the opposite bank, and turned to face me.

‘Come,’ he called to me. ‘It is safe. But you should take off clothes. It will not be good to walk

them muddy and wet. It will make sores come.'

I could not deny this suggestion was sensible, so hurriedly I undressed, laying my boots and robe on the bank, but then rolling up my cloak and taking it with me, holding it above my head to keep it dry as I entered the stream. As I waded in deeper I gave an involuntary gasp, as instantly the soft current of the chill water brought to my body a cold sensual thrill, a sudden and intense awareness of my entire physical self. And for the moment I became frozen, quite unable to move as the sensation seemed to overwhelm me. Then I stirred myself and went onward to the far bank. As I rose from the water I was at once aware of Wecca, standing nearby and gazing at my body with an undisguised interest. Feeling awkward I turned away, brushing off the clinging drops of water as I unrolled my cloak, then threw it on and wrapped it about me. I turned back to Wecca. He was still staring at me now in what seemed like surprise, as if my wish to cover myself were only another example of my incomprehensible eccentricity. These people had no sense of bodily shame whatsoever – another legacy of their primitive pagan habits. It was a thing in which the Church still strove to educate them. After a few moments he said quietly:

'It is good to see...'

'What is?' I said, a little astonished.

'That a holy man,' he pointed to me and smiled, then raised his hands to indicate his own nakedness, 'is made like other men.' He seemed somehow pleased by this.

'But a monk is a man,' I told him in exasperation, for his expression suggested that until now he had not been wholly convinced of this. I could only wonder vaguely what he might have expected.

'Good to see,' he repeated with a nod, then added firmly: 'We are goodly men.' I could make nothing of this. Then he said to reassure me: 'This is a fine island. It never floods. Come, I will show you.'

He turned to lead me, although this hardly seemed necessary, since most of the island was visible from where we stood. I followed him for a brief while, concentrating mostly on averting my eyes, as I began to find that his careless nudity was disconcerting me. At last I said to him:

'Thank you, Wecca. You may go back now and wait for me across the stream. I would like to look around on my own.'

He nodded without offence and strolled away. I began to wander about, inspecting this potential refuge which was in fact just a grassy wooded hillock surrounded by water.

That day, as I have said, was mild and pleasant, and even the ever-present Fenland mist was but the merest wisps of vapour on the waters, while soft sunlight shone down to warm my face. But even this could not disguise what a truly forlorn and barren place this was. A life spent here could only be one of damp, cold and squalid privation. It was exactly what I sought.

In the middle of the island, at its highest point, I discovered an ancient tumulus, a tall solid burial mound of earth, covered with heavy stones which had clearly been brought here from somewhere beyond the marshes. At its base on one side, the large rocks had at some time been torn away, and an attempt had been made to excavate down inside the structure in a search for treasures and grave goods buried alongside the bones of whoever lay there. I was most surprised to find this rugged tribute to the dead in such a remote place, the only sign that there had ever been any human habitation here. Clearly any settlers had long ago abandoned this island, unable to eke out a living here. But this did not concern me, for their needs had not been the same as mine. Yet it did occur to me that the tumulus might be useful. It could serve as a solid foundation, to support the shelter I must build for myself. Now I must return to my monastery to bid farewell to my brothers and come back with building materials and men to assist me. Then I would be entirely alone.

Finally I returned to cross back over the stream and pulled off my cloak as I strode into the water. ~~But this time I allowed myself no moment of pause, no brief sensation of indulgence or pleasure.~~ I hurried across to the opposite bank, snatching up my clothes and pulling them on while I was still wet. Then I went to find Wecca. I discovered him lying on the grass nearby. He was on his back, his arms stretched up to rest his head in his hands. He was still naked, drying his body in the faint sunlight; and as I drew near I saw he had fallen into a light sleep. In that moment I felt loath to wake him, for he appeared so tranquil and innocent, this great rough-looking man. As I stood over him, I found I was beginning to stare with a growing fascination at his body, exposed there in the golden glow of the sun. I told myself as I did so that this was to reassure me that there truly were no innate differences between us, as he had supposed there might be. But in fact there were differences, for mine was the thin body of a monk from the scriptorium, and his was a sturdy frame with powerful muscles and old scars visible on his arms and legs, the wages of years of toil and battle.

It had been many years since I last gazed directly upon an unclothed human form, not since my childhood in fact. When I went with other monks from the monastery into the outside world, I would sometimes see people bathing and swimming in ponds and streams, but I had been strictly instructed that it was seemly to turn my eyes from this. Now that I found myself alone, looking secretly upon this uncovered body, I found I was unable to tear my gaze from it. I reflected that my stare was born of innocent admiration for this perfect example of God's creation, this fleshly instrument so ideally fitted for the life it led. But still my eyes lingered with a devouring intimacy upon the small goose bumps that covered the pale skin in the open air, the broad chest covered in thick hair that rose and fell in a gentle rhythm, and the thin line of down that ran along the middle of the flat torso and was lost amongst the wild growth of curls about the groin.

Suddenly Wecca sighed faintly and stirred a little in his sleep. As he did so I felt a tingling sense of shock, for I saw at once that his organ began to stiffen and rise, becoming tumescent in a few moments. In that instant his eyes opened, and he looked up at me, smiling drowsily. I turned away in alarm and tried to quell the tremble in my voice as I said:

'We are finished here. I have decided this place will be suitable.'

He stood, and moved before me, his member still half erect, although he did not seem to notice this or else to care. Then he nodded and said:

'Yes. I tell you this island is best.'

'Thank you, Wecca,' I said. 'Your advice was sound. Now go and get dressed. We should leave.'

'Yes.' He thought for a moment and said, 'We must go while there is still much light.'

Then he turned and pissed copiously into the grass, before going off to put on his clothes. When I returned it seemed his mood had changed, for I saw that his face appeared troubled. He stood in silence and looked at me with apparent nervousness.

'What is it, Wecca?' I asked him. 'What is the matter?'

He approached me, seeming lost for words, then he fell to his knees and grasped at my legs.

'There is much I would tell you,' he cried out in sudden distress. 'But you will be angry at me and call me a bad man. You will call me sinner and curse me.'

At his touch I felt a strange, slightly dizzy sensation as my heart began to pound. I did not like people touching me.

'I will not be angry, Wecca,' I said, my voice faint as my throat grew tight. 'Whatever it is... I promise... I will not.' I reached out to motion him to his feet. He stood for a moment, his wide blue eyes staring into mine, and once more I was struck by his wild beauty. Then without warning he flung himself at me, his arms enfolding me as he swept me to him in a powerful embrace, his cheek pressed

to mine. And my strength simply melted away as I stood quivering and powerless, unable to move or think, trapped there in his arms. While I knew in my mind I must try to break free and demand some explanation, my body would not respond and I felt I had no ability to resist him.

‘Brother,’ he gasped into my ear, and it seemed he struggled to speak. ‘You know most men be good and natural men. But other men be not natural men and do not do natural things. But these not natural men are true men. This you must believe.’ I heard his words only vaguely, for my body would not overcome and I seemed to be sinking into a kind of daze. Then he thrust me backward, grasping my shoulders and holding me at arm’s length, restoring to me a little of my senses, before he pulled me close to him again, our eyes meeting as I felt the stirring of his breath and the warmth of his body against me. ‘Do you understand what I say?’ he urged me, and I looked back at him, still overwhelmed as I attempted to shake my head. He drew closer still, his breath hot on my ear, and spoke in a whisper which made it seem as if he feared some intruder might overhear us in this incredibly remote place. But I did not listen to his words. For it was now I recalled the previous night and the fearful reluctance of the village men to speak openly of their superstitious beliefs. At once I began to understand. Wecca was attempting to warn me against something, and when he said that ‘Not natural men are true men’ he spoke of his own conviction that the tales of unnatural beings which prowled in the Fens were true.

I stood, my mind simply blank and stunned, barely comprehending what had just happened. I could not believe my own passive response to Wecca’s alarming actions, my seeming inability to offer any resistance.

Wecca was still talking, whispering all manner of wild nonsense, encouraged by my failure to react angrily. I was still too immersed in my own state of shock and dismay to listen to him closely, but what he seemed to be telling me was that the remnants and survivors of old and terrible races still inhabited, in isolated pockets, the deepest and darkest reaches of the Fens. He meant that over the centuries the waves of invaders who had flooded into our isles had supplanted, time and again, the earlier inhabitants, who had fled to seek shelter in the most wild and remote regions of the land, to live there in dwindling numbers, practising their primitive magic, growing inbred and deformed until they were no longer like men at all – if indeed they had ever been. I had heard of these superstitions before. The Church called these mythical creatures the *hominem silvestrem* or wild men of the forest. Some credulous folk imagined they were not in fact the fleshly scions of monsters at all, but rather the vengeful ghosts of the monsters themselves. Where the wild men were concerned, many were uncertain where degraded flesh ended and dark spirit began.

I found these delusions interesting, for I believed I understood how they had come about. When two centuries ago, our own peoples had come to Britain from our Germanic homelands, we had driven back many of the native population – the Celtic Britons – until now they occupied mostly the western parts of the island: the lands of the outsiders, whom we call the *wealas*. But it seemed most likely that some Britons, fleeing subjection or slavery, had retreated into the concealment of these great Fens and that their descendants might still exist here in small groups and must surely appear to be strange and alien if ever sighted by people like Wecca, who had supposed even monks might be made differently to other men.

Yet I found I could not be angry with Wecca for his foolish beliefs, for it was clear his warning was one of honest concern, and that he had risked my wrath to give it. I simply assured him that a good Christian had nothing to fear from the hearth side tales of old women. But I thanked him for the basic good sense of his advice, which was never to wander too deeply into the fen, and *never* at night.

But as we trekked back that afternoon through the marshes, my mind was much disturbed. For it was very clear to me that I, a monk and a servant of God who had willingly taken my strict vows

renunciation of the flesh, should not have found myself entranced in the sunlight by the bare skin of a
common woodsman, nor overcome by his sudden embrace. And as I gazed at the sturdy form of
Wecca, striding in front of me, I found myself at once stricken by a sense of pure anger towards him,
and in my heart I cursed him for an ignorant fool and a shameless savage.

Chapter Three

Next I travelled by river up to the north coast of East Anglia, where I discussed with the boatmen the practical arrangements for transporting men and materials into the Fens. It was not an easy matter but one that could be managed. I was able to inform the head boatman that one of our revered saints, the blessed St. Dado, had died a glorious martyr's death at a place nearby, many years ago, as a missionary preaching the Faith to the pagans. He told me he knew the story, and what he had heard was that the blessed Dado had gone to preach at the hall of the local lord, where everyone regarded him as a harmless lunatic, until one night, when the warriors in the beer hall were more than usually intoxicated, someone had discovered the drunken Dado attempting to fornicate with a goat. So they had taken him out to use him for target practice, and he had died bleating like the object of his desire. This was often the way with such men, he smirked, 'Cross in one hand and cock in the other.' Much angered, I cautioned him for his soul's sake never again to repeat this malicious calumny. Then I concluded my business and set out to return to my monastery.

Some time after my arrival there, I was summoned to an audience with the abbot, a man named Adelard, in his private study. It was an impressive chamber – unlike the plain dwellings of the other monks – with a shuttered window which faced the setting sun, and walls adorned with shelves full of hide-bound books – an enormous treasure – along with fine wood carvings depicting Biblical scenes. Abbot Adelard was a Frank, who spoke English perfectly, although still with a strong accent, and he greeted me with his customary dignity of manner. He was a man of advanced years, perhaps fifty, but his mild exterior concealed a true fierceness in his devotion to the doctrines of the Church.

'So, Brother Athwold,' he said, as he motioned to me to stand before him. 'You are determined to persist with this matter of yours?'

'I am, Father Abbot,' I replied.

'And the reason for your decision, the troubles and dissatisfactions in your mind, I must presume they remain unresolved?'

'Yes, Father Abbot.'

'I must tell you, Brother,' he said, 'that your longing after a life of seclusion has won you much esteem here in our community. The younger monks especially seem to admire your resolve to commit yourself to an existence of solitary contemplation.' He shrugged. 'And why not? Such sacrifice is an admirable thing. So most men believe.' I was aware now that a discordant note had crept into his voice. 'But I feel compelled to ask myself what would be the condition of the Church if all those who serve in it were to abandon their responsibilities and seek escape from the world? The answer is more clearly that the enterprise of our Holy Church would die. So I say to you, Brother Athwold, look carefully and study closely your own motives in this, and consider if what you are doing is truly a thing of devotion and humility, or really just an act of intransigence and pride.' He paused and looked hard at me, for there was significance in these last words. 'I know your opinion of the Irish matter. Indeed you made it very clear. You made it a source of contention all about you. You, who I once thought to be a man of such loyalty to the Church. But you have seen fit to question the wisdom of your superiors and even of the blessed Augustine himself.'

At that moment Abbot Adelard and I seemed to be returned to our positions of nearly two years before. Back then, the Irish matter had been controversial. My own opinion of it had been outspoken and unusually at variance with the prevailing view within our Catholic Church.

The matter concerned the long and bitter dispute between two Christian sects – the Celtic Church of Britain and Ireland, and the Catholic Church of Rome. British Celts are of course Christians – though often poor ones – a legacy from the days when Britain was a province of the old Roman Empire. But over two hundred years ago, when the Empire of Rome collapsed in the west, the British and Roman churches were split and separated as pagan barbarians overran much of Europe, and the British Church began to exist independently from the Roman. At that time a British missionary named Patricius took the Christian Faith across the sea to the Irish peoples; as the pagan Angles, Saxons, Jutes and others began their migration into Britain. Later, the now devout Irish Church sent its own Christian missionaries into Britain to begin converting these heathen settlers – the native British refused to do so, for there was constant war between them.

Then, about seventy years ago, Pope Gregory had sent the monk Augustine on his famous mission to Britain, to Kent, the southern kingdom of the Jutes, to win the pagan lands for the Roman Church. So while Irish missionaries won converts among the Picts and Angles of northern Britain, spreading down from their base upon the Island of Hii, or Iona, in the far north, the Roman Catholics established their mission in the south. In time an unseemly rivalry arose. For by now the Roman and Celtic churches had grown far apart in their customs and practices.

The Romans greatly disapproved of the Britons' unorthodoxy, and regarded the whole British Church as merely an upstart and heretical offshoot of their own. But Augustine, who was now archbishop, saw that if the Britons could be persuaded to adopt the Roman ways, then this would greatly add to the authority and prestige of his own Church. He decided that the British Church was a thing ripe to be taken over. But he botched the matter completely. At first he decreed that the British clergy were to be artfully persuaded into becoming Roman Catholics. But when they proved stubborn in their own traditions, Augustine became incensed.

'Who are these Britons,' he thundered, 'to resist and obstruct us? They must be compelled to comply.'

A conference was arranged between Augustine and the religious leaders among the Britons. Church records exonerate Augustine from all blame for its failure, but it is easy to read between the lines. Augustine greeted the British clergymen without respect and glowered at them menacingly throughout the debate, seeking only to intimidate them. The Britons became antagonised, and when Augustine saw they would not be bullied into obedience, he flew into a rage and cursed them to their faces, threatening damnation and destruction on them before storming out. And so an opportunity was missed, and the two churches remained divided and unreconciled. I always felt that Augustine's behaviour in this matter was quite shocking.

Then came the Irish missionaries, bringing their own version of Celtic Christianity. When I was a child, my family and I were converted to the Faith by Irish preachers. I learned to admire and respect them greatly. I particularly remember a monk named Conchobar. He was an awesome-looking man, tall and rugged, his tonsure cut in the peculiar Irish way – the 'old way' as he called it – with the front and top of his head wholly shaved, leaving only his long and unruly locks at the back. He never washed or cut his beard, and he wore a filthy robe which he never took off, although it was so worn and ragged it tended to expose every part of him. His fasts would last for weeks, while he would sometimes sit on a rock and meditate for days. In winter he would wade into the river and stand for hours in the freezing water. '*It is colder in Hell!*' he would cry. And he was fervent in his condemnation of sin – 'the mortal enemy to be excised from men'. I thought him a remarkable man.

When I decided to receive the tonsure, I reflected long and hard over which church I should join. Finally I chose the Roman, as the first and universal Church. I think I was also intimidated by what

saw of the harshness of the lives of the Irish monks. And for years I remained content in my choice.

~~The antipathy between the churches continued to grow over the years. In my monastery the Irish were derided as idiotic and filthy creatures. Irish jokes abounded. Yet I knew their beliefs were strong and sincere, and I was angered by this discord over matters of mere form between fellow Christians. I admired the devout Irish ways of poverty and humility – qualities for which our high Roman churchmen were certainly not renowned. Then news came that the matter was to be settled finally. There was to be a synod held in the north – the stronghold of the Irish – at a monastery in a place called the Bay of the Light, where King Oswy of Northumbria would decide between the two churches and declare whose rituals and doctrines should in future be adopted in his kingdom. No one could fail to understand the significance of this. It was an open bid by the Roman Catholics to become predominant within the Irish heartlands.~~

My monastery was filled with excited debate over this matter. Abbot Adelard and other monks of high rank, spoke of it as the final battle in a great and glorious war. I grew angry, and told my brother monks that the synod was set as a trap, for the Irish advocates – doubtless honest and plain-spoken men – would never sway a king in council like the smooth and polished politicians of our Church. Before I was aware of it, I had become a dissenting voice. And the other monks always seemed keen to encourage me in my outspokenness. Then one day in discussion, I remarked that this whole matter might have been settled years before with peaceful compromise had it not been for the *intransigence and pride* of Augustine.

Later that day I was summoned into the presence of Abbot Adelard. He gazed at me for a time without speaking, but his expression was enough to tell me my transgression had been grave.

‘Blasphemy!’ he spat at last.

‘Father Abbot?’ I looked at him with astonishment. Perhaps my words had been hasty and imprudent, but blasphemy? They were hardly that.

‘Do you think, Brother Athwold, that any word spoken in this monastery remains unknown to me?’ He glared at me savagely. Truly he was in a fury, barely able to control himself. ‘And I say your words were a blasphemy. That a mere and supposedly humble monk should speak so of our blessed Augustine – that holy man! – the founder of our Church in these lands. That a member of this community...’ he stopped, apparently speechless, shaking his head in disbelief.

‘I am truly sorry, Father Abbot,’ I said, as his rage began to frighten me.

‘I will not tolerate such insolence!’ he shouted suddenly, his face growing red. ‘I am amazed, Brother, that you would speak openly to criticise our Church in defence of that deplorable nest of Irish heretics.’

‘My apologies again, Father,’ I murmured, hanging my head. ‘I was only distressed to see such divisions among Christians...’

‘*Christians!*’ he hissed. ‘They cannot be dignified by the name – they do not keep Easter at its proper time or practice the sacraments as we do; they even consult with their local people in matters of religious custom, if such a thing can be believed. And then there is the abomination of their tonsure. They are barely better than pagans. Hardly like us in any way, for their customs are a foul and loathsome parody of our own.’

‘They are godly men, Father Abbot,’ I objected, shocked by the force of his contempt, and finding that slowly my fear was turning into anger. ‘I believe the differences between us are only small matters...’

‘Ah!’ he said with a scowl. ‘I suspect now I have nurtured a serpent inside my Eden. Let me instruct you, Brother. Let me tell you about your “godly men”. Time and again, we of the true Church have

sought to persuade them from their ways of transgression. We send to them rulings from our archbishop, and even directives from his Holiness, in our efforts to correct them. We have requested they supply specifics of their rituals and practices, to show them where they err, and demanded reports of their attempts to convert the pagans – facts, figures and details. But they simply refuse to respond. They are truly monsters!’

‘But, Father Abbot,’ I said mildly, ‘they are merely not familiar with our Roman ways. Remember that Ireland was never a part of the old Empire. The Irish simply do not understand the concept of central authority. They are concerned with the business of saving souls, rather than in compiling records about it. Surely we cannot despise them for this?’

‘Monsters, wicked monsters, to defy us so!’ he growled under his breath. ‘They follow no true doctrine but act according to their own interpretations. This cannot be tolerated. You should understand that it is our skills of organisation and orderly administration which have been the greatest weapon in our conquest and control of these lands and their ignorant illiterate natives. For nothing frightens and browbeats them more than the writings on a document.’ He seemed to forget, or ignore the fact that I was a native. Then he said softly, as if to himself: ‘Ah, yes. It is our talent for these things that in the end will make them all into our bondsmen.’ Then his voice rose again in anger. ‘But do not suppose for all our successes that our victory is assured. Remember our past reverses among the Northumbrians, and the East Saxons, and others, that demonstrate clearly how fragile our hold upon these chaotic lands remains. The pagans retreat, yet they still have the power to corrupt. So must all Christians remain *united*, to speak with one voice. In this house mine is the voice of the Church and it is your place only to accept and obey. Understand me, Brother Athwold. My authority here is absolute, and I will endure no words of dissent. Reflect upon your *maleficium* – your shameful misdeed – and know that if you offend again it will be my place to determine your fate.’

I bowed my head to him in meek and abject submission. But even as I did so there was born in my heart the secret spark of defiance and fury whose flame was to grow and consume me. I saw then that Adelard – the voice of the Church – cared nothing for honesty or conscience, but solely for his own authority, and my docile surrender and conformity. He concerned himself only with the politics of the world, and sought to bully and intimidate me just as Augustine had with those British monks. I knew him finally as a hollow, soulless creature with nothing truly Christian inside him. So I began to despise him.

Soon news arrived concerning the outcome of the synod. The Roman advocate, a priest named Wilfrid, had slyly derided the Irish in debate, asking with mock amazement how they and the British inhabitants of a few remote and backward islands – could be so presumptuous as to oppose and contradict the opinions of all Christendom, and the very Church of St. Peter? As I had predicted, the Romans were triumphant and the Irish were forced to retreat, their customs rejected, their Church fatally weakened. And it seemed to me that while our Church was a glorious thing, the men who served it in these times often fell far short of glory.

Of course this victory was met with jubilation inside the monastery. I knew I lived under the constant surveillance of Adelard and his informers, so I went with care, giving no outward sign of my feelings in anything. This is the form my rebellion took. Self-concealment became my natural condition and suppressed rage my only companion as I withdrew into myself and grew suspicious of all those about me. I performed my duties adequately, to avoid accusations of obvious fault, but I did nothing more and shunned all company, not even communicating to others unless first addressed, and giving no more of myself in anything than I must. I distanced myself from the rest of the community until I came to see how hopelessly I had backed myself into a corner.

At that time a plague came to ravage the land, and for more than a year we were trapped inside the monastery, forbidden to venture outside for fear of contagion. And, thus isolated and restricted, the pressures in me grew, as the torments of doubt began to fester in my mind. I became ever more conflicted within, as I was haunted by horrible fears that I might be deeply in error and drenched in mortal sin. Could it be that the Devil had sown in me these seeds of resentment so that in my heart I defied the Church with that same anger and presumption with which Satan had opposed Heaven? Desperately I would pace my tiny cell in the night-time, a battle seeming to rage in my head, filling me with uncertainty and terror for the condition of my soul. Or I would awake from troubled dreams, my mind filled with the incoherent echoes of angry voices; or crying out in alarm as I imagined in the darkness that the walls of my cell were closing in upon me. In despair I did penance and mortified my flesh. I prayed constantly and feverishly for guidance. And I asked myself if all my torments were really only the conceits born of my stubborn pride?

It might have served me then to have accepted this; to have submitted and confessed my fault and sought absolution to end my pain. But finally I could not. For there remained inside me a lone unbending voice that cried out: must my principles be pride? Might not my anger be righteous?

I was not ready for atonement.

So I remained alone, confiding my feelings to no one. As the state of my mind worsened, I knew that my life at the monastery had become insupportable and entirely detrimental to me, for I found no answers there. The place which had once been my home was now one of intolerable oppression and confinement to me. And I longed to be free of it: to find somewhere distant to still my mind. I was lost, terribly lost, and I knew I must find solitude to seek my reconciliation with God. So it was that I determined to lead a hermit's life – like the desert anchorites of old – in which I was certain I could feel no more alone than I did in that place.

At first my petition to the abbot was ignored. But I was persistent. For the place of my retreat I proposed the Fens – the most dark and inhospitable of regions – so that my intent might not be dismissed in any way as merely vain or frivolous. And at last Adelard relented.

So finally I came to stand once more before Abbot Adelard, on the eve of my departure, as he stared and regarded me coldly. His accusation that I was forsaking my duty to the Church stung me deeply and instilled in me a strong sense of guilt; but I saw how the monastery itself had come to seem like a metaphor for my very being. How could I hope to stand against the chaos of the world outside until I learned to contend with the turmoil within?

‘And so, Brother,’ he said, ‘it is time for you to leave us. But first you will hear my judgement of you, for I think you stand in need of it. When you first came to us here, you became for a time a most promising member of this community. But your downfall has been your obduracy, which has become apparent in your excessive zeal. Ah, yes. It is true that a monk can be too zealous in his faith, I assure you. And it always displeases me to see this, for such a man is seldom reliable or sound. Remember that we must always be careful to bridle our faith with clear thought. This is what your Irish neighbours understood, and that is why they lost. Common people may be impressed by displays of religious excess, but to thinking men such things are only the foolish posturing of children. I have often thought the title “saint” to be a distinction we bestow too freely upon attention seekers and lunatics. Yet I suppose these things please the simple folk and make them easier to manage. But you are not a simple man, Brother. So I caution you, do not fall so much in love with your own fervour that you mistake it for the true love of God. I have seen too many young monks divert their gross fleshly urges into what they delude themselves is religious passion.’

‘I am hardly seeking to satisfy fleshly urges alone in the middle of a swamp,’ I reminded him.

‘Perhaps not,’ he frowned. ‘But I tell you plainly that while more impressionable men might see something to admire in your actions, I see only a man who would live without order, discipline or restraint.’

Inwardly I scowled at him. I could barely believe his words – that I was being rebuked inside a monastery for being overly religious.

‘Now you may leave me,’ he concluded. ‘I wish you contentment, and bless your venture, Brother. Not because I approve of it, but because I would see you gone from here.’

Chapter Four

There were two servants – good carpenters and thatchers – who went with me from the monastery journeying up towards the sea: to the great bay north of the Fens where lies the mouth of the river called the Weolud which flows down through the marshlands. We took with us a horse-drawn cart containing our many items: building materials and implements, and my own essential things including sacks of grain and quern-stones to make and burn my loaves of bread in the cinders of the fire grate.

We travelled all that day over the flat bare plains of East Anglia, the lands of the North-folk, dotted in every direction with distant settlements, until at last we came within sight of the faraway coastlines as the day grew late and the light began to fade. Then we turned from our course to enter the grounds of a great estate where we might seek shelter for the night. Soon we came upon a small group of dwellings, where several of the cottagers greeted us, then took us onward to the hall of their thegn, a grand manor house where a steward soon came out to meet us.

‘Lord Osric is away,’ he informed us, ‘summoned by the king to Rendil’s ham. But it is his instruction that men of the Church are always made welcome. I will have lodgings prepared.’

In the absence of the lord and his chief retainers the great hall seemed quiet and almost deserted so we were taken to a chamber annexed to the main building; and as we rested and warmed ourselves by the fire a servant brought us some bread and cheese for our supper. When we had eaten we began to settle our weary limbs for the night, but then there came a knock at the door, and the servant entered again and said to me:

‘Lady Hild, the mother of Lord Osric, has asked if you will present yourself to her. She is very ill, near to death, and is confined to her chamber. Normally she will see no one. But she has asked to speak with you.’

I nodded my assent and followed him along a shadowy network of occasionally torchlit passages until we came to a closed door beyond which I could hear the soft chanting of women’s voices as they sang what I took to be curative charms. Their tone was muted, so I could not tell if their words were Christian prayers or pagan spells, or even a combination of both. The kingdom of the East Angles had been converted to the Faith years ago, but sometimes the old customs survived barely disguised among the new.

My guide tapped on the door, and as a serving woman answered, I saw that the room inside was faintly lit, the air thick and pungent with smoking incense. I was led in, and as I entered the woman who sat in attendance stopped singing, then rose and withdrew at once, leaving me alone with the lady herself, who sat wrapped in a dressing-gown of silver wolfskin. I gazed hard to see her, since her face was half hidden as she reclined in the shadows, yet it seemed to shine there with an almost translucent whiteness. Then she leaned forward into the light of a candle which stood on a small table by her side, dismissing the servant at the door with a nod as the glow further accentuated her extreme pallor; and I saw grey hair pulled back sharply from a face that was almost skeletal, the shrunken skin drawn tightly across the bones.

‘I am Brother Athwold, lady,’ I said, ‘and I thank you for the hospitality we have received. How may I serve you?’

‘How pleasant to welcome a guest,’ she said in a voice that was faint and slightly slurred. It seemed that her eyes swam as she peered at me, and I realised she must be drugged and drowsy from a potion

taken to ease her pain. She gave a smile, although in truth it was the grimace of a death mask, and even through the burning incense a cloying smell of sickness hung in the air. ‘Your coming fortuitous,’ she announced. ‘Soon I will die, and I wish to make a confession.’

‘I am not a priest,’ I told her. ‘I cannot give you absolution.’

‘No!’ she agreed. ‘But I hope you will listen to me and give me your counsel. I have long tried to be a good Christian, Brother. But as my time draws near I find suddenly there are doubts which trouble me. I wish to discuss them with you.’

‘What is the nature of these doubts?’ I said.

She gave a long sigh, and her breath rattled in her throat as she sank back into her chair.

‘To explain this, I must speak of a time long ago, when I was young and first married, and the Faith of Christ was new to this land. Our first Christian king, Eorpwald, was murdered by a pagan usurper and there was war in the kingdom between rival factions. But at last Sigbert came to be our king, returning from his long exile among the Franks and firmly imbued with their Christian beliefs. He was determined to convert the whole of East Anglia. Soon after his return a Frankish bishop arrived here on a progress through the land. His name was Felix.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Bishop of Dommoc, now gone to glory.’

‘He came one day,’ she nodded, ‘with a retinue of priests and acolytes, and a formidable escort of armed men, to speak with the authority of the king. His preaching was filled with fire and all warning, and he left us in no doubt that compliance was demanded of us, as of all the noble families. There was much local opposition to this royal decree, and its harsh tone was resented, for until then we had been free to worship as we chose. Men asked how we might dare to abandon the beliefs of our ancestors which governed the cycle of the seasons and our traditional way of life. They looked to my husband’s father, Lord Aldfrith, to give them leadership. But the memory of war was fresh in his mind, and he feared that if the kingdom should turn once more upon itself it would make us vulnerable to enemies beyond our borders. So, under the fierce eye of Bishop Felix, he conceded that we must accept the new Faith.’

‘His only son, my husband Oslac, was deeply affected by this. He was a fine young man of eighteen, good-natured, tall and handsome, his father’s pride, and very devoted to the old gods. We had been married little more than a year, and had already been blessed by the birth of our son Osric, while deep love had grown between us. But now he grew fretful, and remote even from me.’

‘Then one night I was disturbed in my sleep by Oslac rising from the bed and pulling on his clothes in the darkness. Barely awake, I asked what he was doing.’

‘“I must go,” he answered in a strange sleepy tone. “There is a knocking at the door.”’

‘“I heard nothing,” I said. “Come back to bed.”’

‘“I must go!” he said again.’

‘“Go where?” I asked him.’

‘“Outside!” he replied simply.’

‘It all felt like a dream to me, and I fell asleep again and knew no more until I woke at dawn to find him missing from our bed. I went to ask the servants where he was, but no one had seen him, and he was nowhere to be found. Now we grew alarmed, and his father began to organise a search-party for him.’

‘These men returned later, bringing Oslac with them. He was deathly pale, his clothes were soaked through, and he was frozen to the bone, for the night had been very cold. Lord Aldfrith questioned him, but Oslac barely replied or even acknowledged him, and seemed to be confused and lost in a kind of dreamlike state. The servants told us that he had been discovered in a far-off part of the estate, and

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