



**The Fourth Lost Tale of Mercia: Athelward the
Historian**

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The Fourth Lost Tale of Mercia:
Athelward the Historian

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“There, are, indeed, some notices of antiquity, written in the vernacular tongue after the manner of a chronicle, and arranged according to the years of our Lord. By means of these alone, the times succeeding [Bede] have been rescued from oblivion : for of [Athelward], a noble and illustrious man, who attempted to arrange these chronicles in Latin, and whose intention I could applaud if his language did not disgust me, it is better to be silent.”

—William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, Preface

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Hampshire, Wessex
993 A.D.

The intruder entered quietly, but Athelward recognized the footsteps of his dearest servant right away. The servant knew better than to interrupt the ealdorman in the middle of his work, so this must be an emergency. But if this was an emergency, why didn't the servant say something? Silent or not, his presence wreaked irreparable damage. Athelward could not focus on his writing when someone loomed close enough to see over his shoulder, nor when such trivial questions

plagued his mind as why the servant entered in the first place. Already, he felt himself slipping from his own stream of thought: a stream consisting of the dazzling rapids of history swirling in harmony with the sophisticated currents of the Latin language.

Athelward's quill quivered with his growing frustration, then at last fell aside. It was too late now; his focus had been dashed upon the rocks and left to dry. Through gritted teeth, he said, "What is it?"

"There is a woman here to see you, my lord. She seeks your aid." The Celtic servant, Drustan, seemed entirely undaunted by his master's mood. Very little phased Drustan, who had a smug and rather reckless demeanor for a servant. Despite this, he almost always seemed to know Athelward's mind, even without being told what to do, so Athelward kept him.

This, however, was not such a fitting example. Athelward could not believe he had been interrupted for something so trivial, and without more of an explanation. Because he was ealdorman of Wessex, thousands of people desired his aid every day. The fortune of a single woman, when compared to the importance of completing the great literary work Athelward now devoted himself to, was so trivial as to be completely insignificant.

Athelward closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The candles around him fluttered as he exhaled, casting undulating waves of warmth on his face. He did not want to waste his time with a useless conversation right now, especially with a servant he would probably expel from his service on the morrow. Better to simply ignore Drustan's presence and get back to work. After a few moments, he felt as if he succeeded. He felt the stream of Latin words flowing back into his mind, the stream which flowed to his heart, then through his blood to his fingertips. He brought his quill back to the parchment.

"My lord? Her name is Golde. She says she knows you. She has a child with her, a little boy, and they look very traumatized."

Athelward put down his quill with an angry smack. He turned slowly around, the wooden chair creaking beneath him, the bones of his back popping and groaning in harmony with the furniture. Usually, tearing himself away from his writing was a smoother and more gradual transition, aided by a long prayer and a little bit of stretching. This interruption was simply inexcusable.

Now that he looked upon Drustan directly, though through a haze of anger, he thought the servant seemed even smugger than usual. His eyes were twinkling, and his gaunt cheeks glowed bright pink. His short

straw-like hair, meanwhile, was a total mess upon his head, like a roll of hay that had been rummaged by a bear. Athelward's eyes squinted even further, for he now felt suspicious. "Golde? I don't recall her. Is she of noble blood? Married to a thegn? Is she a landowner? A churl?"

Drustan shook his head at the first two questions, then nodded at the last.

Athelward guffawed. How much more ridiculous could this get? "What sort of churl? A geneat? A kotsletla? A gebur?" Drustan stared back at him with a dumb expression. Athelward waved his hands frantically in the air. "Saints above, who is she?"

"She said she was a friend of the ealdorman—er, now exiled, I think—who ruled Mercia. Alfric, my lord."

Athelward sat up, attentive at last. Now, he remembered. She was a woman with long blond hair, a beautiful round face, and even less manners than the fool standing before him. Worse, she had been a whore, or something similar enough to be considered equivalent. But worst of all, she was associated with Alfric, and to be associated with Alfric—whose son had recently gotten his eyes removed by King Ethelred's soldiers—was probably one of the most dangerous traits in Engla-lond at this given time.

Athelward bowed his head and crossed himself. When he was done, he looked back up at Drustan, eyes blazing. "What on earth possessed you to think I would want to speak with her, Drustan? Oh, I have a theory—you were not thinking at all!"

At last, with a heave of effort, Athelward pulled himself from his chair. He did not like to think of himself as old yet—though some might call him such—but he was certainly not heavy or unfit. In fact he was quite skinny, and any extra girth or awkwardness came from his somewhat excessive height. Moving from the realm of literary knowledge to the physical world of sensation and sin was simply a difficult maneuver. Once at last he stood and reclaimed his body, pushing back his shoulders and lifting his noble beard, he loomed over his servant and cut a respectable figure.

For a moment, Drustan looked encouraged. He must have thought Athelward was getting up to see the woman. But his smirk turned into a frown when Athelward took a loping step forward, craning his head low to look the servant up and down. He observed the ruffled state of Drustan's tunic, then the loosened nature of his trousers. "You know better than to interrupt me. How did she persuade you?" asked the ealdorman.

"She, uh ... " Drustan laughed nervously.

Athelward crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the servant in silence.

"Well, she ... um ... " Drustan moved his arms about, then dropped them again, helpless.

Athelward sighed heavily, his suspicions confirmed. "I will see her at church on Sunday and give her some alms, like so many others in need. It sounds as if she needs God as greatly as she needs money, after all. That is all I can do for her, Drustan." He turned to go back to his table, feeling strangely victorious.

"She ... she doesn't want money, my lord. In fact, she says she wants to give you some."

"What?" Athelward turned back around, intrigued despite himself. A wandering churl wanted to give *him* money? "Whatever for?"

"I don't know, my lord. She just told me she walked all the way from Worcestershire—"

The ealdorman saw that it was useless to keep talking, and he had already wasted a great deal of time arguing with his servant, when it would have been faster to see the woman herself and send her away. Without another word, he strode past Drustan and out the door.

The sensations of the world beyond the sanctuary of his scriptorium struck him like a whip as he moved through his manor. At first he simply smelled people: that combination of musky, tart scents emitted by every slave, maid, churl, or thegn who passed through his lodge. As he neared the outdoors, he began to smell wool, its bitter fibres coated with lard and butter to form air that stuffed his nose as he inhaled. This time of year, with the coming warmth of summer, lucky sheep got sheared all across Engla-lond, and anyone with good sense purchased some of the wool for himself. But at last he stepped outside, where the breeze was not cool enough to balance the warmth of the searing sunshine, but at least it eased the olfactory senses—except, of course, for the occasional wafting odors of hot manure and freshly reaped grass.

Through the glare of bright white sunshine, glowing green fields, and a piercing blue sky, Athelward soon spotted his strange visitor. She had the same long yellow hair he remembered, and lashes so pale they were almost white, which made her blue gaze especially fierce as she turned it on him. He stopped a good distance from the woman, all too aware of her persuasive powers, though he did not consider himself to be easily moved by matters of the flesh. Even so he could not help but admire her: the sturdiness of her small frame as she stood in the wind, the lack of weariness on her face despite the tattered state of her dress and shoes.

Then Athelward noticed the little boy standing next to her, head bowed and downcast, small hands curled into fists at his sides. He seemed as if he did not want to be seen, but Athelward could not suppress a gasp of surprise, for he saw the curliness of the boy's hair lashing in the wind, and it occurred to him that this might be Alfric's son. But no, it couldn't be Algar, whose eyes had been seared out with hot pokers.

Athelward forced his gaze back to the woman, Golde, trying to fill his stare with as much stubbornness as he detected in hers. "State your business quickly or go. If your business involves Alfric I'll not touch it. He was my friend once but his actions have necessitated my opposition to—"

She pulled a pouch from her dress and gave it a quick shake, so that he could hear the jangle of coins within. "This is as close to Alfric as my business will ever come. I took this from his manor when I went there to rescue my own son."

"Are you a thief, then?" The historian felt uncomfortable, for the way she held out the money made her dress poof out and display more of her well-rounded breasts than he cared to see.

"Of course not. Alfric was long gone by the time I found this, his household and all of his belongings were up for grabs to anyone who could snatch them up. Including his poor blinded son, who he left to die."

The little boy made a small whimper, and she pulled him tighter against her skirts.

"Anyway, it's money, and I have traveled over a hundred miles without using it, all so that I could give it to you."

"Why would you do that?" he cried.

She stepped closer, her soft lips curling into a smile. "Because I know you respect money, and you will take it in exchange for a service of equal value, even if that service is unconventional."

He was impressed by the woman's awareness of his feelings towards money, not to mention her obvious ambition. Some years ago, Athelward—alongside Ealdorman Alfric, in fact—had advised King Ethelred to pay off the Vikings with money rather than to engage in another bloody and meaningless battle. Many Anglo-Saxons had been embittered by this decision; even though it bought them some peace, they suffered the more immediate effect of losing their money, food, and hard-earned wares. No doubt some of the gossip surrounding the Danegald payment,

and Athelward's involvement in it, had been blown out of proportion. "I respect money's ability to save human lives," he said. "Nothing more."

Her eyes seemed to twinkle a little as her smile broadened. "And what if it could save the human spirit?"

Athelward shook his head in puzzlement. "You speak nonsense. I told you, Golde: state your business quickly, or leave!"

"All right, I will state my business. I want you to give my son an education."

"What!" He felt his own blood drain from his face. "I am an ealdorman. I don't have time to—"

"You are an ealdorman also known as the 'historian.' Unlike any other layman before you, you spend more time reading books and scribbling histories than gathering soldiers and sharpening spears."

"I ... I ... " Instinctively, he felt the need to argue. She was a churl, and shamelessly sinful. But in truth, her statement made him proud. She recognized his accomplishment as being one of the first dedicated scribes who was not also a clergyman, while most people—finding it strange, and thus incomprehensible—simply ignored this feat. Perhaps she even had a vague understanding, if skewed, of what he valued. He hesitated too long to form his response, and she found the breath for more words.

"I want to use this money for something even more valuable than a human body," she went on relentlessly. "I want you to give my boy knowledge, and understanding. I want him to be able to make his life into whatever he wants it to be, despite what other people expect of him."

Athelward continued to shake his head, harder and harder. "That is not how God made the world! Men must make the best of the blood God gave them."

"Blood?" She looked puzzled. "If by blood you mean we are not in the family of some great king like you, then that's all the more reason for you to help him 'make the best of it.'"

Athelward wanted to keep shaking his head, but a small crowd had gathered, and he found himself in an unusual situation. Her proposal was absurd, but indeed, she offered him a pouch of money, and it would look wrong for him to turn it down. He glanced angrily at the people around him: soldiers, servants, visiting thegns, and a few begging churls. He had made a speech to every single one of them, years ago, that their money could serve a greater purpose than buying mere food and clothing: it could buy them peace from the Danes. Now, a woman stood before him, asking to use her money for something greater than a physical comfort. How could he deny her that, in front of so many witnesses?

And yet, even accounting for his own unusual philosophy, her request was absurd. Surely everyone else could see that? "I am an ealdorman," he repeated. "I don't have the time to educate a bastard child."

Perhaps he had gone too far. He could feel the disappointment of his people around him; they pursed their lips, lowered their heads, and exchanged knowing glances that seemed to say, "I knew he would disappoint us." Meanwhile, the woman Golde's cheeks flushed bright red, and when she clenched her fists, he saw the veins bulge along her forearm. No doubt she possessed more strength than her small figure suggested.

"Time?" she said. A breeze gushed as if from nowhere, rustling her dress and tossing her hair, making the rest of her appear even sturdier. "You bought all of Engla-lond a year of peace—almost a year, at least—with ten thousand pounds. So if time can be money, tell me, my lord: how much of your time is this pouch worth?"

She held it out again, and he felt so flustered that his face burned hot. She was turning his own ideas against him. She was clever, but her primary talent seemed to be throwing his own words back at him, in which case this conversation could go on forever. It was useless to argue, and to indulge her any longer would give the people too much to talk about.

He grabbed the pouch and pretended to weigh it in his hand, calculating. But how could he calculate the worth of his time? The notion was preposterous. He looked at the boy again, clutching his mother's skirts, big blue eyes filled with something like fear and hopelessness. He was either a churl with worthless blood, or a bastard, and in either case he was not worth even a fragment of Athelward's time. But he had already caused a great deal to be wasted, nonetheless.

"Bring him to my writing chamber at dawn tomorrow; I will teach him until mid-morning. That is all."

Clutching the pouch in one hand and his robes in the other, Athelward turned and hurried back inside. He could not erase from his mind the smile of triumph he had seen on Golde's face before he tore his eyes from her.

He hoped he had not made some sort of mistake.

*

In the morning, Athelward felt strangely nervous. He could not even explain why.

The night before, Golde's words had echoed at him throughout his entire night meal. His son's family was visiting that night. His wife had

tried to make light conversation and had even asked him about his writing, a topic he normally loved to discuss. But he could not think of much to say. Meanwhile, he had watched his own grandchildren fussing at the table, kicking each other's stools and playing with their food. Most of all, he stared at his own son, Aethelmaer.

Aethelmaer was large, fat, and dumb as a rock. Most of the time, Athelward managed to ignore this fact. But last night, he could not. He watched Aethelmaer stuff down his food, fail to reprimand the bad behavior of his children, and continue to say stupid and meaningless things. He spoke proudly of his rapacious hearth companions, his cowering servants, and how he was looking forward to an upcoming Saint's festival—but he could not even remember the Saint's name.

Athelward spoke little at night, but at one point, he could not stop himself. He looked his son in the eyes and proclaimed, "I taught you to read!"

Aethelmaer stared at him strangely, as he should have, for the statement had little precedent. The fat son had a big bite of food in his mouth which he forced down his throat with a gulp of wine. At last he said, "Um, yes you did. Thank you."

"Thank you?" Athelward shook his head. "I don't want thanks. I want results. Do you ever read anymore, Aethelmaer? Do you use anything I taught you?"

The young man shrugged his big round shoulders. "Sure I do."

"I mean beyond determining charters and taxes."

"What else is reading for?" Aethelmaer took another desperate draught of wine.

Athelward sighed. "Have you started teaching your own children?"

"They're too young!"

"You were younger than them when I began teaching you."

"Yeah, and I almost forgot everything!" Aethelmaer laughed nervously, flinging spittle across his plate. "Anyway, I'll get a monk to teach them. Unless, that is, you expect me to teach them Latin?" He made a wet sound of disgust. "I don't know why you spend so much time turning history into Latin, Father. Everyone thinks you are mad! I do remember at least one thing you taught me, which is that King Alfred himself wanted history to be written in English, so more people could understand it!"

Athelward had gripped his dirk and seethed with anger; his wife had sensed his mood and put a calming hand on his arm. But he did not

know what to say to her. He could not explain what he was feeling, nor why he was feeling it now.

As he sat in the solitude of his writing chamber the next morning, anxiously awaiting the strange boy's arrival, he tried to determine why he felt so upset. He suspected it had something to do with his disappointment in his own son, to whom he had tried to pass off the culmination of his life's studies. The disappointment had been there for a long time, he realized, but he had ignored it until last night. The woman pleading for her poor son's education reminded him of the hopes he once entertained for Aethelmaer. Once, he imagined Aethelmaer becoming wise and clever, using his vast knowledge to impress the king and perhaps become the king's most trusted adviser. He imagined Aethelmaer coming up with brilliant battle schemes, or at least defensive tactics, to push the pagan Vikings from Engla-lond's shores. Instead, Aethelmaer was another man, like so many, who simply did what he was told, and rarely thought beyond his next meal.

Aethelward heaved a sigh, and then heard the door creak open.

The boy stood there, hands clasped in front of him, head bowed so that his unruly hair nearly covered his face. He looked cleaner now, either because this room was so dim, or because his mother had meticulously washed him up for this moment. But the patheticness of his hunched form negated any image of dignity his mother had contrived, and Aethelward knew for certain that the boy wanted to be here even less than Athelward did. He sighed again, thinking it would be best to get this over with as soon as possible.

"Well then," said Athelward, "come and sit on this stool."

The boy obeyed, but he sank his small body down as if he possessed the weight of a horse. He remained there in silence, head sagging on his little neck, and for a moment Athelward wasn't sure what to do. Then, as he often did when in doubt, he turned to his books.

"I, uh ... I suppose I should start with our ancestors from Anglia, across the sea. Do you know whom I speak of?" He paused to sip from a goblet of water and let the boy respond, but his reluctant pupil did not even look up. "You *ought* to know: the Angles and Saxons are responsible for our existence, you and I, here in Engla-lond. The Angles begot the eastern and midland Angles, and many of the people who now live in Mercia, and most the other people north of the River Humber. Then there were the Saxons and Juts, who lived on provinces on either side of Anglia. Five or six centuries ago, the Angles and Saxons both decided to leave their lands and come to Engla-lond. The Saxons, my own

ancestors, claimed the lands of Essex, Middlesex, Sussex, and Wessex—and I, you see, am a descendant of the Saxon royal line of Wessex, the same line as King Alfred the Great!” Again, no response. “In any case, the Angles and Saxons fought the people here—that is the Celts—to claim their own homes. But they also forged alliances, to protect each other against common enemies like the Picts and the Irish ... ”

The little boy sniffled.

Athelward realized he was probably speaking to himself. His eyes darted around his table uncertainly. “Boy,” he grumbled, “what is it you want to learn? I could teach you history, or I could teach you a few letters—though that won’t do you any good, as you’ll never be back here again to learn them all. Or you could sit there and waste your mother’s money!” He waved his hands angrily. “You should at least pay attention! Your mother paid a great deal for you to be here. If you’re to learn anything you should sit up straight, and keep your eyes alert, and—”

The boy surprised him by obeying. Then the ealdorman gulped with dismay, for as the boy looked up through his tangled curls, he revealed big blue eyes filled with tears. “My lord, why do people fight so much?” he said.

Athelward cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “For land, and resources, and ... and power, I suppose.”

The little Mercian looked away for a moment, seeming to really ponder this. Then, his eyes rippling with new tears, he said, “Then why did they hurt Algar?”

“Who?” And then, suddenly, Athelward put it together. “Algar—Lord Alfric’s son?”

The boy nodded.

“Oh dear.” He must have meant the same Algar, then, whose eyes had recently been ripped from his skull. He recalled Golde saying she had “rescued” her son from Alfric, which is also when she had stolen the money from Alfric’s abandoned belongings. “Listen, boy ... what is your name, again?”

“Eadric.”

“Eadric. Did you see Algar get hurt?”

The boy’s face scrunched up, as if a certain amount of twisting could keep back his tears. He didn’t say anything, but this was answer enough for Athelward. Either he had seen the violence happen, or he had seen its bloody aftermath.

“I’m sure it’s hard for you to understand what happened to Algar. But it is the perfect example of violence done in the name of power. King

Ethelred needed to maintain his power by hurting the man who had wronged him—Lord Alfric. But Alfric escaped, so he punished the next person available.”

“Algar didn’t do anything wrong!”

“He was Alfric’s son.” Eadric looked confused. “Our lineage determines our fate, Eadric. Algar was in the wrong by being born of Alfric.”

“That’s stupid!”

Athelward glowered. He thought he could guess why a poor little boy like this might say something like that. “Was Algar ... was he your brother?”

Eadric stiffened and became very still. “No. Alfric’s not my father.”

It seemed like a recited response: one his mother had instilled in him, no doubt. But one had only to look at him to guess his father. “If Alfric’s not, who is?”

“Um ... ” Eadric kicked his feet nervously as he considered his. “Hunwald.”

“Who?”

Eadric grew still again, a fierce scowl creating dozens of lines on his round little face. “Why does it matter?”

“Why does it *matter*?” Athelward guffawed. “Does your mother teach you *nothing*?” He grabbed his goblet of water and drank thirstily, as if this would quell his rising anger. When he slammed it back down, he nearly splashed some drops on his parchment, so furious was he. He waved angrily at his manuscripts. “Our fathers make us who we are, Eadric. My great-great grandfather was Ethelred of Wessex, brother of King Alfred the Great! My name means royal protector. I owned this land, and have the responsibility of overseeing many others, because my father and his fathers passed such things on to me.”

“Can you pass any of that on to me,” said Eadric, “without being my father?”

Athelward’s mouth hung open. He said nothing for a long while, just stared at the boy in utter horror.

Then the little boy did something even more ridiculous. He smiled, tears dissipating as his eyes twinkled. “The look on your face!” he snickered.

Athelward forced his mouth shut, feeling his face turn red nonetheless. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But the answer is no, I can’t pass those things on to you! The idea’s absurd!”

“All right.” Eadric shrugged, still smiling. “I’d rather do something fun, anyway. None of that sounds like fun.”

“Fun! It’s not about *fun!*”

“Then why do you do it?” The boy was looking curiously at the ealdorman’s books.

Athelward followed his gaze to the manuscripts: the carefully blotted ink, the leather and gilt decorations encasing the pages, and all of the ridiculous stories contained within. He could have gone into a long speech about how he was protecting his family’s history, and thus that of Wessex. But he did not. Instead, he felt a little smile crease his face, as if of its own will. “Well ... I suppose it is a little fun.” He felt a warm wave of joy arise within him out of nowhere, filling him up and rising to his throat. “Hah!” he cried. “I suppose it *is* a little fun!”

“No it’s not,” said Eadric, still laughing. “You’re just saying that.”

“Oh, but it is!” Athelward grabbed his quill and raised it up high. “Sometimes, Eadric, it makes me feel like a king!”

“Really?”

“Oh yes! I write about great hordes of people, of armies and battles, and sometimes I feel almost like I am orchestrating them myself! Just now, for instance, I was writing about the Battle of Ethandun.” He leaned in close to Eadric, lowering his voice as if to divulge a secret. “The battle took place after King Alfred and his army had been hiding in the marshes of Wessex for a long and miserable year, while the Danes and their leader, Guthrum, managed to take over most of Engla-lond. Wessex, you see, was the only kingdom still resisting the Vikings, and it seemed as if all was lost. Alfred was so desperate that he disguised himself as a minstrel to sneak into the enemy’s camp. But then he gathered all the peoples of Somerset, Wiltshire, and Hampshire, for Alfred had managed to maintain their loyalty despite everything, and he marched upon the enemy, who did not expect it at all! Now—did they win or lose? My quill can determine the answer!”

Eadric watched with huge eyes, fascinated as Athelward brought the pen back to paper. Teasingly, he wrote a quick word.

Eadric nearly fell off his stool reaching for the quill. “I want to try! I want to make them win!”

Athelward pulled it from his reach, but playfully. “Not so fast, now! You don’t even know how to do it!”

“Let me try!” Eadric stood on top of his stool now, grabbing Athelward’s shoulder for balance as he reached.

Before the ealdorman could help it, the quill had been plucked from his grip. Eadric held it then teetered forward, falling off the stool and towards the table.

"No!" cried Athelward. He watched his bottle of ink tilt sideways, directly over a stack of freshly written pages. A large jolt went through the table as Eadric landed, making the wood shudder, the candles flicker, and the bottle fall.

As Athelward dove forward to catch it, his heart beat uncontrollably, his blood roared in his ears, and his thoughts raced so fast they made him dizzy. As his fingertips clutched for the slippery clay surface of the container, his mind rushed ahead, watching as the ink spilled out and obscured all of his hard work, all of his carefully navigated streams, drowning everything in a blinding flood like the one God gave Noah, destroying the world so that it could all start anew. He imagined this, and then he realized that he was imagining it, so maybe none of it would happen, and he would stop the ink from spilling in time.

But by then it was too late.

The rush of black ink spilled forth, instantly soaking his pages through, and he was too frozen with horror to do anything about it. He heard the little boy's cries ringing in the air, as if from a distant chamber.

"Oh no! My lord? My lord!"

Little Eadric did what he could to belittle the damage of the flood he had unleashed; he grabbed the pages and flung them into the air, away from the spreading black deluge. But it was still too late: all of the pages had been touched. Even if the words were still legible, the beautiful artistry and cleanliness of them had been ruined; they would look like the work of a sorry layman trying to be a scribe, but failing miserably. It would be a confirmation to everyone who had ever doubted him that they were right to do so: that God never wanted an ealdorman to chronicle history, and He especially did not want one to do so in Latin.

It was like a sign from the Lord that all of Athelward's hard work was meaningless; that his dedication had been nothing but a conceited fancy. In the end, he was a failure.

When sensation returned to him, he felt himself trembling from head to foot. He could hardly find the strength to speak. The little boy was cowering before him, eyes filled with tears again, guessing the horrorfulness of what he had done.

"Will I ... will I still find out what happened at the Battle of Ethandun?"

"Get out," rasped Athelward. He took a deep breath, but still he struggled to raise the volume of his voice, which trembled with the exhaustion of utter despair. "Get. Out."

Eadric obeyed.

In the little boy's absence, the room that had once been his sanctuary felt suddenly like the darkest, loneliest, and emptiest place on earth.

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Athelward did not speak another word to anyone all day. His servant, Drustan, discovered what had happened and knew better than to ask about it; he cleaned it up and closed the chamber up tight. Athelward sat in his room a long while, staring into nothingness. Eventually, he found it in his heart to pray, though he could not do even this for very long. He was simply too angry. Every once in awhile people knocked on his door, but Drustan guarded it, and told them all that Athelward was busy.

When it was time for dinner, Athelward went, but he sat still and barely touched his food. The sight of his son, Aethelmaer, gobbling down his own meal made him sick to his stomach. The fat man filled the silence by talking on and on, about this and that, this and that, but all of his words passed through Athelward's mind, leaving nothing behind. They were meaningless. Empty.

Perhaps everything, he thought, was meaningless.

He drank a great deal that night to dull his anger and help himself sleep. The Lord must have been in a merciful temper by nightfall, for when he awoke the next morning, he suffered few ill effects for this indulgence.

In fact, he felt better.

He got up and donned his robes while his wife continued to sleep in the bed behind him. He thought about all of the work he needed to do: all of the thegns and abbots he needed to speak to, all of the walls and bridges throughout Hampshire and beyond that needed repairing before fall came. He already wanted to start campaigning for another Danegald to be paid upon Sweyn Forkbeard's next return. That would be much more difficult to arrange without the help of Lord Alfric, who simply had a way of persuading people, which for Athelward required much more effort.

He thought about all of these things because he was looking towards the future again, and he could endure thinking about the future because when he awoke this morning, he found a reason to feel hope. In order to ensure that hope, however, there was something he needed to do first.

He walked outside and found the morning suited his mood. Despite being summer, the sun was low enough that it had not yet cleared the night's chill. A soft haze covered the horizon, and dew glittered golden on the grass, and bugs thrummed about with the energy of the dawn. He made his way to the servant's lodge, where he knew little Eadric and his

mother had stayed the night. He stopped some distance away from it, stayed by its terrible stench. In that lodge all of the servants and maids slept, some on mats, some on the floorboards, and others on dirty rushes. Fortunately, Drustan had followed him, and he told Drustan to go in and fetch what he wanted.

Drustan came back out shortly and said, "They're gone, sir."

"What?" Athelward shook his head angrily. "The sun's barely risen! I thought the woman had more stubbornness than that." He took a deep breath and thought a moment. Then he made his way to the kitchens.

Fortunately, he caught them in time. The woman, Golde, was bartering with the cooks, trying to get as much food as she could before leaving on her journey to who knew where. Little Eadric stood silently by her side, his head and shoulders even more drooped than they had been when he first arrived. No doubt he had been severely reprimanded by his mother for failing her. Emotion and empathy stirred in Athelward's heart.

Golde took some food and thrust it into her sack. Then she grabbed Eadric's hand, and made to leave.

"Golde," said Athelward. "Where are you going?"

He saw the muscles in her arm tauten as she squeezed Eadric's hand; her eyes glittered like the dew as she glared at the ealdorman. "We don't need you. We have a home and a way to feed ourselves in Worcestershire."

"You don't need me?" Athelward smiled as he looked at Eadric, but Eadric refused to return his gaze. "What about giving Eadric an education?"

He was pleased to see her determined expression waver with uncertainty. "But—yesterday—"

"Yesterday taught me something very valuable, Golde," he said. He glanced at the cooks and servants, who were all watching him with awed expressions. "Let's speak in private."

Golde followed him into the field, away from the mouth-watering smells of breakfast being prepared. They looked over the chalky slopes of southern Hampshire, and in the distance, the haze was lifting enough to reveal the tallest buildings of Winchester far away.

"I thought Eadric ruined your precious manuscripts," said Golde softly. "I thought you would never forgive him."

"Yes, he did." Athelward looked fondly at the boy again. "And that's when I realized that, perhaps, they were *too* precious."

Golde cocked a curious eyebrow.

Athelward heaved another sigh; remembering the events of yesterday were still painful. "So much hard work ... so many years of study and labor ... gone in an instant." He watched as a bundle of clouds swept over the sun, casting shadows on the glittering earth below. "I know my work is important, but God taught me a lesson yesterday. It is not quite as important as I hoped it to be. It is not enough to save my knowledge in a manuscript, especially one that no one may ever read, save my cousin Matilda. Perhaps, even if Eadric had not spilled ink on it, it may have perished in the fires of the next Viking raid. No ... it may not be enough to put my work on parchment alone."

He could sense Golde's confusion and burning desire to keep asking questions, but she was quiet, and allowed him to gather his thoughts.

"I do not think I successfully passed on my knowledge to my own children. They never understood what a gift I was giving them. They showed little interest, and practically no curiosity. I think this is a chance for me to pass the knowledge to someone who will pay attention to it—perhaps even *use* it. Despite his recklessness ... " He peered around the boy's thick glowing hair, seeking out his eyes. Reluctantly, Eadric's gaze met his, huge and gaping with fear. Athelward smiled reassuringly. He remembered how Eadric had asked, before Athelward commanded him to leave, if he would ever hear the full story of the Battle of Ethandun. His own children had never been so curious. It was Eadric's curiosity that made all the difference in the world. "Despite everything, I sense a certain amount of potential in Eadric."

"Really?" Golde sounded breathless. "You'll teach him to read? You'll teach him history?"

"I'll do what I can." He glanced back at his own manor. "I don't want what I am doing to be a well known fact. It's unseemly and would give people ... unrealistic notions. And in any case, I am a very busy man. I truly will not have much time to spend with Eadric, especially now that I will have to rewrite my chronicles." He grimaced. "My secretary Drustan knows a great deal, however; and if nothing else, I know plenty of monks who owe me favors. When I can, I will teach Eadric myself, and when I can't, I'll get a monk to do it."

He looked at Golde, seeing the sparkle of joy in her gaze; but she was holding it back, maintaining a cautious frown. "Is there a catch? What do you expect in return?"

Athelward shrugged. "I'll require you to work for me, of course. We'll find a suitable job."

"No." Golde shook her head. "I would rather continue giving you money."

The ealdorman scowled. "If you plan to go on whoring or stealing, that is out of the question."

"I left a great number of pigs in Worcestershire. No doubt a lot of them have scattered and been snatched up by now, but I want to salvage what I can. I'm sure I can at least come up with enough money to pay you a second time what I've paid you already."

"Why go through all that trouble?"

"No offense, my lord, but I'd like to ensure a future back in Mercia, once Eadric's finished here. Less war there, right now. And it's our home."

He waved his hands with exasperation. "Do what you will, woman! I don't care, so long as you don't vanish and leave him motherless." He took a moment to consider all of this. She seemed very wayward indeed, so perhaps he needed to give her a few terms, despite making up his own mind. "Come back at least once a year with the money."

"Very well. I'll do that for however long it takes."

"How long it takes for what?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "Until he's ready." She reached down and ruffled Eadric's hair. He, too, was smiling. "So we have a deal?"

"Yes." The grins were contagious, and Athelward found one on his own face, as well. "We have a deal."

**

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RELEASE DATES

One Lost Tale of Mercia will release every other Tuesday until October 5, the release of the full story of Eadric Streona and his greatest opponent, the Golden Cross. For more news and updates, visit www.jaydenwoods.com.

The First Lost Tale: **Golde the Mother** (*released May 18*)

The Second Lost Tale: **Ethelred the King** (*released June 1*)

The Third Lost Tale: **Aydith the Aetheling** (*released June 15*)

The Fourth Lost Tale: **Athelward the Historian** (*released June 29*)

The Fifth Lost Tale: **Alfgifu the Orphan** (*released July 13*)

The Sixth Lost Tale: **Hastings the Hearth Companion** (*July 27*)

The Seventh Lost Tale: **Hildred the Maid** (*August 10*)

The Eighth Lost Tale: **Canute the Viking** (*August 24*)

The Ninth Lost Tale: **Runa the Wife** (*September 7*)

The Tenth Lost Tale: **Edmund the Aetheling** (*September 21*)

****OCTOBER 5th:** The novel, Eadric the Grasper, releases on Amazon.com**

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, as compiled by various monks until the year 1140, are my primary sources of information. So, too, were the Chronicles of Florence of Worcester and the Chronicles of the Kings of England as written by William of Malmesbury. Without the devotion of these men to chronicle the chaotic events of their time, so little of the Dark Ages would be known. Other important sources are listed below. A

full list of consulted sources is posted on <http://talesofmercia.wordpress.com>.

WORKS CONSULTED

Gransden, Antonia. *Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307*, Volume 1. London: Routledge. 1974.

From the same author on Feedbacks

The Third Lost Tale of Mercia: Aydith the Aetheling (2010)

Aydith's story is that of a young aetheling who, despite her royal blood, can get no one to listen to her willful opinions. With the encouragement of a kind hearth companion named Hastings, perhaps she will find another way to help her ill-fated country.

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The First Lost Tale of Mercia: Golde the Mother (2010)

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age, releasing every other Tuesday. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended to portray what might have and could have happened. These quick reads will entertain and educate at the same time. Read the stories in any order; though interconnected, they do not follow each other chronologically, and each tale stands alone.

The First Lost Tale, "Golde the Mother," is about the mother of Eadric Streona. It sheds light on Eadric's strange childhood, and raises the question of who fathered the boy who would become notorious as one of the most treacherous men in England.

The Sixth Lost Tale of Mercia: Hastings the Hearth Companion (2010)

A royal hearth companion named Hastings fights on the front lines of battle for duty and the Golden Cross, but he entertains unrealistic notions of how his mistress, Aetheling Aydith, might reward him.

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon

Chronicles." They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Seventh Lost Tale of Mercia: Hildred the Maid (2010)

In 1005 A.D., a terrible famine strikes Engla-lond. When a poor young woman named Hildred grows desperate enough to break the law for her survival, a rising thegn named Eadric takes her fate in his hands.

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Second Lost Tale of Mercia: Ethelred the King (2010)

This haunting short story illustrates the scandalous circumstances surrounding King Ethelred's rise to power at the age of eleven, and reveals why the entire reign of so-called "Ethelred the Unready" seems to have been cursed.

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are a series of ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended to portray what might have and could have happened. These quick reads will entertain and educate at the same time.

The Tenth Lost Tale of Mercia: Edmund the Aetheling (2010)

In the tenth and final Lost Tale, young prince Edmund suspects a plot against his father's life. He turns to his siblings, Aydith and Aethelstan, for help, but King Ethelred heeds none of them. Will they ever find someone they can trust?

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Fifth Lost Tale of Mercia: Algifu the Orphan (2010)

In the wildest Lost Tale yet, we jump to the year 1014. Algifu of Northampton joins forces with Canute, the new and young king of the Vikings. Algifu believes that her father was murdered in cold blood by Ealdorman Eadric Streona. How far will she go to obtain her revenge?

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Ninth Lost Tale of Mercia: Runa the Wife (2010)

Runa expects to live her entire life isolated in the woods until she meets Thorkell the Tall. She tries to conform to society through a traditional marriage, but at a very high cost to them both.

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Eighth Lost Tale of Mercia: Canute the Viking (2010)

As a teenager, Canute struggles to find his place among a fortress of Jomsvikings and the differing religions surrounding them. An unexpected relationship with another Jomsviking, forbidden by the Christians, may force him to choose a side.

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

Ashes of Dearen: Book 1 (2011)

A red-eyed assassin, an unready princess, a sadistic politician, and an adulterous queen all desire the secret behind a magical dust known as safra. Saffra is said to bring happiness, but these

characters' desperate attempts to obtain it will cost them all dearly. Their salacious and violent deeds bring three great nations to the brink of warfare. And little do they know, their scrambling efforts are being carefully watched by a much greater power: the gods behind the beguiling drug that ensnares them all.

Last Tales of Mercia 3: Elwyna the Exile (2012)

In the late 1040's, the first group of Norman lords arrives in Engla-lond. King Edward believes they are allies. But as Lord Richard FitzScrob begins to construct the first Norman castle in Engla-lond, the conflict between Normans and Anglo-Saxons builds slowly to one of the greatest wars in English history.

In Last Tale 3, Elwyna--the exiled wife of Lord Godric--lives quietly in the woods with her lover, Dumbun, until a group of Norman soldiers come to the woods to obtain timber for Richard's castle. The Norman knights treat everything in Elwyna's home as their own--even Elwyna herself. Not sure what to do, Elywna realizes she must go crawling back to Godric for help or somehow take matters into her own hands.

Set in the Dark Ages of Engla-lond, the "Last Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories featuring real historical figures and characters from the "Sons of Mercia" series. Though strongly connected to the series and each other, they can be read independently.

Last Tales of Mercia 5: Osgifu the Sister (2012)

Osgifu finds out that her sister, Elwyna, may soon be hanged for murder. She faces a hard decision of whether to leave matters to fate or oppose the Normans herself.

Set in the Dark Ages of Engla-lond, the "Last Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories featuring real historical figures and characters from the "Sons of Mercia" series. Though strongly connected to the series, they can be read independently.

Last Tales of Mercia 2: Richard the Norman (2012)

In 1051, King Edward calls upon the lords of Engla-lond to protect him from the rebellious earl of Wessex, Lord Goodwin. Richard FitzScrob is a Norman lord who has only been in Engla-lond for a few years and struggles to provide military support. Eager to teach his son the pride and culture of their Norman heritage, he

determines to strengthen his stance in Engla-lond, no matter what the cost to the Saxons beneath him.

Set in the Dark Ages of Engla-lond, the "Last Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories featuring real historical figures and characters from the "Sons of Mercia" series. Though strongly connected to the series and each other, they can be read independently.

Lost Tales of Mercia (2012)

All ten Lost Tales of Mercia set in Anglo-Saxon England can now be read in a single ebook.

A mother defies an ealdorman for the sake of her son. A boy becomes king at eleven years of age through the scandalous death of his brother. A young girl takes desperate measures to manipulate the king's court. An eccentric noble gives a young swineherd a priceless gift in the form of education. An orphaned woman joins the Viking prince to pursue her revenge...

These are only the first five stories of the ten Lost Tales of Mercia. They introduce the characters who will fight, love, and betray each other until the rightful king takes the throne of Engla-lond. These stories serve as a complement to the novel, "Eadric the Grasper."

Last Tales of Mercia 1: Emma the Queen (2012)

Queen Emma's own son, King Edward, has been turned against her by Goodwin of Wessex and Archbishop Robert from Normandy. Edward accuses his mother of treachery and adultery with an English bishop. To prove her innocence, Emma must walk barefoot over nine scalding ploughshares and come out unscathed.

Set in the Dark Ages of Engla-lond, the "Last Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories featuring real historical figures and characters from the "Sons of Mercia" series. Though strongly connected to the series, they can be read independently.

Last Tales of Mercia 4: Ralph the Knight (2012)

When a fight between a Norman and a Saxon gets out of hand, Sir Ralph must employ the help of a knight named Geoffrey to cover up the unfortunate incident. Set in the Dark Ages of Engla-lond, the "Last Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories featuring real historical figures and characters from the "Sons of Mercia" series.

Though strongly connected to the series, they can be read independently.

Last Tales of Mercia 6: Hereward the Wake (2012)

Young Hereward ("the Wake") finds out that a Norman castle is being built in Shropshire and rides with a group of rowdy boys to cause trouble. Set in the Dark Ages of Engla-lond, the "Last Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories featuring real historical figures and characters from the "Sons of Mercia" series. Though strongly connected to the series, they can be read independently.

The Key to Castle Krondolee (2013)

A foreigner surprises everyone in Castle Krondolee when she claims to possess the key to a room that has remained closed for centuries, its contents unknown. Arken Jeridar, descended from the god of greed, schemes to win the key for himself and the queen's love all at once. But success may come at a far greater cost than he ever expected.



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