
Godric the Kingslayer (First Chapter)

**GODRIC[†] THE
KINGSLAYER**

SONS OF MERCA VOL. 2

Preview Chapter

**PART 1
KINGSLAYER**

*“EDRICUS: What strive you for, imperious Ironside?
Renowned Canutus, what do you level at?
We daily to appease your mortal wars
offer our slaughtered bodies to the sword,
yet neither of you have the upper hand.
Today he that was foiled tomorrow foils ...”*

*—Edmund Ironside, Shakespeare Apocrypha,
Act V, Scene 2, lines 120-140*

Jayden Woods

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Winter 1016 A.D.

The only flaw in Godric's plan to kill King Edmund Ironside was that he would not be able to brag about it.

No one would believe him, anyway. He was only nine years old when he devoted himself to the incredible task. Additionally, he would not be able to do it without the help of his father, Eadric Streona, and a contraption from the great Jomsviking warrior, Thorkell the Tall. But Eadric did not want to claim responsibility for the great deed, himself, for reasons Godric did not fully comprehend.

Everything started when Eadric came home and explained the state of the war to Godric. To Godric, it all seemed so simple. After the death of King Ethelred and the Battle of Ashingdon, Engla-lond split in two. The northern lands of Engla-lond—East Anglia, Mercia, Essex, and Northumbria—went to King Canute of the Danes. The southern lands—Wessex, Sussex, and Kent—went to Edmund Ironside, the son of King Ethelred and legitimate Anglo-Saxon heir. Vikings and Anglo-Saxons had been fighting each other for centuries, and now the country was on the verge of being united. But it could never be united under two separate kings.

King Canute clearly deserved the throne, in Godric's eyes. His father's fathers had chosen to sail from their homes in Denmark to conquer Engla-lond a long time ago, striking the Anglo-Saxons from the coasts and rivers. Vikings began without any property on Engla-lond, but had managed to take control of nearly all of it. If the Anglo-Saxons could not manage to defend their own land from Viking pirates, they should probably bow down to the stronger leader. And if that was not enough reason to support Canute, Eadric himself was Ealdorman of Mercia, which now fell under Canute's leadership.

"But Edmund is still alive," Godric said to Eadric. They sat in Eadric's dining hall, their bellies full of fish and bread. Eadric looked exhausted, for he had recently returned from Gloucester, where King Edmund and King Canute dueled and forged their tenuous truce.

Godric knew that his father did not like fighting and warfare. He preferred eating and drinking, flirting with women, and listening to the harpist play by the hearth fire. But tonight there was no harpist, no women, and very little food. Eadric's wife had left him some time ago. Godric did not mind: he had never liked Aydith very much, nor did she like him, for she was not Godric's mother. Even so, Eadric had never looked so sad and lonely as he did at this moment.

"I don't think he'll stop until all of Engla-lond is his," Godric went on. Eadric's large blue eyes flashed a little as he looked up at his bastard son. Godric was glad, for he hated seeing his father look so miserable. Normally Eadric was poised and elegant, his

curly blond hair combed, his face and clothes clean, his mouth slanted by a secretive smile. But tonight his body was heavy with ale and sorrow.

“You are right about that, Godric,” he said at last.

Godric nodded. “So he must die.”

Eadric straightened up even more. He stared upon Godric as if seeing him for the first time. “Godric ...” he said, and his eyes clouded over again. Some of the weight and weariness returned to his shoulders. “We are speaking of the king of southern Engla-land.”

“But you should kill him, Father.” Godric knew something about his father most people did not. Truly enough, Eadric did not like fighting. But he still killed when it needed to be done, and he did so thoroughly. Almost two years ago, Godric witnessed Eadric and his hearth companions kill two Danish nobles and their men in this very same dining hall. It had been bloody, and noisy, full of screaming and slashing as blades tore through flesh. Eadric himself had nearly been choked to death before slitting his enemy’s throat. Godric cried when it happened, but he was stronger now. He understood why people must die. The death of certain people put the world into balance.

As he looked upon his father, Godric wondered whether Eadric had the same confidence in himself. Perhaps he simply did not have confidence in the advice of his nine-year-old bastard son. As if to prove him wrong, Godric reached out and took his drinking horn. It was heavier than he expected it to be, weighed down by the ale inside and the jewels around its exterior. The horn had been a gift to Eadric from Edmund Ironside. Steeling himself, Godric leaned back and poured some of the ale into his mouth.

The liquid burned his throat. Water rushed to his eyes and his chest tightened then felt like it would explode. But Godric repressed his cough, managing to do no more than sputter a little. “And I could help you,” he wheezed.

Eadric angrily snatched his horn back from Godric’s hands. “That’s enough,” he hissed. “Isn’t it time for you to go to bed?”

“Not yet. I have until—”

“I don’t care!” Eadric’s voice was loud and sharp. Godric felt his courage and confidence drain away in the face of his father’s disdain. “Go to bed, Godric. And do not speak of this to anyone.”

Godric obeyed, dragging his feet through the rushes as he left the warmth of the dining hall. He felt angry, and hopeful, and sad all at once. Sad that Eadric hated the idea of Godric’s help. Angry that Eadric denied the necessity of Edmund’s death. But hopeful that Eadric still entrusted him with knowledge he did not share with anyone else. *And do not speak of this to anyone*, he’d said.

Godric had no one to speak about it to, anyway. His mother, Hildred, turned a blind eye on anything related to Vikings and warfare. She turned a blind eye on most things, in fact. She worked in Eadric’s fortress, sewing his clothes and sometimes cleaning his dishes, avoiding his wife, tucking Godric to bed then walking him to church for his lessons in the morning. Other than that she did very little at all, nor spoke of her thoughts. Perhaps she had none. Sometimes, Godric misbehaved just to get a response out of her. If he did something silly, like splashing his water or running about the room, sometimes he could get her to laugh. Those were the best moments between them.

Aside from his mother, the only people Godric spent a significant amount of time with were the monks of Tamworth church and Thorkell the Tall. The monks and prior

taught him his daily lessons, which he hated. Every day they showed him how to read the Bible and copy its words. Godric had long since learned how to read quite fluently, so these days he learned little beyond the rules of Saint Benedict and the wisdom of Jesus Christ. Sometimes they showed him how to tend to their gardens of leeks and onions, but Godric found this tedious, as well.

Godric did not see how the church's lessons would ever be of use to him. Even Father said that monks were not as wise as they believed themselves to be. He said that enjoyment was the point of life and that monks shunned pleasure—though they certainly didn't seem to mind the pleasure of hiding in their churches while the rest of the country fought to protect them from Vikings. Godric preferred Eadric's way of thinking to that of the prior. And as far as lessons were concerned, he greatly preferred Thorkell's.

True to his name, Thorkell was the tallest man Godric had ever seen in his life. He had flowing hair the color of hay and a long, impassive face. His muscles were curvy and rippling but hard as rock. Godric hoped to be as big and strong as Thorkell some day, though he doubted he ever would be. Thorkell had a son of his own named Finn, and even though Finn was three years younger, his head reached almost as high as Godric's.

Thorkell could fight with any weapon he picked up with his huge, branch-like arms. Sometimes he showed Godric how to wield a sword, for Godric was still too little and awkward to try out the axe. But Godric's favorite weapon was the bow and arrow. He could shoot straight and true, whether with a typical bow or with the incredible lockbow, invented by one of Thorkell's companions from Jomsborg. The shaft of the bow ran perpendicular to the grip and included a groove in which the string could be set and "locked." This gave Godric all the time he wanted to aim without tiring his arm, and he could release the tension in the string simply by flipping a small lever.

Shortly after their conversation with each other, Eadric found Godric and Thorkell playing with the lockbow on the outskirts of the city of Tamworth. It was a cold day, so frigid that the grass under their feet was brown and withering, the sky dull and gray no matter how bright the sun, and the air seemed to get colder the further they walked from the cattle-ridden streets of Tamworth. Even so, Godric preferred dying fields and trees to the stench and squalor of the warm town. He liked not having to speak or address anyone but Thorkell, and then—when he came riding towards them—his own father.

"Give me the lockbow!" Godric begged Thorkell. "I want to show him what I can do!"

Playfully, Thorkell raised the bow out of Godric's reach. Godric leapt and clutched for the weapon, and so did Eadric find them: Godric hopping about and making a fool of himself while Thorkell waved his strange contraption through the air.

Eadric dismounted and asked Thorkell to explain himself. As he did so, Godric stood admiring his father, as he often did. As greatly as Godric respected Thorkell, it seemed almost more impressive to him that his own father could talk to the great Jomsviking as an equal, or even as a superior. From what Godric understood, the two of them had briefly been enemies, but Eadric found it more advantageous to become friends with the fellow, and good friends they became indeed. Together, the two of them were largely responsible for Canute's success in overtaking half the kingdom.

Thorkell gave Eadric the bow to try for himself. Eadric took it, turning it over in his hands curiously. Today, Eadric looked more like a rich ealdorman than a warrior of any

sort, and the way he handled the lockbow only added to the appearance. He wore rings on his fingers and jewels around his neck which jangled as he set the string. They were ornaments to be proud of, symbols of his worth in gold, but not very practical when handling a bow. Then he lifted it to aim. His poise seemed perfect to Godric, who had watched his father shoot many arrows, and knew that he made an excellent archer. But as Eadric squinted through the string, a scowl deepened on his face.

Godric did not know what Eadric was aiming at, but he surely missed it. The arrow went spiraling into open air, only to land with a thud in the distance.

"I don't see the point of it," Eadric grumbled.

Thorkell shrugged, then looked at Godric, who stared back with wide, pleading eyes.

"Let the boy show you," Thorkell said at last. "He knows how to use it."

Grinning from ear to ear, Godric took the lockbow from Eadric. He nocked an arrow and aimed it at a small, wilted flower sticking out of the grass. He set the string and took his time aiming. "I will shoot off some petals," he told them. He continued to hold the weapon, staring along the string, until he was certain that the arrow would fly on the path he wanted. Then he released it.

Truly enough, he sent the flower's petals scattering through the air.

"The arrow flies by itself!" Godric cried with excitement. It was perhaps a silly thing to say, he realized later, giving more credit to the lockbow than Godric himself. But after he said the words, he saw a change come over his father's face.

"Hm," said Eadric. His sharp blue eyes fogged over as he stared into the sky. Then, after a long quiet moment, he said, "You two keep playing with it. Perhaps we'll find a use for it. Perhaps not."

Then he got back on his horse and rode away.

That night, Eadric visited Godric in the west hall where he stayed with his mother, Hildred. The two of them shared a small space separated with cloth from the other servants' beds. To have Eadric visit them there was very unusual. Hildred sat on her bed, knitting, while Godric played with wooden toys on the floor. Eadric strode into their space, pushing aside the woolen curtain without so much as an invitation. Hildred flinched and dropped her knitting sticks. Then a red flush suffused her cheeks. The same predicament seemed to strike Eadric as he looked back at her, though Godric could not understand why.

"Hello, Hildred," said Eadric after a moment. His voice seemed tight.

Hildred stared back at him, mouth hanging open uncertainly.

"Father!" cried Godric. He stood up and tried to give Eadric a hug, though Eadric made little effort to return the gesture. He patted Godric's thick brown hair.

"I want to speak with you about something, Godric." But he was still looking at Hildred.

"Good!" said Godric. "Where should we talk?"

"By the latrines."

"But—why?" Godric didn't want to complain, but he did not want to leave his warm sleeping quarters for the frigid, putrid air of the latrines. And truly, he did not understand why Eadric would want to, either.

"Because what we are going to talk about, no one else should hear."

Godric's heart lifted. Now he wouldn't mind going there so much.

“Well, go on,” said Eadric. “Put on your cloak and boots.”

As Godric dressed, Eadric walked over to Hildred and stood over her while she remained on the bed. “Hildred,” he said, and a change seemed to come over his voice, making it deeper but softer at the same time. Out of the corner of his eye, Godric saw Eadric reach out and run his fingers through Hildred’s hair. “How have you managed to remain so lovely after so much strife?”

Hildred smiled slightly. Eadric’s hand trailed down to cup her cheek, which she leaned into. “I could ask the same of you, my lord. As for me, I am well taken care of.”

The two of them looked into each others’ eyes for a short while, then Eadric turned and caught Godric watching them curiously.

“Good then,” said Eadric, dropping his hand from Hildred’s chin. “Let’s go.”

Godric pulled on his boots and waited a moment longer. Before he left, Eadric leaned down and kissed Hildred tenderly on the cheek, very close to her lips. Then he followed Godric outside.

The latrine was a small rectangular building placed apart from the other halls and lodges of Tamworth palace, but still within the protection of the ditches and palisades lining the large fortress. Eadric and Godric walked towards it in the crisp night air, their boots crunching against the frosty soil. Godric preferred feeling the earth under his shoes instead of wood, like the timber roads that lined the streets of the town below.

They were almost to the latrine when a man came staggering from the long hall towards Eadric. He had dark features and, other than his shortly cropped hair, looked very unruly. His beard spread far down his neck and his cloak smelled of dogs. One did not need to see the horn sloshing with wine in his hand to know he’d been drinking. He stepped into Eadric’s path, forcing them both to stop.

“My lord,” he said, though there was no respect in his tone. More sharply, he said, “*Eadric.*”

Eadric took a step back from what must have been very foul breath. “Lindsey,” he said, forgiving his hearth companion’s discourtesy. “How can I help you?”

“I suppose you’ve heard,” said Lindsey. “The Golden Cross is dead.”

Godric did not need to see his father in the darkness to sense the change that came over him. Before, he stood tall. Now, his whole body seemed to wilt. He took another step away from Lindsey, his head of heavy hair drooping. His voice sounded broken. “Of course, you fool, I brought the news myself. What of it?”

“I also heard you killed him yourself. You burned him to death.”

“King Canute commanded me to.”

“King *Canute.*” Lindsey spat on the ground, then wiped his mouth with a long swing of his arm. Bristling, Eadric reached out and caught Lindsey’s wrist, twisting it as he shoved Lindsey backwards.

“What has gotten into you, Lindsey? I’ve never seen you like this. Canute is your king now, as surely as I am your lord.”

“*My lord.*” Lindsey shook his head, then took another clumsy swig of wine. “Well then, congratulations. Congratulations for killing the most courageous, intelligent, and devout Anglo-Saxon remaining among us.”

Eadric grunted as if from a physical blow. “You will not speak to me that way, Lindsey. You don’t even know the whole—”

It was hard to see in the dark night air, but Godric glimpsed what Eadric did not, because his eyes were on the right level. He saw Lindsey's hand flinching next to the hilt of his sword. He interrupted Eadric to cry, "Father!"

The sound of steel scraping its scabbard rang in Godric's ears as Eadric drew his sword. He drew it before Lindsey had the chance to grab his own. Eadric swung the blade around so fast Godric felt the breeze rush over his thick cloak. But he also felt the breeze because Eadric did not slice the air with his blade; he tilted it in order to strike with the flat of the steel. Even so, Lindsey cried out in pain as the metal smacked against the bones of his wrist. He fell back, clutching his wounded wrist, clearly in so much pain he held back tears.

Eadric lifted his sword so that the tip pointed to Lindsey's neck. "Do not do something you will regret, Lindsey." Though he tried to speak with force, his voice was smothered with anguish. "Go back inside, and we will speak of this in the morning, when you are sober."

Lindsey blinked rapidly, as if the pain helped him see through the haze of his intoxication. He must have heard the wisdom in Eadric's advice, for then he turned and scurried away, leaving his horn of spilled wine leaking into the earth.

Godric remained quiet, even when Lindsey was gone, for he could hear his father breathing heavily. He sheathed his sword, but remained standing still, staring into the ground. Godric waited, and waited, until he worried his father had forgotten their important task.

"Father," he said at last. "Are you all right?"

"No, Godric, I am not." Eadric straightened a little, but his gaze remained pinned to the earth, as if he could see hell below the wilted grass. "I have done many bad things, Godric. I have hurt many people I cared about. I did it for myself, and for—" His voice choked, and it took him a moment to recover. "For Aydith. Or at least I thought so. I also acted for you and the rest of my children, and yes, for Engla-lond. I hoped that my actions, painful though they were, would cause peace to come sooner."

"But you succeeded," said Godric. "Edmund and Canute have called a truce. Now all you have to do is kill Edmund, and Engla-lond will be whole again."

Eadric inhaled sharply, turning to meet his son's gaze in the moonlight. "Are you sure you want to do this, Godric?"

"Do what?" Then he realized what his father meant. Of course. Excitedly, he cried, "I'm sure, Father! I'll kill Edmund Ironside."

"*Hush!*" Eadric looked about nervously, but no one was nearby. He seized Godric's shoulder and guided him firmly towards the latrines. He spoke in a harsh whisper. "You will not kill him, exactly, not by your own hand. You are helping your father with his own cruel scheme, nothing more. And after all, the killing blow will not come directly from anyone's hand. It will come from the lockbow."

Godric's eyes lit up. "The lockbow!" Now he understood what his father had meant by finding a "use" for it.

Eadric threw his cloak around his nose, for now they stood at the door of the latrines. Godric followed his example. He had never thought to try it before. It did make the stench more tolerable.

Eadric pointed into the darkness. "I will visit Edmund when he's in Oxford to

discuss some political matters. Canute wants me to, anyway. Then one night, I will install the lockbow under the seat of his latrine.”

“*You?*” Godric could not imagine his father doing something so filthy. Eadric loved cleanliness; he even bathed once a week, like the Danes did. Godric wondered whether once the Danes ruled all of Engla-lond, everyone would bathe on Saturn’s day. Godric hoped not. He did not like bathing so much as his father.

“It must be me,” Eadric said reluctantly. “I can trust no one else with this task, not even a slave, not even a hearth companion.” Remembering the scene he had just witnessed with Lindsey, Godric saw the truth of this. Lindsey had been the most loyal of Eadric’s followers, aside from Thorkell himself, who was not a follower so much as an equal. “If they were to speak of it to anyone ...”

“But I don’t understand,” said Godric. “If Edmund dies, Canute will rule. That was part of their agreement, wasn’t it?”

Eadric nodded.

“So won’t Canute be grateful that you’ve done this for him?”

He shook his head sadly. “Canute is a strange man, and I think my acting in this manner would offend his pride.” He looked at Godric, whose face was twisted with puzzlement. He sighed. “It is difficult to explain. More simply, however Canute may feel, he must put on an act for the rest of the country to keep them united. Many people still love Edmund. Many people ...” Sadness came over Eadric’s face again, and Godric remembered that his father and Edmund had once been friends. After all, they were brothers-in-law. “Canute will want to keep their loyalty. He would never want to be implicated in Edmund’s murder, nor appear as if he supported it.”

Godric wished he grasped politics as easily as his father. Eadric managed to win the favor of every court he wanted to play in, it seemed. Yet it all seemed so complicated and nonsensical to Godric.

As Godric stared into the shadows and imagined Edmund’s death, he couldn’t help but laugh a little. “He won’t see it coming at all. No one will. He’ll sit down to shit and then—pow!”

Eadric smacked him firmly over the head, cutting his laughter short. “Don’t talk like that, Godric. Edmund is a good man. And even if he wasn’t ... death is no laughing matter.”

Godric glared up at him as he rubbed the sore spot on his head. “I thought you said the point of life is to enjoy it,” he said sharply. “But you’ve killed. I *saw* you. Did you enjoy it or not?”

Eadric grimaced. He turned and walked away from the latrines, wearying of the smell. Godric followed a few steps behind him. Once they’d traveled a short distance, Eadric stopped and swirled around.

“I didn’t enjoy it,” he hissed. “It was a means to an end. Some pleasures are not obtainable without a little pain first.”

Godric thought about this a moment, but he was too angry with his father right now to believe him. He grunted, then said, “If you’re going to set the lockbow, why do you need my help at all?”

Eadric looked at the latrine house again. Godric followed his gaze. “I will tie a string to the lever of the lockbow. The thread will be long, so that you can sit on the other

end of it, perhaps from this distance. You are small. You can hide better than I can. When the time is right, I will signal you, and you will pull the string. Then it will be done.”

Godric thought about this a moment longer. “What if he’s not going there to shit, but just to piss?”

His father winced at this coarse illustration. “Either way, it will kill him. If nothing else, I suspect he would die of elf-shot.”

Godric had seen elf-shot before. It was an infliction from elfish sprites that filled wounds with pus and poisoned a person’s entire body. The victim would get hot and sweaty and weak. The doctors would try to bleed some of the poison out of him. But often, the wounded person died anyway.

As if sharing Godric’s thoughts, Eadric said, “I hope he dies more quickly than that.”

Even though Godric was angry with his father for berating him, he couldn’t help but admire his cleverness. As Eadric walked him back to his quarters, Godric wondered whether he ever could have come up with such a good plan to kill a king on his own. Surely enough, Edmund would die at the hand of Eadric’s great scheme, and no one would understand exactly how it happened. Most people had never heard of a lockbow before, as it originated in the mysterious home of the Jomsvikings. No one would be able to blame Eadric, who would be somewhere else when it happened. They would suspect his nine-year-old son even less.

Godric did not laugh aloud again, but he smiled to himself in the darkness. He was not yet sure if he would enjoy killing. But he knew that when all this was over, he would have killed a king, and who else could claim something so amazing as that? Not for the last time, he wished desperately that he might be able to brag about it someday.

No one but Thorkell and Eadric seemed to have any respect for Godric. He was a bastard, after all, born out of wedlock, then forced to live under Aydith’s roof without her approval. Even though Aydith was gone now, vanished, her children with Eadric continued to resent him. There were three of them: Ethelfleda, Colburn, and Kinsey. All of them were younger than Godric, and less educated, yet they rejected his attempts at leadership. The oldest of the three, Ethelfleda, was the most arrogant and stubborn of them all. She humiliated Godric whenever she had the chance, and urged the other two to gang up on him.

She would not be so arrogant if she knew Godric killed Edmund Ironside.

Thorkell’s own son, Finn, was a different matter. Finn was not particularly malicious, nor needy for power. He was so much younger than Godric, as well. Yet he was already big, and strong, and knew that his father was the mightiest warrior in the land. He simply assumed that no one else could get in his way. Godric did not see Finn as a rival so much as a challenging playmate. One day, he would win Finn’s respect, and he would feel good for doing so.

Godric would show them all.

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Everything happened so fast. One night, Eadric and Godric were scheming next to the latrines, forging the fate of the entire country with their secretive plans. The next, they were packing their saddlebags, cleaning their horses’ shoes, and preparing to ride to Oxford.

Before they left, Godric watched anxiously to see what would happen between Eadric and Lindsey. But Lindsey seemed to vanish. He did not appear amongst Eadric's hearth companions that day, nor the next. Godric wondered if he would ever return. He wondered what his father would do if he did. Godric did not know much about the Golden Cross, nor did anyone else, but it amazed him how Lindsey reacted to news of the Golden Cross's death. No one knew his identity—no one willing to speak it aloud, in any case. People only knew that he was a man who wore a golden spangenhelm and inspired the Anglo-Saxons to fight against the Danes until they were defeated at Ashingdon. Why did his death create such a stir?

The conflict between Eadric and Lindsey remained unresolved, but Godric had more important matters to focus on. In no time, he was riding south with his father. Godric did not like traveling from Tamworth to Oxford. The distance was not very far, but even so, they rode during the onset of winter, and the cold seemed to settle into the fabric of their tunics and leggings. They ate salty meat and Godric's tongue felt dry no matter how much water he drank. Sometimes Eadric offered him ale, which made him feel better, though sometimes it made him hungrier at the same time.

They entered the burg of Oxford through the North gate, where the tower of a great church loomed high over the wooden palisades. Godric remembered hearing of a group of churchmen who fell through the second story of a building. He did not mind walking up to the second floor of Eadric's long hall, but he did not know if he'd be brave enough to walk to the top of a tower like that, which was much, much higher.

They turned onto the High Street and made their way to the stronghold. The roads here were not as good as Tamworth's, and the mud had recently been churned by heavy horses and ox-carts. Around the king's stronghold, animals were tethered with awkward ropes and flimsy shelters. No doubt they were here for the sake of the king.

A man wearing soft yellow linens and a cloak with a glittering brooch greeted them at the entrance of the stronghold. Godric disliked him instantly, though he could not exactly say why. Perhaps he just had a good instinct about such things.

"Greetings, Eadric *Streona*."

Streona was Eadric's nickname, and it meant "grasper." Godric noticed that some people pronounced it differently than others. Some said it as if to compliment him, which Godric felt that they should. Hildred explained that when Eadric was Godric's age, he had been a lowly swineherd. Now he was an ealdorman, and only because of his ambition and pride. But some people seemed to see his success as a bad thing. Godric had little doubt that the man with the yellow linens belonged to the latter group.

"Leafwine," Eadric said simply. He did not seem insulted at all, though apparently, Leafwine wanted him to be. Leafwine fidgeted with agitation and Godric smiled to himself. He did not always understand his father's ways, but he understood that Eadric always knew how to behave in almost any situation. Eadric looked around curiously, somehow making Leafwine angrier. "Are you waiting here to escort me to King Edmund?"

"Of course not," snapped Leafwine. "I am here as an ealdorman, just like you."

"That's strange," said Eadric. "You are a man of Mercia."

"You *idiot*," growled Leafwine, his rage getting the better of him. "Are you blind? I have been acting on your behalf in southern Mercia for the last few years, doing what you were too lazy to do for yourself. I defended Mercia while you got drunk in your dining

hall.”

“I understand why you may see it all that way,” said Eadric, “and I appreciate all you’ve done for Mercia very much. If you’d like, I will speak to King Canute on your behalf and see that you are rewarded.”

Leofwine’s face went as red as a ripe autumn apple. “King Edmund has rewarded me, as Ealdorman of the Hwiccas.” Godric had heard the term “Hwiccas” before, and it referred to the lands of southern Mercia.

“I don’t see how he could have.” Eadric made a face as if truly puzzled. “These lands are under Canute’s jurisdiction.”

Leofwine continued to fume, his mouth flopping open and shut, but he seemed unable to think of a retort. Godric tried his hardest not to laugh. He must have let out a little giggle on accident, because Leofwine’s burning eyes soon turned on him.

“And who is this you’ve brought with you?”

“My son, Godric.”

Godric swelled with pride.

“Is that a problem, Leofwine?” said Eadric.

Leofwine just grunted and turned to go inside. Eadric smiled at Godric and put a hand on his back to nudge him in the lord’s footsteps.

That night, Godric dined with the king and many nobles. He felt strange looking upon the man he knew he would soon kill. Edmund looked like a strong but tired man, his firm jaw constantly clenching under his trimmed beard, his golden crown gleaming with uncanny brilliance atop his dark black hair.

For the most part, King Edmund seemed to ignore Eadric’s and Godric’s presence altogether. At the long table, he paid attention to men like Leofwine and other people Godric didn’t recognize, discussing politics, politics, and more politics. More than anything, they talked about how strongly various civilians and churchmen disliked Canute, though they only seemed to dislike him because he was a Viking. Edmund did not make much effort to defend the Viking king; he would only say, “Canute worships our Christian God,” or something to that effect. If Edmund had visited Canute’s territory to ease the commoners’ minds, he was doing a horrible job.

At one point, Eadric added something to the discussion, and the rest of the table grew deathly silent. Godric did not understand what was wrong. Eadric was only defending Canute’s kingship, as Edmund should have been doing, himself.

Edmund glared at Eadric long and hard, his dark eyes like burning coals. Then, without any warning, he looked at Godric. Godric sat straight up in his chair, his eyes doubling in size. He wondered if the king could see into his mind and sense that Godric planned to kill him.

“I don’t understand,” grumbled Edmund. “Why is the boy here?”

Godric fought the urge to stand up and run away.

“He is my son,” said Eadric. “I wanted to show him Oxford.”

“He is not Aydith’s,” Edmund said simply.

“No, he isn’t.”

Edmund turned to meet Eadric’s gaze, half-sneering. “So he is a bastard. You brought a *bastard* to my table? Even though your *wife* is my own dearest *sister*?”

“Y-yes, my lord.” Even Eadric, who usually managed to look calm in the most dire

of circumstances, bowed his head in shame. Godric felt as if his own cheeks were on fire. He did not like being called a bastard, especially like this. "I ... I did not feel as if Godric was safe at home without me," he went on after a moment. This struck Godric as odd. He wondered if his father was lying. "I pray that you understand my meaning."

Edmund considered this, his face softening somewhat.

"Th-thank you for the food, my king," blurted Godric. He wanted to make his father proud. He did not want to be an embarrassment to anyone. "I ... I will retire now."

He got up, shaking from head to foot, and walked from the hall. Extreme silence lingered in his wake.

When he was around the corner, he let out his breath and collapsed against the cold exterior of the stronghold. Then, he felt the timbers shaking with the laughter of the men inside. Why were they laughing? Were they laughing at *him*?

Tears filled Godric's eyes. His hands curled into fists. Let them laugh now, he thought. They would not be laughing tomorrow.

He straightened and stormed away from the hall, even though he did not know where he would go. He wanted to make his way to the latrines and set up the lockbow, even though Eadric planned to do that himself. He wanted to wait in Edmund's bedroom, then kill him in his sleep. Anything to stop that terrible laughter.

Then, he spotted someone watching him.

The darkness made her difficult to recognize, at first. Godric only felt as if he should know her, even though he could not see her face. The shape of her body was familiar, and the flow of her long dark hair. She turned slightly, and he saw her eyes glisten in the moonlight.

Aydith!

What was she doing here? Well, she was Edmund's sister. But she was also Eadric's wife. Godric did not know all the reasons behind their separation. Hildred said that he would not understand until he was an adult. But he was not stupid. He knew that there was something between Eadric and Aydith, something terrible that went beyond their problems as husband and wife. Whatever it was, his gut screamed one thing at him as he looked upon her: *Enemy!*

"Godric?" she said. Her voice shook slightly. He wondered if she saw him as an enemy as surely as he saw her. "Is that you? But why are you—"

Godric did not want to stay and confirm her suspicions. He only wanted to kill Edmund. He turned and ran, his heart thudding in his chest, his belly burning as if on fire.

He could not run far. Guards and retainers surrounded the buildings of the stronghold, and he did not want to attract their attention. To make matters worse, he was not even sure where he was, nor where he and Eadric would be staying. When he wandered close to the tethered animals or storage sheds, the keepers gave him warning scowls. Before long, Godric found himself spinning in circles, not sure where to go.

"Godric."

Out of breath, he turned to see his father standing in the shadows nearby, his bright curly hair glowing in the darkness, his cloak rippling in the brisk breeze.

"I'm sorry, Father."

"Never mind. You gave me an excuse to get out of that accursed conversation. If Edmund was a bit more corrupt, I suspect he would try to murder me in my sleep tonight."

Godric didn't know what to say. Before, he had felt so good about coming here and proving something. But when the king looked straight into his eyes, his courage dissolved like a leaf tossed into flames. King Edmund earned his nickname, Ironside, by his might with the blade. He had led men into battles against Vikings. He had dueled with Canute and survived. And Godric, who had only killed deer and fowl, planned to get the best of him. Suddenly, he was afraid to try.

"Godric," said Eadric. His voice was gentle. His boots creaked as he knelt down and stared into his son's eyes. "Have you changed your mind?"

Godric shook his head, but he could not meet his father's gaze. "I'll do it," he said. "I want to."

Eadric nodded. "In that case, you should rest while you can. I will do my part tonight, then show you where to hide once I'm finished." He motioned to someone, and one of his hearth companions stepped out of the darkness. "Show him to his bed," Eadric commanded.

The hearth companion led Godric to a hall lined with small beds, much like his quarters in Tamworth. Tamworth was much more luxurious, however. Eadric was a rich man, much richer than Leofwine, and he gave his servants nice beds with thick blankets and soft mats. Godric even had a pillow softened with feathers inside. The blankets here seemed particularly itchy, the mat rough and stuffed with sharp hay. Previously, Godric had dreamed of a life away from Tamworth, full of adventure and far from the dull droning of monks. But on a night like this, he wondered if it might not be better to stay home, after all.

Exhaustion overcame him faster than he expected it to and he soon fell asleep. His dreams were restless, full of Edmund's dark eyes glaring at him through a pit of human filth. Godric would fire the lockbow at him, again and again, but no matter how many times he fired, the arrows flew astray.

When he awoke, he heard what sounded like a man in pain. The night air was thick around him, so thick he felt as if he could reach up and push the blackness away. But that was not possible. He could not see a thing. He blinked through the darkness, recognizing the voice of the man gasping and groaning as Eadric, but unable to find his shape.

"Father?" he whispered. He knew by the dead silence elsewhere that almost everyone in the hall was asleep.

"S-silence, G-G-Godric." It sounded as if Eadric's teeth were chattering.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. It's ... ss ... s'd-done."

Godric reached for his father through the blackness, and that's when he smelled the heavy stench clinging to him. Some of the stink surely came from the latrines, though Godric might not have noticed if he hadn't known better. That stink was hidden under something else. Over the smell was heavy perfume, such heavy perfume it made Godric's nose itch.

"What's that smell?" he finally asked, careful to whisper.

"M-musk, and lemon, and jasmine," hissed Eadric. "Anything to take that st-st-stench away. It was so ... so ... wretched. I had to ... wash it off."

Godric's hand finally found Eadric's body on the bed beside him. It was so cold, like the earth when it frosted over. His linen sleeves felt damp. Then he reached up and felt

at Eadric's hair, which was wet and starting to freeze.

"Stop," snapped Eadric, lightly smacking his hand away. "Just give me a moment."

Godric sat and listened to his father grimace and shiver, his own heart racing in his chest. Eadric had done his part. Now it would be Godric's turn. He wondered where his father must have gone to wash. Most likely he rushed to the nearest creek and jumped in, which was why he was nearly freezing to death.

He waited and waited, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. Under his blanket, Eadric's breath began to grow even again, his body calming. Perhaps he had chased away the worst of the chill with good, thick wool.

"All right," Eadric groaned at last. "Come along." He pulled himself from his bed and limped on wooden feet from the hall.

Godric followed, shivering long before the cold air struck him. He didn't want to be scared but he couldn't help it.

Eadric led him to a place in the grass where he could smell the odor of the latrine. Other than that, he could not have guessed where he was, for the moon was blocked by black clouds and he could not see a thing. He crouched down behind a thorn bush and Eadric carefully picked up the string.

"Here it is," he whispered. "Be very careful. Do not tug it at all until it's time. Move as little as possible; don't let anyone see you. From here, I think you will be able to see the window of the northern hall; I will stand there and signal you when it's time."

Godric nodded dumbly, though Eadric could not see him.

"While you're waiting here, however long that may be, think of a lie to tell, should you get caught. Sometimes dishonesty is the only way to save yourself, my boy."

Eadric was shivering again, so he only gave Godric a quick embrace before vanishing into the night.

So Godric remained behind, feeling the tiny thread in his fingertips as his skin slowly grew numb. He heard thunder rumble above and he flinched with fright. He dropped the thread and could not see where it went in the darkness.

Already, he wanted to cry and mourn his terrible predicament. Raindrops pattered on him from above. If his own strong father had been so affected by the cold air while wet, how much worse might it affect Godric, not so large and full of warmth? His teeth chattered just from the thought of his own death, sitting out here and turning into a block of ice.

But the rain did not pour, not for awhile. It drizzled softly, and Godric did not search for the thread in the shadows, because he did not want to move it on accident and release the arrow. His fingers became too numb to find or hold anything, anyway. He would find the string once the sun rose. He curled his hands into his cloak and waited. Eadric told him to think of a lie, should he be found here. So he did. He had thought of many by the time dawn splashed the horizon with golden colors.

Rain fell heavily then, slicing through the frost and snaking in rivulets past Godric's boots. Once the sun illuminated the stiff, yellowed grass around him, he knelt carefully and searched the mud, blinking back rain drops, to find the piece of thread. The wet earth clung to the string, but he pulled it free—carefully—and held it aloft.

Some of the cold weather seemed to melt away with the rain, but it was still unpleasant. Gradually, the wetness seeped through his cloak, then his tunic, then the thin

layer of linens underneath. He was wet through and through, his body trembling, his toes and fingers like appendages of stone. But that was tolerable; all he needed to do was sit and wait.

It occurred to him, after awhile, to be grateful for the rain. Some of the guards who might have patrolled this area did not wander as far from the indoors as they normally would. No one came close to him.

He watched several people enter the latrine house then leave. He began to feel bold again, knowing that he held the power in his little fingers to kill them with one tug. This would work. He would kill King Edmund.

Soon he smelled eggs and pottage cooking in the kitchens. His stomach rumbled with hunger. But his stomach was also slightly upset, and the smell of roasting breakfast could only disguise the stench of the privy to a small extent, so it was easy to chase his hunger away. What worried him more was that he needed to use the latrine, himself. But he certainly wouldn't piss in an outhouse rigged with a lockbow, and he was afraid to leave his post. So what to do?

Then he saw Edmund walking to the latrines.

His heart caught in his throat. This was it. His body trembled so much he thought he might pull the string on accident. He watched the king wade through the mud, his jewels jangling, his dark eyes scowling with grumpiness. He lifted his large fur cloak and wrapped it around his head to cover his nose as he went into the latrine house.

Godric's eyes darted every which way, searching for his father in one of the windows of the halls. The northern hall, he had said. Which one was that? He fought back a swell of panic. All the windows were covered by heavy tapestries; Eadric was not to be seen in any of them.

What should he do? What if Eadric was not giving him a signal for a reason? But this was their chance! Godric did not know how much longer he could hide here, in the cold and wet, without food or a chance to relieve himself.

He continued to look around, but could not find his father anywhere.

He could not wait. He would kill Edmund now or never at all.

He tugged the string.

*****End of Excerpt******

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