

RESSURECTORS

By

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## CHAPTER 1

It was an honest way to earn a living as anything else. But instead of giving the buyers bread they could eat, wood they could construct their houses with, or wild game from the deep forest, Chad Hunter's 'normal day job' specialty, he gave 11<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon free peasants and their small-fry 'lords and ladies' hope. Assurance to the living, or in most cases merely 'existing', that the dead are alright. And stories about the 'other side' which made them fear death less so they could live life with more joy, accomplishment and purpose at a time when life was usually short, brutish and harsh. And the hope that in some rare cases, one could bring the seemingly dead back into the realm of the living.

"It's not so dishonorable a 'service', Svend," Chad told his former hunting companion, who he was still able to keep as a specially-skilled slave as they approached the next small village nestled within large forests and lush meadows which were communally owned, and used, by peasants living in wooden shacks rather than earls squandering their lives in more comfortable castles. "After all, the Catholic priests, whose grandfathers were Christian killing Pagans, sell hard working and under rewarded peasants stories about entering heaven if they work even harder. And indulgences to the rich who abuse, starve or kill peasants so they can enter a special part Paradise reserved for the rich and 'blameless'," he continued as the horse pulled the cart filled with wild boar, deer and rabbit over a portion of road that was finally more flat ground than axel or wheel breaking rut.

"This is true," replied the large framed, all muscle and more heart than brains former five or more decades old Viking, hiding out as a 'simple minded' Anglo-Saxon peasant, whose skill as a spotter, drawer out of game and mastery of the bow was responsible for 90 percent of the game in the cart. "As my ancestors believed, and my family still thinks, that entry into Valhalla is only possible if you died in battle, particularly when fighting Christians. And now, as the baptized ones are convinced now, they enter Nordic and English 'heaven' after killing Moslems or Jews, or 'outlaw' Christians," he said with anger in his deep seated eyes and pity from his cracked, aged lips.

"And those who die of disease, famine and death at the hands of Mother Nature or King Neptune such as storms at sea? Or women who died at childbirth instead of being shield maidens in battle?" Chad posed to Svend, whose name meant 'he who is in the service of others. "What did Wotan and the priests who trained you when you were a child tell you say about that?"

"Some questions, you were smart enough to not ask," Svend replied. "Those of us who were smart enough anyway," the sibling-less Danish refugee continued, a tear of grief coming down his face. "But," he said as he wiped the drops from his eye before they became a river he could not stop. "We have work to do here, in the world as it is. While we are still in these bodies and minds, which hopefully work together rather than against each other," the white haired, balding, wrinkled neck 'volunteer slave' said to his thick, brown haired, wrinkleless twenty-five year old 'master', and student. "A service we give to others.," said of the man who claimed he would be unfortunate enough to live till the

unheard age of 80 rather than die on schedule like everyone else before hitting the half century mark. “At the same rates?” he continued, based more in the world seen by the eyes rather than felt by the soul.

Svend retrieved the ‘magic box’ from behind the buckboard containing the tools of his and Chad’s most valued ‘trade’. He reached into the hidden compartment containing silver coins bearing the likeness of the present monarch who, by sheer accident and dumb luck, was able to unite Mercia, Wessex and the other minor kingdoms into a relatively peaceful and prosperous kingdom with, unlike the lands East of the English channel, more land than people, and more health than disease. “For trying to raise the dead or make them speak to the living, we will charge one silver ‘sovereign eagle’ penny with the likeness of King Edward ‘the confessor’, whose numerous transgressions and ‘moral miscalculations’ will be recorded well after his death, and ours.”

“And for raising the dead, for a few minutes, ten silver pennies,” Chad interjected. “Up from our previous rates. Inflationary adjustment as more legal and illegal mints are printing more coins for gold that doesn’t exist.”

“And for making those corpses that motionless, speechless and responsiveness come to life to DO something on this side of the veil, which can happen, according to the stories my father and yours told us?” Svend inquired, after which the voluntary old slave looked at and into the young peasant master’s soul though his still not yet burnt out eyes. “And the stories YOU make up, and YOU pay people to convince others are true?”

Chad allowed his lips to emerge into a wide smile, feeling the whiteness of his miraculously still present teeth. “A necessary fable we give to people, so that it can become fact. Fables which can become realities. Like your father bringing back to life the corpse of Norwegian Bjorn Borgson who lead his people, your people, into battle, to beat the shit of the Danish shithead chieftain who killed your sisters and raped your mother. With Bjorn---”

“---disappearing into the sunset after the final victory against the most sadistic and cruel Viking who ever lived,” Svend interjected with a doubting and questioning frown, scratching his lice infested beard yet again, perhaps in the hopes of finding some answers to the miracle which was too good to be true, but wasn’t. “And then, according to some--  
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“---Living a happier life, somewhere else, with a wife he actually loved and children who are born from his sperm and not someone else’s,” Chad shot back. “According to the legends and, the few Norwegians who could write, real life observation.”

“And you believe everything that is written down?” Svend challenged the young man who provided him food for his stomach, protection from Vikings who, for reasons still not revealed, wanted his head on a stake, and English Earls who had warrants on his hide for crimes including theft, adultery and having intimate relations with those of the wrong caste and gender. “When do we stop lying to the people we are supposed to be

serving?"

Chad, who had inherited his father's gift of gab, but not self-destructive 'honor' and gullibility, took in a deep breath. "We stop lying to people when we know they can handle the truth," he released from his amply fed mouth, and self-assured conscience. "Or until we can really do what the people think we are doing for the dead, and the living," he said as his final word on the matter. "And be considered doctors of the soul and, with enough luck and herbal tricks, the body as well," Chad continued, recalling how so often the Noble men, some Norman and some English, looked at him and his father as if they were low born scum, no matter how many patients he saved from the plague. And how the nobles' daughters would look at Chad's simple, peasant clothing and honest, loving face with upturned noses. And how the Nobles' drunken, overfed and over-fornicated sons, just for sport, decided to put an arrow into his father's heart for declining to kill a mother deer still nursing her young when he was commanded to do so. "Yes, Svend," Chad said as he looked at the meat in the back of the wagon, then the village down below, then felt a burst of January frigid wind blowing into his chest, blowing the promise of a warm November away into the storm clouds approaching from three sides. "This Christmas, the living in this village will eat well. And the dead or dying...of which there are, according to our last visit, and stories we heard at our last stop----"

"---Will be respected!" Svend insisted, his big brown eyes turning red as he grabbed hold of an axe from the 'magic box' bearing the names and images of both Pagan gods and Christian saints. "Yes?"

"Sure," Chad promised. Provisionally anyway.

After two more hills and three small valleys, Chad's glory seeking young eyes and Svend's still sharp ocular portholes finally beheld structures built by man rather than Mother nature. The entrance to the low lying clearing surrounded by well wooded mountains on all sides, the village of Westphistor, was now known as Aestrikla, due no doubt to an old brigand dying, or a younger one emerging. Its new name was engraved artistically on a sign that probably only one in ten residents could read. But the artistry of the new sign was not matched by any of the dwellings. Each structure was made of hastily planed wood or sticks of small trees held together by hemp twine, with a thatched hut. By the smell and, if the wind blew open the holes in the walls the fashionable people in fashionable towns were calling 'windows', life was as it was when the collection of 300 or so souls who made an agreement to work with rather than against each other, five names three decades ago. Most families lived in a single room, the more well-off ones having a division within the house. Sheep and goats were kept inside during the winter months to provide body heat for their human owners, as well as milk for cheese and butter and, when too old to provide such, a small amount of meat which the farmers here used to supplement their diet of bread milled from wheat, barley and oats. For each of the cows, bulls and horses still standing, there was a skull of such in a communal pile in

the middle of the village 'square'. "No, it's not your time yet to become meat, and won't be for a long time," Chad promised a gelding he recognized from last visit here who on his last visit here had galloped with a bit of a limp to the fence line and whinnied to him, seeking special treats and protection from his favorite human rather than to have 'relations' with the mare pulling Chad's cart. "As long as you prove yourself worthy of pulling a plow, don't throw off any more riders who know nothing about horsemanship or courtesy, learn how to rest that lame leg so it gets better, or maybe..." Chad said to the still breathing and standing horse, after which he contemplated some other function that the horse could perhaps perform before becoming meat.

"We can figure out a way to resurrect your manhood so you can sire more colts and fillies?" Svend said to the horse, reading Chad's mind yet again. "Which you know we can't do."

"But they think we can, Svend" Chad whispered regarding a herd of thin, but for the most part healthy children running towards the cart, greeting 'Uncle Chad' and 'Papa Svend', as they were known here. They sported a mixture of wooden Christian crosses and a few with Nordic and Saxon bracelets and necklaces. Their hair was chopped into windblown mops, or braided in mannerisms resembling Nordic, English and Celtic styles. "Look what God, Wotan, our Saxon gods and the Spirit of the Woods has given us, to give to you!" Chad proclaimed to those young souls with a bold, life embracing voice, showing off the wild game the sombre and life tired Nordic 'Santa' had spotted, shot, gutted and, where necessary, preserved with salt. "Food for the winter, and into the spring. So you grow up to be big, strong, clever and---"

"Wise," Svend interjected. "Able and willing to give more than you take."

"Which we graciously do for you because...we can," Chad added as the children's swarmed all over the game, filled their nostrils with their aroma or their dirt caked mouths with real raw meat that was not their own flesh. "So you can eat like nobles." 'Santa Chad' promised the children. "And live long happy lives," he continued as the parents of the children approached, slowly. And with troubled eyes. "Lives that..."

"Are getting shorter this year," spat out Aidan Carpenter, a tall man with strong arms who was a master at converting trees into houses said with a sad, tired and angry face. Around his wrinkled and sun-baked neck hung, as usual, the wooden crucifix the pious builder of all things wood who took on that profession because it had been Jesus' 'day job'. But on his wedding ring finger this time, a ring of white flesh. "My wife Megan...she..." his strong face turned into a bed for tears of grief pouring from his eyes. He was comforted by his three children. Chad recalled on his visit last year that Aiden had sired at least five offspring, all under the age of 10.

"And my husband Gareth," Anne Wheeler said of the most underpaid, yet over talented converter of rock into metal, and metal into tools within a hundred miles. "Taken from me by demons I couldn't see, instead of, in the 'good old days', invading Danes and Normans who I could see."

The rest of the adults in the village, and then some of the older children who had grown into becoming responsible adults for their younger siblings, or a grieving parent, reported more deaths.

“Where, when, how?” Chad asked them all, individually and collectively.

There were, this time anyway, no reports of pox, deformed limbs or other symptoms of diseases which commonly spread like wildfire. All causes of death seemed to be different. As for the ‘demons’ that was on its way to dwindling the village of 40 families people into a ragtail collection of as many individual souls, such was a mystery to the villagers.

Svend asked other more worldly questions about their demise. Sources of water, food, toxic materials brought into the village by merchants paid by foreign invaders who wanted to decimate it and so forth. But the answers he got didn’t give him many medical answers. Not any which could explain why so many deaths had occurred within the last month

But there was one question that one angry woman demanded to be answered. “You miracle hunters who maybe stole this meat from the nobles rather than found it in the woods,” Ann Wheeler spat out from a face all too visible due to her having cut off her hair for the second time to mourn the loss of her third husband. “You who, so the stories go, are the only effective doctors who can conquer death rather than merely give us tricks to avoid or postpone it. So, can you...with God’s permission?” she said as she looked up to the sky.

“And the help of any other gods?” a small girl with a limp in her stride, a cleft palate on her face and the innocence of all the angels imagined of real in her big blue eyes asked with a stutter.

“And without any word of it to the Priests who come here to say prayers over the dead, and collect taxes for such so they can grow fat and comfortable in the service of God,” promised Stewart Whiteman, a pale skinned, ugly man with a premature double chin who perhaps because of his unlikability was still the village’s mayor. And, as he was the only individual with a sword strapped to his rope belt, was apparently the sheriff as well. “Can you, Wizard, Doctor, Healer Chad, you know...”

“Assure you that the dead are alright?” Svend offered somberly before Chad could formulate a pledge that would gain him popularity and relieve him of any responsibility for failure.

“And bring whoever you can back to life, Uncle Chad and Papa Svend!” the girl with the deformed yet magical smile, nestling in between the two men who towered over her. “Like the stories we heard about you. Please?”

Chad considered the request which, this time, could not be refused. Particularly when he saw several men, and two women, reach for what appeared to be knives under their shirt tails. “We can try,” he promised the girl. “Starting with, who has departed the land of the living, or existing, most recently?” he asked the crowd.

Three hands went up, after which two went down. The remaining patron, or mark, Tata Miller, led Chad and Svend to a hut in front of the building where grain was converted into flour, which, according to the paucity of bags of grain on the shelves and the plethora of nutrient containing husks in the burn pile, was being done by a staff who was not nearly as proficient as her departed master miller husband.

Upon entering the hut hidden behind the mill, Chad and Svend went to work the usual way they had done so many successful, economically and psychologically anyway, times before. Chad informed the still living family of that the beloved dead husband that since the time of departure, had become unaccustomed to the light, so that he had to be woken up in the dark. Once nestled in the dark, un-seeable by the family and, theoretically, the God they worshiped, Chad reached into the magic box, and retrieved two metal bracelets. He placed them on the departed’s wrists, explaining to those family members who were Christian that it contained pieces of the Holy Grail Jesus passed around at the last Supper. And to those who wanted or needed to become pagans, like their ancestors were, that it was forged from metal obtained from the mountains where their favorite Saxon diety had dwelled. Meanwhile, Svend settled himself behind the head of the dead body, placing a cross, or other religious icon of sorts containing highly magnetic loadstone above the departed to channel that Divinity’s spirit into the room, and to shielding the soul of departing or departed from capture by demons. Special sheets of wood were placed on either side of the corpse, creating an echoing effect in the hut.

Chad asked the living to sit in a dimly lit portion of the hut, so they could observe the shadows or faint images of the departed as they were brought back from the dead. Another ‘day at the workshop’ for the venerated holy miracle makers who were too sincere, and beloved, to be turned in to the priests and the County Magistrate. The living would be allowed to ask questions of the dead as they were being resurrected through a mixture of ‘special herbs’ given to them by mouth, and chants delivered into the ear, in tongues that the living recognized, or sometimes did, honoring the God or gods they were terrified of or loved. To each question asked, Svend would answer in the voice of the departed, matching it perfectly once he had heard them while they were in the land of the living with a magical voice that could do such without anyone visibly seeing his lips moved, even on days when he trimmed his usually overgrown mustache.

Assuming that rigor mortis had not set in, or could be reversed by injection of special ‘potions’ injected into the joints, the departed’s arms would move. On good days, the fingers would become alive again. Both were pulled up and down, and to the sides, by the magic magnetic stone above them, or the ‘healing hands’ of Svend, through powerful loadstone magnets he had hidden inside of his shirtsleeve, activated and inactivated by small wires around Svend’s own wrist which moved them around.

On this ‘just another day on the road’, ‘Gordon Miller’ assured his wife Tata, and children, that he was alright, and assured Tata that the men and boys she hired to run the mill would learn the craft soon enough if they were gently taught rather than . And that he has seen heaven. And that he wanted to go there. And that he would be sure that all of them would join him. There and that they would be happier there than anywhere on earth. But that entry to that special place was not possible if they killed themselves. Or (at the insistence of Svend rather than the script Chad provided for them) if they lived dishonorable, non-heroic lives. The resurrected ghost said he would look after his beloved family and, in this case, the itinerant master miller said that he loved no other family anywhere. Such made his wife in his home village smile for what seemed to be the first time since she was unable to save him from dying after he had ingested a meal she reluctantly served him, to be eaten at the mill rather than at home, after they had the most heated argument in a year or more.

“So, next?” Chad said after emerging from the darkened hut, leaving the Miller family with bright auras around their unburdened heads and joyful smiles. He placed one of the coins for his services into his pocket, the other into Svend’s and the third into the communal charity box in the common square of the wilderness village which tried so hard to be a safely isolated town, or city.

Four hands went up, then another three. Chad perused them all, recalling who would be the most gullible of the citizens, as well as the ones in most need of hope. Or the belief in mythological benevolent ‘Being’ that would make their brutish, short and harsh life bearable, or even enjoyable. Or if at all possible, meaningful.

Anne Wheeler marched in front of the desperate peasants who didn’t want to be neither kings, nor slaves, nor even thought about owning the latter. “A special case for a special man, needs special attention, ‘Uncle’ Chad and ‘Papa’ Svend,” she declared. ‘Now!’ she insisted, as she pointed to a hut isolated from the rest of the village.

“It’s too late for him,” one of the citizens said. “And he was a cruel man when he was alive.” The crowd, on its way to becoming an unruly mob, grumbled in agreement with her.

“A necessary evil,” Anne yelled back at them.

“Who, if alive again, as a ghost or a man, will only bring more trouble to us!” Aiden Carpenter shouted out, after which he gathered his remaining family of non-adult humans to him. “And my children. And your children!”

“Who was, and still is, an outlaw, with a hefty price on his already, for weeks now, dead head, who was possessed by demon shakes when he was alive.” thin as a rail and clothed like a scarecrow Megan Tanner pointed out, then turned to her husband. “Whose dead body any smart husband with a hungry family, or group of provider husbands, can collect on, right?”

‘But won’t,’ Mayor and Sherriff Stewart Whiteman proclaimed. “Not as long as I am he elected Mayor and Sheriff, and this is a democracy. Right?” With one hand on his blood stained sword, and the other raised up in the air, he asked the crowd for a vote on the matter.

Three arms went up from the back of the crowd, then three, then four, then a stump of an arm which, according to what Chad had heard, was once connected to a hand that dared to shake it in indignant rage at a Norman born Saxon Earl over the ownership of an escaped horse. More hands went up, some villagers raising both right and left appendages.

“So, it is unanimous,” Ann concluded. “Gentlemen,” she said to Chad, “and sometime lady?” she whispered to a reluctant Svend. Chad, driven by need to maintain professional reputation, and Svend, who found himself desiring to maintain an intact neck and underused for ‘normal male activities’ genitalia followed Anne to the hut, allowing the small girl to carry, then, due to her thin arms and big heart, pull the ‘magic box’.

Upon entering the small hut, Chad noticed that, unlike so many others, the corpse was on a wooden platform which was more than a cot, but indeed a bed. Sheets of leather hung from three sides of it. The man lying on it had a pale complexion, a lost look in his fixed in one place pupils, thin arms and even thinner legs. But he emitted no odor, other than that of feces from his bowels which was cleaned up by Anne as soon as she entered the abode. She filled his partially opened mouth with a spoonful of gruel. But for a small amount of air that went into and came out of his nostrils only after lingering there for what seemed like an eternity, he was dead to the world. And, more tragically, to Anne, who futilely shook his legs, rattled his fingers, then slapped his overly bearded face, commanding him to come to life. After exhausting her raspy voice, and all manners of expletives in Saxon, Latin and Nordic slang, she withdrew to a log next to the bed, the only thing resembling a chair or other furnishings in the boltlocked hut with all manners of weaponry hung on nails pounded into the walls.

“You may have heard of him as outlaw, rebel, equalizer of wealth, heretic and man who could master anyone in battle including invading Danes, petty Normans or the occasional upstart Saxon Earl. But he is a poor match for an independently minded horse, requiring choosing mounts for him very carefully and discretely. Oswald Axerod by name. But I knew him as...someone else, in another time, and another place, that my thankfully dead now husband never knew about,” Anne Wheeler, said as she took off her hood, then a wig of horsetail whose color didn’t match her complexion nor body odor, revealing a head of hastily chopped off hair. “An offering to whoever was listening when the disease that made Oswald shake uncontrollably made him stop moving all together,” she related and confessed by way of explanation for her private gender neutral appearance. Her lips turned upward and she released a small chuckle from her throat. “But I guess it didn’t work, or...maybe God really doesn’t like women who make themselves bald in his service. Which explains why Nuns have such a miserable life?”

“But not as bad as he’s still experiencing, from somewhere between life and death,” Chad said, having looked into the eyes of Oswald feeling...something he had not experienced before. “He’s closer to death than life, I think,” he said feeling more empathy for Oswald than he ever did for himself.

“Closer to life, for which I will pay you handsomely and lovingly,” Anne said as she pulled off her robes, revealing size perfect breasts and legs which were not only shapely, but shaved. She covered her head with the horse tail, fashioning it as an Ancient Roman courtesan’s wig. “If you can bring him back from wherever he is, I will take you to wherever you want to do,” she continued as she stroked Chad’s chest. “Which I see is where you want me to take you,” she smiled, pointing to the erect extension popping out between his legs.

“Not necessary, or appropriate,” Svend interjected. “We will do what we can, and Spirit will do the rest,” he pledged.

“And allow you to pay us, whatever---“ Chad said as he felt Anne’s womanly charms driving flashes of vitality up and down his spine like no other grateful or desperate widow had ever been able to deliver. “Yes, whatever----“

“---is APPROPRIATE,” Svend barked at Chad.

“Yes,” Anne said somberly, pulling back from Chad. She slipped on her robe, pulled off her horse hair wig, and covered her head with a hood. “The way Oswald wanted it.”

“WantS it,” Chad replied. “I guarantee that I can reunite him and you, even for a little while, but...his voice. It may be different than you remember it.”

“Because of the disease, I know,” Anne conceded. “Tell me what you want me to do,” she asked, directing her desperate stare to aging apprentice/servant Svend rather than his charismatic and professionally clad younger master.

Svend explained the usual protocol, instructing Anne to wait in the slightly lighted portion of the hut while he and Chad prepared the body for a magnetic awakening of the limbs, unhampered by real rigor mortis. And of course delivery of a voice from the old ventriloquist’s lips that could be made to appear to be delivered by the corpse’s own lips. To make things more interesting, a freak early winter lightening storm was brewing outside, creating the opportunity to see if the legend of Chad’s father and Svend’s grandmother was true. That if lightning bolts from the gods, or whoever roamed the skies above the clouds, could be moved into the tomb of the dead, the dead could become alive again. Such was set up by hooking a wet rope to Oswald’s torso, extending the other end to a tip of a tall split down the middle three times tree outside the hut which, apparently, had been a lightening rod which drew fire from the sky on other occasions.

There was of course the other things had had to be done. The chanting. The blowing of smoke onto the dead person’s face. And the ‘magical’ herbs put into the departed soul’s

mouth. Such included a mixture of barley from the highlands North of Hadrian's wall which was as full of flavor as the Scots who grew it. Oats from the wetlands of Wales which activated the tongue with a nutty fragrance that made porridge a pleasure rather than a chore to swallow. Ground up velvet bean, which Svend and Chad acquired in trade for meat and leather from a highly literate Persian farmer in Mercia who had to flee the land passed down to him from his English father because of claims from the local monastery that the 'deviously pleasant smelling' bean powder was 'infected with Islamic demons' that made the monks more interested in living happily with life-infused women rather than remaining 'born again sexual virgins' with other lifeless men. And of course a dash of honey dipped rosemary, to make the 'magical potions touched by the angels' smell sweet as well as pungent, and, to those who had not experienced that herb, 'exotic' and 'distasteful' and therefore effective..

Anne accepted each of the fables as fact. She absolved Chad and Svend of all they could not do. But she informed them that anything wrong that they did, including bringing in demons from above or below that would make Oswald's continued existence in Purgatory more agonizing, would be paid for dearly. Now or in the afterlife.

Svend was able to get Oswald to move his arms, fingers and even legs by with usual magnetic tools. And, by 'burrowing' Svend's voice, Oswald assured Anne that his disease was not her fault. And that his love for her was as intense as his dedication to making all Anglo Saxons free from oppression, from anyone, especially their own kind. And he assured her that freedom would eventually replace slavery, everywhere. And that...she should let her hair grow back again, as it was her turn to live rather than obligation to die. Yes, she was very satisfied with the conversation with the resurrected liberator, and lover. Until someone voiced an objection.

"All of that is true, but there's a lot more I have to say, and do," Chad heard from a voice that was not Svend's. It came from the mouth of the motionless, yet mildly breathing corpse as it moved its arms, legs then feet on its own terms. "Who the fuck are you?" the for real resurrected Oswald the liberator, outlaw and perhaps philanderer on his out-of-village expeditions asked a startled Svend, then a terrified Chad.

"Someone who...brought you back to life, and me back to life!" Anne exclaimed from the log she had been sitting on. She leaped up to her feet and hugged the very much alive man who she said she would follow to hell and beyond, but didn't have to anymore. "Oswald!" she shouted out. "Meet your healers, or rather...resurrectors, Chad and Svend who are in the service of..."

"---a free England!" Oswald, who upon standing was a foot taller than Svend and nearly a hand more to Chad, said to his new 'comrades' as he embraced them both in a big bear hug. "And a free world after that!"

"Yes, of course," Chad replied. "Gotta do something of significance between living and dying."

“Dying being...something you will tell us about,” Svend asked.

“Only after we eat,” Oswald proclaimed, letting his new friends go, and grabbing hold of an axe from the wall. He then felt the emptiness of his thin stomach, then the thinness of his legs. “Anne, did you give me something to lose weight before I took a nap? And what happened to this place? And...” he gasped, noting Anna’s missing long mane. “You?”

Anne, Chad and Svend looked at each other, grasping for an answer. The silent vote went to Svend. “We’ll explain later. But for now----”

“---Your people are waiting for you, outside,” Ann said, opening the door. She led Oswald outside, to a crowd of shocked, then terrified, then assured, then inspired villagers.

“What just happened?” Chad asked Svend, both remaining inside the hut.

“We became heroes?” Svend replied. “Or just lucky, somehow.”

As for that ‘somehow’, Chad assessed the liabilities and assets for such. Both were frightening to think about, and would certainly be even more terrifying once they would be put into motion.

## CHAPTER 2

While atop his horse, Robert Dubois gazed over the late afternoon waters of the Channel bearing the name of the island on its western shore, on a more rocky than sandy beach. “Why should we call it the English channel, Charlemagne?” he asked the Norman bred steed in the civilized language of French with which both noble born souls were raised. “It should be called the French sea, or, since it is so small relative to the rest of the ocean surrounding this wretched pair of islands, perhaps the Norman river. Which admittedly is very cold in winter, and very salty all year round, but...you can feel the horizon on the other side, even on a day you can’t see it. Where both of us were born. Where our families are who will, someday...yes rescue us from our responsibility to try to rule these illiterate, crude and chaos loving Anglo-Saxons. Families who...”

The fair haired, handsome nobleman who had crawled out of the womb 25 years ago but not completely into the world outside of that comfort station allowed his pleasure addicted mind and very comfortable body to see, feel, taste and smell the land on the other side of the channel. He recalled his boyhood and brief manhood life experiences as a Norman, on the ‘civilized’ speaking side of the channel. Indeed, Normandy, where those who God ordained to be on the bottom knew their place, and stayed there, allowing those born on top like himself to be unchallenged and unquestioned. A civilized gentle land where the lack of rain and presence of soil rich hills rather than stone covered mini-mountains permitted the building of magnificent castles. Where fields of wildness woods and weeds covered fields of wild grass had long ago been converted into gardens, lawns and large farm fields. Where most people lived now in cities and towns where they could be taken care of, under the protection of God, His clergy and the secular rulers who the Almighty gave the divine right to be called kings, dukes and earls. And where, most importantly for all, ALL of the Viking invaders in past centuries had converted to Christianity, with no pockets of lingering Pagan priests, or followers. None who were still alive or who travelled amongst good God fearing and Jesus loving Christians, that is.

Robert’s horse heard, then saw, a small ship which, upon getting closer, was more like boat. Upon closer examination, he noted that it was brought in by the tide rather than its inhabitants, then the choppy low lying surf. It bore a red flag with the likeness of two angry yellow lions. “See! They’ve come to rescue me from this ‘life’ of protection and privilege here! Where nothing happens and nothing inspires you to make anything happen. To bring us both back to a place where things that entertain and excite us DO happen!” he said to his horse, assuming of course that the steed’s sole reason to live was to be educated by his insights and amused by his jokes.

To Robert’s surprise and indignation, the horse disagreed. He turned his head away from the ship washed up onto the shore, then cast into the sand much, tilting to the side. Robert’s steed was repelled by the stench of its cargo, covered with red tarp, which, upon further examination, was blood. A rat the size of a fox emerged from under the tarp, followed by a moving corpse which seemed, upon closer examination, to still be a man whose tattered rags had once been the garb of a Norman officer of high birth and relatively young age.

Leaping off his spooked horse, Robert ran over to the man, offering him a help up from the muck. He noted instantly that, under the blood, stubble and caked in sweat, the Norman officer's face was nearly identical to his own. "What happened to you?" the young duke asked the young, rodent bitten, bruised beyond any things he had ever younger version of himself, in French of course. "And them!" Robert said of the dead corpses still stuck in the bottom of the boat. All of them were clad in lower ranked military garb clinging to their lifeless chests. Their outer layer of clothing was re-sewn up civilian clothing worn by Anglo Saxon peasants in and around their lush forests, or the attendees to King Edward 'the confessor' at court in Winchester. "What happened to them!" Robert demanded to know, not sure why it somehow mattered to him.

"Nothing," the young officer muttered through a blood soaked mouth half destroyed by scars Robert has never seen. "Nothing that we could stop anyway."

Robert's somehow knew that he should ask another question regarding the officer's welfare. But as he for his entire life had been allowed to concern himself with his own wants before anyone else's needs, and was rewarded by his enabling parents in Normandy and step parents in Britain for such, he posed a more relevant question. "The invasion of this island by those who should own and civilize it. Or a ship that will bring me back home? When is it happening?" he asked his fellow 'self', daring to put his arm around his shaking back.

"Soon. Or sooner if someone else can carry out what was our mission," the young and never to become old officer said with a death rattle, looking up at the sky.

"Your mission to do what?" Robert observed himself saying, observing the grey English clouds that hid the sun so often turn into a black one whose job was to piss down cold British rain.

Before Robert could ask anything more about what had become of 'home', he felt the heavy downpour of bone chilling water from the sky. Then the weight of the soldier's neck on his elbow, as he pleaded, "Hold me please!"

Robert's arms which never acquired any more strength than he needed to control the reins of a well bitted horse, pick up a bottle of fine wine or wield a pen to condemn a free peasant to a life of hard labor gave way. The once handsome officer fell into the muck. Robert caught a glimpse of himself in the reflection of his armor. "He must die," the mission-obsessed commander of the team of shipwrecked Normans said.

"Me?" Robert thought to himself, as he saw his reflection in a way he had never seen before. A reflection which showed a boy who would never be a man, and was never really encouraged or pushed to be so. A lump of privileged unaccomplished flesh who would die as an old, unaccomplished man who had never really tried anything on his own. A scared coward who was sheltered from every fear he had, who had never embraced the challenged to do anything. The rich son of a hard working, smart and

struggling father who brought the family up from nothing, and gave his son everything, except the gift of embracing challenge. And knowing the joy of struggle.

“He must die,” the young officer, who bore a frightening resemblance to Robert, said as the latter was fixed on his bland, plain and ‘did and am nothing’ reflection in his armour. “Him!” he painfully exclaimed, taking a coin out of his pocket bearing the likeness of English King Edward. “A Norman born traitor who...with that...YOU have to...” the officer pushed out of his blood soaked mouth, pointing to a pouch that had fallen from his belt, about to be washed out to sea.

Robert didn’t know what made him, as a water fearing lad, turn into a man who ran into the surf to grab hold of that pouch. Upon opening it, he saw a map, a list of names, and a map that seemed to be an underground passage in what appeared to be Winchester castle. The sealed pouch of powder within the main pouch had what seemed like medical instructions printed on it, a skull and crossbones on the highest dose. A list of names was engraved on a parchment in the lining of the pouch, the names half blurred.

“Who are these people?” Robert asked.

“Those you have to replace, or become,” the reply.

“And if I do? What’s in it for me?” Robert said, slipping back into being his protective self. “Will this take me home?”

“Home will come here, to you,” the pledge. “So God help me,” the officer continued, after which he joined his Creator.

Robert looked at the names on the list of allies. Only one was readable. “Esmeralda?” he said, trying to make out the letters, somehow seeing her name amidst the blurred print. Such was the name of the only woman he really wanted, who was now on the civilized side of the channel. She was an heir to a large fortune in land, gold and owned serfs to do her will. Or the will of a husband who knew how to marry into the right family, a skill far more important than being able to lead any any army to victory in battle. “Ah yes, Esmeralda!” he cried out to the other side of the channel, somehow feeling her presence, still recalling the smile of affection, friendship and love at their last meeting before she was whisked off by her father to the Continent for her ‘education’. The wind answered ‘not here’, as did the strangely moving clouds above him, which had finished spilling their water down on the already drenched inhabitants below, for now anyway. “Where are you, Esmeralda!” he pleaded in all directions to the woman who could fulfill his financial needs, political ambitions and deepest personal desires.

Robert did get sort of an answer, from the large rodent who crawled up from a hiding place under the boat, and onto his lap, nibbling on an half cut apple within his pocket. For reasons he didn’t know, the animal-phobic young duke was not afraid of the rodent. Or maybe he was too afraid to show the rat that he was afraid of him, or...perhaps...as he

contemplated...her.

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Emeralda Vasquez was picky about everything offered to her, and finally taken. From the dresses she was presented with to wear at the feasts put on by her father in the Basque region of what was still Christian Spain. To the men she chose to dance with on those occasions. To the language she decided to speak with them in. To the weapon she used to kill herself, according to the most reliable accounts, when her father ordered her to marry a man whose language, temperament and morality disgusted her. To the various bodies she inhabited after she became a ghost, waiting for the right uterus to reincarnate into in the fifth month of pregnancy in the right mother. For reasons she did not know, but had to accept, the once rodent fearing Basque princess was now a rat. In the wrong body, but with the right man. She found her way into Robert Dubois' saddle bag on the way home, the recesses of his comfortable bed when he was sleeping, and, eventually, his heart when he woke up on the morning when he finally made a decision to do something worthy of his name rather than merely inherit it.

Such was what Robert chose and needed to believe from the recalled conversations with Tatianna Albergehti, the gypsy woman from, so she claimed anyway, the Italian peninsula who raised him from a manipulative, spoiled brat who got everything he wanted from his biological parents except the truth about who he really was, biologically or otherwise. "I'm too tired and old to lie to you, or anyone else," the dark haired, olive skinned multi-lingual scholar, tutor and, some said 'witch', would say to him for the 15 years with a face that had grown somehow younger with each passing winter. "And sometimes you have to remember truths that your heart needs to know rather than the ones your eyes can see," were the last words she told him before Robert's father's soldiers took her away to a 'Nunnery'. Where she would be cared for. To be purged her of the demons behind her increasingly fluorescent coral green eyes that 'made her a potential danger to herself and others'. Appended by an intense conversation Tatianna had with the rat in tongues Robert didn't recognize.

The conclusion for the present of course was, as Robert heard Tatianna's voice in the wind, "you, Robert, and the human soul within this rodent body must and will accomplish great things together."

As for what those great things were...the most obvious one was to kill Norman born, according to his opponents anyway, Saxon King Edward. Or rather, as history would deem call it, 'assassinate' him. A king who was denying Norman nobles, and Saxon Earls, the right to become as rich and powerful in England as God allowed and wanted them to be. In a world where the strong MUST dominate and 'take care of' the weak. The rich must acquire as much wealth as their God-given mind allows them to, so that the poor are taken care of. After all, anyone who has wealth and power has put in the time, energy and dedication to get it. And as for the people on the bottom of the pyramid, who live day to day, or hand to mouth, living happily in rags rather than with aristocratic

dignity in cloaks, are the defective ones.

And as for the 'free' anti-slavery peasants who lived off the land, which was still plentiful in wild game and wilderness trees, they were holding back the new way of living which was taking place in Normandy and other regions of the continent where Nobles in castles took care of and, for their own good, owned peasants, who were now called serfs. Illiterate serfs who said they could read the land, but were too lazy or stupid to learn how to read anything written on parchment, be it English, Gaelic or Latin. Who did not speak a word of French or any other tongue than the one they were raised with. After all, what was the God given purpose of wild bores other than to be converted into pork at a dining table for those who deserved to eat? The reason God allowed trees to grow wild in the forest was so they could be converted into lumber. And as for the stones under the wild grass covered ground and embedded into the still wooded hills, they were created to build castles to fulfill the needs and wants of superior human beings, or gold-laden cathedrals to honor the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Such were the thoughts and aspirations in Robert's head as he came drove a cart to the royal town, but not yet city, of Winchester clad as a well travelled and cultured aristocratic merchant just arrived from the continent. "Our first plan is was to get into the castle housing the King through the front door, because, well, it's easier, and the easiest way to do anything is the most effective one, right?" he told Esmarelda, who was hidden within a wooden box with holes in it situated next to him. As always, she agreed, saying something that seemed like a joke in 'rodenteze' that Robert felt but didn't understand.

The guards at the gate of the city approached him. "What will ye be cartin' under them tarps?" the head guard, a high ranked Saxon with a commoner's face, his mud stained arms stinking of sweat, inquired in harshly pronounced Scottish-tinged English through a mouth only half filled with teeth in a crude accent that was painful to Robert's multi-lingual Francophone ears.

"Have a look for yourself, if you want to," Robert replied in proper English.

"As we needs ta," the reply as the fat old Sergeant with a tight fitting uniform commanded his younger underlings with clothing that hung loosely around their thinner torsos searched the goods in the cart. Each man carried a sword that nearly went down to his ankles, a dagger, and an axe, with scars on their faces and arms which indicated clearly such weapons had been used against them as well.

"I'm transporting clothing, from Italy, for men and women of high birth or those aspiring for their children to be so," Robert said, regarding the garb from his own closet and some stolen from his departed mother's closet.

"Which we can see, as we ain't blind," the Sergeant grumbled though lips surrounded by white stubble.

"And a guitar, a lyre with a hollow hole in it, from Spain," Robert replied as the

Sergeant's curious second in command grabbed hold of the most delicate portion of the instrument first. Robert gently took it from the behemoth and strummed a few chords on it. "To accompany my singing in the court, for the King's refined and God loving tastes," he said, after which he sung a beautiful tune which contained, as he showed off his melodic voice, lyrics which insulted the listeners. Until he saw the Sergeant and his men reach for what some, in Normandy anyway, would say was the most valuable cargo.

"Leather bound parchments, called books," Robert noted as the search went on, the soldiers and Sergeant opening the clean pages with their short grubby hands. "As the King and his ministers, value reading," he continued, noting that the 'readers' of the books were holding them upside down. Declining, at Esmeralda's advisement, to not say "Who value reading unlike those who are dumb enough to use these pages as asswipe" of the shit-smelling Saxon soldiers.

"And...eh... spices," Robert said, noting, too late, a nervous stutter in his voice as the Sergeant came upon a box containing the special herbs that came across the ocean in the boat which according to the notes left by the head of the Norman assassination team, would convert King Edward into a drunk, imbecile or corpse, depending on the dose administered.

Thankfully, the English-bought herbs and spices which Robert put into the box as decoys are the first ones to be tasted by the Sergeant and were not to his liking. But a more precious cargo was of interest to him.

"What be in dat box?" the Sergeant said of the small crate on the buckboard in which Esmeralda was trying to hide. "Somethin' wild and..."

The Sergeant poked one of his remaining fingers into the hole, then calmly retrieved it after having a small chunk of skin was bit off. "Aye, wild and feisty."

"Exotic pet for the King, from the mountains East of the Rhine," Robert replied with a smug yet 'knows one's place' aristocratic grin. "Or meat for his table, if he doesn't take to him. Which, by all accounts, he will."

Surprisingly, Esmeralda had no comment to offer. Then again, she was as smart as she was feisty.

"And your business here?" the Sergeant inquired, rolling his overgrown eyebrows.

"To offer what I can to whoever is in there," Robert said with a courtly bow that made his noble Norman born stomach churn with disgust, pointing to the castle housing the king. "A humble offering to Edward the Confessor. The kindest and most gentle King we ever had."

"Who still is the king, and will be, as long as we have anything to say about it," the Sergeant replied with pride and dedication, his chest extended outwardly.

“And as I say as well,” Robert added, as a lie of course. Looking straight into the eyes of the well armed buyer of that falsehood. A trick he had learned to make others believe what he was saying a long time ago. Which only Tatianna could see through.

“Well then,” the guard said. “To the castle on the hill with ye, and if no one there wants what’s here, no shortage of others down here in the valley who’d appreciate a chance to buy some exotic goods with their hard earned coin.”

“Which for you will be at a discount,” Robert pledged to the Sergeant. “And for them also,” he pledged to the badly bearded head guard’s enlisted, or perhaps conscripted, still-smooth faced young men.

Upon reaching the castle where King Edward was reported to be living, working and recreating, Robert was turned away by every official at the court. Five greeters at as many entrances denied him entry as well as wishes for a good day elsewhere, no matter how many times he tried with faked accents and forged seals to convince them that he was an ambassador, Barron or clandestine emissary from Rome itself. ‘Still in closed chambers’ was the most consistent answer he got.

“So,” Robert said to Esmeralda, feeling to be insulted by his own kind, finally settling in at the smelliest entrance to the castle, next to the garbage dump. He gazed at a plain stone heavily barred window well within the castle walls which, according to the map the Norman ‘assassination squad’ brought with them to British shores, was where the King did all of his most important thinking, and meditating, in private. “Maybe we can get up to the top by coming through the bottom?”

One of the souls living on the bottom emerged out of a door which, upon opening, seemed to be the kitchen. Just in front of the aroma of freshly cooked mutton was a hunchbacked hooded servant in a loosely fitting hole-ridden burlap robe pushing out cart three times higher than his, or upon closer examination, her bowed head and arthritic body. It was loaded to the top with animal heads, scraps of bones, corn husks, fecal soaked straw, two buckets filled with urine, and blood stained white sheets and perhaps a portion of a human hand. Upon pushing the debris from the cart into an overfilled pit, the cart fell on its side. As did the woman, falling into the pit along with it.

Robert self observed himself rushing over to help the woman up but, it was too late for any man born of woman, or mortals with a Caesarian section, to be of help. She lay there, seemingly breathless. Robert reached out his hand to her, but she refused help. “Take what you need from me, Lord, now!” she demanded with a clenched fist. “Please!” she continued, her hands in prayer, fear in her previously defiant eyes.

“Not without you getting something out of it first,” Robert said to the woman who, for reasons he didn’t understand, was tired of living and scared of dying. He ran to his cart,

pulled out a purple robe which lacked the aroma of sweat as well as the holes and tears which working people always encountered when fulfilling their purpose, and offered it to the woman. "I think this will fit you," he said. "And so you never have to go back to work inside, and never saw me outside, this," he continued, throwing her one silver penny.

"What are you doing here?" the old mud-caked woman asked as she squinted. "Who are you?" she said, finally opening up a set of plain looking eyes surrounded by a blacken face with wrinkles as deep as her eyeballs.

Robert threw her another coin, ironically, one bearing the likeness of the King he had come here to put into retirement.

Somehow finding Purpose for living again, the old woman pulled herself up out of the pile of useless debris from the castle. Along with dead or diseased human body parts destined for burning. She motioned for Robert to throw her the purple robe, requesting him to turn around while she shed her own.

Robert did so, of course, and when he turned around, the woman was gone. She left behind the cart, and her own robe. He found himself wondering where the woman whose arthritic legs could not move her torso more than one short hobbled stride at a time could have run off to, or fell into, but...there were bigger issues at hand. Freeing Saxon England from a King who would never advance it into the 12<sup>th</sup> Century technologically or politically.

After adjusting the ropes on the castle servant's garment to fit his waist, and the nostrils of his noble Roman nose to its aroma, Robert snuck into the back door of the castle. For reasons he accepted as 'well, God wants me to succeed because I'm worth more than anyone else' he had no problem making his way unnoticed and uninterrupted through the castle kitchen. Then past the animal stables, the knights' quarters, and to the door which, according to the map, and an easily opened thin slab of stone, the entrance to the secret tunnels which led upward to King Edward's private quarters.

The passageways were another matter. They were narrow, bordered on all sides by splintered wood and jagged stones, allowing one to see no more than three feet ahead, even with the freshly lit torch Robert had brought in with him. The mortar stunk of mold which made his stomach nearly vomit up its contents. The staircases and ladders looked and felt like they were about to break down as soon as you put even half of your body weight on them. But Robert had a guide in this maze. Esmarelda, having escaped from the holding box, ran ahead into the darkness. With each twist and turn in the cavern, she returned to Robert just as he thought he had lost his sense of direction, to lead him to the next turn that led him upward. Perhaps it was the aroma of freshly cooked venison that she was following, or the smell of incense which, according to legends, soon to be canonized King Edward was burning as an offering to God, or, according to Norman belief, the devil. But, eventually, after no less than ten scrapes, scratches and prayers delivered to a God Robert found himself having to believe it, he and Esmeralda reached

their destination.

The door leading upward to King Edward's private chambers was open widely, as Robert accidentally lightly touched it. Such was the first miracle, he thought to himself as he took off the old woman's robe, seeing that his own noble garb under it was intact, and was free of any urine or feces he could have shed in terror. The second indication that he was on a mission where the fates were protecting him was that no one stopped him from climbing up into the chamber, with all of his gear. And that no one saw or heard him pull the his guitar, books and 'special herbs' out of his knapsack. The third miracle was that King Edward was asleep, in his bed chamber, in the next room. With no one guarding him except, so the Saxon legends his well paid historians said, 'the angels'.

Indeed, even in slumber, King Edward presented a picture of 'kingship' to Robert. His long white hair and beard make him seem other worldly, made all the more mystical by his white skin. His fingers were long, his legs longer than any king or commoner Robert had ever seen. His mouth was open, his eyes closed.

Robert reached into his bag of herbs, retrieving a dose of the Norman concocted potion which would make the King wake up as a babbling fool. Or, perhaps, send him to the angels. Either way, it didn't matter. Edward would indeed be the last Saxon king of England, and as he had no heirs, other than six year old Edgar, whose caretakers were more interested in their own welfare than that of the boy, or Edward's vision of what England should be, there would be chaos. Civil unrest and perhaps war, which would pave the way for a Norman invasion. Which would make well off, influential Normans already in England rich and powerful. And turn England into a civilized country that would not fall backwards into becoming a haven for nature loving, passion rather than profit oriented lawless hunters, gatherers and substance farmers who eventually would return to their pagan, and destructive, ways.

But as Robert approached the opened mouth king lying in his, to be fair, modestly cushioned bed, he noticed drool on the left portion of his lip. And blood soaking his inner cheek, and partially bit off tongue. And from that mouth, no air going in or out. With none coming into or out of his nose either. His arms were rigid, stuck in position. Delivering to Robert's shaking hands a shock that made him pull back.

Robert, while training to take his father's place as a middle level Earl, had done many things which caused, directly or indirectly, the death of many people. Both healthy and diseased souls, particularly with disorders of the body and mind which, so the priests and doctors said, were contagious. But Robert had never seen nor touched nor smelled a dead man before. His face turned as white and pale as the man he had come to kill, or make too crazy to rule. Esmeralda abruptly climbed up onto Robert then leaped over to the dead corpse.

"No!" Robert said to her, pulling the rodent back to his lap, then securing her in his pocket. "Eating dead people isn't good for people, or rodents who used to be people," he said. "But...this smells like an opportunity," he continued, feeling something intelligent

come into his brain. Even more so, something clever. An easy accomplishment that he could pass off as a heroic achievement. He reached over the dead king's shoulders and removed the crucifix around his neck.

“This we take back to Normandy, along with telling the right people, that it was me and...yes, US, who had the courage and cleverness to assassinate this backwards, naïve Saxon king in a...duel where we were outnumbered,” he said. “Yes, yes, yes.” Robert said continuously to himself as he envisioned being welcomed back to the family table at home as a hero rather than a tolerated offspring. And to the court in Normandy where he would be declared a Lord, or Duke. And to...yes....Emeralda's father, who had considered him a defective piece of unexperienced meat when he asked for permission to court his daughter. “Yes, yes, yes.” Robert whispered, then said out loud, until Esmeralda, then he, heard footsteps approaching.

Gathering his wares, and wits, Robert placed Esmeralda into the recesses of his pocket then secured her there. With quickness of motion and courageousness of heart, he scurried into the secret escape tunnel, and quickly worked his to the outlet several stories below. Then, with slowness of horse slithered out of the back door castle gate. Followed by swiftness of hoofs which took him, his equine companion and most importantly Esmarelda away well past the gates of Winchester just as the bell rang signaling the king's death. And, so he extrapolated, the chance for England to be ruled by a real king who would make that country modern, rich, civilized and orderly under of course the Norman flag rather than the colored rags the mixed bag of previously fighting minor kingdoms considered their own national banners. A strong central government which could keep England Christian, not to ever be invaded by Danes, Norwegians or Swedes who could bring with them pagan gods who demanded animal sacrifice. Or sacrificial offerings of humans, like Robert's favorite Uncle, who he wished had been his real father. And who, according to what Tatianna said one night when drinking too much wine, perhaps was.

## CHAPTER 3

For bringing back to life its most feared, admired and, now that there was a new untested King in charge of England, needed outlaw back to life, the village of Aestrikla provided Chad with everything he wanted. As much food as he could stuff into his mouth and shit out of his ass. As many women as he could be pleased by, or provide a womb for his sons and daughters. As elevated and soft a bed he could slumber in at night and wake up in as late in the morning as he chose. As much mead as he could pickle his brain with. But there was one thing Chad was not allowed from the villagers, and particularly Oswald, who needed periodic ‘resurrection chants’ with all the trimmings to keep his upright legs strong and his hands as tools to hold a sword, axe or the hand of his new wife, Anne---the right to leave the village.

But what Chad wanted most was the truth about why the ‘resurrection therapy’ brought Oswald out of a living death, but was unable to raise any of the other dead in the village. Or do anything to aid the dying. Chad was of course forgiven his failures with the villagers, as long as he was able to of course keep Oswald well, strong and happy.

“So, what did we do right?” Chad inquired of a confused Svend in their evening quarters dining on late supper of mutton dipped in cheese and turnips drenched in honey, after the former had been pleased by a woman of his choice. And Svend had been allowed to give private lessons in ‘wrestling’ to a young man who took a liking to him in the marketplace that day. “Why, when we do the ritual, on Oswald, does he get better and stronger, and it does shit all for everyone else? I used to think it was the lightening that hit the rope the first time we brought him back to life, but...it has to be something else,” Chad noted, recalling that the lightening strike on Oswald’s awakening didn’t go into the rope attached to the tall ‘thunder gathering tree’, and that he felt nothing go into his hands when holding that rope on any other night. “Maybe Oswald liked your chanting?” he proposed in optimistic desperation to Svend. “Or, Wotan, or these local Pagan Saxon gods or Jesus did!” Chad considered as a joke, then as possible fact, recalling that it contained elements honoring all of those Deities.

“No, it’s something else,” Svend said, scratching the skin under his beard so hard that it nearly tore the skin out from under it. “And not the belief that fake medicine is real medicine, which does make the patient feel better a third of the time, no matter what that ‘medicine’ is.”

“Patient?” Chad noted. “Since when did we become doctors?”

“Since we stumbled into doing one or two things amongst ten that didn’t,” the world traveled and once famous Viking replied.

“And you know this, ‘Doctor’ Svend because...” Chad inquired, deciding that yapping out of his mouth or stuffing more food into it should give way to listening to what Svend was meaning and saying.

“A wise chief knows the value of how to doctor the wounded soldiers under him, so they go back into battle,” Svend said after a deep, reflective breath, his stare lost in one of those places no historian would write about, and no illiterate Viking would ever put into a legendary song. “And if lucky enough, with the right earthly ingredients and procedures, he should know how to raise the presumed dead long enough to make them effective in the land of the living.”

“And the ingredients and procedures we were lucky, or unlucky enough to use on Oswald? Besides belief in our medicine or predicting with our ‘inner mind that rarely talks with the outer one’ that ‘he was going to wake up from the coffin anyway?’” Chad pressed.

Svend opened the magic box, perusing each of the items in it. “The loadstones” he said, grasping hold of the rocks from ‘the magic mountain’ which attracted metal like Viking shield maidens drew cowardly or sex-hungry male recruits into the ranks of ANY army. “Maybe we placed them in just the right place, and moved the mini-thunderbolts of life energy that goes up and down channels in arms and legs to the right places in the torso and abdomen,” Svend considered, using medical terms ‘Doctor’ Chad had not heard before. “The slant-eyed, yellow skinned prisoners we took who were from a place called China put needles into the skin of their fellow prisoners, and some of us, and did magical things when they were twisted and turned. But...”

“You don’t think that was it,” Chad surmised.

“And as for the barley, oats, rosemary and honey, that grow naturally on this island, which we all have eaten, in a fermented and fresh form, I don’t think they did anything to wake up comrade citizen and now ‘Lord-Liberator’ Oswald, who desires and gets the love and lust from every ‘lady’ in the village,” the Viking conqueror who apparently was a better wielder of a surgeon’s knife than a warrior’s sword noted as he smelled, then tasted said ingredients in separate pouches. “But,” he continued as his hands moved to a larger bag, its contents nearly gone. “...as for what is responsible for delivering Oswald from being one of the barely breathing dead to the soon to be corrupted because of all the power he has now. This velvet bean powder we got from the Persian farmer in Mercia. Achmed.”

“Who, last time I heard, is with Allah in heaven if he was a good Moslem,” Chad said. “Burnt as a witch. By the priests who almost crucified US for trying and FAILING to raise their own abbot from the dead, but for the horses we burrowed from Achmed to make our getaway.”

“But as for the valley where Achmed grew plants that were good for ‘body, mind and spirit?’” Svend enquired.

“Which is in the hands of, so I’ve heard from Ann Wheeler AND the town deputy, who used to be Sheriff, invading Danes who burnt what they don’t want and kill whoever they don’t trust,” Chad said. “Or a Saxon Earl who I never heard of who’s as sadistically

cruel as Edward the Confessor was officially kind. Who works for the Normans.”

“And who thinks he can raise the dead corpse of Rolo, the Viking who conquered Normandy, became king, and sired four generations of sons who grew up as Christians, and can’t speak a word of Norse?” Chad proposed. “Or trick his soldiers into thinking that he resurrected our own King Alfred the Great, who co-inhabits that Saxon Earl’s body and empowers his sword?”

“A trick that’s worked before,” Svend noted. “But, since Oswald right now is the most humane and intelligent Lord Liberator in the land of the living, maybe it’s best if we keep him living as long as we can.”

“Which won’t be easy, since we only have three more ‘rituals’ of velvet bean powder left,” Chad said as he felt the weight of the pouch. He then measured its contents with the wooden scoop which, as he claimed to the gullible, was made with wood from the cross Jesus was crucified. Or from the dragon head of the ship Thor used to sail into Norway to plant the trees that produced the first seeds for the first humans there. “Or,” Chad feared as it pertains to the real world. “Maybe we may have only enough powder for one or two more treatments.”

“And an armed guard of villagers from here, and three other towns bigger than I am and three times stronger than I ever was, or you ever will be, preventing us from leaving here to get some more velvet bean extract,” Svend noted. “Under the personal orders of Anne Wheeler, former Sheriff and now Deputy Whiteman and now Lord Liberator Oswald to keep us here, for our own ‘safety’.”

“And if we explain to Oswald that his life, and his Cause depends on us getting more velvet bean?” Chad proposed. “If we come clean about everything with him, and this village, about why he’s been healed?”

Svend pulled his lips back into his straggly beard, then still tooth containing mouth. “They decapitate witches and warlocks who deceive them with lies in this area of England,” he said. “They crucify, slowly and painfully, mortals who dare to tell them the truth. About themselves, life and what has to be done to stay alive. Best to...wait.”

“And in the meantime?” Chad challenged. “As long as I’m drawing breath, I’m not going to lose let the first patient I, and we, honestly saved from dying! But...I know there’s something different and maybe honest that we, or I anyway, have to do.”

“Or stop doing,” Svend replied, seemingly proud of his apprentice’s accidental, passion-driven discovery.

“Stop doing what!” Chad spat back. “What, great ‘teacher’ who wound up losing his school and pupils, should I stop doing!”

“Breathing,” Svend calmly replied with a stern stare at, then into Chad’s sweat soaked

face.

Chad's funeral was a private affair, attended at a distance by only his closest friends, which included everyone in the village. The cause of death, according to Svend, the Pagan who conducted the Christian ceremony in front of his coffin with more reverence than any wannabe Priest in the village, or visiting Bishop, was trying to save a lame lamb from falling down a cliff, at the bottom of which there was a herd of hungry wild dogs. Who tore Chad's body into pieces, then let the remains be swallowed up by the river and washed to the ocean where the sharks and whales could have their bellies filled with his body, and their minds 'educated' by his still alive soul.

Meanwhile, a hooded leper had befriended Chad's horse, introducing herself as 'someone you used to know, and will never see with in this disguise ever again'. Hoping the painted spots on his shaved face and arms would wash away in the river, Chad headed towards Mercia to as three things he never thought possible. A handsome, healthy man passing himself off as a woman. And, more dangerously, someone on the bottom of the social pyramid who was trying to do something to honestly help rather than dishonestly take from others. Fully aware, from many places in his shaking, terrified body and memories of stories from his slain father that no good deed goes unpunished.

## CHAPTER 4

Robert Dubois' adult eyes had never seen the place of his birth, but childhood memories of that wonderland lingered behind his eyes as he landed on the Eastern shores of the English channel. "I suppose there have to be some uncultured ruffians even in the a land ruled by Enlightened scholars," he told himself while his hired coach passed by peasants working tilling large plots of land, throwing curses in French at him he had never heard, and didn't understand. And throwing rotted fruit at his wagon after it went through the valleys of flat farmland which had once been lush forests.

"Justice has to be served, and, sometimes punishes a few innocent people so that guilty criminals would torture their comrades in hell rather than God fearing people on earth," Robert told himself after passing under the carcasses of hung outlaws who seemed like they grew up too fast into becoming men, alongside of men who appeared to be more saintly than sinful, and women whose cropped hair made them look like men from a distance.

"And, a good defense is needed by all Christians to prevent them from being slain by Pagans," he thought to himself as he noted Priests clad in velvet robes collecting coins, jewelry, food and beloved horses from half starved commoners after they were 'convinced' by armed soldiers to surrender their goods on earth, rather than be sent to 'heaven' as defiant heroes. "But," Robert said to himself, and Esmeralda, as he approached the castle where he would deliver the evidence of his own heroism. "William the Second has the best interest of his people, his God, and the world."

Finally, Robert saw a taller than expected King William atop a tower, organizing an army of soldiers below him. They ranged from barefoot conscripts wearing nothing but a burlap sac to knights whose torsos and horses sported armour which seemed as impregnable to the sword as it was awesome to the eye. All of them obeyed each gruff, intimidating or impersonal command from the tower without question, or delay. "William is a scholar, gentleman and Visionary," Robert said of the fair haired, bearded, blue eyed King who everyone, including the lions imprinted on his coat, seemed to fear, admire and love.

But there was one questioning mind within the castle walls. "Act like an arrogant asshole, be treated like a saint," Robert heard, this time in a very human voice from Esmerelda, in French.

"You can say that because you can hide from him on the other side of a small hole in the wall or floor, Esmeralda," Robert replied to the rodent.

"My name isn't Esmerlda," he heard in that same voice. "It's Maria," came out of the mouth of a real life woman, who, to Robert's tired and travel weary eyes, seemed to be more royal, beautiful and real than Esmerelda ever was while in human form. "And you are?" the tall, hooded, young woman with old eyes, and a large recent burn mark under one of them, asked Robert.

“Someone who has something to deliver to his Majesty,” his reply, as he pulled out the cross he had taken from King Edward the Confessor’s neck. “After I did what needed to be done to its former owner, in a fair fight of course,” he boasted.

“And the former owner was?” the hooded beauty inquired.

“Edward the confessor,” Robert said. “Who confessed to me things that King William and only him should know about,” he continued. “And, I assume by the way you are looking at him, and the way he is looking at you, that you know him.”

“I do,” she related and confessed. “Love comes sometimes masquerading as hate. And hate sometimes masquerades as love.”

Such words didn’t make any sense to Robert, but he did know one thing for sure. “You can get bring me to the King?” he asked of the woman who seemed to be in charge of so much on the top from her position on the bottom.

“For a price,” she said, her stare fixed on the leader of the Norman Army, and the wave of civilization following its conquests.

“Which is?” Robert asked, reaching into his pocket for coin to give to the apparently once rich poor woman who would never be a mere commoner.

“Your forgiveness for what you see, hear and have to realize,” she said, foregoing any payment with money or any other earthly goods.

With that, the woman offered Robert a monk’s robe. This one smelled of perfume rather than manure and sweat. She pointed to the back door of the castle, through which entered prematurely bald beardless young men joined by older gentlemen who sported follicles only on their face. She pointed to his knife, then still present thick top knot.

“No!” Robert said, refusing the monk’s robe and declining the offer of a free head shave, or scalping. “I am going in as me. Who is one of him!” he insisted. “Whose ticket into the private chamber is this!” the Norman born Saxon-rich noble asserted, holding onto Edward the Confessor’s crucifix.

With that, Robert adjusted the collar on his cape, stuck out his chest and marched to the front gate of the castle as if he owned it, armed with nothing except the Saxon king’s crucifix and his noble Norman arrogance. And, of course, a rodent advisor who would warn him with a squeak, hiss or with words, if he was tired or allowed the voices in his head to infiltrate into his ear. Esmarelda hid in the corner of her box, nuzzled under Robert’s secure arm.

“It’s okay,” Robert assured her as commoners gave way to his entry, and nobles who he bowed to as if he knew them bowed back. “Time for me to do the talking, and thinking,

for both of us. And as for you, Esmerelda. King William can buy anything for us. Even a witch who can bribe the devil into lending her some magic spells to turn you back into a human. Not that I don't love you as you are. And always will," he said, sort of softly, almost convincing himself that he was telling the truth about the strained inter-species relationship that was becoming...strained, to say the least. "But for the moment—"

"---You're coming with me!" Robert heard from a deep baritone voice behind him. He sounded like his five foot two inch frail in body but rich in pocket father back in England. But he looked like one of his bodyguards. Nay, TWO of his bodyguards combined into one body which was no less than six feet three inches tall, with bulging muscles, and a set of mismatched eyes which both said 'dare to question me and you will regret it'.

Still, Robert had to challenge the all muscle and, so it seemed, no brains castle guard. "You can do to me what you think you are being ordered to do, just as long as the king sees this first," he said, showing Edward the Confessor's crucifix as it was an indulgence given by the Pope himself for entrance into Heaven. "With engravements on it that read..." he said, about to recite the incrypted Saxon English prayer with elegant musical diction and noble subtext.

"No one in this country speaks English," the guard replied in French, with an accent that made that elegant tongue seem as crude as Norse. "English is a language that---"

"I have no time or inclination to learn," Robert heard from another man behind his shaking shoulders, in even courser French. "But tell me where you learned to speak our language," William asked Robert. "And why!"

"Because I am one of you," Robert proudly replied en francais.

William corrected his French, with respect to its grammar and diction. He then said something in French that Robert didn't understand. A joke apparently, as he invited then required the guard to join him in a hearty, condescending laugh. Then all the other nobles.

Robert self observed himself perusing the faces of the nobles to see which one of them understood and liked the joke, and who was faking it. But there was one thing all of the Norman brethren who Robert thought himself to be a part of which they were certain. Robert was a foreigner here, whose motives were being suspected. And whose courage was dwindling fast, if indeed he had any to begin with.

"I took this off King Edward's neck, after I killed five of his guards first!" Robert boasted. "The king put up a good fight, but I had to kill him. So that the right king could come to the throne of a finally, all things considered, united England" he continued. "A Norman king. Sire!" he declared bowing to William. Whose breath stank of cheap wine. And whose noble presumably chaste crotch was stained with sperm juice. And whose hand was now clenched to his drawn sword. "I did this necessary murder so that England would fall apart, so you could bring it together. The way it should be."

“Which I will do, in time,” William said. “After...” he turned to a small framed neatly bearded officer who seemed to be more of a thinker than fighter. “Who did we arrange would invade England before we do?”

“The Danes, Sire,” the officer replied with a bow. “With a Viking army that shared the same ancestors as you do. Rollo in particular.”

“Ah yes, Rollo,” William uttered with a warm, fond smile. “Who taught us to be manipulative Christians as well as cruel pagans. In the service of...God of course.”

“Yes, indeed, Sire,” the military minister answered, with a humble bow, and then a proudly arched back. “But what should we do with this Saxon noble who thinks he is a Norman?” he said of Robert.

William sized up Robert from the top of his sweat soaked face to the tips of his toes which, for the moment anyway, were not being watered by urine. After a stare aimed at and into Robert, the King gave him a welcome home embrace. “For whatever you did, or say you did anyway, we thank you. And welcome you back home.”

Robert didn't know what to think, feel or say. He recalled a joke he heard from someone he admired in his past. “I wouldn't want to be a part of any club that would have me as a member,” he remembered, from, yes, Tatianna. The nearly possession-less gypsy woman who his rich parents entrusted with his upbringing, Said to him the day before she went out into the fields to gather some special herbs, never to be heard of, nor spoken about in ‘respectable noble company’ again.

## CHAPTER 5

While the men spoke loudly in the council chamber on the top floor of the castle, two women listened carefully from the ceiling below it, with the help of a listening device made by one of them, a long hollow cord connected with buds that went into each of their ears. “You what England and France really need?” the first woman inquired of her compadre. “A queen with some balls.”

“And brains,” the second woman said. “The kind of brains that know that what you reap is what you sow. Kindness produces peace. Cruelty makes for violent and destructive revolt. And manipulation sets in motion----”

“---The creation of useful idiots, like Robert Dubois,” the first noted regarding the second.

“Who you knew when you knew before you officially died?” Maria, the courtesan still clad in her undercover commoner robe asked the impeccably clad noblewoman next to her while wiping off the fake bruises from her face and arms. “In England that is.”

“And who you just met now, Maria,” Esmeralda replied, as a very alive, beautiful in body and ugly in soul human woman. “Who you tricked into coming into the castle so...effectively. Through the front door. Past people who all now know who and what he is.”

“A boy who thinks he is the kind of man who is worthy of marrying me,” Esmeralda said to the woman who had greeted Robert just before his entry into the castle, using his weaknesses so that he would choose to make his most destructive blunders once inside. “A very persistent, embarrassing and annoying boy, then childish man, who kept chasing after me in every castle I hid out in England, and here, until the only way he could ‘catch’ me was in the afterlife.”

“So why didn’t you kill him, so you could go on as one of the most desired, powerful and officially living women in Normandy?” Maria inquired of the duchess whose once long, straight black hair was now converted into shorter mane of curly red locks. “Why did you allow yourself to become dead? In England anyway? And now, here?”

“Because dead women who arrive from the grave, or become ghosts, are more powerful than those who remain alive,” Esmeralda replied with a confident grin. “Who pay other women well for seeing that they stay dead, in manners of coin,” she affirmed placing a gold coin into Maria’s pocket. “And other ways,” the Spanish born Norman duchess whispered into Maria’s ear while placing a second coin between her breasts, fondling both of them with her fingers.

Maria’s eyes looked at the coin in her hand, affirming that it would go a long way towards keeping her two sons out of having to join the army, and prevent her daughter from being sold into servitude as a whore, or worse, a ‘bride of Christ’ in the local

Nunnery next to very well sexually served Priests and Monks. Her body felt a tingle going up and down her spine, saying 'yes' to her desires to continue serving Esmeralda's want for affection, and Maria's own need for love. But then her mind said something else, which was halted by Esmeralda's voice.

"We are bound together by destiny," Esmeralda said to Maria, sealing that pledge with a kiss on her quivering lips. "Locked in a future where we will be puppetmasters of those men upstairs. All of them. From William to the newly arrived expendable lap dog we will have to put down to put out of our misery."

"And 'Lord' Robert's?" Maria asked, recalling how miserable he really was behind his facade of being a man born to great fortune and destiny. A rich lad who got poorer in spirit with every gold coin given to him by his earthly providers and every stroke of good luck the Spirits decided to throw his way. "Yes? We will put Robert out of HIS misery when the time comes, for the common good? And the good of common and noble women?"

Esmeralda pulled back her lips, stroked her chin, then looked directly at and into Maria's hard bitten, weather beaten but still youthful looking face. "Of course, my love. My comrade. My right hand woman when we are on the top floor and the men are on the bottom."

Logic, necessity and past experience told Maria that Esmeralda was good for her word. And that she was a channel for Ultimate good. But, God, in His, or rather HER wisdom, would make the next two most powerful women in Europe wait for the right moment to set their plan to educate men and liberate women into motion. The sound of footsteps approaching their room told Maria that she should pull the listening tube from the ceiling and slither out the escape tunnel. Esmeralda pulled out the tapestry she was working on, singing the praises of the men it was intended to immortalize, as her mind no doubt had other designs on images that she would put in for THIS generation to see which showed those heroes, including William, as the greedy, cruel and ignorant cowards they really were.

## CHAPTER 6

It was easy for Chad Hunter to find the valley where the Persian farmer, scholar and (as he found out from the nearby 100 percent illiterate village) burnt at the stake medical heretic for curing patients in the name of Allah rather than Jesus had planted a thriving crop of velvet bean and various 'other worldly' botanicals. Greeting him at the thankfully only partially burnt down to the roots field were three thinly skinned but still well boned guards. One was a dead cow, whose skull was still intact, the eye sockets still containing material not eaten by crows. The black avian who had apparently dined itself on the bovine eyes lay lifelessly next to the cow skull. Not three feet away from it was a human skull loosely connected to a spine which had been broken in three places, perhaps by the mad cow, and or by villagers told by a monk, priest of bishop that he was a minion of the devil who had to be chopped into three pieces so that his ghost would not lure innocent children into the forest en route to hell.

"Sorry, I think it's too late for you three to be resurrected," Chad said apologetically to the bodies that once housed the cow, crow and man (or perhaps woman) somehow feeling their souls still lingering about. "And, I've heard that with medicinal plants, just because a little is good, and a bit more is better, that doesn't mean a lot is best, which you probably found out already."

The ghosts of the three departed souls seemed to say 'yes' to that through a brisk, cool wind as well as silence Chad heard between his chilled ears. "But I do need to pass through here to save the living, or partially living anyway," he said as he rummaged through the collection of bones scattered about, feeling somehow light headed and 'godlike' in his perceptions thanks to a eating a dying rabbit he put out of its misery along with some strange looking mushrooms three valleys, or perhaps dimensions, ago. It led to overgrown brush which, if you listened with the tips of your fingers and smelled with your wide open eyes, and saw through your flared nostrils, contained freshly spouted as well as mature velvet beans. The exotic plant which magically awoke Oswald from what most everyone perceived as death, perhaps with or without incantations, thunderbolts brought down to earth by wire cores. Perhaps it could have been the elixir that Jesus used to resurrect Lazarus from the grave, Chad considered. Or, he found himself daring to think, with a hood over his head so that God would not see his thoughts, awoke Jesus himself from the tomb after his crucifixion. Or used as an antidote to something he had been drugged with on the way to the cross where most but not all of his body functions met their demise.

"Alright, enough speculation about things best not investigated, or found out," Chad said to the three skeletons at the entrance to the small meadow, after which he gathered, according to the formula he had stumbled into by accident or divine guidance, enough velvet bean to resurrect ten 'locked in' Oswalds ten times over. His eyes then beheld other low lying plants he did not recognize that seemed to be left alone by the worms, flies and carrion. "And I wonder that happens if we eat you?" he asked them. "What forbidden good health or expansive perception will all of you give those brave, bold and insightful enough to eat you in the right doses. Those right doses which Svend possibly

knows about, or his doctor teachers found out about by testing on patients with nothing to lose, prisoners of war who had lost everything or...". The earth rose up out of the Eastern horizon, with primal screams from the ground and a cloud of dust merging into the low lying fog above it.

Chad's horse whinnied an alarm, like he never heard before. "The devil's minions are coming after me, for my not listening to the guardian angel's voices, and for questioning the existence of... You," he said to the sky, his back turned to the steed.

"Or it's just stupid, illiterate Saxon villagers with pitchforks, who you asked too many questions of," he heard from behind him. "Backed up by soldiers on horseback who work for even more stupid, illiterate Saxon dukes who will be making a human sacrifice by burning both of us at the stake, in the name of Jesus or course," came from the mouth of a real mounted human, rather than a horse. "We have to get out of here, fast, Chad! Before they find out who either of us really is, or was," continued a not unattractive noble woman with wavy red hair in a velvet robe which was more of a gown than a dress sporting a Spanish accent.

"Sure," Chad said, mounting his horse, his feet feeling hard ground, his pounding heart connecting him back to harder reality as he saw the swords of the helmeted horsemen approaching. "As long as you tell me your name."

"Emeralda," she replied. "Who has a job for you, Master Ressurector."

"Which is?"

"Bring me back from the dead. Or a harder task for a bigger reward. From inside the body of a rodent," her reply as they galloped away from the torch bearing mob.

"Why?" Chad inquired.

"I have one too many useful idiots to have to deal with, me and my people won't tolerate another one," her reply as she galloped through the thicket, into what seemed to be through hastily constructed gate guarded by two mounted women with armor that made them look like men. Who lingered behind as Chad and Esmeralda galloped to a river, where there as a boat waiting for them. Which he took, post haste. Particularly as he heard the two female knights guarding Esmeralda sent to their last reward, or judgement, by male archers hiding behind trees, who then disappeared into the bush before they could be identified.

## CHAPTER 7

It had been a busy day for Svend ministering to the civilian sick in the village, treating the wounded who were carried back from battling the invading Danes and wondering when his fellow Norsemen would figure out that he was hiding out as a Saxon commoner. Coming to mind and soul most notably was his wife, Olga, who divorced him when he, once a feared and high-stationed warrior, decided that he was done killing anyone, for any reason. On that same day Svend's brother, Eric, who on that fateful day, surmise that Svend's abrupt aversion for killing was because of his love for a Christian monk who, ironically, Svend had converted into a devotee of both Jesus, Odin and a strange more human than any of his subjects god from the East called Buddha.

Such events occurred four winters ago ago on a late summer day not unlike this one, by the side of a river which bore a frightening resemblance to this one. Only this river today carried water rather than blood. And shiny coated fish darting playfully in and out of the white water waves rather than flesh toned human corpses bumping on the rocks, breaking into bits of putrid flesh. But from up river, according to all information coming back from the living, and the unresurrectable dead, shield Maiden Olga and most probably Chieftan Eric would arrive to conquer more Saxon territory in the service of both Odin and their new savior, the Viking Jesus.

For the moment, Svend gazed at the fish, speaking to them in a gentle musical tone I Norse that he allowed himself to think was understood by them. As, perhaps, humans reincarnated as less worried and more playful beings than those walking on two legs, assuming of course that they would not be caught on a fishing line or trapped into a net. "Beware of worms, and land dwelling animals who traded their fins for legs," he said to the lead fish in a smooth surfaced pool by the shore who seemed to be organizing his fellow trout into a congregation dining on algae, or smaller prey Svend couldn't see with his aging yet still very open eyes. "And aspire to be nothing more or less than who you really are," he said to the 'commoner' fish who seemed to enjoy being with each other. "And remember, that the price of knowing too much is to not know many others, and certainly for them to not really know you."

Where those words came from, Svend didn't know. Perhaps he could write them down so someone else who needed to be would be warned about becoming too smart, or wise. Or as a recommendation to those who were lucky enough to be happy rather than accomplished. But, just as the fish were cursed and blessed to be able to swim in water, so Svend had his duties to tend to on land. Such as, on this, the appointed day, and time, being at a tree covered 'mini cove' of the river, waiting for Chad. Who would, ideally, smuggle back enough velvet bean to keep Oswald alive. Or at least to look alive to his fellow Saxons. To be able ride his horse without being tied to the saddle, to wield his sword without letting it drop on the ground, or to march with firm, non-shaking legs in front of his, so far anyway, mostly volunteer army of Saxon commoners to fend off the Danish invasion on their OWN terms and in their own way.

As the sun raced its way to the horizon, Svend's concern turned to worry, then panic. He had promised Anne Wheeler and Sheriff, now Deputy, Stewart Whiteman that he would keep Oswald alive. "As popular with the troops as he is with their wives and daughters," he recalled. Appending it with 'God willing', of course. But, as always, people only hear what they want to hear, and believe the part of the truth that makes them feel secure. They want to be taken care of. And be...happy. Requiring stories and truths that made sense, provisionally anyway.

But what still didn't make sense was why Svend's attempts to leave the village, be it for supplies, recruiting of more peasants into this 'people's army' or just a change of scenery were thwarted by Anne, Deputy Stewart Whiteman, or even Oswald Axelrod with a 'reminder' that he was needed in town. Supported by armed guards behind them who volunteered to get whatever, or even whoever, Svend wanted. Even, as Anne 'joked' with an all seeing eye, 'young scholar monks who can sing inspiring poems in Latin, Norse and English'.

"Maybe Chad doesn't know what day it is," Svend said to the fish as he remained alone at the shore, noting the passing of the allotted time by the position of the sun. "Or I don't know what day this is," the old in body but maybe young in spirit ex-Viking considered. "Except that this is the day when, because of not having any velvet bean left, Lord Oswald will join the breathing dead again. And, when the Danes get here..."

"They will be sent back North," Svend heard from a familiar, yet somewhat higher pitched voice behind him from a hooded rider who threw him a burlap sac filled with velvet bean. Followed by snortling of a horse, who he recognized.

"So, Sidhartha," Svend said as he turned around to Chad's horse who he had renamed with a special name which no one would be able to say was good or evil. "You trained Chad here to disguise himself as a member of the weaker, fairer and less intelligent sex, with shaved legs as well," he said after getting a glance at the lower portion of the body on top of the saddle. "So that he could be..."

"Chad the ressurector, who apparently has resurrected himself from the grave, has another contract to fulfill, with a fellow member of the stronger, more pleasing to look at and smarter sex," the rider said, pulling down her hood, revealing a face that was definitely not that of Chad. "But he insisted that these beans were brought to you. Because your Lord and Master gets very upset if he doesn't have these special beans in his stew," the mystery woman in a brown, unembroidered Saxon farmer's wife's dress continued with a worn out 'regal outlaw' tone, and the diction of a Continental noble lady. She opened up a sac filled with fresh velvet bean, allowing Svend to assess its contents with his eyes and overgrown hairy nostrils. "Your Lord and Master being---"

"---Someone who you don't want to be around when he is upset," Svend interjected. "And because of this addition to the royal stew, many lives of honest, hard working and compassionate people will be saved," the former Viking chieftain linguist who knew

how to hide the truth in several languages offered with a grateful smile. And, of course a courtly bow. After which he pulled up the food he had prepared for himself by the riverbank and held it up to the sky. "And in whose name shall I make an offering on your behalf to..." Svend merely put his hand up to the sky, allowing the commoner woman who carried herself off as a shield maiden and chieftan to decide for herself which Deity she believed in, or was officially affiliated with.

The woman pulled back her lips, thought a moment, then looked at Svend. "Maria. They call me Maria back home."

"And home is?" Svend inquired with an inviting tone.

"Somewhere else," Maria replied, looking longingly to the East. "Just like you," she continued, gazing to the North.

With that, Maria, if indeed that was her name, pulled Chad's horse back into the woods, and galloped away. Leaving enough velvet bean for at three, maybe four treatments to insure victory in as many battles. A good and needed thing in the war which was now here, assuming there would be a fifth battle of course.

## CHAPTER 8

“So, there is one question I need to know before lifting my drinking mug to my dry lips then bestow knighthood on you on this birthdate of my great, great and greatest grandfather,” King William said between belches and farts to the honored guest seated to his right at the banquet table.

“Rolo, the honorable Viking who turned Christian,” Robert acknowledged with reverence as he looked down at the dual lion coat of arms he was finally allowed to wear on his proud, outstretched chest. “When he was elected king of Frankia by a democratic vote of the people, and the mandate of God and...”

Robert saw laughter emitting from the eyes of every drunken noble Norman around him, as well as their very much younger cum smelling noble ‘wives’. But none dared to open their mouths, as William put his hand up to restrain them.

“No, my dear Sir Robert,” William slobbered out of his mead reeking mouth, as he plunged his large, muscular arm around Robert’s under-developed shoulders. “It is this I am talking about!” he said, pointing to the box next to Robert. “And the creature that is in it,” he continued as he peered into the cage at the rodent inside.

“She is my...good luck charm,” Robert asserted. “Who tells me why is my friend, and who is my...”

“...Enemy?” William splurged as he put his index finger through the door of the cage. “Which is...me?” he noted after pulling his hand out, then discovering that he was missing a piece of flesh from the tip of that digit. “And to that nibble you and her say?”

The room turned silent. A deadly quiet, as the king considered what to say next.

Robert’s body tensed up. He grabbed hold of the cage for dear life, or more accurately, to protect Emerelda from the king’s revenge. But before becoming paralyzed by fear, his new companion, something emerged inside of Robert’s head. Or maybe from Esmeralda’s. “She is my taste tester, Sire,” he said with a slight bow, and arched back. “And your fingers have pig meat on them.”

“Which is pork here!” William declared.

“Which carries disease, if it isn’t cooked completely, Sire,” Robert offered. He pointed to the pig with the apple in its mouth, about to be carved up. Thankfully it was cooked hastily, allowing him to continue his next lie, which was based partially in fact. “A wise woman, who was not English, who raised me when I was stranded in that primitive, crude country, said that this was why Moses was told by God that Jews should not eat pork. Because in the desert, there was not enough wood to cook the meat long enough.”

“And not enough pigs to eat in the first place,” Robert heard from a small framed hooded

woman whose face was hidden from view by larger-chested men.

“Perhaps so,” William said, after which he laughed. Such allowed the men to laugh, then their women to chuckle.

The face of the partially roasted pig remained the same, at least to Robert’s point of view. He voiced a ‘thank you’ to its face.

“Yes, I have heard that you talk to animals,” William said, who eves dropped into Robert’s unspoken conversation. “And that they talk to you.”

“Which only crazy people do,” another unidentifiable woman said, but with a different voice.

“Or witches,” another female voice added, this one with a timber of a man, or elderly woman in the manner of a Mother Superior in charge of not only all the Nuns in the Cloister but every overpaid whore and under rewarded wife in the village next to it.

“Or those who are given special insights by God,” Robert self observed himself saying.

“Like help in how you, with this rodent, found your way to King Edward’s private chamber, where you fought off all his guards, and killed him?”

“Yes, after your assassination team died, leaving Esmeralda here in my care, along with what I needed to do. What YOU needed to do to destabilize Saxon England so you could civilize it into becoming Norman England!” Robert proclaimed proudly. “Right?” he asked Esmerelda.

But this time, Esmeralda didn’t chirp back anything. She just lay there, saying and doing nothing. “Come on, tell them who you are!!!” Robert pleaded.

“But we know who YOU are,” the first hooded woman threw across the room with an echo that felt like it hit Robert from all directions, all at once.

“Yes,” William said, somehow emerging from his drunken state as a sober channel of truth, and finality. “Someone who is either lying about how King Edward died, or who broke the rules about how one dethrones a king.”

“But your assassination squad that landed on the beach!” Robert exclaimed.

“Didn’t exist,” William declared. “I assure you of that, with my hand to God!” he said with upturned palms to the collection of Ambassadors from Scotland, Spain, Ireland, Wales and England. Along with the Pope’s own deligate of from Rome. “Kings don’t kill other kings by sneaking into their private chambers, dining halls, or chapels. We do it on the battlefield!” He pulled his sword out of its sheath, pointing it up into the air. “Which we will do to the Danish king or the Saxon pretender to the throne very soon! As

God-serving, civilized Norman men!” he continued with an evil growl to his voice that sounded like it was from Satan himself, to Robert anyway.

“And Norman women!” Robert heard as one of the hooded women stood up. “Who brought with us, to this court, a man who can arm us with more than just the gift of immortality,” Maria continued, as she cast aside her hood and waved in a young man with a freshly shaved face and priest-like garb that didn’t fit his sneaky, commoner eyes, or face, pulling a cart with a corpse on it which resembled Esmeralda the way she looked the night before she died as a human soul. “He’s called Chad, the resurrector, who is wanted for heresy, witchcraft and bringing to life dangerous rebels in England. Who can also transfer souls from one body to another. Like moving Esmeralda from the body of an old, and probably rat into a young female girl. With a few magic words.”

“And some herbs, which can awaken this still, in some ways, alive woman back from the grave,” Robert heard Chad claim. “God willing of course.”

“And MY willing!” Robert shouted into the heavens he could feel above the encroaching ceiling. “I will give you anything if you can take Esmeralda’s soul from this rat, and put back into a human body.”

“And if for this transgression, you have to have your soul, moved into that rat, or this roach that...can be squashed at any time?” Maria offered as she grabbed insect in her hand, then slowly moved in into a fist.

“I’ll do anything to liberate Esmeralda!” Robert proclaimed regarding the woman who wanted to possess as his own. “Even if I can’t have her! Even if she wants to above all else, liberate other women!”

Maria smiled with delight. “The Magic words we needed to hear,” she said with a proud smile.

“And the herbs to make it happen, with metaphysical science rather than demonic magic,” Chad added, after which he lit some herbs, and filled the room with a distinctive smoke. “And I will ask all of you to close your eyes, so that the light of Esmeralda’s soul leaving the rodent enters the body of this young woman who just died, of natural causes,” he said. “And breathe in the vapors of this offering to Jesus, who resurrected Lazarus from the grave.”

Robert of course closed his eyes, then breathed in the incense that felt both holy and heretical. He put his hands together in prayer, listening to the silence, then...something else. It was laughter. Upon opening his eyes, Roberta saw that it was from Esmeralda. Who emerged from the young woman’s body, as herself. A bit older, a lot smarter and a lot more vicious than he ever imagined she ever was. As the rat remained in its cage, doing and seeing nothing. “I told you he was a deluded idiot,” she declared to the noblemen in the room, many of whom did close their eyes. As their ‘dumbass’ women exchanged rolled eyebrows with each other at the stupidity of the men. “And if me and

Chad here could trick you MEN into thinking that resurrection and transfer of souls is possible, think of what we can do to, and with the peasants who need to see a miracle before they follow us into battle, willingly. And by US I mean women with swords and titles to take as well as you 'men'." She said. "Isn't that so, William. William the Conqueror?"

"Yes, it is so," William said with pride. "And as for you Chad!" he said. "How did you come in here, and why did you come?"

"For one," Chad said. "To show you all that this brave Saxon noble, who has been stealing from his own people, even more than his father did, needed to be exposed," he said. "And," he continued, turning to Maria. "Maybe I can be of service to you Normans who, Maria says anyway, will never really invade England. But want the world to believe you will so that no one invades you, including the English. Right?"

"Of course," William said. "We do not want to conquer England. But help you Saxons liberate yourself from the Danes. To demolish the Danes, so you live on your side of the channel, and we live on ours. Different cultures with different destinies. Sharing the wealth." William nodded to a man hiding in a dark corner to bring out a chest filled with coins, jewels and elegant weapons who brought it to Chad.

This time Robert saw the face of a fool in someone else. A rich Saxon fool, paid off for his ignorance. Chad put the goods in his cart and walked away, feeling good about himself. Rewarded for ignorance as well as cruelty. But nothing matched the cruelty emanating from Esmeralda as she stared at and into Robert. "King William, put him out of my, your and his misery," she declared, after which Robert was taken away by two men twice his size. He found himself looking to the rodent in the cage, as it was about to be stabbed. "No!" he said regarding the rodent who, even if a just a rat, had become his closest friend. "Do anything to me, but not to her!"

"You mean him!" One of the guards said, lifting the rodent up, revealing a small but still present penis between its struggling legs. "Do you want me to add having relations with someone of the same gender to those of falling in love with someone of a different species, Sire?" he asked William.

"But before you do," the real Esmeralda blasted out. "Think of how many of your MALE soldiers can't tell a difference between a mare and a stallion."

"Which I will think about," William said. "As long as you tell me why and how you stayed dead for so long, Lady Esmeralda," he continued, inviting her to sit beside him.

As Robert was being taken away, he could see Esmeralda stealing the throne from William after he had conquered England for her. But such was a minor misdemeanor compared to what she had stolen from him. "She will pay for this!" Robert said to the rat as it did its best to escape being stabbed by daggers in a bigger cage by William's guards, and some of the new women emerging onto seats of power at the banquet table. "And so

will You!” he pledged to a God who he found himself believing in, then betrayed by.

## CHAPTER 9

It was just another day, as future generations would say, 'at the office' for Svend in the heavily armed and well protected village of Aestrilka. That collection of independent yet somehow inter-connected had become a town now. And with each passing day, it was well on its way to becoming a city, given the number of Saxon refugees from other regions taken re-conquered by the Danish Norsemen or invaded by whatever invisible 'demons' caused disease that found their way through the reinforced wooden walls surrounding it.

As per usual, Svend woke up from an uneasy slumber having nightmares about his Norse friends and relations who wanted him dead, or worse. After evacuating his bowels, he told the children in Astrilka on the way back from the finally constructed community latrine about the potential good that could come from embracing a new thing called science and the danger of believing as fact the fables presented as gospel religious truth. Then, there were the rounds at the corals and barns housing four legged souls to see that they were given the food, shelter and affections they were not being given by two legged humans who considered them expendable 'things'. And then, or course, to tend to the treat the people afflicted by the latest epidemic, hoping he would be as lucky as he had been in containing the last ones.

This time, the affliction was selective, and something that affected the human mind more than body. "Four more women who woke up to find themselves as old, ugly men," Deputy Stewart Whiteman said as Svend approached the newly constructed hut now expanded to a multi-story barn he called a 'hospital'. "The most beautiful maidens in the village, who went to sleep last night with long braided hair and woke up----"

"Bald," Svend said as he viewed one of the women who was not quick enough to place the hood over her nearly hairless head, which she was scratching madly. "Even more than I am." He recalled the joy he had flaying his long hair around as a brash and handsome young man before it fell out, catapulting him into his destiny to become a humble and wise old one.

"Sheered like a sheep in their sleep by insects? Something in the water? Something in the food?" Whiteman asked, in desperation. "Like the other seven women this past week who---"

"---Were sluts, and got what they deserved," Anne Wheeler said as she came into the hut with the medication cart for those injured by swords, spears and, as Svend intuited, smaller 'naturally occurring combatants' which did horrific damage to their entire bodies rather than merely their legs, arms or eyes. "It's the angels' revenge, for cheating on your husbands or taking to bed a man who is already spoken for," she blasted into the tear covered face of the youngest victim of the 'disease', rubbing her hand on the tufts of the hairs still holding onto her scalp.

"All he did was look at me, and I smiled back and..." one of the most, yesterday anyway,

marriageable immigrant widow maidens in Aestrilka replied. “What did I do to deserve this?” the most fertile and beautiful maiden in Aestrilka bawled out as she rubbed on a head which just a night ago was fixed to a thick mane of yellow hair which flowed down to her waist, that the wind blew into an aura of delight for any man to gaze at. Including Svend, a man who was not normally attracted to women. “What do I and all of these other women do? Not all of us actually did sin with the man who desired and deserved to be with us?”

“I suppose you all can be brides of Christ now,” Anne replied, with a caring tone. “Compensation for sleeping with, or wanting to sleep with, the devil, I suppose,” the normally critical thinking and logical widow of the man who founded Aestilka as a haven for free thinking Saxons continued.

But Svend sensed another kind of pathology in Anne, his nurse, magician assistant and fellow physician that he knew had to be addressed quickly if she was to remain an asset rather than a liability to Aestrilka and its surrounding Saxon communities. Before he could open his third eye, and see what was going on behind her two ocular portholes, she took in a deep breath, and put an arch into her back.

“We’ll deal with these future nuns, or repentant old maids later,” Anne declared to Svend. “There is a special patient who needs your assistance, and right now! Who is more essential to this village than anyone else, including you, or me.”

Svend knew who she was talking about. And it seemed that most of the eleven bald women did also. Why or how, he didn’t know. But the killer of so many Christians in his younger life who became a savior of so many now, by means of magic, medicine, or persuasion, put a stern, cold look at his face. He grabbed hold of his most special medicine bag, hiding it under his shirt, and followed a hooded Anne out the door.

“He can’t get out of bed now,” Anne, whispered to Svend en route to Oswald’s hut. “He needs more magical extract, and more magic,” she said. “And now that you have more velvet beans from that Persian heretic...”

“...That I hope no one cooked, thinking that it was something to eat. Or ‘accidentally’ burned the ‘demonic Islamic toxin’ from them,” Svend whispered back while pretending to give ‘good morning’ smiles to the many villagers in Aestrilka who liked, trusted and, despite his pleading, worshipped him.

“If they did, they’d be hung,” Deputy Stewart Whiteman said, joining the duo. “These people don’t deserve a hero like Oswald to lead them into victory, and freedom,” he claimed, with enthusiasm. Perhaps too much enthusiasm, Svend thought. Then confirmed with a glance at Anne who nodded ‘yes’ to what he was thinking. Or perhaps to something else.

In any case, Svend, who had traded his cleverness to manipulate people for special insights from Jesus, Oden, Buddha or perhaps Allah to understand the biological actions

of nature, focused on what to do with and for Oswald. Upon seeing Oswald in the secluded hut, Svend was thankful that the ‘shaking’ and ‘tremor’ affliction the, all things considered, greatest and most charismatic Liberator in all of Saxon England was curable with a specific dose of velvet bean. Of which there was now a plentiful supply. Thanks to the courage, tenacity and perhaps wisdom of his young student Chad, who he hoped would come back to Aestrikla someday after his faked, or perhaps real, death. Even if he were resurrected as a ghost. Indeed, the old Viking teacher felt lost without his young Saxon student and, in more ways than one, master. At least with regard to the ways of the world as it is.

With all windows covered, Svend approached Oswald. His wrists and fingers shook, no matter how hard the self-reliant, courageous and humanity serving hero tried to put it into a defiant fist. His voice slurred when he demanded that God give him back his strength so that he could be of service to Him, and the human species he left vulnerable, or stopped caring about. His legs were fixed in rigid, twisted extension.

Svend measured out the appropriate amount of velvet bean powder, and affixed magnets to Oswald’s arms and legs, trying to make them move with the loadstone he had hid into the bottom of the medicine bag that never left his sight, or presence. He sung the Viking resurrection song he had done as scam, or believed in prayer, so many times before, attempting to move Oswald’s arms and legs to the rhythm of it. But it was Anne’s singing of such that provided some movement of his limbs. And eased of the terror in Oswald’s eyes. And brought a smile to at least one side of his face, as Oswald, perhaps was recalling the night of passion and love he had with his betrothed, Anne. The smell of her skin and vaginal excretions was indeed still between his legs.

Svend took Oswald’s hand into his. The hero looked up to him like a helpless child. “Helpppp meee tooo helpppp them,” Oswald said, trying to point to the villagers outside. “And hhherrr,” he continued, struggling with all of his might to point his finger, or perhaps still interestingly hard penis, towards Anne.

Oswald’s mouth then froze in an open position. Anne gasped in terror. Deputy Whiteman crossed himself, begging God for help in mispronounced Latin as well as Saxon English.

“He’s been here before,” Svend assured Anne and Stewart. “And we all got him back from there. With this.” He retrieved a spoonful of velvet bean, the ingredient of the ‘curative process and elixers’ that he, by process of elimination and gut intuition, believed in most now. Forfeiting the prayer as part of the process, Svend inserted it into Oswald’s mouth, deep enough to force a swallow. He sat back, counted to thirty, expecting, yet again, to hear Oswald’s voice and body return to normal function. Cursing at something he had seen or was fighting wherever his soul was. Or yelling at someone or something in the real world he had been doing battle with before relapsing into ‘needing to have a private conference with God’, as his loyal followers were told by Anne, and former Sheriff Whiteman. And, by necessity, ‘never tell a lie because it will catch up with you’, ‘Doctor Svend’.

While counting to 30, Svend considered the etiology and, if it was available in this century, the most recent outbreak of baldness that left eleven women with scalps bearing a thin layer of strands and stubble. Some ideas were brewing, including a new brand of lice, a new soap that promised beautiful hair, and something on the dyed hoods and hats brought in from a Norman merchant who skipped town after selling everything on his cart. But as for which one was real, that would have to wait for Svend to count to sixty. Then three sixties...then three more sixties, which clockmakers were now calling minutes.

“He’s not getting better!” Anne cried out in desperation, stating the obvious regarding her beloved.

“And we need him to fight the Danes! And to keep this village rich and prosperous!” Deputy Whiteman growled at

“I need him more, for something else!” Anne yelled back at Whiteman. “Do something!” she commanded Svend. “More fucking magic.”

“On its way,” Svend said, as calmly as he could, retrieving another spoonful of velvet bean powder from his bag. Thinking that perhaps there was a difficulty in swallowing it. And hoping that doubling the dose would not put Oswald into the state of mind where he was hearing voices from another world. Or, if he was, that those voices would be kind this time instead of cruel, condescending and confusing. “A little more,” he said, then counted another minute.

“Nothing is happening,” Anne screeched. “What’s happening!”

“I don’t know,” Svend replied, his back turned, hoping that the panic in his voice wouldn’t be perceived, and the fear in his face would not be seen by those still in the ‘real’ world, or by Oswald himself. “I’ll try another dose,” he said. “Which should do something, gods willing.”

“Gods?” Deputy Whiteman said regarding the new sheriff who had replaced him after his first awakening. “Don’t you mean ‘God’?”

“Which he does, Stewart,” Anne assured Whiteman.

“As a pagan Dane who maybe is giving our friend, comrade and leader powdered charcoal that does nothing. Or toxins that will make him worse! So that Aestrilka gets a Danish name, with HIM as sheriff, mayor and king!” Deputy Whiteman said as he grabbed hold of Svend, shaking him by the collar.

“Something I never wanted to be! For the Danes, or anyone else!” Svend barked back, offering no resistance except with his voice and heart.

“But are being well paid for, by the Danes, in their currency,” Anne blurted as she picked up Nordic pressed coins from the recently built wooden floor next to Svend’s shaking and urine covered left leg. “Paid very well, I see,” she smirked.

“And as I see also!” Whiteman added.

“Those coins are not mine!” Svend declared, feeling his almost never examined pockets. “And....”

“And you did something to these magic beans of yours?” he smelled the powder in Svend’s bag, then giving them to Anne who took a whiff.

“He cooked them,” Anne said, more heartbroken than angry. “Made them inactive, or toxic.”

“Someone else must have!” Svend claimed. “I swear. Someone else did.”

“Yes, the devil did. Or one of your Nordic ghosts did. Since the only people in the real world who knew about this bean was you, Anne me and...”

“Chad,” Svend surmised, and gave voice to. Thinking the unthinkable. “Who---“

“You said was dead,” Deputy and now, in the absence of a functionally active Oswald, Sheriff and Mayor Whiteman growled into Svend after throwing him against the wall of the hut, appending it with a punch into his jaw.

“Who risked his life to get more velvet bean,” Svend replied through a bloody mouth now relieved of two teeth. “That were delivered through someone else.”

“Someone else who is?”

“Her name was Maria,” Svend asserted. “And the beans were all raw, uncooked. Still working.”

“And you know this because?” Anne pressed.

“I sampled them myself. In small doses. And heard voices. And lusted after women who I would not normally be interested in, who maybe became interested in me,” he related and confessed. “Side effects which...”

“...Is nothing relative to the afflictions I will force on you!” Sheriff Whiteman promised, proof of which was provided with a punch into Svend’s belly

“And I will, you sodomizing, charlatan, pagan eunic,” Anne added, delivering the sharp end of her boot into the unused manly jewels still lingering between Svend’s legs.

“And if Chad ever gets resurrected from the dead, or anywhere else, he’s going to get a lot worse than the punishment we’ll give to you,” Whiteman asserted.

“Which is?” Svend asked the two Saxons who had become his closest comrades, and allies.

Anne and the Sheriff looked at each other, no doubt considering the most painful and deadly options. Which would no doubt be far worse than being send back to the invading Danes for removal of his testicles, healing hands and all too seeing eyes.

## CHAPTER 10

Svend was now both empty in vision and pocket, as he felt where those cloth appendages to his shirt-robe had been stripped of the container which was claimed to contain payment from the Danes for intentional failure to resurrect Oswald, their most feared enemy, from keeping them out of his town, county and county. Chained to a post in a specially designed hut, the ex-Viking but still lover of the Norse homeland could see the cross being erected in the woods outside of town upon which he would have his final sleep at a time of Anne and Sheriff Whiteman's choosing. It was an elaborate piece of architecture, fashioned with small nails and splinters on its surface. Nests for crows were placed on tree branches to the right and left of where Svend's eyes would be, affording the black eaters of eyeballs that seemed to stop moving an easy breakfast, lunch or dinner. A basket of snakes was placed where his feet would lay. But for the moment, he was fed fresh bread, clean water and on occasion a plate of meat and vegetables, as long as the blind folded patients who were brought in for healing left in better shape than they came in. And as long as he disguised his voice well enough to not be recognized.

The fifth patient of the day was a Saxon soldier with two intact arms, a functional right hindlimb but a left leg which he could still feel, but was not attached to the body by anything except two tendons. By the recent insignia put on his uniform, had been promoted to being a junior officer. "Where did you get this wound?"

"In the leg," the brash young man grunted into the caring face of the older one. "Which I can still feel and which I was told you could fix with special magic and potions reserved for heroes so I can go back out there to kill more invaders with this!" he declared, holding onto his bow. "Another 10 notches on it, and I'll have killed more invaders than anyone else from my village. Or any other village in Mercia."

"And feed the buzzards more Danish sausage at the end of the day?" Svend inquired.

"Norman sausage," the blindfolded soldier said. "At Hastings. Where those of us who could ran as fast we could from King William's cavalry. After our own English king was killed, by a fucking Norman infantryman. But one of my arrows did hit William the Conqueror's horse. And one landed in chest. I don't know if they penetrated the armour that they had, which was better than what we had, but it was a clean hit!"

"I'm sure it was," Svend said. "Even though it was fighting armoured knights with rotten tomatoes," the old man who was about to have his own life ended thought, but didn't give voice to.

Svend looked at the wounded Saxon's leg, smelling nothing but gangrenous material below the knee, and seeing late summer maggots eating at the portions of lose flesh under the bandage wrapped around the appendage. "Just stitch me up, so I can get out of here! And continue the fight for Saxon freedom and dignity!" he was told.

"After we do something first," Svend pledged to the master archer who still, thankfully,

had two intact arms, and a heart that was determined to use them. “Place the bones together so that they will heal.”

“And I when can I use that leg?” the soldier asked. “Even if it’s to hobble back out to face the fucking Normans before they take over every village in England.”

“As soon as you wake up from sleeping,” Svend said, handing him a jug of wine spiked with special herbs he had collected in his pillaging of cities east of Greece during his Viking days. “Two swallows, no more,” he said, anticipating that the soldier would take three.

By the third swallow, the lad who so wanted to become a man fell into slumber. Svend then motioned to his assistant, and specially assigned guard, Sheriff to hand him a saw, and a portion of an oar. “Tell him that if I didn’t take this gangrenous leg, which his brain still thinks is attached to his body, the tiny creatures in that limb that someone will be able to see and kill, would take his life,” he commanded as he cut off what remained of the leg, preparing to insert yet another wooden stump in its place.

“And you tell yourself at the time of dying, that because you decided to not resurrect Oswald when he fell into his death sleep again, we Saxons were unable to recruit and send enough men to Hastings to push William back into the ocean!” Sheriff Whiteman blasted back through a hushed whisper, in English combined with whatever Norse he knew.

“Just because William landed here and won the battle at Hastings, that doesn’t mean he’ll win any kind of war here,” Svend replied. “We will preserve the Saxon way of life, one way or the other. Compared with the Danes, who fled England after William came here, the Normans will....”

“---Be more civilized than anyone thought, I know,” Sheriff Whiteman said. “As long as we pay our taxes, and learn to speak a little French. As we teach them a lot of English.”

By the way Stewart Whiteman went on about how the Normans, even though descended from Vikings, were more Christian than the, for all practical purposes, still pagan ‘christian’ Danes, he seemed to be accepting of the new order. “We will fight them of course, but if we lose, we have to accept what is here, and work with what is rather than what we want to be,” he said as his final statement on the matter with a strange sense of acceptance, surrender and relief. Appended by, “But you won’t see any of it, Svend, or whatever your real name is!”

With that Whiteman, took the snoring one and a half legged master archer out into the recovery wagon, and drove it to town. Leaving Svend chained to his post, and sunlit view of the cross awaiting him. An appropriate death, he surmised, having killed so many Christians in his youth as a die-hard Pagan Viking, along with an appreciable number of ‘Christ killers’ who called themselves Jews. Finally, he accepted the fact that

there was no rescue from becoming an eyeless, rotting corpse except perhaps a wolf that was brave, or strong, enough to jump up above his legs to eat out his heart or liver. After of course biting off his balls, which were to be coated with honey so as to make them an delectable meal for any kind of wildlife. “If I had another ten years as a healer to make up for the two decades that was a destroyer,” he said to the mixed Deity of Fathers up in the sky who he had to believe was still there. “I can make things right.”

“Which I will grant you,” he heard. From a female voice. “If you will forgive me my trespasses and allow us to work together rather than against each other,” it continued. Upon turning around, it was not God, in Her most natural true compassionate form, but a mortal. “Pull your legs apart, hold them still, and for Buddha’s sake, hold still!” Maria instructed him, as she pulled out of her robe the axe which he had given to Chad prior to his departure to Mercia, or, perhaps, the afterlife. “I want to cut as much chain and as little flesh as possible,” she said as she pulled the axe up with shaking hands, unsure of her aim as she was of her mission, so it seemed.

As Maria chopped at the metal links, scraping off minimal amounts of skin shackled to them, Svend considered other things besides being a liberated man with one and a half, or no, legs left to run away on. Upon hearing the metal clanking on the wooden floor, no doubt put in so as to prevent him from digging his way out, he recalled the Danish coins dropping from his pocket. And the exact time when they dropped. And who was next to him when they did drop, shaking it out of him. And the pleasure that Whiteman had in all manners of expression when he was temporary sheriff, mayor and surrogate Liberator when Oswald was afflicted with the ‘sleeping death’ disease. And, the smile of ‘resigned accomplishment’ when Sheriff and Mayor Whiteman, a man who lacked internal self esteem no matter how much external power he had, said that a Norman invasion of his Saxon homeland would not be so bad.

Maria finally detached chain from leg, threw a monk’s hooded robe over Svend, and led him outside the hut. Past Saxon guards who had been slain by Norman arrows. And to thankfully uninjured horses hidden in the woods, one of whom was none other than his and Chad’s still loyal but sweated up and lame on the left hind horse.

“There is one thing I have to do here before you take me wherever you think I, or we, should go,” Svend said as he scratched his chin, feeling the missing teeth behind it. “Find out if Stewart Whiteman has as many Norman coins in his humble hut as he has been hiding Danish pay offs.”

“There’s no time!” Maria said. “The invasion of the civilized devils is underway,” she said, pointing a liberated Svend’s attention to a clearing to the East. Where a Norman Army column was held back by a man on foot waving a white flag. Upon turning around, the man was none other than Sheriff Whiteman, who held out his hand to the commander, requesting payment which was given in a bag so heavy that it took two hands to retrieve it, and three deep pockets to hide it. After which he was given a badge to wear on his pushed out chest.

“Realizations come to us always when it is too late to do anything about them,” Svend said as he mounted Chad’s horse, who intensely recognized the name his absent owner had given him. “I promise to go easy with you as long as you trust me as much as you did Chad,” the horse fearing but equine loving Viking said as Maria pushed his aged, and badly beaten legs on the still relatively young frisky horse. “And if I do anything to hurt you...”

“Chad will worse to you if you do, and, thankfully, from the realm of the living,” she said as she mounted her horse.

“But the coins, and evidence that Sheriff, and soon to be Duke or Lord Whiteman is a traitor to his people, and humanity,” Svend pleaded. “A search of his hut before it becomes a castle.”

“Which can be done by a useful idiot, Robert by name, who is in service of the right cause now,” Maria suggested.

“Done with the only real and true matriarch of this village,” Svend demanded. “Anne Wheeler, who...”

“Now is going to be subservient to a female monarch, and friend, who I helped resurrect from the dead,” Maria confessed. “Who showed me that women can more cruel than any man. Particularly when you question her judgment, strategy and morality,” she said, after which she opened her robe, revealing a chest which contained one intact breast on the left, then a flat bloody scar on the right. “Absolute power does corrupt, absolutely” she said, with broken hearted eyes. “And being ignorant of knowing that doesn’t forgive us for letting it happen,” she growled, after which she kicked her horse in the groin and loped down a narrow path through thick brush.

“You heard her,” Svend said to the horse three seconds after the young horse took the old man into a dense forest which got darker and thicker with every stride. And ever prayer breath he offered to whatever Deity was listening.

## CHAPTER 11

The introduction of Norman civilization to the primitive Saxon town of still-named-as-such Aestrilka was very civil. As long as one didn't object to being civilized of course. The wild and unruly woods were the first to be 'tamed'. Each Saxon was required to cut down twenty trees a day so as to make for farm fields on which crops could be grown and distributed according to Norman specifications. And of course to push the wild and 'ferocious' animals further into the remaining areas of bush, where they could be easily hunted by Norman lords to make furs and provide meat that went elsewhere to provide for 'the welfare of the entire country and empire' to unnamed places where it was needed most. As for the language of instruction and civil administration, such was now elegantly grunted French rather than sincerely expressed English. Responses required to be in that same Frankish tongue. Those who 'went with the flow' were rewarded by the 'Riveire de Normandy. Most particularly Sheriff Whiteman, and now Duke and soon to become Lord LeBlanc, who strolled around the town that once considered him 'one of its own' garbed in a nobleman's purple coat, white sash and knee high leather boots befitting his new position. Hands held behind his back, his back arched, his chin held upward, his eyes looking downward at his fellow Saxon Aestrilkans he was now charged to 'protect and serve'.

"And his back protected by 'transitional' Norman civil protectors," Chad, from under the hood of a monk's robe, grumbled regarding the three men escorting him to his destination as the sun which, so far anyway, rose in the east decided to slowly ease its way into down into the murky Western horizon. "On his way to taking his evening shit this time instead of being a shit as a tax collector. Then to the nobles and Normans-only mead hall to fill his gullet with 'pork' rather than 'pig meat', and French wine rather than Saxon ale so that he can make more shit, and piss. Who, so far, is collecting only 'a fair percentage 'tribute' of pigs, chickens, grain or declared possession of coin instead of a strong husband to go fight for the Normans, a smart son to be sent away for an education in France to become smarter, or a beautiful daughter to provide children for French noblemen, or entertainment if they are not fertile enough," he continued to his burlap robed companion as he noted Whiteman's newly constructed house, which still had enough holds in the walls to be penetrated from the back without being seen or heard from at the front, or inside the wooden floored rooms.

"So now is the right time to sneak into his house to rob him of whatever money he stole?" Robert Dubois sent out through gritted teeth on through his mud covered lips and face. "Or his scalp so I can glue it onto the excessively large monk bald spot shaved on my head that, despite what Maria said, where the hair is NOT growing back!" he said of the transformation required in his appearance to get him out of a life sentence in a Parisian dungeon or not-so-public hanging behind King William's summer estate.

"As for the money he has in there, we're looking for Norman and Danish coins, minted BEFORE William invaded England that are evidence of him being paid off well before we lost the Battle of Hastings. And if possible, ashes of the inactivated bean extract that Whiteman was entrusted to be kept away from any flame which, if not burnt, could have

gotten Oswald back on his horse so he could have brought himself and enough men to have made that Battle become a Saxon victory,” Chad reminded his once thickly haired fellow fugitive from the Norman court. “And as for your hair----”

“---No grass grows on busy streets, right,” Robert grumbled regarding the large, still bald spot on his hot head. With sarcasm which had grown from a seedling into a fully grown forest of bitterness and anger from the time of his being rescued by Maria, and Chad, from the Parisian dungeon across the channel. “But I still haven’t forgiven you, and Maria, for tricking me into thinking that Esmerlda’s soul was being transferred from that rat I was dumb enough to fall in love with to a real live human body. Making me look like a fool, so that no one would believe my story about killing King Edward the Confessor, or at the very least, following up on the Mission of that shipwrecked ‘non-existent’ Norman assassination squad was sent to do.”

“Yes, I did trick you,” Chad related and confessed. “And others, and maybe myself, into thinking that I could Esmeralda’s soul from that probably now dead and I pray not tortured rat. And believed Maria when she said, and maybe thought, that William the Conqueror was going to be William the Enlightener, God help me.”

“I can’t and won’t believe in God anymore,” Robert grunted back.

“Which makes you the most effective agent in His service,” Chad offered. “And most importantly now, humanity’s service.”

“All I want now is to service Esmeralda and her fellow Normans with the punishment they deserve,” the deposed, ridiculed and disowned by family as well as country Norman- born former Saxon Noble grunted.

Chad observed Robert’s eyes fixed upon the money chests in soon to be Lord Whiteman’s dining room and the overfilled crates of non-monetary eatable and wearable items around them. Then the Norman soldiers and Welsh mercenaries, guarding the soon to be largest house in Aestrilka. Who were wooed away from their posts by Maria winking at them as she sauntered by as a Saxon maiden turned whore, wiggling her ass, offering them a look at her single intact breast, and luring them into the adjoining storage shed and three horse stable with a jug of mead.

“I hope that your friend put enough toxin in that mead to send them to the afterlife,” Robert shot back at Chad, while pretending to be in prayer to his Uncle, a fellow Norman born Saxon nobleman who Robert grew up with, or as he now knew, grew up UNDER. “And I’ll cut off your scalp, balls and eyes if you even think about resurrecting them from the grave or the ‘sleeping death’ of purgatory.”

“Svend knows what he is doing,” Chad assured him. “He’s a master herbalist. As well as a---“

“----Condemned by his own and his adopted country old man with nothing to lose who I

haven't seen yet, and you haven't either," Robert shot back, landing the arrow directly into Chad's self-doubting and now even more than ever, cynical mind, soul and, as he painfully discovered that he had one, heart.

As cloudy sunset gave way to dark twilight, the two monks with bowed heads, slowly worked their way to the new 'citizen Master's' house. Where, Chad hoped and now preyed, his fellow Liberator would focus on stealing the evidence needed to expose still Duke Whiteman to his own Saxon brethren as a traitor, most importantly to Anne Wheeler. Who would be the first one to put a blade through his corrupt heart, as well as lead a revolution against Whiteman's new patrons. Perhaps with Oswald, wherever he was now, or perhaps by herself in the lead. So many 'perhaps's'. In a world, and new era, where nothing happened as planned.

## CHAPTER 12

Anne Wheeler's eyes were fixed on imprint on the bowl full of Norman coins dumped onto the table in her hut, which like other Saxon villages, still had four intact chairs around it and some food inside the storage closets on either side. "So, even if they do I have that this is the face of William the Conqueror's father. And that were minted before the Norman Invasion. And that they were paid to Stewart Whiteman before William II decided to take his 'rightful place' on the English throne by force," she said to the two monks who had snuck into her hut through the hole they had carved into the wall the night before. "Stewart is pretending to be a collaborator with the Normans so they will go easier on us than anyone else. And as that far fetched fable that Whiteman framed Svend for being on the payroll of the Danes and the Normans by dropping some of these coins from his own pocket, making it look like they fell from Svend's medicine bag, Chad," she said to the first monk, aiming a cross bow at his unprotected chest. "That's as believable as you and Svend actually being able to resurrect the dead."

"And the woman I loved having her soul transplanted out of being a rat, into a creature a lot more vicious and powerful than any disease carrying rabid rodent," monk number two interjected, pointing the Matriarch of Aestrilka to a carriage that had just arrived from Normandy, and a red haired woman of the highest breeding and lowest moral character emerging from it. "I don't know whether Duchess, Baroness or, God help us, Queen Esmeralda came here to find me, your resurrector healer Chad, you or..."

"...Him?" Chad informed Anne, pointing to Stewart who emerged from his house in an even spiffier purple coat and with polished boots, greeting the Lady with a rigid upturned chin and downward looking condescending eyes. "But of course, he's only being polite to her majesty."

"Or maybe more than polite," Robert said as Isabella lowered her head and on her royal face upon Stewart opening up her arms, and calling out her name. Such was followed with wide smile of both parties, indicating not only familiarity of purpose but, by the tightness of the hug which followed, a connection of primal passion. Which both angered Robert and made him envious. "They are inspecting the village arm in arm now, but no doubt it will be penis into vaginal opening within the hour."

"Maybe so," Anne replied still holding onto the crossbow, her trigger finger about to let loose with an arrow into Chad's chest then quickly into Robert's. Something Robert was, to his surprise, not afraid of anymore. "But tell me why didn't Stewart notice that all of this coin is missing from his house?" she said, turning around to him. "And why he isn't combing the village looking for the thief who took them?"

"Because we were very quiet when we entered and left your sheriff's house," Chad replied.

"As quiet as you were when you 'quietly stumbled' into here," Anne reminded them "And I disarmed you of your swords and your naïve battle inexperienced faces with a

wack of a stick, and a ‘ladies jab’ in the belly?” Fear entered the warrior woman’s face as she noted more Norman soldiers milling about the village, passing back and forth like guards, or deputies, rather than merely booty extractors.

“Whitman not looking for us, or the gold” Robert replied, still feeling the pain of Anne’s fist into his empty stomach. And noting that the Norman soldiers were more interested in young, most probably recently widowed, Saxon women washing laundry in the river than the men who had owned those garments. “Because he can get more from Isabella than he can ever extract from every villager in England, or was bribed so that England could become Norman,” he continued. “For now,” the dejected boy who had become a cynical man said, pitying the Sheriff.

“But his greatest crime was this,” Chad volleyed back, showing Anne a pot from Whitman’s kitchen. “His personally engraved specially made pots, with residues of cooked velvet beans in it.”

“In which he probably boiled, and inactivated the extract in that Viking magician’s bag of resurrection herbs,” Robert added, feeling himself to be a part of something deeper and bigger than himself. And for the RIGHT reasons this time.

“Which is why Svend was unable to wake Oswald up from the ‘sleeping death’ like he, and I, did three times before,” Chad said.

“And why your husband wasn’t able to get on his horse and lead these people of yours in successful battle against the Danes, and the French spitting scum who I thought were my people,” Robert suggested.

“Which you are wrong about,” Anne said, after several moments of intense reflection, averting her eyes, lowering her crossbow. “He wasn’t my husband. Who is now...” Reflective passion turned into anger, then a strange brand of remorse that even Robert could read on her face.

“I know,” Chad said. “He was a lot closer to you than that.”

“He was and still is...mine,” Anne said, dropping her weapon on the ground, unable to stop tears from falling down her cheeks. “ALL mine, if I can...and you can...or Svend can.”

“Give him some of this?” Chad said, pulling out a medicine bag filled with velvet bean powder.

Anne grabbed for it with the desperation of a woman trying to save herself from the abyss. Or even more so, as a mother willing to risk everything to save her beloved child, lover and friend from the grips of the devil’s abyss. But Chad pulled it back. While Robert self observed himself aiming the crossbow at the woman’s head.

“So, you’re going to shoot me if I don’t believe you?” Anne challenged Robert. “This from a ‘man’ whose un-blistered hands have never seen an honest day of work in his life, who doesn’t look like he’s killed anyone. Who hired someone to do his killing. And sweating. And...”

Robert’s anger at himself, and Anne, and the world he was now charged to transform, or if possible, save, all gathered into one flame. Then into a growl from his mouth from someone he didn’t recognize. “You are going to help us get rid of the Saxon traitor who is has already sold this ‘protected’ village to the devil himself! And then...”

“Help you send that Norman aristocrat bitch Esmerelda to hell?” Anne replied, with a determined grin. As yet another adversary in the chess game who was, yet again, one step ahead of Robert’s non manipulative grasping mind. “Which I will do, with the help of everyone here, but...such things take time and determination. And...a leader, whose whereabouts only I know. Who better be savable with that uncooked extract you say will work!” she yelled back with sharper arrows in her eyes than anything that could be released by any crossbow.

“You help us kill Whiteman, make sure that Svend’s name is cleared, and we’ll bring Oswald back to life,” Chad promised, after which Anne breathed a sigh of relief, hope returning to her forlorn face. “Or at least try to bring him back,” Chad whispered to Robert. “Which worked some of the last times.”

“And what about Esmerelda?” Robert asked Chad.

“Not my problem,” Chad replied.

“Or mine either,” Anne added. “Kill her and another arrogant bitch will take her place. One is even worse no doubt.”

“Which even if true, doesn’t matter,” Robert thought, but didn’t say, as he looked out of the small hole in Anne’s hut which allowed access to seeing but not being seen. Observing the first of the Norman ‘prisoner’ wagons taking away what seemed to be Saxon offenders of the new laws which had been posted on the walls of the community board for villagers who, conveniently, couldn’t read.

## CHAPTER 13

There were two ways that information, or rumors, spread like wildfire throughout Aestrilka. The first was anyone telling anyone ‘this is confidential, just between us, tell no one else.’ The second was if it was message from Anne Wheeler, which she intensionally restricted to as few words as possible.

“So are we going to give Stewart Whitman a trial before we hang him?” Megan Tanner growled from the gathering of selected citizenry who gathered in one of the only patches of fruit and shade bearing, and wind breaking riverbank trees still left standing after the Norman dictated chopping down of the trees of the unnamed forest which the Saxons thought would not be destroyed until the second, or third, coming of Jesus as dusk merged into dawn. “Then cut his mother fucking traitorous throat! Then stick that boat he comes out here to take a ride in every morning up his goddamn ass!” the twenty four year old widow from whom n’er a blasphemous phrase over her fair lips shot out as a revenge-seeking hag.

“Then chop him up in pieces and feed them to my children, and yours,” now barely 98 pound Gwen Miller added, with a voice that was fed rather drained by hunger. “Except for his heart which, if it exists, at all, is poisonous.”

“Which I reserve to feed to my husband, who told my only two sons to join him in the revolt against these ‘civilized’ Norman demons if they just showed up at the Northern fork of the river,” Aiden Carpenter added. “Who came home with none of his sons, and wounds in his back, after being tricked into thinking that Oswald Axelrod would be there to lead them to victory.”

“While ‘Lord Liberator’ Oswald, who we have not seen in weeks, was maybe victorious fighting WITH the Normans somewhere else?” Gwen proposed. “Who was paid off by the same fat, rich, never got their hands dirty with honest work French blabbering Nobles who turned Sheriff Whiteman into a Judas.”

“Who, of course, is collaborating with the Norman conquerors so they go easy on us,” Megan barked back.

“Or who is someone who is trying to convert us to becoming French speaking slaves so we are better understood and better fed by our Norman ‘liberator’ masters,” old and bitter before her time Gwen threw into the soup, loudly.

“And who, along with whatever guards were assigned to protect him, can probably hear us here!” Anne Wheeler spat out in a hushed whisper to the twelve selected members of the citizenry who she approved for the capture, and hopefully interrogation before death, of the once most trusted, liked and loved Mayor-Sheriff of Aestrilka.

“And who framed me for being paid off to burn the medicine which did and could have saved Oswald, the only man who CAN bring make the people in this town fight the

Normans rather than each other,” Svend whispered to the rope-bearing Anne after she had calmed down the six women armed with knives and as many men brandishing axes as well as now-illegally possessed swords. “And the man who you should have married...” the too wise to hate and too tired to fight ex-Viking warrior continued.

“We were more than married,” Anne replied with downturned eyes reeking of grief. “Until he---“ she continued, those ocular portholes staying dry, the fire of anger coming from them drying up any tears that wanted or needed to come out.

“Anger,” Svend whispered to her as he laid his old, wrinkled hand on Anne’s still young, non-pox scared shaking forearm. “A necessary state of soul before...”

“---Action, yes, I know, and have told a whole lot of other people who lost assumingly loving and certainly beloved souls from their life,” she related, pulling her arm away, grabbing hold of a long rope in her hand, tied in a large capture loop at one end and a hangman’s noose at the other. “But whatever this turned out to be, it’s personal,” she continued lost behind a stare fixed on something, to Svend’s perceptions anyway, both outwardly cruel and internally secretive.

Svend had known Anne long enough, or at least intensely enough, to not ask her any questions. First, because his gentle, and still needed, tongue would be cut out if he dared to ask the question which made her reveal, and face, the real answer regarding the real dynamics of the relationship she had with the awakened from ‘sleeping death disease’ Oswald, who was in a location known only to her now. And secondly, he knew that no one can fully know or feel someone else’s grief, a sadistic albatross that God, Wotan and perhaps even Buddha had inflicted upon members of his, presumably, most favorite species on earth. And thirdly, as Svend lingered in thought regarding what Anne had said about being a beloved or loving soul, the urgency of the world that is rather than the one that should be emerged into his and her consciousness.

“Whiteman’s coming!” Svend heard from an illiterate ‘juror’ he was too worn out to recognize, but who three long months ago had thanked him for saving himself, his children and the woman he secretly wished WAS their mother from deadly dysentery and blood producing coughs of still suspicious origin which Nature allowed him to halt.

“If the God we are stupid enough to name but not strong enough to laugh created the eighth mortal sin, it would be excessive regularity, for which he will pay with more than the ‘comfort and security’ of lifelessness” Svend whispered to Anne and whoever of the other twelve well armed jurors, and no doubt executioners were listening as Whiteman strolled down the trail to boat tied to the now private dock. On the same footprints he had, according to Anne, set his feet every just as the sun made its way up three mast lengths above the horizon. Humming the same song which he seemed to find soothing, which to any outside ear was painfully off key. Then setting out on the boat he sailed or rowed across the slow moving river and back three times, in directions that always led him back to the peer, as he read the river currents in all seasons better than he could decipher any writing on any monk’s manuscript, or duke’s edict. Where he would dine on

his breakfast while sitting on the same rock after splashing his arms, chest and face with water three times.

But this morning, he danced rather than strolled down the path to the peer where his craft, the only floating object in the water, was tied. His mouth sang the words to that song, with notes that were more on than off key. As for the breakfast he brought, it was far more than a pauper's ration of bread, dried meat and rancid cheese wrapped in burlap but an assortment of fruit, legumes and baked delectables which Svend barely recognized. And as for his olfactory presentation on this day, Whiteman was free of any odor of sweat, the tips of his neatly combed hair and trimmed beard still wet from no doubt the warm bath he had taken upon rising from his straw cot, or more likely this morn, mattress covered bed.

"We have to move now!" Anne commanded her fellow Saxon commoners, as the ethers of fear, anger and astonishment held, one way or another, all of their stares and consciousnesses hostage. "Before he gets in that boat of his."

"In which he is preparing a seat for someone else," Svend noted. "A very comfortable seat."

"For someone who is standing him up?" A noted with a self-satisfied grin as she noted Whiteman looking anxiously towards the village, then repeatedly at his sundial, his impatience leading him into disappointment, and the kind of lack of self worth which the Normans seemed to be wanting all 'good Saxons' to embrace. "Let's put him out of his misery!" she said as he turned his back on the people covered riverbank, then lowered his head in despair.

With that, on a silent command which everyone obeyed, and which Anne could not stop, the ensemble merged upon Svend like a swarm of voiceless and invisible locusts. Just as he turned Anne threw her rope around his torso, pulling him away from the boat. Then onto the deck of the peer which, prior to the Norman ban of Saxons being able to own boats, had been a mooring place for all manner of craft for fishing, trade and, when there was enough of the former that went well, pleasure. Before you could say the Lord's Prayer, or whale out two verses of a drinking song given to voice by men who sought paradise in the arms of a whore rather than the bussom of the Virgin Mary in Heaven, or the Walkuries in Vahalla, Whiteman was tied to a tree, stripped of his coat, boots and dignity.

"You're making a big mistake!" Whiteman admonished his captors. "But if you let me go, and let me explain myself, we can reach a mutual understanding."

"The same words I said to you, when I was a boy accused tied to a tree just like this one," C admitted, lowering his sword. "While you were one of us! Which you aren't now!" he growled, edging the rusty blade on Whiteman's neck.

"And which I said to you when I was accused of being a whore who tempted Oswald

into lustful adultery,” a woman emerging from the back of the justice seeking crowd which had become a vengeance demanding mob said. “Which I didn’t!” she insisted, after which she removed her hood, revealing half an inch of stubble where her long distinctive mane of red and brown streaked hair had been. “And can’t right now, even if I wanted to. After I fell asleep drinking tea from a traveling masked court jester with a clown’s mask who played the flute for me, then woke up in my cot the next morning looking like...this,” she lamented. “And if you did anything to Oswald!!!” she shouted back, grabbing hold of Whiteman’s manhood with her left hand, her right holding a knife prepared to geld him with one swift slice.

“I didn’t do anything to Oswald!” Whiteman shouted out through fearful breaths, accompanied by a flood of urine flowing out of his penis onto the ground, and feces falling down his legs. “And I did nothing to you!” he went on. “Or to you, you and you,” he continued, looking at and, as much as he could, into the faces of every juror Anne had chosen. Then to Anne herself. “Every man, and woman, is entitled to some trial. And to know what he is accused of!” he asserted. “By Saxon and, if you people give it a chance, even Norman law!”

Anne motioned to Svend, who presented him with the box of coins Chad and Robert had pilfered from Whiteman’s hut just before being caught by her. “Old Danish coins and those imprinted before Duke William became King William,” he pointed out. “Along with some freshly minted Norman coins bearing the likeness of William himself.”

“Which I do admit to having!” Whiteman pleaded. “The new coins at least. Which maybe could have some old coins mixed in with them. Which I was going to share with all of you, when I could do it without any of us getting caught!”

“Which we will take now, as you are already really caught,” Aiden Carpenter mused, after which he took began distributing a fistful to each of the twelve jurors. Then, as her insistence, handing over the rest over to Anne after she had seen how holding those coins were turning the souls of the innocent, hard working Saxons into money hungry, greedy, family rather than community serving ‘commoners’.

“And there is this,” Anne said, presenting Whiteman with a view of his engraved cooking pot, lined with deactivated velvet bean. “It was you who boiled, baked or fried the healing power out of the medicine that Doctor Svend risked his life to get, and which Oswald needed to remain in the land of the living, and effective.”

“That wasn’t me! It was that Pagan magician, and witch!” he asserted, extending what he could of his finger at Svend. “Who once claimed to be able to raise the dead! Or make them talk from the grave! Then, yes, cured some of our body ills. But which also corrupted our minds, and perspectives...Like...”

Whiteman went on and on about how many of the patients Svend and his still officially dead partner had treated would get better anyway. And accused him of using the devil’s medicine to convert good, God fearing Christian Saxons into ‘thinking for themselves’

Spiritual seekers, reasons for living and, worse, believers in the new religion of 'critical science' rather than blind faith. Thankfully, this time, the jurors believed the sincerity in the old ex-Viking's eyes and their past experiences with his unique brand of treating body, mind and spirit rather than their rantings, most of which were true, about the trickery Svend had used to give the people what they wanted, and eventually what they needed.

"But there is one thing I demand to know before you execute me!" Whiteman finally said, collecting his composure. "To face my accusers. And the cowardly thieves who broke into my hut, and stole what you accuse me of having there."

"So you can have them executed?" C shot back. "Or sent off for trial in Paris where they will be sold into slavery, which was non-existent here under Saxon rule, as just punishment for their crimes?"

"So I can look into their eyes, Anne," he pleaded with the life appointed judge. "And let all of you see who is right, and who is wrong in all of this."

Anne considered the matter stroking her chin in deep thought. The jurors muttered amongst themselves, with more humanitarian based reason than Svend gave these uneducated and tortured souls credit for being capable of.

"Just tell me their names," Whiteman interjected. "Or, after I'm gone, tell your juror's their names."

"Which I'm alright with, Anne," advisor without a vote Svend offered.

Anne delved deep into herself. She folded her hands in prayer, then emerged from it with axe rather than crucifix in hand. "But I'm not with telling you any names, Stewart," Anne said, after which she threw the wood chopping implement at and into Whiteman's chest, landing it straight into his heart. "I made a promise to protect them from Norman soldiers, French Lords, and any Saxons here or anywhere else who would turn on their own for special consideration from our new 'protectors'," she said by way of explanation as she pulled the axe out of his breathless body, then placed it between a fist she made with his pale but still movable fingers. "Now, get this dead traitor who had an accident with this axe, by his own hand, on his boat," she said with grieving and angry eyes. "And send him down the river! The one that doesn't lead to Heaven or Valhalla! No...to the bottom of the river."

The entire congregation agreed of course, while Svend watched. But before the boat could make the journey to the Deep Six, there was a rustling in the woods. Then banter of casual conversation in French by soldiers.

The jury fled, as did the judge. Their feet were swift, their footing sure. All escaped except for Svend, whose feet had not yet healed from being bound by shackles. He lay down in the dirt at the riverbank after nearly hitting his head on a rock. He lifted his head

up, to give thanks for his continued life and saw an angelic face bordered by flaming red hair blowing wistfully in the wind. Which was attached to a body of woman clad in the finery of a Norman maiden who knew nothing about war, religion or politics, carrying a picnic basket under her delicate arm.

“Stewart! I’m sorry I am late,” she said to the corpse lying on the boat. “As I see you are sleeping,” she said with a warm smile.

“As you will be too! Like the rat you really are!” Svend heard from a voice he didn’t recognize. A young man with old monk’s bald head shave emerged from the woods with cross bow. He aimed it at the young maiden’s back. With brains in his hands, Svend tossed a rock at the assaulter, causing him to misfire the arrow in his bow. Then to drop his weapon on the ground. He fled as French speaking Norman soldiers approached rapidly on foot, followed by more on horseback.

“Get him!” the young maiden cried out, her voice transformed into that of an old battle axe. Or worse. “And any other Saxon scum who is here!”

“Yes, Lady Esmerelda,” Svend heard from the commander, his subordinate, and at least one other as he buried himself in the brush, then the mud leading to the river, then into the river itself. From that hopefully secluded place, he watched the noble woman not so nobly look at Whiteman’s lifeless corpse with anger, disappointment then...a wide smile of delight. “So, they kill one of ours, that gives us legal right to kill ten of them, right gentlemen?” she said to the commander of the detachment with more authority and condescension than any king Svend had ever observed, or imagined.

There was no shortage of ‘Yes my Ladies’ with bows that brought the heads of the compliant, heavily armed men nearly down to their knees. And, for Svend, no shortage of guilt for being tricked into being an instrument of cruelty, made possible by of course his humanity. Which, in a world designed by God rather than the devil, would serve rather than endanger the Cause of Goodness.

## CHAPTER 14

“Une, deux, trios, quatre, cinq et en route pour Normandy,” Chad heard the new six foot three Norman born and bred Mayor, Sheriff and Lord of Aestrilka bark out from behind his spotless tunic bearing William’s due of Lions as he moved along the line of unwashed Saxons lined up in the village square which was now called ‘place de village’ by whoever didn’t want to join the sixth ‘lucky contestant’ in the game of export to places from which they would never return. “Une, deux, trios, quatre, cinq,” the fat cheeked, full bellied ‘protector’ of civilization continued, pointing his blister free finger at the sixth Saxon in line who was then assisted to the export cart, or rather ‘carte de export’.

“They didn’t do anything,” Chad explained to his fellow rebel, hidden in what was left of the woods outside of the village. “Where are they being taken?”

“The first, second, and thirds randomly selected hostage who is sixth in line, to Normandy for ‘re-education’, to become an obedient slave, who they are now calling ‘protected and fed serfs’, in France rather than one here,” Maria said. “The fourth, to a hanging tree outside of town as a demonstration for whoever thinks about ambushing the wagon.”

“But they’ve done nothing!” Chad whispered in a bark. “And they are...”

“...Yes, I know, boys who will be brought up to be loyal, non-thinking Norman soldiers or if they become too much trouble, shackled for life laborers ‘in the service of the Christian French king. The girls, IF they are lucky, and not raped before they reach the boat, obedient wives who will produce Norman babies, or if assigned other serfs, breeding mares who will produce children who are born into slavery with no way out,” Maria replied. “Or...someone like who, well...”

“Was so good at being paid for pleasuring men you didn’t know that you didn’t have to marrying a wife beating husband who the priests ordered you to obey at the altar?” the Saxon born master of mischief, now turned into an avid student of revolution put forth to the woman who saved him from a Norman dungeon after having hired him as a resurrection magician. “Don’t these Normans understand that it is our right and duty to kill any of our own people who became one of their people?”

“Who Whiteman was loyal to, nobody knows except for him, and, if He, She or It still exists here, God,” Maria offered. “It’s said that the Heavenly Father has a plan and purpose for everyone.”

“And what about the fathers, and mothers, of those children who are being taken away?” Chad challenged.

“They will turn from terrified observers who are praying to God for help to vicious rebels who have traded their crucifixes for axes only if we let a few more wagons become filled

with children, and after they've seen two more boys hung, and three more young girls scalped," Anne asserted with a dirt caked face. "Or raped."

"We have to stop them!" Chad asserted. "With or without Oswald, wherever he is," he pushed out of gritted teeth as he made a visual connection with the fourth 'sixth picked' child, who upon turning around, was a four foot tall skinny girl so terrified by the six foot goons throwing her into a special transport cart that the only tool she had available to ask for help was with her fear-infused eyes, which met Chad's after they bypassed the downturned faces of her parents. "I'm resurrecting myself as Oswald!" he grunted, reaching for his father's sword, pushing himself "And leading this revolt right now!"

"Not till we have the numbers," Anne commanded, pushing her arm in front of Chad's chest, then belting him a breath-taking blow into the belly. "And when every man in this village turns into an Oswald."

"Which won't happen," Maria said, pointing Chad's attention to the well armed Normans and the wagon of knives, axes and home-made Saxon lances loaded onto a wagon to be 'exported' to, perhaps, a training school in France where young nature loving English boys would be turned into Britain-hating Normans. "Your Saxon farmers don't have the weapons. Military training. Or the most important skill a Norman warrior has over them."

"The ability to fight from the back of a horse?" Chad pushed back, catching what he could of his breath, and recalling the most logical reason why an equally matched army of Saxons are slaughtered by the same number of Normans at the Battle of Hastings.

"The ability to be manipulative, clever and cruel," Maria related. "Like I used to be," she related, and confessed. "And like the deluded idiot who once thought that he started the Norman invasion ISN'T. No matter how vicious he thinks he is, or can be, God help and bless him," she said, turning to a silent, in his own confused world Robert. "Who----"

"----Could have killed Demoness Esmerelda if not for that Old Dane 'healer' who decided to prevent me from killing her," Robert grunted, spitting at Svend's guilt ridden face, holding his dagger to the aged well ahead of his time ex-Viking's wrinkled throat. "And if I did!!!"

"The Normans would have taken every child from this village away, and done unthinkable things to whoever was left, or whoever was hiding in the woods," Anne interjected. "Very much including you, who, thank God, WE saved. And still can give up to them as a bargaining chip! To be tortured by Esmeralda in ways that you can't even imagine."

Robert pulled back his knife, the his eye, gazing into space again.

Chad had many strategic questions about what to do next, including assessing who, other than himself, was expendable. And who could be relied on to be effective. One name

came to mind. "Oswald," he said to Anne regarding the battlefield commander whose masterful skills as a strategist, fighter and inspirer of human emotion had become legendary. "If we can get some velvet bean that hasn't been destroyed."

"One more victorious cavalry charge," Anne said, envisioning something hopeful and vengeful behind her ever secretive, but always reliable somehow, eyes. "And done without horses, for a final victory," she mused, breaking into a smile and confident chuckle. "And then....him and me leave all of you to fend for yourselves."

"Assuming we can find him," Maria interjected.

"Which...eh...we eh....will," Anne replied. "If we work together instead of against each other," she said to the congregation of rebels behind her, numbering 10 to the Norman's 200 or more.

"Yes," Chad said to that suggestion, thinking, unlike the inspired citizen rebels behind Anne that there something 'off' about their trusted nurturer, advisor and leader. The kind a craziness that could make or break a revolution. A conclusion that Svend seemed to come to an agreement to as well, communicated between the young rebel and the old revolutionary with a look, a nod and silent dialog which only they could understand.

## CHAPTER 15

Only one in ten villages decided to leave their homes to live as starving rebels in the forest rather than marginally fed serfs in the town which was now renamed 'Ville de Terre' rather than the Pagan name of 'Mother Earth's village'. Anne Wheeler took over command of those who chose freedom over security with an iron hand, but she was fair. Everyone got an equal portion of whatever wild game was still left in the thinned out woods, or whatever crops could be dug up from fields harvested by Saxons who gave 90% of it to their new Norman masters. And as warm fall days gave way to cold pre-winter nights, she was the one who 'slept' with one eye open covered by the thinnest blanket, or none at all. As such, everyone, including Svend, believed that she was capable of finding Oswald, so he could liberate him from the 'sleeping death disease', so he could liberate England. But, as with anything else, she needed the help of the 'comrades', as she now called them, under her. "We'll split up," she said to the group as dawn emerged in the woods, a thick fog rolling in, a gentle rain falling from the clouds settling into the horse frost settling in on the ferns and moss covered tree trunks. "The last time I saw him, he was here, wandering in the woods, hunting for wild game," she related to the group with guilt and fear in her usually confident, stoic face.

"Which maybe killed him before he----" Maria suggested.

"He's not dead!" Anne screamed out to the wandering band of liberators seeking the only leader who could ensure victory over their new French masters, or stop them from killing each other, or trading in their fellow comrades for a pardon from the Normans. "And I told him to stay here," she said, pointing to an unusually large overleafed branch that had fallen to the ground which, as Svend observed, and no one else did, was obviously a door to a cave dug into a hill.

"Which is where he isn't," Chad said, emerging from his, or perhaps Anne's, most recent hideout.

"That can't be!" she blasted out, her beet red face turning white. Her cold sweat reeking of fear, an odor which Svend's keen olfactory senses allowed him to detect in injured animals in the woods, opponents on the battlefield and, as he never revealed to anyone, his own torso when the world turned upside down on him. "And who told gave you permission to go in there!" she blasted at Chad.

"You did," Chad replied. "You said to all of us to watch for places where he could have dropped onto the ground, or maybe had enough strength to dig into it, Sire," he continued with a courtly bow.

"I'm not a Sire!" Anne replied. "Or a sir."

"And there's no word in English or French for a woman who leads other women, and men," Maria added, wiping the dirt off her dried out face, pulling bugs and knotted hair out of her once well kept long mane. "But there should be."

“Part of Comrade Oswald’s agenda,” Anne volleyed back.

“And Lordess Esmerlda’s,” Maria said. “The woman who---“

“IS the devil incarnate!” Robert blasted into the political argument that was escalating in both tension and volume. “Who tricked me into believing she loved me. And---“

“----proved it by being born again into the body of a rat who knew exactly what beach you would be riding your horse to on a pleasure ride,” Maria noted with rolled eyebrows. “On a shipwrecked boat MANNED by a Norman assassination squad of MEN who she, hey, maybe killed, so that you could---“

Before Maria could remind Robert yet again that it was SHE who saved him from a Norman executioner’s axe or, being burnt as a warlock, or, worse, a life of confinement in an asylum for the insane, the former nobleman brought up to pay everyone else to get their hands dirty or bloody, extended his grim infused, blistered fingers and grabbed hold of Maria’s throat. It took three of the male rebels and, thankfully, Anne, to pull him away from breaking her neck. And three of the women to put a gag around his mouth as he yet again yelled out towards Esmeralda back in the village, promising he would kill her, describing each of the ways he would do it. And twice as many rebels to prevent Maria from stabbing the ‘rabid rat lover’ in his grief-struck and blackened heart. Such gave Chad time to open the door to the cave, giving Svend, and only him, a view of the inside.

Svend noted a cup inside, with un-burnt velvet bean. And a large pot with ashes from velvet beans which had been fried into complete ineffectiveness. Along with a body covered with leaves and debris, still breathing.

“Get out of there and help me out here!” Anne yelled out as she was pushed into the dirt, then onto a rock. her head aching, unable to get back onto either of her feet. “I can’t feel my toes, or fingers.”

Svend rushed to Comrade Anne’s aid as a physician, unable to feel any broken bones, then twisting pine needs into specific points on her torso which had ‘magic healing’ properties according to the Chinese physicians he had met in Persia when trying to assess whether it was worth conquering the region to make it a Viking colony for Norsemen who had had enough of living as strong, vibrant, supermen who could sleep soundly while naked in the snow.

Meanwhile, Chad belted Robert in the jaw, silencing his accusations. Then he kicked Maria between her legs, just as she was about to slice off Robert’s testicals and associated appendage.

“I’ll be okay!” Anne assured the shocked, terrified and/or remorseful mob of rebels who had caused her injury while trying to be of service to them. “I’m in good hands with the

Doctor here,” she assured them. “Slow movement coming back to my fingers. Which I will put into a fist and put into any of you if SOMEONE doesn’t find where Oswald is. Spread out! Follow any footprints you see. Human or animal. And that includes YOU, Chad! And you, Svend. Whose magic touch, healed me.”

Demonstrating the point, Anne pushed herself up off the ground and stumbled onto her feet. Every rebel eye bulged out of the sockets as if even the most atheistic of them had seen Jesus perform one of his ‘just another day at the carpentry shop’ medical miracles. Something that Svend learned, during his time as a charlatan resurrector, learned that one had to accept with gratitude if one was to be paid for and get out of town fast before you got your legs chopped off by someone who saw through the trick. Indeed he thought to himself that the ‘Chinese Magic acupuncture points’ were indeed medical reality. And that he had maneuvered then them just right. But, alas, Svend was relieved of the glory and burden of being a medical magician of the highest caliber by one look of Chad’s face, as his former dream merchant, and now oppression fighting comrade, pointed into the ‘cave’, revealing a view of a predictably familiar face.

“Go, all of you!” Anne commanded. “Find Oswald! He’s got to be here somewhere! And bring him to the river by the Old Roman fort, where we will move him by boat to a safe place! And get him healed again.”

All obeyed the command, as did a very sore Robert, and a very offended Maria. Chad pretended to lead the party going into to the North, disappearing into the fog. Svend took leadership of those searching the Western woodlands, doing the same. Anne led the detachment going to the East, from behind.

Meanwhile, after faking an injury of his own, Svend, snuck back to the source point, while Anne kept the rest of the group in the woods. Upon entering the carved out cave, which was more like a well constructed hut, he discovered that the battered, bruised and old before its time face under the dirt and brush covering it was Oswald. His breathing was shallow, but steady. His eyes blinked repeatedly, accompanied by an upturned smile on his right side as he seemed to be dreaming something which was both pleasant to one side of his brain, and horrifying to the other. He was mumbling in a language that Svend didn’t recognize.

Chad snuck in just behind him. “Company’s coming, in----” he told Svend.

“After I get a good look at what I’m smelling,” Svend boldly interjected. He very legitimately limped his way to a three mugs of velvet bean powder next to the cot while Chad locked and guarded the door. “It smells potent, and it’s allocated in just the right amount of doses for three more resurrections.”

“And this?” Chad said, showing Svend a pot containing a caked layer of burnt powder on the bottom and the side. “Inactivated velvet bean which...” he offered a sniff of it to Svend.

“Yes, smells like the powder I thought was active, and tried to give to Oswald when...”

“It didn’t work, because she didn’t want it to work?” Chad offered.

“Maybe,” Svend replied. “But...why?”

Something cliqued in Svend’s active but always underappreciated and exhaustion-producing mind. Something that was popped into full consciousness and connected rather than fragmented thoughts by strips of thick hair braided women’s hanging from the walls. Long hair with ribbons attached to them, like trophies rather than an on looking man who wants to know if he would have to propose the former wearer of it with marriage, or an arrangement to be a secret mistress. The colors of the hair and braid arrangement resembled that of which the women who had contracted ‘balding’ disease which Anne discouraged Svend from curing, stopping or investigating, inferring that the afflicted women deserved it. As for who the women were, Oswald provided the next clue and confirmation of what Svend was thinking, and fearing as he mumbled, with fond smiles in his ‘sleep’, the names of the maidens, wives and widows who had come down with the ‘balding disease’. “What did the women who lost this hair deserve it for?” Svend asked himself, giving voice to that thought.

“Maybe causing that?” Chad said, uncovering the appendage between Oswald’s legs, which was sticking up at attention, reeking of semen. He picked up a knife from the table, showing Svend the inscription on its handle. “‘To Anne. My best Friend and Comrade’ And maybe ex lover? Anger, jealousy and greed will make any woman do horrible things to anyone who is attracted to their man.”

“Or their man, if he, as a side effect of velvet bean, has an enhanced attraction to other women in this society,” Svend noted. “Making him think with his penis rather than his brain, or, when he’s thinking straight, loyal heart.”

“But how did Anne chop off the hair of those women? She couldn’t have done it in their sleep,” Chad noted.

“But maybe she had some chemical help,” Svend said, after sniffing the air again, following his nose to a bottle of sweet smelling lotion he recognized from his past travels to the East, and merchants from the continent, with Latin inscription. “For hair. Perhaps to remove it rather than grow it,” he said, pouring a portion on his hairy arms, after which he was able to wipe off several follicles, revealing smooth skin under it. “Sneak it into the soap they use to wash themselves.”

“To make themselves more attractive to their husbands, fiancées or---“

“---Charming revolutionary heroes who won’t take no for an answer, because they can’t help themselves,” Svend said as he pointed to Oswald. “Who..”

Svend sniffed Oswald’s hair, noting the scent of the hair removing extract on the crown

of his head, which had thinned down considerably with regard to being forested by a thick long mane. “She thinks will be bedding fewer young women if he looks like an old man. Like...” Svend rolled his fingers over the hairless crown of his head, wondering if his wife had deforested his once thick mane during the difficult times during his marriage to her. She, not knowing of course, that if he had any real love interests, it was for other men rather than women.

“But, it’s in the interest of Anne now, to get Oswald back on his two feet,” Chad said. “To save her town, and country, and then to worry about saving what she thinks is an unofficial till and beyond death do us part marriage with Oswald later.”

“I would like to say ‘yes’,” Svend replied with a heavy heart, and worried mind as he heard, then saw, Anne approaching the ‘healing hut’. He did a logical neurological exam with his two biological ocular portholes, then checking in with his third eye to see that both modalities were in agreement with each other. “We need a double does this time,” he said to Chad as he measured out two spoonfuls of the unburned powder. Hoping that it had not been inactivated, or made toxic, by ‘Doctor Anne’.

The first layering under Oswald’s tongue brought the mini tremors into jolts, in accordance with the Promethian mandate to control what the self-taught physician would never really understand. The second layering brought the arms and legs into coordinated motions that seemed to be voluntarily requested of them, a reward for Svend’s offering another portion of his soul to the gods, and God, for the magic normally forbidden to mortal physicians to work in this particular mortal patient. The third layering connected Oswald’s visual and auditory senses to the world in front of his eyes rather than the elusive one behind them, finalized by his feeling his own head, noting a fist full of hair coming out into his fingers. The fourth enabled him to voice his thoughts, feelings and aspirations to his soul, which given the quality of that voice, was transformed into something Svend sensed as..different. Which the next visitor detected as...something far more frightening.

“So there you are Anne!” Oswald bellowed out to, according to all of Anne’s descriptions as well as Svend’s observations, his beloved as she walked into hut, breaking the loose safety restraints she had tied onto his ankles. “And what witch potions do you have in your hand now?” he demanded to know regarding the half opened sac of rancid leaves, sweet berries and moldy smelling roots in her hand as his two pounding feet carried him into the zone within an inch of her face.

Before a shocked , angered and hurt Anne could give voice to a medical explanation, Oswald’s hand had grasped hold of her wrist and twisted it, with a loud crack. “Don’t think I know what you were doing while I was asleep!” he blasted into her quivering and tear soaked face with her back against the wood and dirt wall.

“Protecting you!” she yelled into his face, and soul, as her hands got lost in the tangles of hair hanging on the wall. “From the witches who were weaving spells against you and our cause, with this. That I relieved them of, for both of our goods.”

“And what about mine!” Oswald blasted out. “Which I thought I was just dreaming about. But which---”

“---Was a side effect of the awakening herb we used,” Svend interjected, sensing that there was still a twig of love amongst the dead forest of hate and jealousy which could blossom into a strong tree again.

“Which Doctor Svend had happen to him when he was formulating it,” Chad added, pointing to the bald spot on his partner’s head.

“Which is true,” Anne said, with a face that somehow lost the ability to lie effectively. Perhaps because of fear, or perhaps because the Mistress of deception had lost her own footing in a world she was so good at designing, and implementing. “Please, Svend,” she pleaded as Oswald pulled out a knife with a shaking, then firm hand, preparing to add Anne’s own mane to the collection of ribbon tied ‘pony tails’ nailed to the wood slabs behind her. “Tell Oswald Axelrod that the strength of a liberator is measured by how little hair he has on his head. And that no grass grows on busy streets.”

Under normal circumstances, that postulate about the cause for baldness in deep or expansively thinking men would elicit a somber but fond chuckle in Svend. But this time, he used rather than basked in the glory of his advanced, by necessity rather than choice, intellect. “Tell me about those dreams you had,” he gently asked Oswald, man to man.

“Why?” Oswald demanded to know, his stare still fixed on the woman who he once loved, and thought he could trust as well. “She knows!”

“But I don’t,” Svend replied, calmly. “And since what we do in our dreams affects this awakening state, and can change it, the Cause requires you to share with us what you saw, heard and DID in your dreams. It’s because of those dreams you had in the ‘sleeping sickness’ you were afflicted with that you knew so much about how to fight against the Danes, Normans and now traitorous Saxons. And if your body is slain in battle, we who are not blessed with these dreams, no, visions, need to know so we can continue the Fight. For the Cause.”

The lie, which Svend wanted to believe in so much that it became his new Reality, achieved its intended objective. Oswald lowered his knife, then the death grip his had on Anne’s neck, then turned away from her, thus releasing his most powerful restraining weapon in battles or between such---his penetrating stare. While pacing around the hut, Oswald related his dreams while under the spell of the ‘sleeping death’ in vivid detail. With a lyrical musical voice, along with auditory and visual descriptions, which were worthy of Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, tales related from, as Svend recalled from his exploits in Greece, came from a blind man who had seen the world with more clarity, feeling and commitment than anyone with functional eyes could, or did. Some of the tales from ‘beyond’ related directly to what Anne had done while ‘taking care’ of him.

As evidenced by Svend's logical and intuitive suspicions, and verified by her yelling out 'lies', 'fantasy', 'his imagination' or 'something you 'resurrectors' planted into his brain somehow' and a frantic attempt by Anne to run out of the hut which was halted by Chad, all of which were ignored by Oswald. But some of the visions seemed...to be from a realm deeper and more powerful than the 'dimension' real life 'resurrector' Svend and his formerly disbelieving, atheistic partner Chad were living in. Maybe a more insightful place as well. Just as the insights from that realm were being clarified and explained, with explanations as to how to kick the Normans out of England as well as how to make it a better country than it had been before, the language in which Oswald was channeling those descriptors changed into a tongue that Svend didn't recognize. And which somehow charmed Chad. But which terrified Anne. To such a point that she grabbed hold of Oswald's neck, attempting to 'choke the demon out of him.'

Chad and Svend both tried to pull her off Oswald, but to no avail. Finally, a creature more natural to the woodlands intervened. Where and how three wolves found their way into the hut, Svend didn't know. All he knew after the successful attempt to kill the pack's leader, and scare the two followers back into the woods while they still had their paws attached to their blood soaked torsos, was that in the wake of these 'messenger spirits', hungry animals or perhaps Norman trained Saxon hunting dogs, two humans were sent to their maker.

Breath no more flowed in or out of Anne and Oswald's pale faces, but their eyes seemed...satisfied somehow. The fight between man and beast brought both hands, and so it seemed, hearts of the two lovers together.

"So, now it's time to do a resurrection?" Chad mused, pulling Svend once again out of thought so deep that he would never be able to perceive, or connect, to worldly 'reality'. "But who?" he said. "The wolf, who will pay us with dead rabbits we can cook? Oswald, who could pay us with booty from Norman nobles after we loot their palaces? Or Anne, who..."

"Will reward us with more secrets that inspire us that we will not, and should not, understand?" Svend replied. "Who, for the moment, left YOU with a full head of hair. But who maybe could..."

As Svend looked around the hut, an idea emerged, particularly when he saw the real identity of a metal bowl after it had been freed from its place amidst a ball of straw.

"Oswald's helmet?" Chad inquired.

"Telling us from its inside that perception can become reality," Svend replied, looking at Chad, getting an idea that no resurrector had ever thought about. A necessary experiment that had to be attempted. For many reasons.

## CHAPTER 16

Like any baby boy born to a father who was in a war, or whose ancestors were, one of Chad's yearnings, or inherited assignments, was to honor the family name for any progeny that would carry the Hunter name. Unfortunately for Chad's ancestors, he died as a hero with the name of Axerod on his tombstone, posing as 'Oswald the Liberator' with his helmet on for all of the fighting, then losing his head to a Norman sword and, no doubt, the disappointed wielder of such. "It doesn't matter much," Chad told himself as his soul headed towards the White Light in the dark sky above him the night after the final Battle of Astrelka was concluded. "The people believed I was Oswald, and therefore the Saxons I was leading believed they had the right to throw expel the Normans away from their once cursed but not beloved England. A battle I fought from the back of my horse, who, thankfully, is still alive. And unharmed," he said as he looked down on the planet that, according to Svend anyway, he would have to return to in another life to make up for the missed opportunities and moral miscalculations he had committed in the one he was now done with. "But my horse is in the woods somewhere with one of the half starved rebels who had to flee to fight another day instead of being a fat, over pampered and underappreciated work horse for the Normans."

As for the Saxon rebels, they did live to fight another day, avenging the heroic death of Oswald, which made them better fighters than if they honored Chad, the fallen and reformed Resurrector. But though they were unable to expel Normans from England, they did accomplish a longer lasting victory. And, after a few generations, as Chad noted when plummeting down into the womb of Gwen Miller's granddaughter (whose mother he did impregnate during his brief glory days as a miracle worker in Astrikla) the Norman invaders became more Saxon than their French counterparts on the other side of the channel. Anglicized Normans, and the Saxons who intermarried with them, were the first to sign and benefit from the Magna Carta in 1215, the basis for institutionalized democracy, which didn't come to the Continent for many centuries later. Such made the moral imperative of the ancient peasant Saxon code of 'every man a king but no one wears a crown' legal.

As for the battle of and for Aestrilka, the usual tragedy of war happened. Saxons extracted revenge for kidnapping of their sons and raping of their daughters on replacement Norman troops who had just arrived on English soil rather than the bastards who did those deeds in the first place. Such of course led to reprisals for the slain French conscripts by their relatives from Normandy in other villages on Saxons who had not raised a sword, spear or pitchfork against the Norman Army.

But there was one balancing of justice, and ironic turn of fate. During the battle, Robert Debois' arrow went straight into Duchess Esmeralda's heart. A victory for his personal self as well as, so Maria informed him, women everywhere, who were preparing to fight under Esmeralda's command to kill any man born of woman, and enslave any human bearing a penis in ways far worse than what had happened to souls born with vaginas.

As for Maria, to hide out from her fellow Normans, and Saxons who soon found out

about her Norman roots, she became Robert's wife, taking his name, hard earned shelter he learned to provide her, but not his dignity. They both lived long, happy lives well north of Hadrian's wall in a vicious, rainy, rocky yet somehow fair to those who were not unfair to others land called Scotland.

Svend, whose body and soul were ready for death, survived the battle that restored Astrilka to its Saxon inhabitants, and the counter attack of the Normans which took it back, then converted it into a pit of burning wood and flesh. He lived a long life in the woods, doing what he could to save the lives of wounded and diseased Saxons. And the occasional lost Norman soldier who got lost from his unit, one of whom rewarded him with a sincere smile of gratitude, and the gift of love which was secretly accepted, and celebrated in ultimate privacy. As for waking the dead, or those afflicted with 'sleeping disease' Svend did with that younger and, by way of biological accident, male companion, such remained unwritten about and not spoken about. Some things humans were not ready for yet in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. As would be the case for at least the next thousand years. But after that...well, the Promethian agenda of humans seeking to become godlike, would prevail. Hopefully with goodness, enlightenment and humility as its reason d'etre.

“