

## 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--”

“---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 'devishly 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.