

SAXON HEROINES

WOMEN OF DETERMINATION AND COURAGE

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SAXON HEROINES

WOMEN OF DETERMINATION AND COURAGE

Sandra Wagner-Wright



WAGNER
WRIGHT
ENTERPRISES

*“Blessed are the peacemakers:
For they shall be called
the Children of God.”
— Matthew 5:9*

Contents

Cast Of Primary Characters	9
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PART 1: ETHELBERGA

Anno Domini 624 — Anno Domini 633

Chapter 1: <i>Anno Domini 624</i> – The Year Princess Ethelberga of Kent Marries King Edwin of Northumbria.....	15
Chapter 2: <i>Anno Domini 624</i> – The Year Pope Boniface Sends Gifts to King Edwin.....	34
Chapter 3: <i>Anno Domini 625</i> – The Year Eumer of Wessex Fails to Assassinate King Edwin.....	45
Chapter 4: <i>Anno Domini 626</i> – The Year Coifi Destroys Woden’s Temple at Goodmanham	65
Chapter 5: <i>Anno Domini 627</i> – The Year King Edwin Is Baptized at York.....	75
Chapter 6: <i>Anno Domini 633</i> – The Year King Edwin Is Slain at the Battle of Hatfield Chase	96

PART 2: ENFLEDA

Anno Domini 642 — Anno Domini 664

Chapter 7: <i>Anno Domini 642</i> – The Year Princess Enfleda Learns Her Fate	115
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----

Chapter 8: <i>Anno Domini</i> 656 – The Year It Is Said Queen Alchfled of Mercia Murdered Her Husband, King Peada	136
Chapter 9: <i>Anno Domini</i> 664 – The Year of The Great Synod at Streoneshalh.....	150

PART 3: ELFLEDA

Anno Domini 670 — *Anno Domini* 706

Chapter 10: <i>Anno Domini</i> 670 – The Year King Oswy Dies and Egfrid Becomes King of Northumbria	163
Chapter 11: <i>Anno Domini</i> 680 – The Year Hildeburg, Abbess of Streoneshalh, Dies	179
Chapter 12: <i>Anno Domini</i> 687 – The Year Bishop Cuthbert Dies at Inner Farne	193
Author’s Note	209
Questions and Topics For Discussion	213
Timeline.....	217
Glossary Of Names.....	227
Glossary Of Terms	233
Glossary Of Places	235
About The Author.....	239

Cast Of Primary Characters

In Order of Appearance

Part 1: Ethelberga

Hildeburg, Princess of Northumbria (Later, Abbess of Streoneshalh)
Hereswid, Princess of Northumbria, Hildeburg's sister
Breguswid, Mother of Hildeburg and Hereswid
Edwin, King of Northumbria
Ethelberga of Kent, Queen of Northumbria (Later, Abbess of Lyminge)
Bishop Paulinus (Later, Archbishop of York, Archbishop of Rochester)
Enfleda, Princess of Northumbria (Later, Queen of Northumbria)
Coifi, High Priest of Woden
Penda, King of Mercia

Part 2: Enfleda

Hildeburg, Princess of Northumbria (Later, Abbess of Streoneshalh)
Ethelberga, Abbess of Lyminge
Enfleda, Princess of Northumbria (Later, Queen of Northumbria)
Oswy, King of Northumbria
Alhfrith, Prince of Northumbria (Later, sub-king of Deira)
Aidan, Abbot of Lindisfarne
Egfrid, Prince of Northumbria (Later, King of Northumbria)

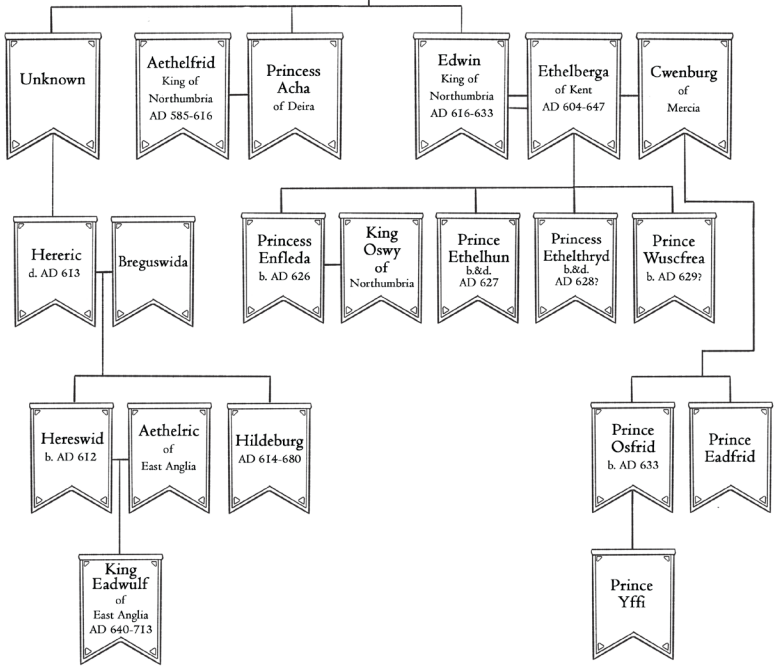
Wilfrid, Student (Later, Bishop of York)
Elfreda, Princess of Northumbria (Later, Abbess of Streoneshalh)
Ermenburg, Prince Egfrid's Companion (Later, Queen of Northumbria)
Etheldreda of East Anglia, Prince Egfrid's Consort (Later, Queen of
Northumbria, Abbess of Ely)
Cadmon, First English Poet
Colman, Abbot of Lindisfarne

Part 3: Elfreda

Hildeburg, Abbess of Streoneshalh
Elfreda, Princess of Northumbria (Later, Abbess of Streoneshalh)
Egfrid, King of Northumbria
Wilfrid, Bishop of York
Enfleda, Dowager Queen of Northumbria, Co-Abbess of Streoneshalh
Etheldreda, Queen of Northumbria (Later, Abbess of Ely)
Ebbe, Abbess of Coldingham
Ermenburg, Queen of Northumbria
Cuthbert, Abbot of Lindisfarne (Later, Bishop of Lindisfarne)
Wilfrid, Bishop of York
Trumwine, Bishop of Albercorn
Aldfrid, King of Northumbria

HOUSE OF DEIRA

Aelle,
King
of Deira
AD 560-588





Firth of Forth

Dunnichen

Coldingham

Lindisfarne

Farne Islands

Coquet Island

Bamburg

Heretu

Streoneshalch

BERNICIA

Carlisle

Hexham

Catterick

NORTHUMBRIA

RHEGED

Ripon

York

Driffield

Goodmanham

Sancton

Hatfield

Chase

River Humber

Villa by River
Derwent

LINDSEY

MERCIA

GWYNEDD

EAST
ANGLIA

ESSEX

River Thames

Rochester

KENT

Reculver

WESSEX

SUSSEX

Lyminge

Chapter 1

Anno Domini 624 – The Year Princess Ethelberga of Kent Marries King Edwin of Northumbria

Hildeburg, Princess of Northumbria

July

I'm not supposed to be here, but I can't tear myself away. I'm mesmerized, watching the red deer graze with her fawn close beside her. The smaller creature balances on spindly legs and tries to nurse. The hind ignores it and continues tearing into the grass. Tiny insects buzz near my eyes and land on my neck, but I don't slap them. The doe lifts her head. Bits of grass cling to her mouth. *Does she smell me?* I hold my breath. *Don't run away.* After a moment, the hind returns to her meal. I can't hold my breath anymore. My exhale makes a small whooshing sound, but the doe doesn't notice.

I shouldn't be here. I'm supposed to be in the Queen's Hall helping my mother. I roll onto my back and squint at the sun until clouds move in front of it.

Someone calls me. The voice gets louder as it nears my hiding place. The doe lifts her head again, whirls, and leaps into the brush, her fawn trying to keep up.

"Hill-day!" the voice shrieks.

I push myself up, brush off my clothes, and turn around. I see that it's one of the shepherd boys. He's tall for his age, with light, matted hair. His voice hasn't cracked yet.

"If you're going to call for me, you should say my name properly. It's *Hildeburg*, as you well know."

"I wouldn't have to say it at all if you didn't run off so often. Your sister's looking for you."

I jump up and tweak the boy's cap. He straightens it, exasperated. "I've enough to do without running after you," he whines. "What were you doing?"

I glance back at the open grass. "Watching."

"Aren't you a bit old for that?"

I pout. "What would you know about it? All you do is take the sheep out." I stamp my foot. The lad gives me a quizzical look and starts walking. "You can't walk ahead of me," I stammer. "I'm a *princess*."

"Then stop acting like a dairymaid. I must see to my dogs. I have to go back to the pasture tomorrow, and my lead dog has a limp."

"If you're so busy, why did you come for me?"

"Hereswid sent me."

I smile. The boy is afraid of my sister. When I catch up to him, he hands me a sprig of rosemary—the aromatic herb of remembrance and death.



Despite the bright sunshine, the Queen's Hall is dim. Smoke swirls around the cauldron, lingering over the central fire before wending its way out through the roof. I spot Hereswid; she is fingering her amber beads in the far corner.

"Where's Mother?"

My sister raises her head. "More to the point, where were *you*? Lying in the grass again?"

"What makes you say that?"

"It's all over your sleeves. You could at least brush it off before you come in."

I look down at the bits of soil and grass still clustered at my elbows and wrists. I brushed my tunic but forgot my sleeves.

“Did you want me for something?”

Hereswid shakes her head in disgust. “I have important news. Our uncle, the king, has given us a great honor.”

“How can he give us honor when *he* has none?” I wince as the words fly out of my mouth. *When will I learn to hold my tongue?*

Hereswid looks toward the doorway. “Keep your voice down,” she hisses. “How can you say such a thing? He brought us out of exile and made us part of his court.”

I shrug. “Only because Queen Cwenburg reminded him. Now that she’s dead, I’m surprised he thinks of us at all.”

“You’ll get us both in trouble for saying such things. The king’s new wife arrives in a few days. Now isn’t the time to moan over the past?”

I’ll never forget Queen Cwenburg. She clothed us, fed us at her table, and made us members of her court. Now she’s dead, and everyone acts like she never existed. “Cwenburg gave King Edwin two strong sons. Surely he could wait before marrying again. Aren’t there raids for him to lead?”

My sister’s lips move as if separate from her face. “You mustn’t do, say, or even *think* anything disloyal to our uncle,” she says. “Especially now, when he honors our father by giving us both a role in the King’s Hall.”

I glance at the doorway and whisper, “What do you mean?”

“When Princess Ethelberga arrives, our mother will serve in place of the king’s lady, and we will be among the serving maids. Everyone will watch us. Everyone will know Edwin the King sponsors us.”

I think about the warriors, the cup-bearing, the drinking horns. I ponder the music and boasting.

“What pleases you so about being on display?” I ask.

“Don’t ask such stupid questions. The new queen will respect us, and the king will make good marriages for us. We’ll attain the position our mother should have had.” Hereswid wears a satisfied smile, before quickly frowning

again. “And you won’t embarrass us, or give them any reason to think we don’t know how to behave. Do you understand me? *Do you?*” Hereswid squeezes my ear.

“Yes,” I manage to gasp out, pushing her hand away. My fingers are sticky from the rosemary, and its earthy fragrance clings to my skin.

Hereswid wrinkles her nose and says, “For goodness sake, go wash. Then go to the Queen’s Hall.”



Queen’s Hall, indeed. I kick up dirt as I walk across the compound to Queen Cwenburg’s Hall. *I won’t accept a new queen.* Slaves and servants hurry past me carrying wall hangings. Others sweep old rushes out through the doorways. The weaving looms stand outside, their weights and spindles strangely still. I don’t know how we’ll ever untangle the threads. *Why did Mother allow such waste?* I step aside as two servants drag out a bench.

Inside, the fire releases aromatic herbs, and I smell rosemary again. Mother stands where the queen’s chair belongs.

“Hildeburg.” She gestures for me to come forward. I step around the workers and greet her with a kiss.

“I see your sister found you. I could have used your help earlier.”

“May I take you outside, Lady Mother? It’s too warm in here. Why did you light a high fire on such a hot day? And why are the looms outside?”

Mother takes inventory of the activities and accepts my arm. I start to take her to the queen’s chair, now sitting outside in the shade. She redirects me to a stool beside it. A slave hands us cups of ale.

“What happened to your ear?”

I shrug. “Hereswid and I had a disagreement.”

Mother takes off my cap and moves my hair to the side. “You’ll have a bruise. Too bad it won’t be green to match the grass stains on your sleeves.” She winks, then puts on her serious face. “Hildeburg, you must make amends with your sister. You’re not a child anymore. This is your tenth summer.”

I hang my head. “I’m sorry, Lady Mother, but truly, I’ve no amends to make. Hereswid acts like Queen Cwenburg never existed. Mother, she was a good wife to the king and a good friend to us. But Hereswid, well, she acts like the queen no longer matters.” I push my foot into the dirt.

Mother detaches her comb from her kirtle and begins looking for lice in my hair. “I see you keep your cap on, as I advised.” Her fingers work in tandem with the comb. She parts the follicles and peers at my scalp. Then she looks away, deep in thought. “Hildeburg, have I told you about the dream I had before you were born?”

“About the necklace?”

“It was a terrible time. Your father was dead, and I thought your sister and I would be next. I didn’t know who to trust, and I couldn’t flee with you in my belly. I ate so little the midwife warned me you would die. I prayed to Goddess Freya for your survival and sent gifts to her shrine. I didn’t expect to survive your birth—and then what would have happened? To you? To Hereswid?”

“My serving woman brought me a birthing draught. I pushed her hand away. She told me you were taking too long, that I had to rest because you had a right to be born. I was so tired, I took the drink. That’s when I dreamed.” Mother falls silent. She halfheartedly picks up the comb again.

“But what about the necklace?”

“Ah, yes. The necklace. In my dream, I wandered in a dark forest and stopped to rest under a tree. Something rubbed my belly, but I couldn’t feel anything. Finally, I lifted my tunic and saw a necklace so dazzling it lit the darkness. And then I was awake and crying and pushing, and you were born.”

“What did you do with the necklace?”

“It wasn’t real.” Mother laughs. “It was a sign from Freya that you would be a treasure of great value. You’re not like other girls, or even boys. Do you understand? Freya chose you for some great purpose.”

I clench my eyes closed and concentrate on my future. I’m the daughter of a dead prince. The king can’t use me for an alliance, so he’ll probably give me to one of his thanes as a reward.

I look at my mother. “I don’t think I have a useful purpose.”

Mother laughs again and hands me my cap. “Perhaps not. But you’ll never find any purpose if you can’t accept reality. A new queen is coming, and we’ll support the king and make her welcome. Can you do that for me?”

I nod. “But . . .”

“There is no *but*. We belong to King Edwin. As long as he rules, we are safe. And the alliance with Kent makes us strong.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“And one more thing: Princess Ethelberga didn’t choose to come to Northumbria. It is her fate. She’ll be a good wife, and we’ll support her. Your sister is right. You mustn’t speak of Queen Cwenburg again.”

“I won’t forget her,” I say, setting my jaw.

“You are a good, loyal girl. But you’re also stubborn.” Mother taps my chest. “You can remember the last queen, but you may not speak of her. She’s gone from us forever.” Mother rises, kisses my forehead. “Survival depends on acceptance.”



My uncle, the king, gave a tapestry from his hall to decorate the new queen’s chamber. I wonder if she’ll notice that the silk fabric—with its exotic, circular designs—has silver threads woven through it. The king took it from a merchant whose boat ran aground, and placed it behind his *giefstol*. Now the king gives it to his bride. She may not regard it as anything special, but it’s the most beautiful hanging I’ve ever seen. Yesterday, Mother placed it behind the queen’s chair, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

This morning, the entire compound fills with horses and carts. The most important thanes mount up to join the king. We follow in the carts. Mother, Hereswid, and I share a cart with our maidservants. The new queen’s wagon is twice the size of ours and filled with furs and cushions. And she’ll have horses—not oxen, like we do.

The king raises his arm and leads the cavalcade. He's in good spirits, and there's lots of friendly jostling and shoving among his men. The queen will be much pleased with her husband. Men have come from all over Briton to fight with him against Rheged and Mercia. The scop sing of his bravery, of his relentlessness in the thick of battle, willing his men to victory. The new queen must be proud, and perhaps fearful, of her good fortune.

When we arrive at the campsite, fresh venison is already roasting on spits. I jump off the wagon and run to the shore to see if the new queen is near, but I only see endless water. I ask one of the stewards if anyone has seen the queen's boat.

He leers at me. "Why? Are you hoping to join her household?"

I take a step back. "You can't speak to me that way. I'm Hildeburg, the king's niece."

"Then, for the safety of us all, go back to your mother. There are too many men about, drinking their weight in mead. They won't stop to ask for an introduction."

I drop my head, clutching my skirts. "But the queen ...?"

"Her boat will arrive soon, but she won't come ashore until morning." He motions to a slave. "Gunnar will take you back. Now, be away with you."

Gunnar is apparently in no hurry to return to work, so we take our time. He's clean-shaven like the Britons and looks older than most of the slaves. I wonder if our thanes captured him in a battle against Rheged. He doesn't speak. When the wagons come into sight, he gestures for me to go forward, turns back around, and is soon gone.

The venison is black now. The thanes are singing and gambling, having drunk rounds of mead. I give them a wide berth and approach the queen's wagon, where my mother stands directing the servants.

Eventually, we return to our wagon, and I settle in with my sister and the maidservants. I listen to the scop strum his harp and sing about King Edwin's battles until I fall asleep.



“Hildeburg, wake up.” Hereswid shakes me. “We have to be at the shore for daybreak.” She hands me a beaker of sheep’s milk. “Come quickly.”

“The sun isn’t up yet,” I grumble, and reach for my shift.

“Hurry. We have to be there before the queen’s boat arrives.”

Everyone wears their best clothing. The king and his thanes, dressed in their finest tunics and coats, mount their horses. Beside them, a groom leads a packhorse laden with gifts for the bride. The rest of us assemble according to rank. We walk to the shore in the predawn darkness. The horses whinny softly, as if surprised to be moving. At the shoreline, the king and his thanes ride to the edge of the water and wait. Just as the sun peeks over the horizon, we see the queen’s three long ships appear, their carved prows proclaiming their importance. It’s so still; I hear the oars striking the water in perfect unison.

When the ships are well into the estuary, our men row out to meet them. The king’s thanes reach up to lift the queen’s ladies into the boats, but leave her escorts to climb down into the bobbing vessels. It takes three trips to bring the queen’s household ashore. The queen arrives last. King Edwin rushes to help her out of the vessel, but her own man, clad entirely in black, steps ashore first and gives her his hand. When the queen steps ashore, everyone but the king falls to one knee. She bows deeply to my uncle, and then stands silently with her hands folded.

My uncle speaks with her man, marches away from the shore, and motions the man to follow. The man turns to the queen and escorts her to her place, facing the king. Then he stands between them. The king removes his gloves and clasps the new queen’s hands. I watch the man wrap fabric around their wrists and pray loudly in a language we can’t understand. Finally, he gestures above the couple and turns them to face us. King Edwin smiles, and we cheer.



Ethelberga, Queen of Northumbria

My new husband places a thick gold torc around my neck and gives me bracelets for my arms and wrists. I incline my head and allow him to draw my arm into his. We lead the assembly back to a clearing. A woman introduces herself as the king's sister-in-law, Breguswid. She prepared a sumptuous wagon for me, and looks disappointed when I don't invite her to join me for the journey to the king's villa at Sancton. I'm not in the mood for pleasantries. I gesture for my ladies, my scop, and Bishop Paulinus to join me.

My husband and his men mount their horses and thunder ahead of us. I don't expect to see him again until the celebrations begin. The scop begins a song, and Paulinus, with his small dark eyes and pronounced nose, turns to speak with me. I've had enough of his self-importance.

"My lady—"

I raise my hand. "Stop there, my lord bishop. I am now Queen of Northumbria. You may address me as Your Majesty, or Your Grace, but never again as your *lady*."

Paulinus inhales sharply. "You forget yourself. I'm the one who made you queen."

"Spin your tales for someone else. King Edwin needs the alliance with Kent, and my brother, King Eadbald, needs help against the Saxons. You merely facilitate my brother's intentions."

The priest disdainfully looks down his nose at me.

"Your, ah, Grace," he says. "Your duty to God is far greater than any duty to kings. The pope gave you a task as great as that given to your mother, the Frankish princess."

"And I shall have the same result. My husband wants to be a great king. To do that, he needs what I bring—an alliance, more heirs, and the pope's blessing. He does not, however, need *you*. If necessary, another priest can be pressed into service. You are here to serve me and to serve the king. And if you serve us well, I'm sure your reward will be great in heaven and on earth."

Paulinus drops his jaw, closes his mouth, and swallows several times. I've never seen him look so surprised. For once, he's at a loss for words. I allow myself a small smile that doesn't reach my eyes.

"Are we allies, Bishop?" I ask. "Or shall I ask my brother to send another priest?"

Paulinus clenches his fists, but otherwise regains his usual self-control. "We are perfectly aligned," he says smoothly.

"Scop," I call, "sing a new song in the hall tonight. Sing about my wedding to the strongest king in the land."

The lad nods and begins composing a song for tonight's celebration.



When we arrive at the king's villa at Sancton, I can hardly believe my eyes. The courtyard is awash with mud and there are no recognizable pathways between buildings. Men and animals trample over the soggy ground, creating small puddles in their wake. Surely this is a way station.

Edwin and his thanes dismount. *No! This cannot be!* Edwin stands before me, reaching up to lift me down from the wagon. I have no choice but to place my hands on his broad shoulders. He leers at me as he swings me to the ground.

"What do you think, wife? Will you be happy here?" Edwin looks at me expectantly.

My eyes tear up. "I am overcome, my lord. You do me great honor."

Edwin places my hand on his arm. With his thanes acting as escorts for my ladies, we make our way to the Queen's Hall. Our boots make soft, sucking sounds in the mud. A servant holds open the door, and we enter the timbered structure with slivers of light shining between the wall planks.

I clutch my throat in horror. Edwin looks at me, and I realize I should say something. "My lord, I didn't expect so much beauty this far north."

He laughs heartily. "I leave you to your ladies' activities."

I bow, and he leads his men away to their entertainments. My ladies and I stare at each other, shocked by our fate.

The sister-in-law is here again. “May I show you the hall, Your Majesty? We didn’t weave new tapestries, because we didn’t know what designs you prefer.”

“I *prefer* that the walls are covered from the drafts,” I say. “Fortunately, I brought tapestries from Kent. Tell me your name again.”

“It is Breguswid, Your Majesty. My late husband was the king’s brother.”

“Well, Breguswid, why haven’t you ordered the central fire to be lit?”

“We were away, Your Majesty, and we knew that today everyone would be in the King’s Hall. The fire will be ready tomorrow.”

I scowl.

Breguswid’s eyes dart away from my face. “Your Majesty, may I show you the king’s wedding gift to you? It hangs behind your chair.”

My ladies and I follow the woman to the dais. The chair has a back, and there are stools for my ladies. The gift is a tapestry with a few silver threads shot through the geometric design, but it’s nothing special. Two nervous girls stand below the dais.

“Your Majesty, may I present my daughters, the Princess Hereswid and the Princess Hildeburg.”

I’m glad I didn’t ask if they were my chambermaids. Unlike their mother, who has dark hair and eyes, these girls both have light eyes and hair that looks like wheat. “You must join my household,” I say. The taller girl smiles broadly, but the younger one looks at the floor. “Which of you is Hereswid?”

“I am, Your Majesty.” The girl bobs her head.

“Princess Hildeburg.” I call the other girl back from her reverie. “Escort me to my chamber.”

“It’s the next building. I can take you,” Hereswid says.

“I didn’t ask you. I asked your sister. Hildeburg, I’m waiting.”

The child leads us across the mud to a chamber that is smaller than any of my mother’s chambers in Kent. There are chinks in the timbered walls, and the central fire smokes. I wave the smoke away. A maidservant cowers in the corner.

“You there!” I shout for emphasis. “Get someone to fix the chimney immediately. I will not greet my husband in a smoke house.”

The girl scuttles away.

“Hildeburg, bring torches and servants to clean every corner of this chamber. Tell someone to bring the tapestries in my baggage. And bring furs and clean straw for the bed.”

“But Your Majesty, we changed the straw, and cleaned everything for you already.”

“Then you didn’t do a very good job. Tell your mother it all has to be done again.”



Under my eye, Breguswid summons every servant and slave to clean my chamber. They take every piece of furniture outside, sweep out the floor rushes and lay new ones, and refresh the straw in my bed with sweet-smelling herbs. My ladies attach tapestries to the walls, blocking out the drafts and the pinpoints of light that come through chinks between the wall planks. When everything is put back, the aromas of rosemary and lavender replace that of smoke from the fire.

At dusk, the king’s men arrive to escort my ladies and me to the King’s Hall. I order them to wait while I finish dressing. I’m wearing my costliest tunic with its heavy embroidery, the king’s golden gifts, and a headdress my mother brought with her from Frankland. Breguswid is suitably impressed and holds out the household keys for me to hang from my belt. I snatch them from her hand. The woman winces and drops her eyes.

The King’s Hall is twice the size of mine, built of planked timber, and has a fire pit running the length of the building. The flames create an interesting shadow play on the walls. I focus on the shapes as I prepare my entrance. The men are well into their mead, but still respectful. I briefly close my eyes, take a deep breath, and then nod for my escorts to enter through the upper door while I wait outside the center door until the hall becomes quiet. As I pass through, my ladies fan out behind me.

The king rises from his giefstol at the head of the hall. With the firelight on his ruddy cheeks, I realize he is quite handsome. He approaches me. I'm mesmerized watching his long stride and feel a flutter in my belly. My husband winks as he raises my hand and presents me to his thanes. They cheer and bang the tables, but I don't hear them. I'm too engrossed in my husband's touch, and the realization that though his gesture is gentle, his hands are rough from swinging his sword. I shiver to think of them touching my skin. I incline my head to accept the thanes' admiration. The king releases my hand and returns to his seat.

I accept a chalice from the seneschal and follow my husband so I may present him with the first formal cup of the evening.

"My lord." I incline my head. "Please accept this cup with my best wishes and regard. I bid you drink joyfully as you serve your people."

My husband drains the beaker and returns it to me. I begin serving his court, the cupbearers at my elbow to keep the drinking horn full. My eyes spy Paulinus sitting alone at the lower end of the court. I lock my eyes on his so he knows I am the one who controls his status.

"My lord bishop," I say loudly with a commanding voice. "I enjoin you to be one with my husband's court."

A warrior glances at Paulinus and turns away, unimpressed by a foreign priest. Paulinus glares at me before nodding his head. "Your Grace," he mutters. I send him a glittering smile before passing on to the warriors below the court and the younger men below them.

Everyone responds to me with bows and broad smiles. Their acceptance gives me confidence that I will be their true queen, not just a womb to produce princes. When I return to my seat, I glance at the king, who lifts his beaker to me. He seems pleased by my reception. I hope he realizes I can make his court as respected as the court at Kent or even Frankland. My scop recounts the joining of Kent and Northumbria, concluding with jests about the handsome princes who will soon crowd the trestle tables. I'm pleased with his songs.

Servants light the torches and begin serving the meal. It is a sumptuous feast, and I wonder how many heads of cattle were slaughtered. The men sup their mead and use their daggers to separate meat from the roasted haunch. Many slices dispense blood onto the floor and furniture. I feel slightly nauseous and content myself with bread and cheese. There is no wine, so I drink ale. My ladies don't share my scruples and eat heartily.

My husband's face is red, with grease from the meat running down his chin. He gestures with his beaker in his hand before slamming the container on the table. Like his men, the king uses both hands to tear meat off the bones before tossing them to the dogs below the table. The hounds growl and snap. My head begins to pound.

Finally, everyone is sated. Servants place dishes of honey cakes on the table. I nibble the dry pastry and listen to the wedding toasts, which become increasingly graphic. The king laughs heartily and sends me meaningful looks. I drop my eyes, embarrassed by his lewd attention. When my tipsy ladies draw me away from the noisy revelry, I'm both relieved and terrified.



In my chamber, I shiver by the fire and watch my women place tapers into the wall slits. The light grows to give the room a shadowy glow.

"Your Majesty?" Breguswid hands me a beaker. "Drink this. It will make the night ahead easier." *Easier?* I swallow the liquid without stopping until the beaker is empty. "Stand up," Breguswid says.

Breguswid lifts off my headdress and frees my hair. My ladies slide off my armbands and remove my torc. Each time an item leaves my person, my heart thumps louder in my chest. The women lay aside my tunic and tell me to sit. They remove my boots and stockings. Only my shift is left to protect me from the air. I shiver, but refuse to enter the fur-covered bed.

"Do you know what you have to do?" Breguswid asks. I look at her, speechless. "Never mind," she says, and pats my hand.

I hear masculine scuffling and laughter outside. My husband arrives with his closest thanes, who crowd inside my chamber with their torches. They stare at me, momentarily silent. The heat is unbearable.

“Wife” is all the king says, but the word portends our marital consummation.

Paulinus pushes himself in front of the men and begins making the sign of the cross over the bed. Breguswid and her women pray for Goddess Freya to grant the king and me many sons.

While they mumble, the king strips down to his tunic and confers with Woden’s priest—a man called Coifi. Finally, the prayers stop, and everyone departs. Paulinus is the last to leave, a look of mild concern on his face.

“Wife,” the king says again, and joins me atop the furs.

I lick my lips. My husband looks at me, then gets up to pour me a beaker of ale. “Drink this,” he says. “You look like a scared rabbit.”

I watch him as I drink. “That’s better,” he says. “You have a bit of color now.” He takes back the empty beaker. “What do you think?” he asks softly. “Shall we make a prince?” He puts his hands on my shoulders and pulls me forward. His breath smells sour from the mead. I turn my face away as he suddenly and quickly makes me his wife. I’m horrified. My husband ends his activity with a great shout, and begins snoring.

When I’m sure Edwin sleeps, I struggle out from under his body and pour myself more ale. Thankfully, I see that Breguswid left me a clean shift. I wash and change out of my bloody one. It will be better next time. I’ll know what to expect.



Hildeburg, Princess of Northumbria

Queen Ethelberga isn’t anything like my mother or the first queen. She orders her slaves to build what she calls a “chapel,” and puts a wooden table in it. She puts a white cloth over the table and a gold image she calls a “cross” in the center. Every morning she makes the entire household go there. The queen

and her people kneel on cushions on the floor. The rest of us stand and watch. The priest makes fragrant smoke come out of a covered cup and prepares what the queen calls a “special meal” she takes with her god.

Then she goes to her hall and reads something called a book. I don’t understand the words, but I love listening to her soft, musical voice while I spin wool with the other girls. Spinning wool is boring, but the words make the time pass quickly.

“You,” the queen calls. “Tell me your name.”

I look around to see who she’s talking to. My mother looks in my direction and nods toward the queen.

“Y-you want to speak to me?” I stammer.

“Yes. What’s your name?”

“I’m Hildeburg, Your Grace. The king’s niece.”

“Yes. I remember now. You escorted me to my chamber when I arrived. Come forward.”

I feel everyone’s eyes on me as I walk the length of the hall. The queen waves her lady away and motions for me to sit next to her.

“Would you like to see the book?” she asks.

“Yes, please, Your Grace.”

“Come sit beside me, and I’ll show you how I read.”

The book is beautiful. It’s bound in leather with golden designs on the cover. The pages inside are thick with black marks on them, and there are beautiful drawings with colors.

“Would you like to hold it?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

She places it in my lap and lets me turn the pages. They feel like thin leather.

“It’s from Frankland,” she says. “Now I’ll show you how I read.”

The queen places the book on her lap and uses a silver pin to show me each word she speaks. I don’t understand what she says, but it’s beautiful to watch the pin cross the page.

“Would you like to read?” the queen asks.

I hang my head. “I don’t know what the designs mean.”

“We don’t have symbols for the words we speak. These designs are words from the Latin language, and once you know how to speak Latin, you can learn how to read and write it. Would you like that?”

“I don’t know,” I mumble.

“Then trust me. Everyone in my household must read and write, so you will learn. Bishop Paulinus will teach you, your sister, and even your mother. What do you think, Breguswid? Are you willing to learn with your daughters?”

My mother hesitates. “If you wish it,” she finally replies.

“I do. In fact,” the queen declares, “all my ladies will learn.” The queen graces us with a self-satisfied smile. “My court,” she whispers to herself, “will outshine Kent.”



Ethelberga, Queen of Northumbria

August

I’ve been sick every morning for weeks. Breguswid persuades me to send for the wise woman, a wizened hag. Her ragged clothing and lined face make me uncomfortable, until her tranquil eyes smile. With a gentle touch, the woman looks in my eyes and mouth, pats my belly, and asks when I last laid with the king.

“And when did you last bleed, Your Majesty?”

“Not since I married the king.”

The old woman grins a nearly toothless smile. “Send an offering to Goddess Freya. She blessed you with a child.”

Praise God! I hardly dared to hope for His favor so soon.

“Are you sure?” I ask, tentatively. “I thought it might be the food.”

“I’m sure, Your Grace. If all goes well, your child will be born in the spring.”

“May God be praised.” I drop to my knees in thanksgiving.



Every night, Edwin's thanes escort him to my chamber and clap him on the back before returning to their own pursuits. My husband leaves his shield by the door and his sword an arm's length away from the straw mattress. We share a beaker of ale by the fire before he takes me to bed. This evening will be different. I bow before him and lead him to the bench. He looks at me curiously. "You don't seem ready for me," he says.

"Come, Your Majesty, let us enjoy a drink together. I have something to tell you."

Edwin turns to look at my face and raises his eyebrows. "Is something amiss?"

I drop my eyes. "My lord, something happened that changes everything. My lord—"

"Spit it out! You know I can't abide women's concerns. Are you sick? Have I come when you're bleeding?" Edwin stands.

"No, no, Your Majesty. Pray, sit down again. I have wonderful news. I'm—" I tremble and force myself to go on. "I carry a prince, my lord." I can't read his face. *Is he pleased?*

"You're sure?"

"Yes. The wise woman was here today. She said the prince arrives in the spring."

My husband chuckles. "Who would have thought it?" he says to himself. "And so quickly." Edwin turns to me and smiles. "You please me, wife." He pulls a gold ring off his finger and hands it to me. "You please me very much." Edwin pats my shoulder and stands. "I'll not trouble you again until it's time to make another prince." He gives me a warning look. "Don't do anything foolish to harm my son."

Edwin picks up his sword and shield and walks into the night, his laughter echoing into the distance.



After chapel the next morning, I invite Paulinus into my hall. “God blesses me,” I say.

Paulinus puts down his beaker of ale. “How so, Your Grace?”

“I carry a prince, the first of many,” I say smugly. “Once he’s born, my position will be secure.”

Paulinus’s face lights up. “Your Grace, God smiles upon our work. We’ll baptize the child as soon as he’s born. The king will see how God blesses him.”

“Suppose the king thinks Coifi’s prayers made me pregnant?” I needle Paulinus.

“Never say such a thing, or even think it! The prince is God’s holy work.”

I nod my head while Paulinus praises God. My husband believes he has the prowess of a bull. My priest thinks his prayers filled my womb. And I am happiest of all. Not only will I give the king a son, but he’ll bestow his favors elsewhere for the foreseeable future.