



*Middle Anglia, eastern Britain,
late summer, AD 631*

THE SUN rose above the flatlands, spreading a bloody glow across the mere. Shafts of brilliance swept into the hall through a side door left ajar the previous night. A streak of pale light swung across the floorboards to touch the head of a sleeping boy with hair like a lick of fire in the dark. His name was Essa, he was nine summers old, and when he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the red dawn waiting.

Red sky in the morning, Essa thought. If Da wants to ride out today, we'll get wet. And ride out they would, he was sure. Essa sometimes wished they might stay in a place long enough for him to make friends, but they never did.

He stretched out an arm, working it free of the blue blanket drawn too close around his neck and chin. The blanket had been given to them in exchange for a song only a few days before.

"And not a moment too soon." Cai had held up their old

rug so that Essa could see sunlight streaming through the holes. Cai had quick black eyes, like the pieces of obsidian he'd once sold to the High King in Northumbria. He was dark and light-boned like a bird. Nobody could tell what he was thinking, not even his son, who knew him better than anyone.

Essa sat up, shrugging the blanket away from his shoulders. Next to him a fat man lay on his back, snoring gently. On his other side a small child was curled up next to her mother. The entire hall was filled with sleeping people. Cai preferred to sleep outside with their horse, Melyor, when the weather was warm enough, choosing the mare's company over the closeness of strangers. This village was a rich place with two grassy, hollow mounds behind the weaving hall, where big clay jars of barley and wheat were stored in the earthy coolness. They had a stable full of horses too, although Essa had noticed last night that two were old wrecks and one was lame. Maybe Cai was in the stable.

He squinted in the half-light at a small bundle lying at his feet, unwound himself from the blanket, and snatched the tooled leather bag to his chest. Cai must have been very drunk last night. They had so few things that everything was guarded like a dragon's hoard, especially this. Without it they'd starve, because Cai was British and proud. He was of the Iceni, whose great queen Boudicca had almost driven the Romans back into the sea, long ago. Cai used to say that more generations had come and gone since the high days of the Iceni than Essa could count on

the fingers and thumbs of both his hands, and if anyone knew, Cai did, for he was a song man and a keeper of the past. But this was an English village, and Essa knew Cai would never beg a meal from these people, who knew nothing of Christ the Redeemer and sang of their grandfathers crossing the eastern water in long ships with sea serpents snarling at the prows.

The night before last, Essa and Cai had been given a linen package containing dried yellow saffron and a lump of amber that had delighted Essa because it looked like the head of a dog: a rich haul. He loosened the drawstring and dug his fingers inside the bag, reassured by the smoothness of the amber in his hand. The linen packet of saffron heads was there too, rustling against his fingertips. He buckled his belt around his waist, pushed the bag inside his tunic, and ran to the door, leaping over sleeping bodies. He'd managed to get a place near the fire, and there were a lot of people between the hearth and the nearest door.

The yard was quiet and peaceful in the dawn light. Opposite the hall, a row of scythes lay against the barn wall under the low, thatched roof. He ran for the stables, where the air was quiet and thick with the warm, sweet smell of horses. When he got to the stall where he'd left Melyor the night before, Cai was not there, and neither was the horse. It was always Essa's job to bed her down whenever they arrived at a new place, whether it was a clearing in a wood or the golden-banded hall of a king. For the first time since waking, he was afraid. Had he not bolted the stable door

behind him? He should have left her tethered. Without Melyor, they would be beggars. Men of song did not travel on foot. He would have to catch Melyor and bring her in quick before anyone noticed she had got out. Cai was already angry with him, and it would do no good to remind Cai of his own mistake in leaving the tooled leather bag lying around for anyone to take.

The argument had started in a hall across the border, in the kingdom of Mercia, when Cai sent a messenger to summon Essa away from a game of Fox and Geese.

"Tell him I'll come soon." Essa watched his opponent move a goose piece across the board. He was a tall, wiry boy with stooping shoulders, and he was about to get beaten. Two more moves and Essa would be the owner of a knife with a bone handle.

"He says come now."

"Tell him to be patient," Essa said, earning a burst of laughter from his opponent and the small gathering of onlookers. He watched the board, pretending to think over his next move, although he knew exactly what he was going to do: in two moves, the game would be his. He was the fox and he had captured nearly all the geese. How would it be to slink like a real fox through the night, he wondered. Cupping the small wooden figure in his hand, he could almost feel the thrill of running slick and silent in the darkness, and the thirst for hot blood.

Cai could wait. Anyway, these Mercians would probably

give him another drink. He had played well the night before. The women cried when he sang of the dying bear king who was taken away in a boat by nine maidens, leaving his warriors asleep in a green cave. They could not understand a word Cai was singing, of course, but the notes he reached were so mournful and beautiful and his lyre sang so sweetly that they cried anyway. Maybe they'd be asked back to sing at a feast, and then they would get a garnet brooch, or a barrel of Frankish wine, or some green glass bottles. The messenger left, and after a short while Cai himself arrived, riding Melyor across the courtyard.

"Come up." Cai sat as still as a hawk, wrapped in his worn cloak with the ragged bear pelt around his shoulders. The long sword hung from the saddle in a scabbard that glittered with silver dragon-snakes artfully inlaid into the oiled leather. The Silver Serpent, she was called. Essa had never seen Cai use her, nor had he ever seen him go anywhere without her. She would have fetched a good price, too.

"Hadn't you better go?" said the boy who was losing. He had narrow green eyes the color of ivy leaves. For someone who looked clever, he was really bad at Fox and Geese.

Essa grinned. "You just don't want to lose your knife." He turned to Cai and spoke in British. "I've nearly beaten him, the fool."

Cai dismounted in a dark swirl of bear pelt and pulled Essa sharply to his feet, so that he dropped the little wooden goose pieces he'd captured. His opponent and the onlookers scattered in all directions, the wooden figures bounced

off across the dusty courtyard, and the bone-handled knife was gone forever.

"You come when I call you," Cai said. "Get up in the saddle."

"I'm not a dog," said Essa. "Why don't you just whistle at me and be done with it? You've ruined everything. I nearly won a knife."

"I do not care. Get up." Cai's face was impassive and his eyes shone like dark water, seamy around the edges from staring too long into the sun. There was no sense in arguing. Essa shoved past him and swung himself up into the saddle.

Essa expressed his disdain with silence. Cai would not usually have suffered this childishness, but he was brooding on something, and their routine was so deeply ingrained that they were able to ride across open marshland, while the sun moved over their heads, without saying a word. Essa sat before his father in the saddle; usually, Essa practiced playing the lyre while they rode, but this time the beautiful cherrywood instrument remained folded in its leather bag. He would not give Cai the satisfaction of pointing out his mistakes. At any rate, it was a fast ride with plumes of marsh water spraying up around their legs and Melyor's mane flying in Essa's face. Together, Cai and Melyor seemed to sense where the ground was true; although sometimes Melyor was up to her fetlocks, they never got stuck. Cai's thin brown hands held the reins with loose ease, but Essa could feel the muscles taut in his arms. The wind rushing past his face made the blood surge at his heart, and

it felt as if they were no longer tied to the earth as a man and a boy but flying like the curlews circling above.

The silence persisted until they dismounted at the gates of a hall across the marshes from the Mercian fort. They were now in Middle Anglia—a land of marsh and wild white horses and sweeping skies, harried without mercy by Mercian cattle raiders. The hall was heavily fortified, surrounded by high earthen walls. On the horizon, Essa could see another such wall, huge and stretching across the rim of the marsh.

"Look," Cai said. "That wall's the East Anglian border; beyond that lie the marches of the Wolf Folk. The Wolves have all East Anglia in their power, and they rule parts of Mid Anglia too, like this place. They fight with Mercia for the rest of it, and more men have given their lives in that cause than there are birds in the sky." Cai glanced up at the great village walls, shaking his head. "These people are the Wixna tribe. Years ago, before you were born, Redwald the Wolf King sent one of his nieces out here to marry the Wixnan chief, with a gold ring for him to wear so that he'd always be loyal to East Anglia and not lend his sword to the Mercians instead. So they're bound to the Wolf Folk now, like it or not."

Cai paused, and Essa knew he was waiting for a question. Essa, son of no tribe, child of no kingdom, was usually fascinated by the knotted, gory pattern of loyalty and betrayal linking the different realms of Britain. He loved bloody

tales of girls sent to marry their fathers' worst enemies, and he especially loved songs of men bound by gold rings to their lords, promising to fight till death took them.

But we're bound to no man, Cai would say. And you must not forget that's the best of all. Because being bound by a ring is the same as being shackled by an iron chain. They're drunk on the power of gold, these English people; fire of the sea, they call it, and it makes them think of the sunlight burning on the waves when they came here in their ships. It turns their minds, sends them mad. And if they give you a ring of gold, you're as good as a slave. Better you follow the hawk's path, free under the sky.

Suddenly, Essa wanted to ask a stream of questions about the Wixna and the battles they fought, and if there were British people in their village too, or just English. In some villages there were people like Cai, dark and slight, who had stayed when the English and the Saxons and the Jutes came from across the sea, and taught them how to grow barley and where the deer ran. But in other places, the only British were just ghosts of the long dead.

Yet it was Cai's fault Essa had lost the knife, so he kept quiet, staring at the ground instead.

Cai glanced at him, his dark eyes narrowing with laughter. "All right. Sulk, then. But you should know this; you should know how things work. They call King Penda the Mad Dog of Mercia. He wants to be High King over all Britain, and he won't stop till he is or till he's dead. So always he presses east, trying to snatch land off the Wolf Folk and get not only Mid Anglia but all East Anglia for

himself. Then he'd have more land than any other king in Britain, and he'd be more powerful than the High King in Northumbria. The Wixna are stuck in the middle, right between Penda and the Wolf Folk, more fool them." Cai banged on the gate with the hilt of his sword.

Essa shrugged, trying to look as if he were not interested. If he'd gotten that knife, he would have been able to skin a hare all by himself. He could have carved faces into sticks. Or dug for worms. But he could not help thinking the Wixna had gotten the worst end of the bargain — everyone knew that Mercia was the most powerful kingdom in the whole of Britain after Northumbria, where the palace of the High King sat, windblown on the wild moors. And now the Wixna had Mercia as their enemy. It could not have been much fun for Redwald's niece either, getting sent to live in the middle of a bog. What a place. He wanted to ask his father what they were doing here, but he didn't.

"Suit yourself," said Cai, and struck the gate again.

A woman with a flaming torch came out to meet them. Essa saw her first in shadow: a tall, slender figure wrapped in a cloak against the night air. She had come out to the gate followed by a huge female hunting dog fat with unborn pups.

"We're always pleased to see a scop," she said, glancing at the cherrywood lyre in Cai's hands. "Who are you?"

Cai stepped forward into the torchlight. "Hild," he said.

The woman cried out, and threw her arms around him, laughing. "Oh, Cai! Oh, it's been such a long time. I can't—

And who is this?" Another expression flickered across her face as she looked down at Essa—what was it? He could not tell. Surprise? Fear? Maybe both. But why would anyone be afraid of him? The woman looked across at Cai questioningly. "Is it—?"

"My son, Aesc," said Cai.

The woman smiled down at him. "Ah, a little ash tree, are you? That's not a British name. Oh, Cai, I can't believe it's been this long since I've seen you."

"His mother was one of your people—English. Elfgift gave him the name before she died, God rest her soul. I call him Essa."

The woman flinched, as if Cai had struck her face, and Essa looked up at his father in surprise. "*Tasik*," he said, speaking in British, "why do you talk of my mother to this woman, when you never mention her name to me?"

Cai ignored him, and the woman smiled brightly, saying, "I am pleased to meet you, Essa. Well, do you both come in out of this fearful mist." She stood back, allowing them through the gateway. Essa decided he liked her. Her hair was coming undone from its braid and hanging loose in curly strands around her face. But he did not reply to her: he was still too annoyed with Cai to be polite. Essa thirsted for talk of his mother, but hers was the one tale Cai would not tell. Essa knew only her name, Elfgift, and that she was called elf-shining: fairer than any earthly woman. And that she was dead. So why was Cai speaking of her now, to this stranger?

"I was sorry to hear your husband died," said Cai, and

another look passed between them both that Essa did not understand. Cai did not really look sorry, and she did not really look sad.

"Yes," said Hild. "Fighting the Mercians, last year. So I'm the chief here now."

She must be the niece of King Redwald, then. Essa squinted at Hild in the wobbling torchlight. She looked just like a normal person (well, a normal Anglish one, anyway): tall and bright-haired with a scattering of freckles across her cheekbones and nose, wearing a plain robe hitched up into her belt. In the shadowy gloom, he could just make out the bottom hem was dark with ash, as though she had been lifting pots out of the fire.

Cai had told him stories about the British kings and queens of the west, with their black hair oiled into shining snakes, the swirling blue clan tattoos on their faces and the gold torcs around their necks: twisted ropes of shining metal. That was how a royal person should look. But these Anglish were different. Hild was chief of a whole village, yet she came to open the gate herself, and her robe was dusty.

"I hope you look to your safety, then," said Cai. He tightened his grip on Essa's shoulder and spoke in British. "You had better be more gracious to my foster sister than you have been to me. Take Melyor to the stable and stay there with her until you recall your manners."

Foster sister? So King Redwald's niece, the girl that had been sent out here to marry the Wixnan chief, was Cai's foster sister?

The words were out before Essa could swallow them. "*I hate you.*"

He turned around to give Cai the look that said, *I didn't mean it*, but Cai was already walking across the yard with Hild.

Essa stayed behind in the stable for as long as he could, cleaning the fine bronze stirrups that his father had won by beating a braggart in a horse race. Why did Cai never tell him anything about his past life? Essa knew his father had lived with a foster family by the sea, the only child of Iceni nobles who'd thrown in their lot with King Redwald once they'd seen how the power of the English settlers was rising. They had both died when Cai was young, leaving him to the care of Redwald's court.

That was why Cai looked different from other pure-blooded Britons—he had no swirling blue clan tattoos on his face to tell the story of his people. Yet he told Essa they had the blood of kings and queens in their veins: of how the Iceni had once been the most powerful tribe in Britain.

But that was all generations ago. The Iceni ruled the east coast no more, and Cai had never mentioned a foster sister before. That was not really surprising, since he hardly talked about his childhood, only of long-dead queens and forgotten heroes.

Essa polished ferociously at the stirrups with a scrap of thin, floppy leather until they glowed like firebrands and he was so hungry that he felt sick, and so cold in his damp clothes that his teeth started to chatter. Then he hung the

bridle on a nail in the wall, laid the saddle across the stall door, and went into the hall where his father was singing by the fire, the lyre propped in his lap. A woman gave Essa a bowl of chicken stewed with white grapes, and a wedge of bread. He took his food and went to sit at his father's feet. Sometimes he sang with Cai, but on this night he just sat and listened until he fell asleep.

And in the long years afterward, Essa often wished he had at least said good night, and that the last words he'd spoken to Cai had not been *I hate you*.