

Author's Note

In Wilding, after Thomas meets Godric at Wulfstam and the two part company, the harper drops out from the rest of the book. This is because the other chapters featuring Godric were all from his point of view, showing what he was doing apart from Thomas. Since I could only include chapters from Thomas' point of view I could not include the other Godric ones. The bulk of those chapters I rewrote into this short story, which I included as bonus content for newsletter subscribers after Wilding was released.

Some readers have told me they have a soft spot in their hearts for Godric. If you are one of those, never fear. His story comes back in Bound, the second book of the trilogy.

A Singular Obsession

Near Eoforwic, Deira

November 11, AD 642

“Wake up, mister! Wake up!”

The voice in his ear, coupled with the small hand shaking his shoulder, brought Godric out of a deep sleep. He opened his eyes blearily to see a small boy staring at him.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m awake.” He closed his eyes against the bright morning sunlight, taking stock. The wagon rumbled along underneath him, jostling him with every bump in the road. He opened his eyes again. The round blue eyes of the boy were still fixed on him with fascination. He sighed, and winced as he pushed himself painfully to a sitting position. Too much ale last night. He should have known better. The family’s enjoyment of his show, the fine brew the father insisted on sharing, and the worshipful blue eyes of the oldest daughter had pushed him into indulging more than was his custom.

He vaguely remembered staggering over to the family’s wagon last night and climbing in the back to settle down amongst the straw and the belongings that were stacked in the wagon’s bed. He had met this family two days before, as he journeyed towards Eoforwic, and they had gladly accepted his offer of entertainment in trade for a ride. The father, a merchant, had been returning with his goods to his holding nearby the town. His wife and children were with him, as they had been visiting relatives as he did his trading.

He squinted at the boy, trying to remember his name. *Aethelred... Aelfvold... Aelf-something.*

His head hurt too much to puzzle it out.

“Ma says we are almost at Eoforwic and that you should get up.” Message delivered, the boy nimbly hopped off the end of the wagon, straw stuck to his coarse woollen tunic.

With a sudden lurch and a “Ho!” from the front, the wagon came to a halt. Godric had only a moment to appreciate the blessed silence before the boy’s sister approached, her slim form lithe under her long skirts. She was pretty, with even features and glossy auburn hair that was tucked under her head covering. Probably around sixteen, he thought. Old enough, in this time, to be married.

Those eyes. Even better in the daylight. Sapphire blue, with thick, upswept lashes. Bewitching eyes a man could get lost in.

The girl smiled shyly as she noticed Godric’s regard. “So, you are awake, good Master Godric. ‘Tis about time. You have slept half the day away.”

“Only because I was dreaming of you,” Godric murmured, careful to pitch his voice low enough that the mother would not hear. He managed a lazy smile, one that he knew females were hard pressed to resist, especially when accompanied by the slightest *push*, as it was in this case. The girl’s magnificent eyes widened slightly, a blush appearing on her cheeks as she dropped her gaze.

Godric’s smile widened, enjoying the girl’s discomfiture. She was his for the taking, if he wanted. As it had been a very long time since he had a woman, the thought was tempting, to say the least. *Too young*, he scolded himself. But still...

The boy’s head appeared at the end of the wagon again as he strained to peek over the edge of the board nailed to the wagon’s end.

“Father says come here!” he announced. Godric squinted at him, uncertain who had been addressed, himself or the girl. But the boy spun around and scampered off, leaving him none the wiser.

“We are almost at the gates of Eoforwic,” the girl said. “Where will you stay? There is an inn

near our house,” she added.

“Ahh, ‘tis tempting, to be sure.” Godric hesitated. “But I have a friend I must see, and work to attend to as well.”

The girl’s smile broadened. “Work? Is it hard, constructing poems and learning songs?”

Godric grinned back. “Oh, you would be surprised, fair mistress. The life of a *scop* is full of many trials and tribulations. It is not all ease and glory. Try singing for your supper one night, and see how you do.”

Gytha giggled, a pretty sound that warmed Godric’s blood further. She gave him another sly look from under her lashes, and he revised her age upwards. There was too much worldly knowledge in that look. *Eighteen? Nineteen?* Perhaps a visit to this inn she spoke of would not be out of the question. He could find out more about her.

“Gytha!”

Godric winced as the mother’s exclamation brought a spike of pain to his abused head.

“Enough of your foolishness,” the woman said sharply, addressing her daughter. “Don’t you stand and chatter at Master Godric. Your father needs help!”

Gytha ducked her head. “Yes, Mother.” She risked another glance under her lashes at Godric before she hurried off.

“Now then, Mister Godric, we have come to Eoforwic. Aeric will water the animals here and then we’ll be off to our holding.” Godric heard the unspoken addition. *So bugger off and quit flirting with my daughter.* “I thank you for your entertainment. It was most...unusual.”

Godric smiled easily, hiding the trickle of disquiet that clenched his gut. *Unusual* was definitely not what he wanted to be. *Unusual* attracted attention, the last thing a Fey needed. Which was the reason he normally kept his alcoholic consumption to a minimum. He racked his brain to recall what he had done last night to provoke the woman’s comment.

He had started with the usual folksongs and poems. Things had gone well, and Aeric had

brought out the ale, which had encouraged some of the bawdy drinking songs he knew. Gytha had begun clapping and swaying to the music, smiling prettily. He had never seen a female with eyes of that unique glittering blue before.

Shock rippled through him. Had he really started singing a Beatles tune? Straining through the alcohol-induced haze in his memory, he realized with a sinking stomach that he had.

He cursed himself twice over as a stupid fool as his gaze met the other woman's. She shared the same piercing blue gaze as her daughter, but it was not so attractive on her.

Time to layer on the charm. "You are too kind, Mistress Godgyth," he said, clambering out of the wagon to stand on the dusty road beside her. He brushed down his tunic and breeches carefully, noticing some new stains that were not there yesterday. His head pounded sickly with each movement, but he managed to bow his head politely. "And I thank you indeed for your charity. It would have been a long walk without your assistance."

Godgyth nodded, and opened her mouth to reply, when a sudden shout distracted her.

"Wife! Come here and give aid! This beast..." "Her husband's voice was cut off by a loud bellow from the ox, who had planted his hooves and was refusing to move. Godgyth shot an apologetic look at Godric and hurried away to help her husband.

Godric blew out a breath. Time to get out of here before he brought any more of the wrong kind of attention to himself. He dug among the straw and parcels in the back of the wagon and retrieved his cloak, along with his bag containing his lyre. He slung the bag's strap across his chest, enabling him to carry the instrument on his back. His other bag, which held his personal effects, he tied onto the end of his stout walking stick. This enabled him to rest it against his shoulder as he walked, the bag dangling from the end behind his back. The stick also doubled as a handy weapon. That, and his proficiency with the throwing daggers he kept in his boot and at his waist, had kept him safe against the occasional threat a lone traveller could meet as he travelled.

Of course, those were a last resort. The occasional Charm was enough to deal with most

humans.

“You comin’ with us, Mister?”

The boy had reappeared again at his side. Godric studied him through narrowed eyes. The boy could almost be Fey, with his cat-footed quickness. But there was no tingle of recognition that would identify one of his kind. It was just the usual quick grace of childhood, he supposed.

“Nay, Aelfwig,” he said, relief at the easy retrieval of the name causing him to smile benevolently at the boy. Finally all his neurons seemed to be firing properly, even with the hindrance of the thundering headache. “I must be on my way.” He reached out and plucked a coin from behind the boy’s ear, to Aelfwig’s delighted surprise.

He spotted Gytha leading the ox to the stream, and after a quick glance to confirm that her mother wasn’t watching, sketched a courtly bow to her, winking as their eyes met. The pretty blush that stained her cheeks was worth the renewed pounding in his skull as he straightened up.

“Gytha!” Godgyth’s sharp voice rang out. “Quit gawping and move along!”

The girl threw him a guilty glance and tugged at the rope holding the ox as she started moving again.

Godric sighed and with a nod to the boy, turned and started down the road, toward the gates of Eoforwic, known in his time as York, although this rude settlement was a far cry from the elegant city he had visited then. After a couple of steps, he turned back on a sudden impulse.

“Aelfwig! Catch!” He flicked the coin at the boy with his thumb. The coin winked brightly as it looped towards the boy, who caught it deftly in his outstretched hands. He looked at the treasure in his palms, and then looked up again at Godric, awe blossoming in his blue eyes.

Godric tugged his forelock in exaggerated respect to the boy, and turned and spun on his heel, whistling jauntily as he walked.

No matter that the sun was piercing in his eyes, his stomach was roiling and his head pounded in time with his steps. He grinned. Life was good, and he was heading for something big.

He could feel it.

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Godric ignored the curious looks cast his way as he walked through the muddy streets of Eoforwic. He had turned his multi-coloured harper's cloak around, so the brown side was visible, but people could still glimpse the colours on the other side as it swirled around his legs, and there was no hiding the bag holding his lyre, which bumped along his back with every step. But he ignored the inquiries that came his way as he walked. He had business to attend to, first, and then he could think about earning some coin.

The York of his time, with its glorious cathedral and charming Middle Ages architecture, was much more interesting than this huddled collection of Dark Ages dwellings pressed up against the crumbling wall which encased the old Roman city. As was the case in other places in seventh century England, people here had an aversion for living amongst the ruins. They preferred to build their own dwellings, scavenging stone and bricks as they needed.

The afternoon sun was starting to wane as he entered the gap in the old Roman wall where a wooden gate once stood. He paused for a moment, looking around. He soon found what he was looking for: the wooden cathedral built some fifteen years ago for the baptism of the newly converted King Edwin.

He started towards it, turning his mind to the puzzle that had preoccupied him over the last few days. The unexpected meeting with the wilding, Thomas, had disturbed him a great deal. A third Traveller. One who was bright with Fey power he had no idea how to use. It gave him a cold shiver down his spine. He shifted his shoulders under his cloak, trying to set the feeling aside. Hopefully Wulfram would know what to do with him.

The boy's tell-tale Fey power had been evident to him as soon as he entered Siward's hall with the dour Welsh warrior. But Godric had been in the middle of a performance and couldn't spare time to talk.

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Good thing, too, for as he found out later, the young man was a wilding Fey, one who had grown up among humans, ignorant of his true nature. Luckily the Welshman who'd found him right after he Crossed hadn't killed him on the spot, but instead was determined to take him to Lindisfarne, to the monks.

Godric had managed to persuade the boy to sneak away from Celyn and come back to meet Godric, but the kid hadn't shown up. So Godric had headed north to Wulfram, the other Traveller, to share the news and figure out what to do. They couldn't leave a wilding Fey roaming around, that's for sure.

God knows what the monks will make of him. Godric snorted at the thought. He stopped walking as another thought struck him. He could have gone after Thomas, tried to catch up with him. Why hadn't he? Faint alarm stirred in his gut, but just as quickly as it surfaced it was gone, fading like the waning daylight, and he continued walking. He was hungry. Hopefully Wulfram would give him something to eat.

He drew closer to the church, and to the newer buildings that had sprung up beside it. Edwin had built a larger dwelling in which to stay when he visited this part of the kingdom. A new king used it now, for Edwin was long dead, his kingdom divided. Oswine, the cousin of the newly crowned Oswy of Bernicia, now held the Deiran throne, at Oswy's bidding. Or maybe the other way around.

Whatever. Godric shook his head, dismissing the thought. The lives of the humans and their affairs were more or less window-dressing to him. Travellers kept to themselves, hidden amongst the humans like the other Fey, although it was a little harder to stay unnoticed as a Traveller. His mouth twisted as he remembered his mistake from the night before. He had better be more careful. Especially in these unenlightened times to be different was to stand out, and that could get you killed more times than not.

Of course, getting too entangled with the Fey of the time carried its own dangers, and could

be just as deadly. He had discovered that the hard way last time.

He clenched his jaw, pushing the memory aside. No use thinking of it now. It had happened some two years ago, and he knew better now. Thankfully many more years than two years had passed in this time since he was here last. No one here likely remembered it, especially not here, in the north. But he had stayed away from the Unselie Court just in case.

He slowed his steps as he got closer to his destination, trying to remember which house he was looking for. There were quite a few newer dwellings in this part of the previously abandoned town. Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne, also had a smaller house near the church, a place to stay when he was in the area. And as it was true in any time, the presence of power attracted those who wished to either curry favour or bask in its reflected light. So, others had erected houses near the king and Bishop's dwellings.

Wulfram had got one of these houses for himself. The details were hazy in Godric's mind. Probably he had drunk more than he should have the last time he was here, when he had run across Wulfram in Eoforwic, shortly after Godric's Crossing.

He rounded a corner. *There.* He pulled into the shadows of a nearby building to study Wulfram's house.

It was a typical house of the time with a thatched roof, timber-planked sides whose chinks were filled in with daub, and only one window and door.

But Godric frowned as he studied it, a chill rippling through him. There was something off about it. The shadows that fell from the late afternoon sun seemed darker, somehow, than the shadows around the other buildings, and clung to the house in an oddly determined fashion. In fact, the shadows seemed longer than the hour would warrant, almost as if the house itself was slightly off in time.

Which was impossible. The presence of a Traveller did not have that effect on the physical world. There must be some other explanation for the way the dark lingered around the corners of

the building and pooled thickly under the slanting edges of the thatched roof. The trouble was, the only possible explanation that Godric could come up with was one he didn't care for very much.

Godric watched a group of humans as they walked towards the house. They were engaged in deep discussion, and seemed unaware of their surroundings. But Godric noticed their path swung wide around the house without so much as a glance at it. He swore under his breath. He had learned not to discount the humans' instincts. At times they could be as finely attuned as a Fey's, especially when the Undying were involved.

The icy chill within him deepened. The other Traveller's fool plan had not gone unnoticed, he would bet his bottom dollar. The best thing for him to do would be to get out of here—

—he approached the door, lifting his hand to knock. Sudden dizziness swept over him, and he leaned against the door for a moment. *What...* He felt odd, dislocated, like something had happened, but what? *Thomas. Gytha. The boy. Going to Eoformic.* As he reviewed the last couple days, he straightened up, feeling foolish. He must be more tired and hungry than he thought.

A throaty rumbling croak startled him out of his reverie. A dark shape detached from the roof, calling out again as it flapped away in an ungainly fashion. He watched, trying to judge the direction it was going. *West.* A wry smile lifted his lips. A raven calling to the west meant a shift in your life, according to the old Celtic woman he had met when he had first Crossed. *A shift for the better, no doubt, once Wulfram bears my news.* He saluted the bird as it disappeared into the twilight sky, and turned and knocked at the door

He heard a low murmur of voices and the sound of shuffling steps and then the door opened, to reveal an untidy-looking child who gazed at Godric with dull eyes.

"Master bids you come," he said.

Godric frowned at the boy, taking in the unwashed hair, stained green tunic, and the lack of expression on the young man, who could hardly have been more than twelve. *Odda. Wulfram's slave.*

Right.

“Do you remember me, Odda?” Godric asked.

The boy kept his eyes downcast and did not answer. He stepped to the side of the door, holding it open. “Master bids you come,” he insisted, a hint of panic creeping into his voice.

“Yeah, alright,” he said, his jaw clenching. “I’m coming.” He knew that dull look well. He had seen it himself the last time he had Crossed to this time. Had been the *cause* of it. It was the look of a human who had been Bound to a Fey. A Fey who had used their Speaking Gift to overpower the human’s will, to make them their slave.

Deja vu washed over him as Odda stood waiting for Godric to enter, the feeling that they had played this scene before. He had seen that look on the boy’s face before, the last time he was here, and his reaction had been the same. Shock and remembered shame, alarm over what Wulfram was doing.

The memory dropped full formed into his mind. How could he not have remembered that? His alarm grew, along with the urge to flee, but he took a step inside and the feeling snuffed out, gone as if it had never been.

Odda reached to close the door behind him, but Godric put his hand out to stop the door’s progress. He couldn’t stand the thought of having that door shut behind him.

Wulfram was mixed up with the Undying, he was sure of it. He would have to be very careful. Tell him his news and then get out of there. Even as the thought crossed his mind, another followed on its heels. *Best to get out now.*

But that voice of warning quickly faded as he peered into the dark interior, looking for the other Fey.

The candles that dimly lit the inside of the house sputtered and wavered in the breeze from the open door, causing the shadows in the interior to jump around crazily. It gave Godric’s heart a bit of a start, but he calmed himself, taking a deep breath as the boy scurried over to Wulfram, crouching down at his feet with a look of fearful adoration as the other Fey rose to greet Godric.

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He was tall, lean, and elegant, much the same as when Godric had seen him last. The candlelight glinted off the subtle gold trim at the edges of his dark green tunic and the heavy silver ring on his finger. His black hair was short, neatly trimmed; his eyes amber, flecked with gold. He was a powerful Fey—something else Godric had forgotten.

He showed no surprise at Godric's arrival. Likely his birds had given him warning. He regarded Godric with the same expression the harper remembered from the last time. Arrogant, sardonic, self-assured. It grated on Godric's nerves, just like it had before.

"Man, you need some fresh air in her," he commented. He should have given the Greeting, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to extend that common courtesy. The window was shuttered against the evening breeze, trapping most of the smoke from the smouldering fire inside. The little that filtered out through the small hole in the thatched roof made no difference as far as Godric could tell.

If Wulfram noticed his discourtesy, he didn't show it. "Perhaps," he said with a shrug. "But I desire the warmth more. Shut the door, before we freeze."

"Whatever," Godric muttered, and pulled the door shut behind him. He had a queer feeling in his stomach as he did so, and he had to squelch the quick desire to open it again, to walk away.

Get a grip, man, he thought. *He's a Fey, another Traveller. And he's going to love your news.* Thomas' face rose up in his mind, and with it, a frisson of excitement. Wulfram might be generous in his appreciation, after all. And besides, it was his duty to tell the other Traveller about the wilding. His birds could track him down easier than Godric could. The kid probably needed some help.

He just barely managed to suppress the sudden snicker the thought inspired. *Something's wrong*, he thought, faintly. But he stepped into the room on wooden legs like any other choice had been denied him.

Sardonic amusement lurked in Wulfram's amber eyes as he swept a hand towards a chair at the table. "Sit, please. I'm surprised you have come back so soon. Has something happened?"

He sat down on the other chair, looking at Godric expectantly. Godric sat, oddly tongue-tied. Normally he had no lack of things to say. But his normal self-confidence was diminished in this Fey's presence.

Candlelight glinted off the silver goblet on the table. That was new, as was the tapestry that hung against the wall to shield the interior of the house from the cold air leaking from the wattle-and-daub wall. Wulfram had gained some money, or influence, since Godric had been there last.

Probably both. His plan must be going well.

He wasn't surprised. The humans didn't have much chance against a Fey with his power, his Speaking gift.

Wulfram interrupted his thoughts. "Odda, take Master Godric's cloak, and bring us some ale." The boy jumped up, jerked into motion like a marionette dangling at the ends of its string.

"Water will do for me," Godric said, mindful of the excesses the night before. The last thing he wanted was to be dulled-witted around the other Traveller. He handed his cloak to Odda, who folded it carefully over his arm and hurried off, towards the back room where Wulfram slept.

"You've Bound him," he blurted out, switching to English from the Saxon language they both had been speaking. It was safer that way, as long as no one heard their strange speech.

The other Fey's eyebrows raised. "We discussed this last time. I was...experimenting. His mind was weaker than I thought." He too spoke in English.

"Not a great idea." A memory flashed through his mind. *A woman, wailing, hands outstretched towards him...* He shoved it away. *Focus.* He didn't need that distraction. "Hasn't anyone noticed?"

"I keep to myself," Wulfram said, absently, studying him carefully. He cocked his head. "Interesting. You really don't remember this, do you? You told me to be careful, that I would bring unwarranted attention. I told you the same thing I will tell you now." He leaned forward, his eyes hardening. "The Binding is a tool, a part of my Gift. The same Gift you share, the same Gift *you* used once, to accomplish a greater good."

Shock froze Godric in his chair. He *never* spoke of his first Crossing to *anyone*. That debacle he kept very carefully to himself. How had Wulfram found out?

Wulfram kept talking. "I do what I must, for the good of the Fey." He sat back, curiosity in his eyes. "Do you remember nothing of what occurred the last time you were here?"

Godric swallowed, feeling distinctly odd. There was a note of fear in Wulfram's voice, despite the casual manner of the other Fey. *Something's wrong*. He knew it in his bones, but he couldn't chase it down, couldn't figure it out. He wanted to get up, to leave. But he remained sitting, just the same.

"Of course I do." Even as he said the words, he knew they weren't true. A fog had settled in his mind over the events of the last time, preventing him from seeing the details, only giving him the big picture. He strained at the memory.

He had bumped into Wulfram in Eoforwic when he came here to earn some coin. After the performance he came to Wulfram's house, and the other Fey had given him the big song and dance about what he was trying to do. Godric had warned him against it and left.

Or something like that. The details were slippery. He couldn't seem to hold the memory of that night in his mind in a complete whole, just bits and pieces.

Odda returned, another silver goblet in hand and handed it to him. The water was cool and fresh, and Godric drank it eagerly, hoping it would revive him.

Wulfram sipped at his cup. "Very good Odda," he said, in Saxon. "Leave us now. See to supper. I'm sure Master Godric is hungry. You may prepare a chicken for our meal."

The boy nodded. "Yes, Master." He left quickly, shutting the door behind him.

"Never mind our last visit," Wulfram said, waving a hand. "Tell me why you have returned. You were meant to go to Bebbanburg, to see how Oswy fares as King. You could not have made it there and back again so soon. What has happened?"

Godric frowned. *I was meant to go Bebbanburg?* They had talked about it, certainly, but hadn't

he *offered* to go take a look, as a lark? He pushed himself to remember, but it was hazy, as seeing it through gauze. He hadn't drunk that much, had he?

A furious squawking erupted from outside, breaking his train of thought. The frantic clucks stopped abruptly, followed a moment later by the dull *thunking* sound of an axe against wood. Godric grimaced. Sometimes living here made him strongly tempted to be a vegetarian, like some of his hippie friends back home.

“Well?”

Wulfram's impatience snapped him back to the present. *Thomas. Right.* He gathered himself. *Sooner you tell him, the sooner you can leave.* “I met another Fey. A Traveller.”

Wulfram stiffened slightly, a sudden spark of interest lighting his eyes. “Go on.”

Godric swigged back some more water, then wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “He's a wilding Fey. Said he was from 2019.”

“A wilding!” The words erupted from the other Fey. Shock filled his face. “Are you sure? Where did you find him?”

“At Wulfstam. Near the coast, south east of here. And yes, I'm sure. The kid's a wilding. No doubt about it. I had to tell him he was Fey.”

Wulfram's eyes narrowed, and he sat back, exhaling. He sat in silence for a moment, absently twirling the ring on his finger, lost in thought. Finally, his gaze sharpened on Godric again. “Tell me everything.”

Godric obliged, briefly describing his encounter with Thomas from the time he had met the young Fey to his last night at Siward's lair, waiting in the darkness for the boy to appear. He ended with a shrug. “He never showed up. I figured you would want to hear the news, so I came back here, to fill you in.”

As he said those words, however, unease trickled down his spine. To come running back here like an eager puppy to its master was odd, now that he thought about it. Now that he was here, he

remembered how much he didn't like the other Fey, with his grandiose plans and arrogant ways. And he had *Bound* the slave—

Wulfram interrupted his thoughts. "Why do you think he didn't come back to meet you?"

Godric blinked, feeling like he was two steps behind in this conversation, trying to remember what he had just been thinking, but it was gone. He shifted in the chair, uncomfortable. "I dunno. They could have run into some trouble on the road. Outlaws. Or an ambush, or something. Or maybe the Welshman stopped him." Privately he thought this last option most likely. Celyn was the type of man that would be hard to fool, of that Godric was certain.

Wulfram sat bolt upright. "This human, he was Welsh? You didn't say that before. Are you certain?"

Godric nodded. "Yeah. So what?"

The other man looked bemused for a moment, and then threw back his head with a short barking laugh. "Godric! You have indeed done well! Hah!" He pushed himself away from the table and stood up, pacing back and forth, his hands behind his back.

"What's the big deal?"

Wulfram stopped, his hands on his hips, shaking his head. "You should pay more attention. The native Britons of this time, the Welsh, Irish, and Scots—the Celts, in other words—are enemies of the Saxons, except that the Irish have made some accommodations with them in order to convert them all to Christianity. But the Welsh, especially, are implacable enemies. Think, man. Why would a Welshman be heading north, to Lindisfarne, and Bebbanburg? To an important seat of Anglo-Saxon power?"

Godric shrugged. Politics never interested him much. It was why Wulfram could be so tiresome. That's all he wanted to talk about.

Thankfully Wulfram answered his own question. "Because he must be an ally of Oswy's. Which makes him a traitor to his people, who are allied with Penda, the Mercian king, *against* Oswy.

Which makes him someone of interest to us. A piece of information we can use.”

“I suppose.” Godric conceded Wulfram’s point. To survive in the unfamiliar places that Travellers found themselves in, they had to become adept at inconspicuously gathering as much information as they could, and then sifting through that information to understand what would be relevant to them. Godric understood this, of course. This was hardly his first Crossing. But he had allowed his discovery of the wilding to overshadow the importance of his companion. That and the fact that Celyn rubbed him the wrong way. It was a mistake that he shouldn’t have made.

He frowned. A mistake he *wouldn’t* have made, normally, but—

The door opened, allowing a burst of cool air that made the candles flicker in in their holders. Odda came in, the beheaded and plucked chicken dangling from one hand. He held up the bird. “Chicken, Master!”

Wulfram smiled a thin smile. “Yes, very good, Odda. Make sure you roast it properly now, like I showed you.” He looked back at Godric. “We will speak again later,” he said, in English, with a slight nod towards Odda.

“Sure.” His stomach rumbled. He would eat and get a good sleep, rest up for the road. In the morning he would leave.

He had a fine enough sense of self-preservation to know that lingering long with Wulfram was asking for trouble. Trouble was the last thing he wanted. He’d rather pay a visit to the merchant’s daughter, instead.

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“So, this wilding. Where did you say he was from?”

Godric stretched out his feet towards the fire, warming them. After a change of clothes, a short nap, and a satisfying meal, he felt more like himself. Odda had been dismissed to his pallet at the foot of Wulfram’s bed, leaving Godric and the other Traveller alone. With the setting of the sun, the temperature outside had dropped considerably, reminding him that winter was not far off. The

failing light had also deepened the shadows inside the house.

Despite the coziness of the setting, Godric still felt uneasy. The lengthening shadows reminded him of his earlier impression of the house. He couldn't shake the sense that something out of the ordinary lurked, waiting for a moment to pounce. Now that his hunger had been satisfied, he had been toying with the idea of changing his plan. He could leave now, find a room in the inn Gytha had mentioned.

He blew out a breath, biting back his impatience. The other Fey would not be satisfied until every bit of information Godric possessed would be brought to light and examined for its possible implications. Like a crow looking for every last shiny piece in a pile of garbage. "He said he was from Canada. That's all."

Wulfram's eyes narrowed. "Hm. Interesting." He sat in silence for a moment, then continued. "And the Welshman. He must be a Sensitive, no?"

Godric shrugged. "Probably. Thomas said he saw him when he first Crossed, and that he saw— "He broke off abruptly, realizing too late that he had neglected to mention Thomas' tale of the Undying in his first recounting of the story. The gloomy atmosphere of the house had spooked him, and he hadn't wanted to invoke even the thought of the Others as he told the story. The same reluctance stopped his words now. "That he saw him. When he first jumped."

"Yes, that is unusual." A log fell, causing a shower of sparks to flutter up. "Did this wilding show signs of any other Gifting?"

"Not that I noticed, but we weren't together long. I mean, he's likely a Speaker, right?" Travellers often had that Gift, but not always.

Wulfram nodded absently, deep in thought. Finally, he let out a breath, and stood up and began to pace. "This could work out very well for us, very well, indeed."

Godric shook his head. "Look man, forget *us*. Keep me out of it. I came to tell you about the kid, but that's as far as it goes for me. Whatever you have planned here, it doesn't involve me."

Wulfram stopped pacing and looked at Godric, his eyes narrowing. “Do you not remember what I told you? About what happened in 2001?”

Godric frowned, straining at the memory. Details emerged from the fog. “The planes, the World Trade Center....?” He wasn’t sure if it was true, or something Wulfram made up to suit his plan. The Towers were still being built in his own time. Even in California he had heard the news about the construction of the tallest buildings in the world. It was hard to believe they could be destroyed in such a fashion.

But he had crossed over to this time with the events of the 1972 Olympics fresh in his mind. The humans’ capacity to destroy one another was not exactly a surprise.

“Exactly. The Towers, the planes, the rain of destruction—” Wulfram stopped abruptly, and his head dropped, as if the weight of the memories were too much to bear.

Godric took a drink of mead, trying to figure out what to say. One detail he did remember from his last visit was that this conversation hadn’t ended well. He cleared his throat. “Look, I’m sorry about your brother. Really. But you can’t change it. It’s crazy. Doesn’t matter what you do, it’ll be what it’ll be. Period. *To change the future by the past is forbidden.* You know the Rule as well as I.”

Wulfram’s head snapped up. The candles on the tables flickered as a gust of wind rattled the shutter on the window. The other’s Fey’s eyes were hard. “The Rule,” he said, scorn dripping from his words. “What is the Rule, anyway? It was made after the Destruction, when the Fey were hiding in their caves and trembling at every sound. Afraid of the damned humans. They had us beat, and we skulked back to our hidey-holes to lick our wounds. We forged our peace. Laid low, hid in plain sight. Pretended we were *human*—weak, and soft, and pliant.” His fists clenched. “We pretended so well we forgot what *we* were. We, an ancient and noble race, heirs of the planet just as much as *them*, with the faery blood singing in our veins and power coursing through our fingertips, we decided to let the *humans* enjoy the spoils of victory while we sang our songs and mourned over what we had lost.”

Godric shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. These were not new ideas. The history of the Fey was littered with small revolts, those who could not accept the truth of their place in the world. Those who could not accept the Rule that had been crafted in those dark days of despair, when the Fey began the painful process of forging a new way of living in the world; not as masters, but as the vanquished.

All Fey felt the sting of it. But Seelies and Unseelies alike agreed that the long-ago Fey who created the Rule were right. The humans held sway in the world, either by victory, divine right or sheer biology, seeing that many Fey were barren and the humans bred like rabbits. There were simply not enough of the Fey to mount any credible resistance. And so, like any conquered people, they had had to learn how to survive, or be wiped out entirely.

Godric preferred survival, even though it irked him when he saw the messes the humans made. But they had learned that to step in led to destruction, not only for the one who tried to meddle, but for other Fey as well.

The humans had not forgotten their ancient hatred of the Fey. It resided still, buried deep in their unconscious minds. It only took a small spark to light the fire again, a fire that burned hot, destroying any Fey in its wake.

But the fervour burning in Wulfram's eyes was just as hot and just as hard to quench. Godric had tried before. *Time to split.* He blew out a breath and stood up. "Listen, man, it ain't gonna work. You know it. You try, and you'll attract all sorts of attention. Attention you don't want. You know what I mean. You really want that?"

"What I *want* is for my brother to live. And for the Fey to survive. It is what you should want, too."

Godric shook his head. "I told you before. Count me out, man. You're crazy. I came to give you the news, but I'm not staying. You're on your own in this one."

The other Traveller's eyes narrowed, his fists clenching and unclenching, and he gave a small

nod.

Godric felt a ripple of power, a whisper of electricity that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He acted without thought, quickly pulling his knife from his boot, whipping around and throwing it blind in one seamless blur of motion, allowing his instinct to guide him.

It was an accurate shot, but it didn't matter. He hit the shape that stood behind him full in the chest, but the knife merely passed through the shadow with a slight wobble and buried itself with a dull *thunk* in the wooden door behind it.

The terrible desire that radiated out from the creature beat against him, freezing him to the spot. Behind him, he heard Wulfram panting harshly.

MOVE. He leapt to the side, crashing around the table, careful not to touch the shadow creature. He flung himself at the door, his fingers reaching the latch.

Unhallowed wight, grim and greedy—the line from *Beowulf* flashed through his mind, and he had a moment's wild triumph, the impossibility of success coursing through him.

"He must be stopped." Wulfram spoke quietly, his voice strained as if he forced the words out.

Godric had a moment to appreciate the subtleties of that statement. Not a command. No Fey would dare to tell one of the Undying what to do. A suggestion wrapped up in a declaration, the outcome left entirely to the other creature's will.

Apparently the Undying so willed, for a sudden surge of power against his back crashed Godric into the door, and he fell heavily to the floor. He would have gladly changed into a mouse or a spider in order to crawl under the door if he had the shape-changing abilities some humans attributed to the Fey. But as those abilities were a myth that option was not open to him.

The breath was knocked out of him, but he staggered to his feet, fighting the dizziness that was making it hard to think. He tried to lift his hand to the latch again but it was like trying to fight against a strong current. His limbs were uncooperative, heavy and unyielding. *Come on, come on...* he

panted with the effort, desperate to get away from the shadow-creature at his back.

Godric shuddered as he felt the creature's touch against his mind. He struggled to pull his wits together to resist it, but his thoughts fell away like raindrops running down a window. The aching desire to grovel before the thing and do its will drowned out the small flames of resistance that he tried to fan into being.

He opened his eyes. Panic surged as he realized he had stopped struggling, a fly exhausted in the spider's web. The rush of adrenaline allowed him to push away from the door, only to be slammed back into it again, his face pressed up against the wood.

Behind the turmoil of his thoughts and the screaming need to give in he heard Wulfram muttering under his breath. The words flowed around the room, slipping and sliding between his heartbeats, through the rush of blood in his veins. He dared not concentrate on the words, but he recognized a few from the tales of the Old Time. Wulfram spoke ancient words of power, belonging to the time when the Fey were many, when they welcomed the help of the Undying in their war against humankind.

Godric had a moment to wonder at the other Fey's audacity, that he could imagine he could control the creature, when another surge of power flipped him around, facing him towards his captor.

The Dark One stood where it had been before, one arm outstretched towards him, but it was too far away for it to touch him. Godric tried to press himself back into the door, *through* the door, to avoid that touch, but at the same time an eager desire for it flooded through him. He trembled.

Thankfully, at that moment, the creature lowered its arm. The pressure ceased and Godric gasped as he staggered forward. He stopped himself at the last moment from throwing himself at the creature's feet and pressed himself back up against the door again, feeling behind him for the latch.

The desire to abandon himself to the Undying One was so compelling it was hard to remember why he shouldn't do it. *Unhallowed night*—

Suddenly the outline of the Undying One wavered, shrinking and condensing into a more solid form, accompanied by a faint hissing that brushed against him. The form coalesced into that of a man, thin and supple, dressed all in black. The face was pale, possessing a terrible beauty. The eyes burned red.

“We meet again.” It spoke in a deep voice, even and rich, but with a faint wrongness to the sound that scraped against his ears.

As the words sunk in memory returned. He had been standing here, in this very house, facing this same creature, caught in its thrall just as thoroughly as he was now. He didn't remember exactly what had happened, but suddenly the compulsion to report back to Wulfram began to make more sense.

Fury seized him. He tore his eyes away from the Undying, looking past it to Wulfram, who stood behind the creature. The other Fey's eyes met his briefly, and then skittered away, to rest again on the demon. Godric would bet Wulfram was as firmly caught in this spider's web as he himself was, no matter what the other Fey thought about who was running this show.

“You bastard,” he panted through clenched lips. It felt good to focus on Wulfram, as it kept his attention away from the creature in front of him.

Wulfram glanced at him, his eyes amused as he folded his arms against his chest. He would have looked the picture of nonchalance, except for the sweat beading his forehead, and the strain around his eyes. “Yes, you said the same thing last time, if I recall. Is it coming back to you now?”

Godric wished with all his heart that he could grab his other knife and plunge it into Wulfram's heart. But he was frozen in spot, unable to move. Wulfram stepped up beside the Undying, but he was careful to keep his distance from it.

Thomas' story came unbidden to Godric's mind. One or more of these beings had actually

touched the kid, *grabbed* him, as Thomas had put it. Horror flashed through him at the thought, as well as a sudden deep longing to feel that smooth hand against his skin, to be surrounded and enveloped in the pure power of the creature...

If his knees hadn't been locked in place he might have swooned. *Stop it stop it stop it.* He squeezed his eyes shut as Wulfram begin to chuckle, thinly.

"Yes. The youngling Nephilim," the demon spoke, a slight hiss accompanying the word *yes*. "We will hear more about him." The deep voice, although hypnotic, skittered along his nerves painfully.

Godric knew he should feel alarm, and even shame, that the creature could read his mind so easily. All the defenses he put up before it melted away, but he could hardly bring himself to care. All he felt was a dark pleasure, that at last he could once more be of use to the Undying.

And so, with a gasp that escaped as his final resistance melted away, he told the whole story once again, this time leaving nothing out.

#

Godric was a day's journey from York before he began to regain some semblance of himself. The first day had passed in a nightmare—stumbling on nerveless feet, half blind with terror and sickened to his core. Running with no thought but to get away from that cursed house.

He had bolted through Eoforwic, all thoughts of stopping to visit the merchant's daughter forgotten. He ignored the haunting fear that that no matter how far he ran, he could not escape the Undying's reaching hand.

Mixed with the desire to flee was the pounding insistence that beat through him to go north, to get to Lindisfarne, to bring the wilding back. It was a scalding fire in his blood that drove him on with every heartbeat, even as he cursed it.

But after blindly running through the dark and then collapsing for a few hours rest, curled up under his cloak under the protection of a spreading oak tree, he woke with a clearer mind.

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He took stock as he walked through the early morning mist down the road. *I'll figure this out*, he promised himself. But truth be told, he wasn't sure what *this* was. What exactly had happened to him?

Wulfram. Odda. Memories flickered through his mind, jumping here and there. They had eaten dinner, and then—

—he heaved a breath, his hands on his knees, sucking in air. *What the hell?* Why was he running? He strained at the memory, feeling odd. *Wulfram.* He shut his eyes, concentrating, panic beating around the edges of his mind, but he forced it away. *Christ. Pull yourself together.* He took a couple more shuddering breaths, and straightened up, looking around at the dull landscape with little interest, trying to figure out what was going on

Suddenly the memory came back. *Wulfram. Odda. Wulfram's ridiculous plan. And the Undying...*

Panic flared and he gritted his teeth against it, willing the memory away. *North. Lindisfarne. Thomas.* Purpose seized him, replacing the fear. *I'll figure this out. Just get the wilding back to Wulfram.*

Eager desire filled him, and he set off on the road again, those three words beating a rhythm in his brain. *North. Lindisfarne. Thomas.*

#

A day later he came across a small holding. He paused at the edge of a cleared field, eyeing the jumbled buildings, the fat sows squealing in their enclosure. Sudden resolve filled him, lightening the weight he had been labouring under the last couple of days.

This is what he did, *this* is who he was. A *scop*, a teller of tales, a travelling minstrel who wandered from place to place, playing his music and getting some coins in return, or a warm bed and food, or, if he was lucky, or good enough, all of the above. He would go to this place, and play for his supper, eat his fill.

But his feet refused to move. He should be striding across the field with his lyre bumping

against his back. He could see himself doing it. Could picture his flourishing bow, the suspicious scowls turning to gleeful welcome, the family welcoming him in.

As quickly as it came, the resolve faded away. As much as he longed for his old life, there was no going back to it, not just yet, anyways. Not with that black hole in his mind, the one that the nightmares came from.

Bring him to me.

The words whispered through his mind. He shook his head, as if to clear it. The problem was, he couldn't.

The realization had come slowly over the last couple of days, a realization that had crept up on him, one that he could hardly look at squarely, for fear of collapsing under the weight of it.

He was carrying the Undying with him. Or perhaps, the Undying was carrying *him*. He had a sudden vision of that dark, elegant form striding down the road with him piggy-back upon it. A small giggle escaped him, and the sound of it snapped him back to himself, appalled, cold despair falling upon him.

He couldn't risk going to that holding. He was under the sway of that creature, and no telling what it might make him do. Besides, he must hurry, go to Lindisfarne, bring back the wilding Traveller. A delicious shiver ran through him at the thought. *Yesss.*

So he turned his back on the welcome he would get at the holding, and the coin, and the warm bed. He faded back through the woods in the deepening twilight, heedless of the hunger in his belly, the cold that seeped through his cloak.

Bring him.

Slipping through the shadows under the trees, a mere shadow himself, Godric's longing for his old life dissolved, transformed into the singular obsession of the Undying.

#

The obsession drove him through the night, ignoring the cold and the ever-growing ache in his belly,

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until he collapsed from exhaustion in a heap, crumpled next to a rowan tree after stripping some of the shrivelled berries and cramming them into his mouth.

He didn't think of building a fire, and as the sky cleared and the temperature plummeted, he easily could have frozen to death had not it been for the sustaining power of those berries and the family that discovered him in the early hour after dawn.

He awoke from his shoulder being roughly shaken by a man, a hard-eyed *coerl* of few words, his wife hovering in the background anxiously. He blearily came back to life as they bundled him into their cart. They fed him some bread and cheese, and slowly he started to feel more like himself.

It was fortunate they had bothered to investigate his still form under the tree. Many people of the times wouldn't have bothered. People were too occupied with their own survival to worry overmuch about a stranger. Never mind the superstitious fear that would keep people from approaching one they thought was dead. But his bright harper's cloak drew them, and when they saw he was alive, the affection most felt for a gleeman prompted them to do what they could to help.

As he bumped along in the cart Godric found another reason to bless his good fortune. His head was clear for the first time since he had left Wulfram, the twisting presence of the Undying quieted into mere murmurs once and again, an uneasy feeling of dislocation that occasionally flashed through him. Perhaps nearly dying in its service had caused it to realize the limitation of his mortal body. Godric didn't know the reason for its withdrawal, and he didn't care. He was just glad to be free from its suffocating shadow.

He thought about leaving the couple, about finding a Crossing spot and jumping back home, but the thought only lingered for a moment before a sudden panic seized him, and with a spurt of alarm he felt the Undying awakening within him. He hurriedly turned his thoughts away from escape, and to his relief the presence of the Undying faded. After that he avoided any idea of Crossing. It was a small tradeoff for being able to be free in his own mind, at least for now.

So he simply sat in the cart with a blanket wrapped over his cloak, brooding.

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They arrived at the family's holding just after dusk. Godric peered at it in the gathering twilight as the cart came to a halt. The collection of haphazard, rickety buildings didn't seem too promising.

The woman sighed in relief, all the same. "'Tis good to be home, husband. Seems much longer than a week since we left, so it does."

There was no reply from her husband, just a noncommittal grunt.

The door to the house flew open and three small children of indeterminate sex erupted, roiling out of the doorway like puppies. The children were followed by another couple, an older man and woman. The children's welcoming howls were just about enough to make Godric regret his rescue.

The woman clambered down from the cart and met the children half way. She bent down to gather them all in her arms, her exclamation of joy rivaling the piercing cries of the children.

Godric began to help the father unload the supplies that the family had obtained in Eoforwic. He was a potter, and had traded several of his pots for a new axe and some spices and cloth.

"Ye'll sleep in the barn," the man commented as Godric handled a bundle to him. "It's warm enough, and the hay be fresh."

Godric nodded, relieved to not have to share the close interior of the home with the family. He would find little peace amongst the rioting children. He would get far more rest with the cows, to be sure.

But a worse fear haunted him. The conclusion that had been jostled free in his mind during his bumpy journey in the cart was a sickening certainty that filled him with dread and bitter anger.

Wulfram had Bound him to the Undying. Those muttered words of power that wove through the scattered memories of the night in Eoforwic, his eager surrender, the dark cancerous spot in his mind that ate away his will; all confirmed it.

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He knew what a Binding was. He had done it himself, and the undoing of it had left a hole within him that he had never been able to fill, the same hole that now carried the Undying. The thought of it, the *feel* of it, was something he could only approach sideways, carefully, not head-on, lest he be overwhelmed by horror. But even so, the weight of it was tinged with a slight touch of relief. Finally, finally the hole was filled, the need satisfied. And that disgusted him more than anything else.

He wasn't sure what the creature might make him do. He was afraid of what he was going to become. He couldn't linger long with the humans, or surely they would notice. And being noticed, for any Fey, was bad news. The distraction of their company would stop him from brooding on his dilemma, but he was going to have to be careful.

The chatter of the children as they ate supper helped. And as he expected, after they ate, one of them tugged on his sleeve, looking up at him with wide eyes.

“Play us a song, Master?”

Godric managed a thin smile, looking around at the eager anticipation of the children, the expectation on the faces of the parents. He could hardly refuse. “Just one or two. To thank your parents for their help, and the hospitality. But then I will need to sleep, and so will you.”

The little one scampered back to his mother, climbing up in her lap. The rest of the kids grinned and clapped their hands, eager to have the distraction.

Godric pulled his lyre out of his bag, running his fingers over the strings experimentally, tuning them. Music was a balm to the Fey, a means of expressing their deepest emotions. It could be so for humans as well, but the effect was magnified for the Fey. As he started to play, his fingers moving without thought on the strings, his eyes fell shut. The music spoke notes of anguish and fear, shadowed by rage, the pace quickening as his fingers moved faster—

He snapped his eyes open, stopping his fingers. *Careful*. A Fey could Charm a human easily through music, and that was the last thing he wanted to happen. He quickly launched into one of his

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most rowdy songs, a nonsensical ballad about a drunken warrior who cuts off his own head during a battle and gets it reattached by a doddering old witch, who botches the job and puts it on backwards.

He strummed the first chord, tentative at first, and then more boldly as he sang the second line. He felt comfortable, at home, the strings coming to life under his fingers. He looked around, saw the children grinning, the wife's toes tapping, and a smile split his face. He felt more himself than he had in days. He bent his head over the lyre and abandoned himself to the song.

Later that night, as he burrowed under the blankets on top of the sweet-smelling hay, he smiled again. The dark presence in his mind was quiet, for now. The music hadn't driven it off, by no means, but there was something pure and honest about it that was anathema to the cruel twisting darkness that was the essence of the Undying.

He was under no illusions that he was free for good. Wulfram and the Undying would not discard him that easily. But maybe he had found a way to thwart them, just a little. He would have to be careful. But he would not roll over without a fight, however small and feeble that fight might be.

He would go to Lindisfarne, collect Thomas. He couldn't help the shiver of pleasure at the thought. But along the way, he would play his music, and bide his time. Slow his pace, delay.

There had to be a way for him to be free completely. For now he would try out what small rebellions he could, dally as long as he dared, learn the limits of his tether.

These optimistic thoughts lulled him to sleep, a small bulwark against the despair that shrouded his heart. He ignored the icy ball in his stomach that would not go away, not even in the warmth of that flickering hope.

* * *