

Parchment – M. Willis

PARCHMENT



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616 AD

Aelfwine allowed his quill to hover above the ink he had prepared for the manuscript. Beside the inkwell, the vellum glowered. Its unbroken paleness was a threat. A calf had died for this. Its skin had been removed, scraped, prepared, dried, stretched and now fixed on the writing surface. All so he could ruin it. The silence of the new scriptorium joined the blankness of the page in threatening violence to his soul. The Word of God stood there too. All three waited for Aelfwine to find the audacity to mar them. He felt the fires of Hell on his toes.

A couple of breaths. A couple more, and his blood began to settle. Aelfwine allowed the words of the Gospel to circulate in his mind. At first, he just heard them. Then they formed letters and words that he could see. Eventually, in his mind, they settled on the page, around the space that would be left for illumination.

Very well then. Ink.

“You.” The voice in the chamber echoed off the high windows, the vaults of the ceiling. Aelfwine's heart contracted. Slowly, he put the quill down and stood, head down in deference as the others did the same. “You,” the voice said again. It was one of the Roman monks. Aelfwine recognised him vaguely – he wasn't in Canterbury much. A missionary. Paulinus? Or was it Justus? The monk made a noise in his chest, definitely aimed at Aelfwine. “Scribe. The Saxon.”

He turned. “Yes, Father. Sorry Father.”

“Come with me.”

“But the manuscript, Father.”

“Someone else will look after the Gospel. Come.”

Aelfwine heard the angel of the Lord singing in his soul. He followed the monk through the grounds of the small monastery to some private chambers. Rather well

appointed. Aelfwine had never seen so much gold. It took an act of will to prevent his mouth from falling open. The monk sat. Aelfwine did not.

“You are from the Saxon kingdom north of the Stour, are you not?” the monk said.

“Er, we... they are Angles, Father. But yes, I was born, and raised there for a time.”

“Do you write in their heathen language?”

Now it took an effort of will not to grind his teeth together. “Yes, Father.”

“I have been at the court of their barbarian king, Hraedwald.” the monk said. “Bishop Augustine had high hopes for the king when he converted, while visiting the court of Aethelbert. But now he keeps his Christian altar beside the heathen shrines, which he shows no willingness to dispose of. I have made little headway in ordering the Saxons to destroy their false gods.”

Aelfwine winced inwardly. He was committed to the new Christian God now, of course, since bishop Augustine's mission had bought him from the Frankish traders. People should be shown the majesty of God's love, of course. But he could not help react at the way this priest would trample over the ways of people who knew no better.

“How can I help, Father?” he asked, knowing the answer. Go back among your people. Those you have not seen since you were seized and sold at the age of twelve. Persuade them to kill the old gods and raise up the new.

But that was not it. “Hraedwald wants a scribe,” the monk said. “Not just any old half-educated savage with a few letters to inventory stores. No. He wants someone to write a manuscript.”

“A gospel, Father?” There were others who could write a script for a king, surely?

“No. That's just it. Not a holy text at all. Some lurid heathen work. A poem about battle and feats of arms. You have heard of it perhaps. Bee-wolf.”

“Beowulf, Father?”

“Yes. He wants it immortalised in script. I said the church would provide someone to write it down for them.”

Gods! The cycle of Beowulf. And he was to write it? But why would the Church submit to that? And didn't Hraedwald have Angle scribes? He opened his mouth once or twice without any sound coming out.

“Yes, the king was most impressed by our manuscripts. They don't have anything like that.” The Roman peered at him, eyes narrowed. “You're wondering why I, a minister of Our Lord, would consent to send a scribe to write a heathen poem?”

“Yes, Father. Er, that is to say, the Lord's ways are... are...”

“It is simple. It won't be a heathen poem when we've finished with it.”

Aelfwine travelled to Rendlesham with the next supply caravan for the Roman mission to the East Angles. With him went boxes of materials for making inks, a selection of quills, a case of wax tablets for taking notes and packets of vellum sheets, wrapped against the damp. Father Paulinus – or was it Justus? He still had no idea and how could he ask now? – had hoped to send Aelfwine for a time to listen to the tales and come back to Canterbury to write them. King Hraedwald, it seemed, had insisted on his epic being written in his own country, not the territory of some Kentish Saxon, especially now Aethelbert was dead, and Aethelfrith of Deira was overlord these days. The Lord only knew how he would manage to write a script fit for a king in this far country. Between the Anglian king and the Church, he would have to. At least he wouldn't have to deal too much with the latter for the time being. The Father had indicated he would restrict himself to paying the occasional visit. The mission to the East Angles had been stripped down to a few preachers, not even priests. And him.

The journey took an age. The Spring rains had turned the roads to mud, and the wagons and animals made heavy going. Aelfwine marvelled at ruined towns and villas that sprang out of the landscape every so often. Huge pillars and massive chunks of wall that must have been deposited there by giants. He used the time practising his English, composing poetic stanzas in his head.

*Wondrous is the foundation – the fates have broken
and shattered this city; the work of giants crumbles.*

*The roofs are ruined, the towers toppled,
frost in the mortar has fractured the gate,
torn and scoured, worn by the storm,
eaten through with age.*

The walls of Londinium, bigger than anything he had seen so far but much-patched and crumbling, came into view towards the end of the first week. They stayed there in that swarming, vast place for a day before heading North. They were in the kingdom of the East Saxons now, hoping their letters from various authorities would carry weight, hoping more that they weren't challenged. Or murdered and robbed. Mercifully the party moved on quickly, into land that became progressively flatter, lower-lying. Aelfwine began to remember things he did not know he had forgotten. The call of the wading-birds. The way the mists hung in the gentle hollows every morning. The lazy flap of a heron. The scent of the salt-marsh. Land and water were close in this country.

The road began to swing inland, and crossed a large river. This was now territory belonging to the East Angles. His people, whatever that meant. The land seemed fertile. Fields of crops and animals began to grow more plentiful. At the end of the second week, Cynefrith, one of the traders accompanying the caravan, pointed to a smudge of smoke, a cluster of forms on the horizon. "Rendlesham," the man said. Seat of King Hraedwald.

Rendlesham was not, as Aelfwine had been led to believe, the hovel of a barbarian warlord. It was a decent-sized town with a port on the river, crammed with trading vessels. The town surrounded a huge structure. Hraedwald's mead-hall. He could see its roof thrusting above all the houses. The beams of the gables extended above the ridge so they formed a great V against the sky. The thatch was new and shone gold when the sun broke through the clouds.

A young man in simple but fine clothes met them at the gate. "Where is the scribe?" he asked.

Aelfwine stepped forward, all hopes of hiding among the group and avoiding attention shattered.

“I am commanded to bring you before the King,” the young man said, ushering him toward the mead-hall. He introduced himself as Aedwin of Deira, Hraedwald's ward. A foreign prince to greet him? And to be taken straightaway to see the monarch? He had never even spoken to his own bishop. This was a strange world.

“I am to ensure you have all the materials and assistance you require,” Aedwin said as they walked, dodging between wagons of goods, passersby and knots of traders apparently negotiating deals in the street. “Tell me what you need. Pens?”

“Pens? Oh, I have quills.”

“Quills? Ah. We use reeds here. Then parchment? Inks?”

Aelfwine smiled, looked down, only partly to see where he was putting his feet. “Thankyou. I brought them from Canterbury.”

“Everything?” Aedwin frowned. “Why on earth bring everything all that way? We produce manuscripts here, you know?”

“You do? Oh, of course you do.” Aelfwine flushed. “I apologise, I...”

The young man smiled, though it was a little forced. “No need. You wouldn't be the first to come here, head full of Roman tales of the illiterate heathens covered in mud and animal skins. Well the Romans left and my people came and it's our country now, however much they might want to push their noses into our affairs.” He looked at Aelfwine and frowned. “But you're not Roman, are you? You're English. One of us.”

“Yes.” Aelfwine didn't feel like one of anything.

“Don't say much, do you? Come on, the King wants a word.”

The guards simply let Aedwin through without so much as a challenge. Aelfwine scuttled after him as he strode along the long benches, marvelling at the rows of shields and spears hung on the wall. At the far end, a cluster of people sat around the high table.

“There's a council in progress,” Aedwin whispered. “We should wait until we're called. I normally sit on the council,” he added, conspiratorially, “but I think they've been talking about me.”

They hung a little way off. Aelfwine stole a glance at the council. He could not immediately tell who was the king – the thought left him a little dizzy, though that might have

been the day's long travel followed by this. No-one was particularly grandly dressed. With a start, he realised that one of the group was a woman. Of the others, there were four or five fair-haired, stocky men of middle age, warrior-looking types Aelfwine thought, a young man, and an older man, tall, grey, imperious. He looked like the bishop did. That must be the king, Hraedwald Wuffingas.

One of the stocky men stood. "Come forward Aedwin," he said, and turned to Aelfwine. "And you, friend."

Aelfwine stood, mouth open, just a second too long, long enough to notice the beautiful gold and enamel emblem attached to the stocky fellow's tunic. Aedwin had taken two strides forward and knelt on the reed floor. Aelfwine scurried to catch up, and almost tripped. The light ripple of laughter from the council burned at his scalp.

Aedwin stood. "I introduce the scribe sent to us by Augustine in Canterbury," he said. "Er..."

Now it was Aedwin's turn to flush red as he looked at Aelfwine, whose name he had not asked.

"Aelfwine, your... er... my Lord. Son of..." The word was old and unfamiliar. He had not uttered it in half his life. "Hildraed, my Lord."

"You are welcome Aelfwine, son of Hildraed. I am delighted you have come to us." The king smiled, an open, genuine expression. A little of the knot in Aelfwine's chest relaxed.

"I should introduce my council," Hraedwald continued. "This is Wulfnod, my uncle, loremaster and chief adviser," he indicated the tall grey-hair, "Raegenhere, my son," – the young man – "and Olava, my queen." The warrior-types were introduced as Sigeward, Osbeorn and Leofric, East Angle thegns. "Aelfwine has, at my request, been sent to us by the Christian priests in Cantware to write a manuscript of the Beowulf cycle in the Roman style. I have directed Aedwin to provide anything the scribe might need. Only name it, Scribe Aelfwine."

The knot tightened again. "Uh... in Canterbury I worked in the scriptorium, my Lord. Might I ask if there is a place I might work? With good light, and a surface to fix the parchment on."

“Of course. A space in a workshop has been found for you. Aedwin will show you to it. I hope it's satisfactory, and you must let us know if anything is wanting.”

“Of course, my Lord.”

“You are English, Aelfwine.” It wasn't a question.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Might I ask how you came to be with the Romans in Cantware?”

It would always mark him. The act that had meant he would have no real home. “I was taken and sold by a war-band, in my childhood, my Lord. I ended up with Frankish merchants. When they found I had been learning to read and write I think they thought they could get more for me, so taught me my Latin letters, though I continued to write English, for myself. The priests bought me and set me to work in their scriptorium.”

A cloud passed over Hraedwald's face. “I am glad that the gods have brought you homeward to enrich the East Angles...” The mask of the king slipped, and the man was briefly visible beneath. “But Aelfwine, I am sorry to hear how you have been served. It is my hope that in time, though a mother should travel with her new-born child, she might go from coast to coast in this land without harm coming to her. Our people been too marked by war and strife, and the disorder that comes with it.”

“With Christ's blessing, my Lord.” Aelfwine felt a dart of panic as the words slipped out, but Hraedwald just smiled.

“Indeed. You are familiar with Beowulf?”

“Yes, my Lord. That is, I remember a little of the stories but I could not write the cycle from my own memory.”

“Of course, and that's why I wanted you to come here. The best song-tellers in the kingdom will perform for you. Starting tonight.”

The hall was so full that evening that Aelfwine thought all of Rendlesham must have squeezed in there, and probably half of the rest of East Anglia. He had brought a box of wax tablets and a stylus but found to his horror that Aedwin had placed him at the front with the nobles, and he dared not take notes.

Somehow, as the bard began to spin his song, Aelfrith felt odd sensations stirring. He seemed to know these tales, even though he did not remember ever having heard them before. For a brief moment of confusion, he realised after a short while that there was no line between good and evil as there were in all the texts he had become familiar with in the scriptorium. There were human men and women, sometimes more than human in their powers but never so in their failings. There were Danes and Geats and Swedes and Saxons, but none were exclusively the heroes of their history.

It was impossible, surely? God must be on the side of *someone*, and their adversary spurred by Satan? It had been drilled into him by the Father that the good characters were inspired by the Lord, and the evil were stuck in the devil-worshipping days of the past. How on earth was he to resolve it?

It wasn't even so simple as descent. Hraedwald's family had come from Geatland, Beowulf himself was of his people. Yet he also claimed descent from the Dane, Hrothgar, back to Scyld Syclding. Aelfwine stole a glance at the king. It doesn't matter, he realised. All humanity is in these tales. They had filled their ships with story as they had travelled over the water, and planted it in the soil here. They could not now be uprooted. The Eastern God was as distant as Rome, as the sky in which he lived. The Northern gods existed in the land, the water, the people, the seasons, the stories.

He turned his attention quickly back to the bard. He would need to remember this, and there was much more to come. Beowulf had arrived at the mead-hall, Heorot, to hear the tale of Hrothgar's ruin. The king had exiled Hraendel, greatest of his warriors for some sin, unsaid. Hraendel, vast of limb and vicious in battle, so unnatural of stature that some folk felt he must be born of god or goblin, found a home at the hall of Swedish ruler, Eadgils, and his Saxon queen Yrsa. But Hrothgar in a fit of fury, insisted Eadgils give up Hraendel and have him killed, or war would be his portion. Eadgils, at first thought to agree, fearing to fight, until Yrsa, wise counsellor that she was, advised the king of his duty.

She turned him from the false way of his feelings,

Asserting to Aedgils it was not noble

*For a King of such qualities to cut adrift,
Cast off his companion for gold's greed,
And love renounce, richer than treasures.
What king would walk away
From a fight for righteous reasons?
Suffer the straw-death safe in his hall,
While valiant men find their place in Vaelheull?*

*So war was upon the Swedes, weighing heavy,
Soon Hrothgar was hard-pressed by Eadgils and Hraendel.
But the Swedish king was killed in battle,
Surrounded and stabbed, he fell in the field.
Strong now was Yrsa, the Saxon queen,
Refusing still to submit and surrender.
Her half-god heir, Hraendel, cast-out by cowards,
Defeated every Danish champion, tore them
Limb-from-limb.*

Aelfwine realised with a jolt he had stopped trying to memorise the poem and had simply been swept up in its power. He gave up any hope of trying to retain the words, and settled for absorbing the story. The hall was rapt as the bard built the rhythm of the song up to a pitch. Beowulf, after a lengthy speech about the pride and honour of Geatland, challenged Hraendel, and the two grappled and fought for an entire day. So long did they hew at each other with their steel-forged swords that they blunted the blades, and began to wrestle instead. Eventually, by some trick, the Geatish hero got a grip on Hraendel's arm, and hauled it from its socket. Aelfwine winced as the muscles tore and the bone popped.

It was far too early to start writing of course, but Aelfwine was vibrating with energy, desire to get started. The written form began to take shape in his mind. It couldn't hurt to try for an introduction, surely? Aedwin showed him to his workshop, where all his equipment had been brought. All his euphoria evaporated when he unwrapped the first packet of parchment sheets.

“These aren't my pages!” he said, rifling through them. They were of poor quality, covered with blemishes and blotches, even perforations that would have to be stitched less they open into holes when the pages shrank. “It must be a mistake.”

How could you write a script for a king on these? He'd intended to keep the packets sealed for as long as possible against the damp, riverside air, but what if there had been more mistakes? He opened each one, and each was worse than the last. Clearly the last sections of skin to be salvaged from the beast.

“They gave you the wrong parchments?” Aedwin asked.

Aelfwine clutched his head in horror. “I spent weeks with the skins! Selected and scraped them myself. They were prime pages, the purest and whitest. Made sure they were as even as possible. How can I write for Lord Hraedwald on these?”

“It was a mistake?”

Aelfwine looked at Aedwin. “What else could it be?” But what else? Surely the church had not... stolen his pages? Substituted dross for the heathens?

No. Of course not. To even think it... His cheeks glowed, hot. That he, a poor sinner, might think that his betters... He was not worthy of their indulgence.

“How can I write for Lord Hraedwald on these?” he repeated, voice catching.

“Do not worry,” Aedwin said, smiling. The prince laid his hand on Aelfwine's arm. “We will find new hides. The finest. I will see to it. And do not trouble yourself about the preparation of the skins, we will stretch and scrape them. You need only concentrate on the words.”

Aelfwine tried to smile, and largely failed. The words! Oh heavens, there must be thousands of them. Tens of thousands.

Aedwin left to make enquiries about the animal hides, while Aelfwine brought out his wax tablets and belatedly sketched some notes on the poems he had heard the previous night.

There were to be many more tellings. Aelfwine felt the world of Beowulf and his allies and foes expanding within his mind until his skull began to pulsate with it and he thought he could retain no more. Some of the stories barely included Beowulf at all. Some very different tales felt as though they might have been the same story once, but diverged along whale-road and Watling Street until they barely recognised each other. In some stories Beowulf was a self-sacrificing hero, in others an arrogant brigand. Hrothgar and Aedgils, by turns, the noble lord or the power-crazed despot. How could one person write one version of this? Where was God to choose which tales were sacred and which profane?

Aelfwine rubbed the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger as he studied the diagram he had scratched onto a tablet, part family tree, part chronology. Good and selfless acts, defeating evil, could be attributed to the influence of the Good Lord. Acts of evil and cowardice to the Adversary, the Eater of Souls, whom the peoples of the old world unknowingly followed. But that way, one who shared God's love in one story might be cast down by Him in the next.

Aelfwine used the dreadful parchments from Canterbury to practise with. The priests would surely have him whipped for such waste, but they were in Cantware, two kingdoms away. Aedwin was as good as his word, and provided him with a wedge of beautiful creamy pages that the ink settled down onto as if it had always meant to be there. It almost felt as though the words were writing themselves.

617 AD

Christmastide passed. Aelfwine joined the celebrations in Rendlesham, throwing himself into them more than he should. The worship of Christ's birth was intermingled with rituals to recall the sun, and render the earth fertile in the coming season. It was straightforward. Joyful. Nothing moved in mysterious ways. Aelfwine enjoyed himself, and prayed for forgiveness.

He could wait no longer for the priests, and asked for an audience with the king to show him the first poem. Hraedwald called for him to come to the great hall and he went, knees shaking so much in his English breeches he half wished he was still wearing his monkish robes. The king studied the pages, running his finger down them, while Aedwin pointed out particular flourishes here and there. The king's brows rippled, in concentration or displeasure. The muscles in Aelfwine's hands began to hurt and it occurred to him to relax them.

To his surprise, the king grinned broadly and laughed. "Excellent poetry, Scribe Aelfwine. You really are one of us!" he said. He presented Aelfwine with a tiny gold ingot, the size of the end of Aelfwine's little finger, of the kind that would usually be hammered into a coin – a Cantish coin, or wherever the monks might trade. It was a thoughtful gift and more wealth than the scribe could ever have imagined owning. He could pay for the church at Cantware with it and have change left over. He would have to give it to the church, of course. He was permitted no possessions of his own, but for the while he, Aelfwine, lowest of creatures, was custodian of vast riches. This was a strange land.

Soon afterwards, he received word that Paulinus would be paying a visit. His heart turned to lead, and he redoubled his efforts to find ways to introduce the Word of the Lord into the poems. He should have the first two written out when the priest arrived.

News of the caravan's arrival reached Aelfwine a week later. He expected to be summoned to see the priest immediately, but no summons came. Unable to bear the anticipation any longer, he went out to look for the party. The streets were in more than usual turmoil, and he had to fight from the workshop district all the way to the gate. He overheard fragments of conversation along the way. The church party had arrived at almost the same time as a delegation from King Aethelfrith, heavily armed and many in number.

Cynefrith the trader called out to him as he crossed the main square. "Well met, scribe!" he laughed, showing the stumps of his teeth. "How have you fared in the land of the giants and barbarians?"

"Well, thankyou. That is," he felt himself blushing, "there are no giants nor barbarians that I have seen."

Cynefrith laughed uproariously. “Will you be coming back with us?”

“Oh, I don't think so. I'm not nearly finished. Though it is for Father Paulinus to command.”

“Ah. Well he's locked up with the king and queen. Oh, he didn't like that! Wanted to see Hraedwald alone but the king insisted. Word is, Hraedwald's in no hurry. He'll talk to the priest as long as he wants and keep the Northumbrians waiting. We shan't see Father Paulinus for days.

“Oh.” The knot of tension tightened further. Knowing the priest was here, yet not knowing what he might order? What he would think of the manuscripts? It was beyond bearing. He sloped back to his workshop.

Aedwin was waiting for him. But the brightness that usually accompanied the young man was absent. His face looked as grey as Wulfnod's hair.

“Is everything well?” Aelfwine asked when they had exchanged greetings.

Aedwin pursed his lips. “I would it were. You saw the delegation from my homeland?”

Aelfwine admitted he had heard about it.

“Do you know how I came to be here?”

“No, my Lord. That is, I have heard some tales, but not the full truth.”

“Neither have I, if it comes to that. My mother were forced to flee Deira when I was a child. My father's line was one of kings, and Aethelfrith of Bernicia, who is king of all Northumbria, feared the strength of that line. We went to Mercia. I was even to marry the king's daughter,” he smiled, weakly, and looked away. “By my eighteenth summer, spies and assassins were found in the Mercian court. My mother feared that Aethelfrith's influence over the Mercians might lead to them turning us over, or looking the other way while we were murdered. We had to leave. Hraedwald took us in. We owe him everything.”

So that was it. “What do Aethelfrith's envoys want?” Aelfwine asked.

“Me. Twice Aethelfrith has sent messengers with offers of vast riches in return for surrendering me. Twice has Hraedwald turned them away. It seems the latest has threatened war on the Wuffing kingdom if I am not given up.”

“Oh.” Aelfwine's stomach knotted. Surely Hraedwald would not betray Aedwin? But a Christian king should desire peace above all things. And did not our Lord give himself up that others might live? “But... but he has offered you sanctuary? Is that not sacrosanct?”

“Aethelfrith is the overlord of Angleland. Hraedwald owes him fealty. And he has a powerful army. Word of his great victory over the Britons at the City of Legions came but recently. If Hraedwald refuses, he risks everything. His entire kingdom, his line... how many people might suffer?”

The world spun and dipped around Aelfwine's head. “But if you left Rendlesham. Left East Anglia.” His voice sounded oddly high in his ears. “There must be somewhere you could go that was safe? If Hraedwald didn't know where you'd gone, he couldn't be punished.”

“Perhaps,” Aedwin said. At that moment he seemed utterly weary.

Aelfwine's thoughts came at a furious rate. Some of the traders were leaving for Canterbury tomorrow. They could smuggle Aedwin out. Cantware might not be far enough but if it came to it, they could cross the sea to Francia, or even back to the ancestral lands. He could arrange it. There would be someone he could trust? It would only cost him gold. And what was gold to him? It was not his, of course, but what the church had never seen it could not miss. He took his leave from Aedwin and searched Rendlesham.

In a mead-house he found Cynefrith. The little trader looked delighted to see him, though the scent of honey and something astringent on his breath suggested the root of his joy may be elsewhere. Aelfwine rattled out his plan. Cynefrith laughed and rattled out excuses. Then Aelfwine opened his hand. The tiny ingot sat there like a ship on a broad lake. Cynefrith's eyes widened, he said not another word, picked up the ingot and left. Aelfwine was not sure who he was betraying most. The king, the church, the Lord. He might burn in any number of hells. But Aedwin would live. Next to that, what were eternal flames of damnation?

Despite his breaking of more commandments than he cared to identify, Aelfwine slept easily that night. He rose two hours before daybreak as usual to say his prayers, and perhaps break his fast if there was time, before starting work as soon as the first lick of sun painted the windowframes.

Aedwin safe. That was all that mattered. He bent to his work once more.

Until a familiar voice greeted him. “Good morning, Scribe.”

His heart plummeted. Aedwin. Still here! Aelfwine felt his meagre breakfast rising in his throat. He swallowed it back, trying to choke out a greeting.

The prince sat. “I have a most unusual tale to tell.”

“Oh?” Aelfwine felt his eyes pricking with salt.

“Indeed. A mysterious, hooded stranger came to me in the night offering to take me away.”

“Oh?”

“To a place where the power of neither king could reach me.”

“Oh.”

“That very night, in fact.”

“Oh. You did not go, then?” It came out almost as a howl.

Aedwin smiled, warmly. “No. I could not. Cannot. The pact so kind a king as Hraedwald held out to me, I cannot break. He has shown me no evil or loathing, despite the ruin I might bring upon him. If I am to suffer death, better it be at the hands of a Lord I love than a more ignoble man.”

Of course. These Angles held honour in high esteem. They would never flee.

“There is one more thing,” Aedwin said.

“Oh?”

The prince laughed. “Is that all you can say this morning? Have you emptied all your fine words onto parchment and have none left for your friend? No matter. The hooded stranger told me to give you this.” Aedwin placed a tiny, gleaming square on the edge of Aelfwine's table.

The next day, Paulinus summoned him. He gathered up his pages and hurried to the chapel.

The priest greeted him cursorily. Aelfwine knelt on the reed floor and kissed Paulinus' ring. He stammered an explanation of the difficulty of pinning down the stories among the

variations, apologised profusely that only two poems were yet ready, and offered the manuscript. The priest looked at the script, did not take it.

“These are not the pages we sent you with.”

“No, Father, the Angles were good enough to provide me these.” He hung his head. “There had been a mistake. The parchments I had prepared were not there. Instead there were poor ones, pocked and blemished.”

“I know. I could not allow such fine skins as you had taken to be wasted on these brigands' tales. I had them substituted.”

Aelfwine's mouth fell open. It was true! He had been betrayed!

Yet what was his pride? A sin. He must not blame the priest. The priest was doing God's work. Wasn't he?

“No matter. If the Saxon rabble want to waste their own parchments, they may.” He huffed and looked Aelfwine in the eye. “I cannot read this heathen scrawl. Translate it for me.”

Aelfwine transferred the story to Latin as best he could in the flickering candlelight, though it sounded clumsy in that tongue. The rhythm and the alliteration had all gone, and the lines no longer scanned. It took some time. He reached the end of the second poem, after Beowulf had defeated Hraendel and gone with his Geats to the hall of Olava, where she had been despoiled and died, after giving a speech denouncing the ignoble behaviour of the so-called heroes and causing Beowulf great guilt about his actions, after which he had prayed to the Lord for forgiveness and guidance. Aelfrith was proud of that part, until he remembered pride was a sin.

“No,” said Paulinus. “It won't do. You'll have to change it.”

What? Change the story? He had added the Christian elements just as Paulinus had asked, but to actually reinvent the tales? That couldn't be what the priest meant. “You want me to... alter the story, Father? Which parts?”

The expected rebuke for stupidity did not arrive, at least not in the way Aelfwine expected. “Of course I'm asking you to alter it. The Saxon queen is unacceptable. Write her out. No, she is allied to this monstrous Grendel, isn't she?” the priest said. Aelfwine had to

force himself not to wince at Paulinus' inability to pronounce the simplest English word.

“Make her his mother.”

“But... Father, these are the Angles' stories, we can't just change them can we?”

“You said there are numerous versions, did you not?”

“Well, yes Father. But on these aspects all agree.”

Paulinus' face was like a thundercloud. He ground his teeth. “The word of God is immutable. Only the word of God. These heathen tales are nothing to Him. I say this Saxon queen is unacceptable. She allies herself with monsters, so it stands to reason that she is monstrous, yes?”

“Er. I suppose-”

“And a character like this Grendel. If he is as hideous and deformed as the story says, he must have been cursed by God. He cannot be virtuous in any way. The storytellers must be mistaken. In fact we are restoring the true version to reveal his villainy.”

“Father.” He didn't know whether to laugh or groan that Paulinus had failed to notice that Rendlesham, the very town where he stood, was named for the exiled hero. ‘Grendel’ it would be then...

“And the Danish king. He is wicked? That won't do.”

“In this poem, Father. In others, he acts nobly, and the King of the Swedes, or the Geats is the enemy.”

“Hmm.”

“Father?”

“It suits our purpose to regard the Danish king as more... consistently virtuous.”

“I don't understand, Father.”

“You don't have to understand, Scribe. Suffice to say that the Danes have submitted to a mission. The Swedes remain steadfast devil-worshippers. I wish you to concentrate on the Christian virtues of the Danes. In order to throw into relief the good example of the current king. I want to see Hrothgar as virtuous and Grendel and this queen as monstrous. Rewrite it.”

“Yes, Father.” Aelfwine was about to turn to leave, when Paulinus held out his arms. Dumbly, the scribe handed over the manuscript and watched as the priest held the first page to a candle in a sconce in the wall. The page seemed to resist at first, but then Aelfwine saw the fire begin to glow through the translucent sheet. White flames caressed the parchment. It seemed almost gentle until the surface started to brown, then blacken, curl up and crack. Page after page followed the first. Aelfwine's heart burned with them. By the time he was finally allowed to leave, he was merely a thin hide filled with ash.

At his workshop, the whiteness of the page was a threat. He could not mar it. Aelfwine carefully removed the Angle parchment, fixed one of the dreadful Cantish ones, and began writing, sloppily, uncaring.

The next morning, Aedwin arrived just after daybreak again. His old confidence was back, but not the easy smile. “Have you heard? You won't have heard, of course. There's going to be a war. Hraedwald sent the heralds away. He refused all Aethelfrith's demands. Olava spoke for me. And your priest is livid about this, I can tell you.” He began pacing up and down. “The Romans want peace with us and Northumbria, you see. He wanted Hraedwald to send me back, but Lady Olava was determined that he should keep his word. Paulinus accused him of pride!”

“Oh.”

“Anyway. He's stopped trying to get around Hraedwald and even Raegenhere. I gather he's been hanging around the king's nephew, making all kinds of flattering noises.”

“Aethelric?”

“No, Aethelwald. But he doesn't have any influence. There'll be war all right. Of course, Paulinus was delighted at Aethelfrith smashing the British. But do you know, it's said he slaughtered a thousand priests? We all thought the church would give its blessing to Hraedwald for avenging Aethelfrith's massacre. But the priest was delighted! They were British Christians who died, you see, not the Roman sort. Paulinus said that Augustine had uttered a curse against the heretic priests, and Aethelfrith was doing God's work. I can't understand it. I just can't.”

Aelfwine looked up at him. It felt as if he were standing at the end of a long tunnel.

“What's the matter?” Aedwin asked.

“Paulinus was unhappy with my work. He burned the pages.”

Aedwin's eyes stretched.

“*Burned* them? How many?”

“All of them.”

“All of them? Gods, Aelfwine, that was eight moons work! More!”

“I know.”

“But why? They looked very fine to me. Very fine indeed!”

“That wasn't it,” Aelfwine mumbled. “There was evil in the words. It had to be destroyed.”

“Oh. I'm sorry, Aelfwine. This priest...” Aedwin went to speak again but stopped, perhaps thinking better of it.

“It's all right. Will you be going to war?”

“Yes.”

All that had happened, and now Aedwin was going away. And what if they lost? Or Aedwin was killed. Misery settled on him like the morning mist over the land. “How long will you be gone?”

“From you? Not at all.” The smile was back, briefly. “Hraedwald wants you to come with us. To record the events.”

Going to war? “Will Paulinus be coming? Or any of the preachers?”

“No! Paulinus is cutting short his visit to show his displeasure.”

“How far will we go?”

“A long way.”

“Good.”

There were offerings to the gods, the omens were good. There was also a mass, of sorts.

Hraedwald prepared his ship for the journey, and Aelfwine and Aedwin went to the docks to see the work. Aelfwine was astonished. The vessel was vast. Surely it would have

taken a forest of trees to build! Its bow and stern swept gracefully to a point at each end, a blade aimed at any enemies heart. Rapidly it was being fitted out for war – shields fitted to the flanks to protect the rowers from arrows, a great mast and yard stepped to carry a sail, spears, bows and swords loaded amidships. It was not just Hraedwald's flagship – a dozen smaller vessels were also being prepared. The king had called his thegns and every day more men arrived from the towns and villages, armed for battle, ready for the long voyage North.

*Skimming on the sea, well-found the war-fleet,
Hraedwald's great hull washed over the waves,
Curving round the coast, the winds were welcome.
The gods favoured Hraedwald, held him high,
close-hauled his course, laid for Lindissi.
Running upriver, the stout sea-cutter
Swapped sails for oars, overhauling tides.*

*At Lincoln the whale-road ran dry.
Onward the army went on foot,
In good order, going to seek battle.
At the River Idle Aethelfrith's host encamped,
Fortified in ditch-and-bank they were formed.
Hraedwald hailed Aethelfrith, challenged his champions,
Withdraw your warriors, stand-down your spear hordes,
Aedwin reprieve and call off your claim,
Pardon the prisoner, protected by me, or
Face your foe, ferocious on the field.*

Aelfwine looked down the slope from the low hill where the baggage train had halted, and he had been left with the old men, and those who had fallen sick on the road. He could

see the square earthen fort by the river, manned by Aethelfrith's army, while a row of spearmen stretched across the front of it, like a flesh fence. Fears that the Northern army would easily outmatch that of East Anglia seemed unfounded. Hraedwald's force seemed half as big again, at least. Yet this was a battle-hardened foe, one to be feared.

He could see three groups on Hraedwald's side, each a line several men deep, the king's own force in the centre, and a column on each flank, reaching round the sides of the enemy force. Even from a safe distance, Aelfwine could make out the fluttering banners, the forest of spear-tips. Occasionally a flash of sun on metal reached his eyes. He imagined it might be the shining war-helm Hraedwald wore, moulded in metal, a mask of silver. It could just be weapons, of course.

Aedwin had explained to him about shield-walls – the collision of armies in one huge mass, the thrusting of sword and spear, the clash of shields. But before the two forces had time to join, a wedge of men seemed to dart out of the Northumbrian line, straight at the centre of Hraedwald's column where the banners were thickest. Soon, the battlefield was a mass of men, rippling, swelling and contracting like a flock of starlings in the early evening.

The sun began to set, and Aelfwine realised with a jolt that the river had turned a deep red where it reflected the Western sky. Aedwin was down there. He might be dead, and I wouldn't know, Aelfwine thought. But I would know. He couldn't just be gone and the world not change.

The silent, battling mass was closer to the river, now he looked. Was that a good thing? Some of the others around him were standing now. “He's done it!” Someone said. “Hraedwald's won!”

“King of the East Angles and overlord of the Angles and Saxons,” someone else said.

“Don't start stitching the banners just yet,” another growled. “I've seen battles where a king won the field and lost his life.”

That cast a pall over things and they fell back into silence. As the light began to fail, the field had stopped convulsing. Whatever had happened was over. Before long, they heard the sound of marching feet, the rattle of war-gear, distant, but coming closer. A sickness took hold in Aelfwine's stomach. But the advancing men answered the guard's hails. Angles.

Hraedwald had won! Then why did they sound so sombre? Was it as the old soldier had said? Hraedwald dead?

No. Raegenhere, Hraedwald's son and heir, had died in the first charge, when Aethelfrith had almost broken the Angles' line. Aedwin lived. And, as Aelfwine realised from the gossip around him, he was now King of Northumbria. Aelfwine felt as though the Lord had split him down the middle, and filled one half with joy that his friend was alive and had been so richly rewarded for his faith – and the other half with gloom that he might soon part from him forever.

The voyage back to Rendlesham was muted. No-one felt delight that it had come to this. Aethelfrith had broken faith, and been punished, but Hraedwald's victory had cost him dear. Aelfwine had seen Aedwin only briefly before the prince had gone to take up his crown, along with a bodyguard that had once belonged to Raegenhere. Aelfwine's workshop felt dead, inanimate, on his return. Who cared about writing on paper now? What did it matter to anyone? Life was short, and what lay beyond, uncertain.

But he had a task to fulfil. The bastardised version of the first two poems wrote itself from a corner of Aelfwine's soul. The rest was given over to grief. He could fail either the priests or the king. He cared little which. Each morning his spirits rose a little in anticipation until he remembered that Aedwin would not be coming to see him. He was ruling another kingdom, half a world away. Now the king's son was dead, Aelfwine no longer knew if the king even cared about his words. He wrote, but his soul no longer painted the pages. More poems were completed. He received two more ingots, but no more audiences with the king. The gold remained in the bottom of his box of reed pens.

One morning, around the time Aedwin used to drop by, Aelfwine felt the same old anticipation. Before it had time to fade into bitterness, he realised a figure was standing in the doorway. He looked up.

“My Lady Olava!” He leapt up, and prostrated himself on the floor, wishing he had swept the reeds more assiduously.

“Please get up, Master Scribe,” the queen said. “I'm not your bishop.”

Aelfwine looked up. She was smiling. Almost laughing. Dumbly, he gestured to the milking stool that Aedwin always used to sit on. She sat.

“What can I do for you, My Lady?”

“Write,” she said. “Write the way you did when you got here. These scripts you have been writing. They may please the priests, but they are not our Beowulf.”

“I am sorry, my Lady.”

Olava smiled. “Don't apologise. You have come to us by a long road and strange path. The world is changing. The ways of the bards are giving way to square pages and lines of script. But our people and our land from the time of the migration and before is in the tales, and the old gods and heroes are there too. We need them now, more than ever.”

Aethelfrith looked at the ground. He didn't know what to say. His soul had been bought for the Eastern Lord. But it belonged to the East Angles. He was destined for one hell or the other.

“The life of a man is like a sparrow in a storm, flying through the king's hall. For a brief moment he comes out of the turmoil, and quickly into it again. We see only the passage through the hall. What comes before and after, we cannot know. If anyone understands the wyrd of the warriors, Scribe, it is you.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“Write my people, Master Scribe. Write your people.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

The queen rose to leave. “Thankyou. Oh, and King Aedwin of Northumbria wishes to inform you of the great love he holds for Master Scribe, and hopes that he may speak with him again should Master Scribe find time to visit him in his mead-hall.”

Aelfwine prostrated himself again. “Thankyou, My Lady. Thankyou.”

Aedwin's love! Greater than gold. Reward enough for all the hells. The twisted, confused poems were sent to Canterbury with rough Latin translations. On smooth, white Rendlesham parchment, the epics of the heroes were written. Beowulf's three battles, the tales of Hrólfr Kraki, the poet Widsith, and the victories of king Hraedwald of East Anglia.

Aelfwine created them and presented them to the king. They were read out at the turning points of the years. Hraedwald presented Aelfwine with one more ingot.

624 AD

The ship, Hraedwald's great hull, carved a furrow in the sandy soil of the burial ground. The vast crowd of men, thegns and aeldormen, soldiers and traders, young and old, heaved on ropes wrapped around its robust ribs. The wave-cutter left the whale road, climbing the earth. Hraedwald, his hall now empty, his last battle behind him, lay in the ship's waist, arms and riches around him. At his right hand, a purse of whalebone and enamel, the work of Rendlesham's best craftsmen. In it were coins from across the known world, gold and silver. And four, tiny gold ingots. The king's loremaster had placed them there, along with copies of the great songs he had written out in his Latin style.

Aelfwine watched the ship scraping closer to its earth-coffin, graceful prow lurching in its death-throes. He had neither the strength nor the desire to man a rope. As loremaster, it would not become him. He sensed, rather than saw, the new king nearby, and his hand closed on the scrap of parchment that bore his fate. A dictum from the priests at Canterbury calling for the return of their scribe to answer charges of satanic writings. Hraedwald refused, had shown Aelfwine the summons, dictated a reply to be written in Aelfwine's own hand, in English. Hraedwald's nephew, the new king's brother, had urged otherwise. The priests protested. Hraedwald sent them away. The Roman altar remained in the hall of the Gods, but no mass was heard there in these days.

The ship edged into the pit that had been scraped for it, nosing downward. It would sail in among the burial mounds of Hraedwald's ancestors. Soon it would float on a sea that none could name. Carrying its royal passenger to an unknown hall to his far faring with his finest goods, that were no longer of any use to the living. His gold and silver war-helm, rested by his side for future battles in the hall of Waelheall.

King Aethelric gave the order. The cabin was closed over the old overlord. He was never seen again. The earth was heaped over it, and eventually a vast mound stood in the

field, dominating its neighbours, proud against the horizon from the river where every traveller would see it and know of Hraedwald's greatness. A salt flood flowed from Aelfwine's eyes, a vain hope to float the ship again on a sad sea, and he looked away.

634 AD

Aelfwine thought the priest looked young. But then, most people looked young to him these days. Perhaps it was that his eyes, long failing from years staring at ink flowing precisely onto parchment, did not see the wrinkles any more. Or perhaps his soul was old. Soon it would go to one hell or another.

The youthful priest glanced around, and even with the state of his eyes, Aelfwine could see the fear. To him, this was an evil place. “Do you renounce your apostasy?”

“I did as I should,” Aelfwine said. “I will be judged by others than you.”

“Renounce, and you can have a Christian burial in the precincts of the new church,” the priest said. His voice rose. “King Aethelwald has permitted it. If you don't, you'll be put in the ground in this pagan soil and your soul will burn in the flames of hell for eternity.”

“The life of a man is like a sparrow in a storm flying through My Lord Hraedwald's hall. He comes out of the turmoil but briefly, and soon returns to it. No-one can know what happens to him before and after. Do what you came to do, priest. I'm ready.”

The priest nodded to one of the heavysset men who had dragged Aelfwine from his workshop. The man waddled to the edge of the hole in the soil – Aelfwine presumed they'd done that to intimidate him, or perhaps save a little time - clutching a large bundle of parchment pages. He dropped the sheets. Most of them went into the hole with a thud that gave Aelfwine a little satisfaction. His life's work was not so very insubstantial. A few drifted off the main pile as it fell, and settled outside the pit. They fluttered away on the breeze, and no-one made any attempt to recover them. It took them some minutes to strike a flame, and longer to persuade the pages to catch. The flames caressed the white sheets, almost gently. Then, like anything that loves too strongly, they began to destroy. The parchment resisted, but eventually, it was reduced to a blackened pile of scraps, glowing orange around the edges.

If he only could have seen Aedwin one last time. The priests had forbidden another journey North, and after they had gone there was never the time. Always something else to attend to. Aelfwine looked around the land, wondering how long it could live with its soul destroyed. He had no more tears for it, and few for himself. Then the rope tightened on his neck. He did not think he would struggle, but he did. Slowly though, the feeling that his head had swelled to twice its size and his skull was being split from within, passed. The darts stabbing at his chest eased. The last thing he saw was Hraedwald's burial mound spotted with stars, and then his soul passed out of the quiet hall and into the storm.