

HOSTAGE OF THE HEART

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HISTORICAL NOTE

By the mid-11th century, England was the diamond in the crown of European kingdoms. Its harvests were good, its trade advancing, internal dissenters were few. Yet a current of unease coursed through the land. Edward the Confessor, king for twenty-four years, had no heir to take his place on the throne. Across the seas, the greedy eyes of Norway and Normandy watched, and waited.

On 5 January 1066 Edward died. Amidst speculation and controversy, Harold Godwinson, the most powerful earl in the country, was offered the crown and, in unseemly haste, was enthroned the next day.

Both Harald Hardrada of Norway and William of Normandy were incensed by what they saw as a flagrant breach of previously sworn promises. They began building ships ready to take by force of arms what each believed was rightfully theirs. By September, both fleets were ready. All that was needed was a favourable wind. When it came, it came from the north.

Harald Hardrada's distinctive longships were sighted in the Humber, and the English militia, the fyrd, was raised and marched towards York to do battle in defence of the kingdom. They came from all parts of northern England, but none answered the call as quickly as the lesser nobility, eager to prove themselves loyal to the new king. One such man was Edwulf, thegn of a small estate on the borders of northern Wales. When he and his men marched east, what befell his household would not readily be forgotten.

CHAPTER ONE

Dena looked up from her embroidery and out over the dusty yard. Her gaze traced the rutted lane as it wound down the bank, through the palisade and over the defence ditch, towards the narrow fields beyond. Women, bent double with the weight of corn on their backs, were shuffling towards the wooden hall and its adjacent buildings, their children following, each carrying some burden, however small.

Pursing her lips, trying to reconcile the sight before her with her ever-increasing sense of guilt, Dena stole a glance at the richly dressed woman beside her. Never to be seen in workaday clothing, Ethelin had no eyes for the labours of her people. Her attention was fixed on the partly completed banner on her lap, and Dena watched her smile as she fingered the delicate stitches. Her opinion would get short shrift from her aunt, but her conscience kept goading her to voice it.

‘We should help with the harvesting,’ she said. ‘With all the able-bodied men gone with Edwulf to rally at the king’s standard, there aren’t enough people left to work in the fields.’

‘I’ve told you, Dena, it’s below your station to harden your hands with such a task. Until you are found a husband, your place is to be at my side as companion.’

Ethelin didn't even raise her eyes from her needlework as she spoke, and Dena let a terse sigh of frustration escape her.

'You must learn patience, girl. King Harold will reward our lord when this upstart Norwegian has been routed from our shores, just as the late King Edward did in return for our lord's services. I'll ensure that part of it goes towards raising your marriage settlement. Edwulf will gain prestige at court if you marry well—' Ethelin's head inclined slightly '—and you *will* marry well. Those puppets are quick to sneer at my lord because his wealth is not inherited, but when the banner rises above the king, Edwulf is first beneath it. Remember that with pride.'

It was well to speak of prestige at court, but Dena felt it had little to do with the matter in hand. 'Edwulf won't be happy if he returns to find that it has rained before the crops are in and the harvest ruined.'

Ethelin shot her a piercing look, and Dena knew that she should keep her tongue. Edwulf's young wife might not be the best of female company, but she certainly understood the politics of marriage brokering, and she was all that Dena had since she'd been forced to seek shelter with her uncle on her father's death.

She'd never met Edwulf before that day, nor learned a great deal about him from her father. Her only uncle remained a shadowy figure in her thin list of relatives, and although her father wouldn't be drawn, Dena had gained the impression that in their younger days the two brothers had held little love for each another, finally travelling their separate ways long before she'd been born, or either had taken a wife. Ethelin was Edwulf's third wife. She'd been told the second had died in childbirth. The first was never mentioned. Dena could understand that.

When the coughing sickness had taken her father from her, she'd felt desperately alone. With creditors clamouring at the door, she'd been left with no option other than to seek the protection of her uncle, or to gain entry to a nunnery. But without funds or income to cushion her entry, a nunnery would have been a pitiable choice for one in the first flush of womanhood.

The first sight of Edwulf had made Dena wish she'd chosen a nunnery. He was shorter than her father had been, but powerfully built, with deep-set eyes all but hidden beneath a fierce growth of hair and eyebrows. He growled often and hardly ever seemed in a bright humour, apart from feast days when he drank more than was good for anyone. But the people didn't fear him, and since her arrival in the late winter, Dena had come to realise that his growling was his normal manner and not to be taken too seriously.

In such a household she would have felt alone and rejected except for the friendliness shown her by Wybert, Edwulf's steward, who kept the day-to-day routine of the estate running smoothly. He was older than Edwulf, a trusted friend and adviser for many years, she'd been told. He was very tall, Dena believed almost a giant, with a great breadth across the shoulders. He had a shock of iron-grey hair and blue eyes that melted like a summer sky. For all his advancing years, his body was still rigid with muscle, for he practised his weapons with Edwulf daily and did, indeed, live up to his name of Wybert the Bear. It had been plain to all that he'd taken badly to Edwulf's command to stay at the estate and not join his march to the king's standard, but it seemed commonsense to Dena. Someone had to run Edwulf's lands, and Ethelin had no mind for it.

She'd been surprised when she'd first arrived not to be allowed the freedom of the estate that she had enjoyed at her father's farm. It was dangerous to go beyond the palisade, Ethelin had told her. The Welsh raided for cattle and sheep and would not be above carrying off a woman if they were given the chance. So Dena remained within the hall's defences, a caged bird yearning for the freedom she could enjoy only in Wybert's company. Under his protection she could go riding, visit the people at the tun, Edwulf's northern outpost, see the

spectacular waterfall to the south of the hall, pick wild fruits at the edge of the forest, all the things Edwulf's ceorls could do, but she, because of her *station*, could not.

Close to tears one day after a particularly cold rebuff from Edwulf, she'd confided in Wybert her wish that her uncle could be more like him. The steward had placed a comforting arm round her shoulders.

'You must remember,' he'd said, 'that Edwulf is a fighting man in the old tradition. The land, the animals, the people — all this is his wealth, but he is never happier than when he has a sword in his hand.'

That Dena couldn't deny. When news of the Norwegian invasion had reached the estate, it was as though Edwulf had been bewitched. All the people had been gathered into the hall where he gave a rousing battle-speech that would have lifted even the faintest of hearts. Before the day was through, he had the freely given allegiance of every man present and ensured that all were equipped with the best weapons available, be it a spear or plain cudgel. Beneath his banner they had marched east the very next morning, leaving their loved ones tearfully proud, yet fearful, to listen to the dimly echoing drumbeats drifting on the breeze.

'I hope there will be time to get this finished before my lord returns triumphant,' Ethelin mused, inspecting the stitchwork of the banner in her hand. 'He's been gone four days already. Surely that will be time enough to get the men to York?'

Dena did not reply. She didn't share Ethelin's enthusiasm for the rigours of the battlefield, nor her blinkered view of the prestige and honour to be gained there. Men died. Limbs could be severed in a single blow, skulls crushed beneath the hooves of terrified horses — and these Norwegians, weren't they the sons of the Norsemen who'd viciously plundered the land long ago? She recalled the terrifying tales spun by the travelling story-tellers during the long winter evenings of her childhood. Could it all be about to happen again?

'Dena?'

Her thoughts flew back to the moment, and she couldn't help blushing when she found Ethelin peering at her curiously.

'You look so pale. Do you fear Edwulf will not return?' The thought made Ethelin chuckle. 'Poor Dena! He may be your father's brother but, from what I've heard, there could never have been two sons so opposite in temperament. I mean no disrespect to your father's memory, Dena, but Edwulf revels in the chase, in pitting strength against strength. Everything he owns has been gained through force of arms. Wasn't the land which feeds us wrested from the hands of the barbaric Welsh? Have you never listened to the minstrel's songs?'

Dena turned her face away in embarrassment, and Ethelin laughed at her niece's discomfort.

'Some will die in the battle; no doubt some from this estate, but not Edwulf.'

'No,' admitted Dena. 'I can't see you in widowhood yet.'

She could see others, though, others Ethelin held no concern for. Ethelin never addressed the people by their individual names, only by their occupations. She even referred to Wybert as 'the Steward', and he was Edwulf's lifelong friend. Dena had seen him cast dark looks in Ethelin's direction after she'd arrogantly directed him as though he were her servant, but if he'd ever complained to Edwulf, Dena knew nothing of it. Perhaps Wybert realised that his words would fall on stony ground.

For all their difference in age, Edwulf doted on his wife and she on him, though more than once Dena had found herself wondering uncharitably if Ethelin loved the many gifts he bestowed on her more than the man himself. The attention she paid him in front of guests seemed a little too affected to Dena's untutored eyes, but who was she to judge what passed for love between a man and a woman? She'd spent her years in a sad household. Her father hadn't taken another wife after Dena's mother had died. Dena had always believed that her company had been enough for him, but since coming to live on Edwulf's estate, she couldn't

help thinking that, perhaps, she'd been but a shadow in her father's life, a shadow which had constantly reminded him of the dead wife he'd loved so much. Whatever she thought of Ethelin, Dena had to agree that compared with Edwulf, her father had been a crushed and desolated man.

Ethelin laid down her embroidery and stretched her slim legs until her slippered feet peeped beneath her green ankle-length kirtle. 'I tire of this,' she groaned, 'and the day is long and hot.' Shielding her eyes with her hands, she looked up into the bright September sky and snorted irritably. 'The sun is at its zenith, yet we sit here without food. Is the cook, too, working in the fields?'

Dena winced at her tone and rose stiffly from her stool. 'I'll go to the kitchen and ask about the delay.'

'It will be I who shall go,' Ethelin retorted. 'With your mild manner, we shall still be waiting when darkness overtakes us.'

Dena returned to her seat with an inaudible sigh. As she watched Ethelin strut forcefully through the open doorway of the hall, she felt sorry for Osyth and the other over-worked women trying to divide their time between harvesting in the fields and feeding the tired workers. She'd never sat idly and watched others toil in her father's household, and she found it hard to do so in Edwulf's.

She tried to direct her attention to her embroidery, but her concentration had gone and she let her eyes wander over the countryside which made up Edwulf's estate. Sitting against the stout log wall of the hall, it would have been an inspiring view if the land had looked a little more hospitable. The hall had been built on the site of an ancient hillfort, and Edwulf had saved labour by using the course of the original defences. Although the ditches had been re-dug and a new palisade erected, the old vitrified stonework could still be seen in some quarters. Wybert had taken great pains to point them out to her when Dena had first arrived. As far as he was concerned, Edwulf couldn't have improved on the original defensive design, but Wybert was made in the same mould as his lord and admired a keen military mind. All Dena could see were mass fortifications, the like of which her father's farmstead had neither seen nor needed.

It was a hard land compared with the rolling meadows of her childhood, all high moor and forest-cloaked vales, the tiny fields hacked from the waste, shining yellow now through the dark green foliage of tree and thicket. It was not a land Dena would have willingly chosen to make a home in, but perhaps she was only seeing it through a woman's eyes. Besides, her stay would be short. She had been made welcome by both Ethelin and Edwulf, but neither hid the fact that they were anxious for her to make a good match to boost their own standing. To Ethelin, at least, gaining prestige at court seemed to be her one goal in life. Dena knew that she should feel no animosity towards her aunt for that. Marriage, after all, was a business arrangement. It was doubtful whether Ethelin had set eyes upon Edwulf before the pledging papers had been signed, and there was love between them now. Still, for all his gruff manner, Edwulf was the sort of man a young woman might warm to. Such considerations could be over looked in the choosing of her spouse, especially when the matter of prestige ranked so highly.

Dena shrugged away her thoughts. There was no point in fretting over something that might never happen. She turned her eyes towards the women carrying corn towards the hall, expecting to see the same slow toil she had been witnessing all morning. Instead, there was confusion. Burdens were being thrown aside and children swept up into their mothers' protective arms. Everyone was running up the lane towards the hall, some waving their hands above their heads, others shouting an inaudible warning.

Dena raised herself from her stool, letting the embroidery slip from her lap to lie on the ground at her feet. She stood as if mesmerised, watching as the women's anxious faces came

more clearly into view, waiting, tremulously now, for their words to be carried to her on the breeze.

‘Welsh!’ the women were crying. ‘*Welsh!*’

Dena frowned, not understanding; then realisation came like a dagger-blow, making her gasp. She looked up to the land beyond the fields, beyond the enshrouding forest, towards the ridge of wild inhospitable moor where lay the barbarous kingdoms of the Welsh. Edwulf had taken his estate from the hands of the Welsh by bloody conflict, or so the minstrel sang. Now the Welsh were coming to reclaim what was rightfully theirs. And where was Edwulf to hold them back?

She flew into the hall as if on angel’s wings, but after the brightness of the sunshine the gloom of the hall reduced her to the state of a blind beggarwoman. ‘Wybert!’ she cried frantically. ‘Wybert! The Welsh are upon us!’

A muffled exclamation came from her right, and she peered in its direction, her eyes gradually regaining their power of sight. Wybert was sitting at the head of a trestle table, Edwulf’s huge ledger before him.

‘What folly is this?’ he demanded.

Dena hurried to his side. ‘It’s no folly. Everyone is running from the fields in panic. Please come, Wybert. Please!’

From the expression on his face, she saw that she was not totally believed, but there was no mistaking the clamouring of high-pitched voices as the people neared the hall. Wybert motioned her aside with a sweep of his arm and strode towards the doorway, Dena at his heel.

They met the fearful throng on the threshold, and for a moment it was all Wybert could do to stop them from tumbling into the hall. Children cried and women whimpered, some unable to hold back their tears. One old woman even fell on her knees before him, her hands held in supplication as though he were the Saviour.

He stilled them all with a thunderous roar which even the Welsh could have heard. ‘What is this noise I hear? Are these the people of our Lord Edwulf or whining curs fit only for the stick?’

Wybert placed his hands on his hips and tossed back his long hair, defying anyone to challenge him. Even Ethelin, who had appeared from the kitchen and knew nothing of their danger, held her peace. He stepped into the open semicircle before him, casting a suspicious eye on anyone who dared to hold his stare.

‘Whose ears heard these barbarians? Whose eyes saw them in the flesh?’

There was a shuffle and then a hush, and one by one the people turned to watch a thin sallow-faced youth step forward and struggle for his words.

‘It was I, Radford. I was at the waterfall, hi— hiding from my work in the barley-field. They came past me, not an arm’s length away, all armour and weaponry, but very slowly, as if they didn’t wish to be heard. I ran all the way back, warning everyone I saw.’

Even Wybert looked at him in surprise. Radford might not have been the best worker on the estate, but he was not one for spinning tales.

‘You’ve done well, boy,’ the steward said quietly. ‘Edwulf shall hear of it.’

The hubbub began almost immediately as the people turned this way and that, putting voice to their fears. Dena risked a glance across the doorway to where Ethelin stood, hoping to gain strength from her aunt’s resolute manner, but the news had dented her aloof and arrogant bearing more than Dena could have thought possible. Leaning against the edge of the doorway as if in a faint, she was murmuring quiet prayers of deliverance and crossing herself repeatedly after each short petition.

‘Peace!’ cried Wybert. ‘We can still out-fox these surly Welshmen. It seems to me that they are not planning a main assault, but are intending to encircle the hall and hold us hostage for Edwulf’s return. If we act quickly, we can still leave them with shamed faces.’ He thought

for a moment.

‘Into the forest with you all! Women, take your children — take food and clothing, and leave all else. Men, close the palisade to the west. Bring out all the carts. Load them high with food. We will not lose this harvest to those marauding thieves!’

With tasks set them, the people hurried away with a new will. Wybert made no attempt to return to the hall, but marched towards the tight grouping of stores and work-huts, leaving Dena and Ethelin alone by the doorway. It was a deflating experience to be ignored. Dena knew every hand would be needed if they were all to escape the ensnaring grasp of the Welsh, and it irked her that she should not be thought fit to be given a task. Wybert considered that she had one, of course, as companion to Ethelin, but Dena looked upon that as being little more than a well-kept maid.

She sighed as she looked at Ethelin, still caught rigidly in her continual evocations of the Holy Trinity. Although the wandering priests may have looked on her aunt’s exultations with benevolence, at that moment Dena had more faith in the military prowess of men like Wybert. But Ethelin was mistress of the estate, and however much Dena wished she would show a little more defiance, she couldn’t chastise her. Gently she curled an arm about Ethelin’s shoulders.

‘Come, we must make ready to leave.’

For a moment Ethelin looked as though she didn’t know where she was; then she gave a little shudder and seemed to pull herself together.

‘Yes,’ she agreed. ‘My Lord Edwulf will expect us to make a stand against these barbarians.’

‘He will expect us to escape their clutches so that we can’t be used against him,’ Dena corrected.

‘Of course,’ Ethelin intoned, but Dena wasn’t sure whether she fully understood what was being said.

Ethelin’s strange behaviour mystified her, but she knew little of her past life. Perhaps Ethelin had seen with her own eyes what atrocities the Welsh could inflict on their enemies.

‘Come,’ Dena gently coaxed, ‘we must go to your chamber and make preparations.’

Once surrounded by her personal possessions, Ethelin began to behave more like her usual self, but Dena wasn’t sure she preferred it.

‘I don’t think Wybert will take kindly to your wanting to take so much,’ Dena prompted.

‘Do you think I should leave Edwulf’s silver to adorn some peasant hut!’

Dena didn’t know what to reply as she watched Ethelin pile plates and goblets into the chest containing her gowns. It was large, by any standards, and would need at least three men to carry it to the carts, if a cart were available.

‘I’ll try to find some transport,’ she murmured, and she took her leave.

As soon as she reached the outside door, she knew that her fears were being realised. The first carts were already moving away, being pulled by lumbering oxen under threat of prodding sticks. The others were being loaded with sacks and earthenware jars. It was as though Wybert intended to take every morsel of food with him

Dena crossed to the crippled man, Swithun, who was vainly trying to steady the head of a reluctant milk-cow forced between the shafts of a small cart.

‘Are there more carts?’ she asked. ‘Lady Ethelin has a chest to be loaded.’

‘I think not, but Steward Wybert has kept some horses back. Perhaps my lady’s possessions could be put into saddlebags?’

Dena nodded. ‘It would be best, I think. Where is Wybert?’

‘I hear he’s in the brewing-house, though I don’t know the truth of it.’

Dena turned for the brewing-house, but her way was soon impeded by a group of older children driving swine and ducks before them. The air was thick with squawks and squeals as

fowl and animal alike fought to escape their drovers. She found it easier to cling to the staves of a wattle fence and let them pass than to try to force a path through them. Everyone but she, it seemed, had a worthwhile task to do.

To her surprise, she did find Wybert in the brewing-house. The potion-woman, Mildthryth, was with him and they were busy crushing freshly-cut herbs with pestle and mortar. Even at this unlikely task Wybert was as if a commander on a battlefield, and as Dena hesitated in the doorway several people pushed past her to deliver messages and await instructions.

‘Who has been sent to the north tun?’ Dena heard him ask of one of the youths. There was an ominous silence. Wybert almost dropped his pestle in his anguish. ‘Dear God! Has no one gone to warn them? Take my horse at once.’

‘I — I cannot ride such a beast,’ came the fearful reply.

‘I can!’ announced Dena, stepping forward.

Wybert blinked at her in disbelief, but she left him no time for mockery.

‘When my father was alive, I bred my own horses and was well known in the district for my skills with them.’ She hoped that the good Lord would not strike her down for her exaggeration, but she knew if she were to do anything worthwhile, this was the task.

‘All the horsemen have gone with Edwulf. The boy is as all the people, used only to riding cattle and ass. You have only me to send on this matter.’

Dena said no more. She could tell from Wybert’s expression that he was caught between decisions. All she had to do was to hold her tongue and wait until Wybert realised that he had no other choice.

‘You cannot go!’ he protested. ‘I’d never forgive myself if anything happened to you.’

‘Let her go,’ Mildthryth countered. ‘Beneath that timid shell, a stout-hearted girl yearns to break free. She won’t fail you. There are many lives to be saved at the tun.’

Dena turned to the old woman with a smile, pleased to have an ally, but that smile faded when she saw the familiar glint in Mildthryth’s eye. Some said she was a witch of sorts, living alone in her wattle hut beyond the palisade; but whatever the rumours, everyone — including Edwulf — consulted her for the treatment of ailments and to have bones cast for signs of Fate. She was to be neither crossed nor taken lightly, and Dena felt a chill run through her body as her gaze was held for long, curious moments. It was as though Mildthryth was reading the destiny of her soul.

‘There is no other way,’ mumbled Wybert. ‘Any man capable has already left with the carts. Go with care and my blessing, and may the Lord God watch over you.’

Dena’s heart rose like a lark. She rushed out into the yard, pulling at her long skirts to draw the hems through her girdle so that she’d have a suitable mode of dress for riding astride.

Wybert’s mount was a large black war-horse with thick legs and a large head, and he did not take kindly to anyone but its master on its back. Dena fought with the spirited animal, talking to it continuously until she felt it quieten beneath her; then, with a slap to its flanks, she headed it out of the yard and down the lane to where two youths were making her a way through the closed palisade. Her pulse beat wildly as the great loping horse began to gather speed. If it decided to try and unseat her now, it could do so quite easily, and if she were to land in the dust within sight of Wybert and the estate workers, she’d never dare to raise her head again.

The big horse offered no resistance. As its stride lengthened and it gained its wind, Dena found she had to do no more than grip the saddle with her thighs and wind a hand in its flowing mane. It seemed to know it had to keep to the track along the edge of the trees, and with a full heart Dena realised that she would soon be within sight of the stone walls of the north tun. It had always surprised her that the tun had been so heavily fortified, when the hall

had only a wooden palisade inside its ditches. Not many people lived there — only three families, as she recalled — but Edwulf was as proud of this extension to his domain as he was of the hall itself.

Past the line of the fields worked by the people living at the hall, trees crowded in on either side of the track; to the left the thick forest, to the right thinner woodland already partly cleared under Edwulf's direction and waiting for a plough to break the mossy earth before the onset of the winter frosts. Dena had to keep her head low to stop the reaching branches snatching at her flimsy head-cloth. What with the movement of the horse and the height of the closely-packed trees, it was some time before she noticed the pall of smoke hanging in the sky.

Fear numbed her senses, freezing all movement in her limbs. Then a different fear filled her mind: fear for her personal safety. She pulled at the mane and the reins, and using all her strength, dragged Wybert's great horse to a shuddering standstill. She looked up at the trail of smoke that she knew must come from the burning thatch of the tun's dwelling-house. There was no point in going on, she accepted that, but in all conscience could she turn back to the hall and leave the people of the tun to their Fate? Perhaps they were already dead — every man, woman and child — but what if they were not? What if one survived and was making his way along the track towards the hall? What if he was wounded or being chased? He could be just beyond the next bend in the track.

Dena could not turn for the safety of the hall without being certain that no one needed help. She urged the horse on at a steady walk, all the time keeping alert for sounds and signs which would give her warning of impending danger.

She hardly dared to breathe as she reached the turning. It was a long curve following the stream which fed the tun. She could smell the smoke now, gliding silently through the trees, felt its pungent odour catch at the back of her throat. Still she kept the horse walking, finding that she had to take it further than she intended in order to gain a view of a sufficient length of track.

She saw them before she heard them, men walking on the rough pathway from the tun. She reined in the horse, unsure of what was before her. They looked like Saxons — they were certainly dressed like them — but she had never laid eyes on a Welshman and didn't know what to expect. They saw her and stopped, equally surprised.

One raised his arm and waved, calling a greeting she couldn't catch, but the other men were moving oddly, shuffling behind one another as if trying to hide. Dena caught her breath as she realised how heavily armed they were. There was no such cache at the tun. These were Welshmen!

She turned Wybert's horse as quickly as she could, pulling at it and desperately digging the heels of her slippered feet into its ribs. The great brute was slow to respond, and before she could get it moving again, the Welshmen were bearing down on her, howling like demons straight from Hell.

Dena never looked back to see how close they were or whether they were still running after her. She hadn't seen any horsemen with them, though it seemed inconceivable that the Welsh force didn't have any. Truly the Lord God was watching over her. As long as no more Welshmen, on foot or on horse, blocked the track, she would be able to gain the safety of the palisade round the hall and report the grim news to Wybert.

The journey seemed endless, but she never allowed the horse to slacken its pace. At every curve of the track, she expected to see either the hall or the Welsh — or both. She saw neither. How far had she ridden? Relief flooded through her taut body as she reached the fields and recognised the beginning of the winding lane. She urged the horse on, right up to the outer defence ditch where the lane narrowed to pass through the palisade.

When she called out for help to move the barrier, no one came. As she listened, with a

sinking heart she realised that the fortified grounds were deserted. The palisade, which had been made secure against the Welsh, was keeping her from safety.

In desperation, she turned in the saddle to look for another entrance. How she wished she'd taken more notice of Wybert's explanations the day he'd escorted her round the defences. She dared not try to circle the outer ditch on horseback, as she knew the Welsh were to the north, and Radford had said he'd seen them to the south, too. The only safe route seemed to be through the grounds surrounding the hall and over the palisade at the eastern side.

Dena drew the horse alongside the rough timbers, and kicking free of the stirrups, proceeded to climb on to its broad back. To her surprise, it didn't mind her shaky attempt to stand on the saddle, and it stood unmoving until she gained her balance.

It still looked a long way from the sharpened tips of the palisade, and even further to the ground beyond — and Dena was no tumbler. She'd watched them often enough, though, at fairs and markets, and knew, or thought she knew, how the feat could be accomplished. She gritted her teeth, determined to try. After all, she couldn't stand on the horse's back for ever, no matter how patient it was; the Welsh would not be dallying. Filling her lungs, she closed her eyes and launched herself into the air. The flight felt most ungainly, even by her standards, and was accompanied by a loud ripping sound as her skirts were shredded by the deadly tips of the palisade. The heavy landing winded her badly, but she was so relieved to find that she'd not broken any bones that she ignored her grazed skin. Struggling to her feet, she limped up the lane towards the hall and its outbuildings.

As she came to the brewing-house, she peeped inside. No one was there, as she'd expected, and she hurried on to the hall. To her surprise, the great west door had not been made secure, but stood ajar. So quiet now, without a soul inside, the building held a sense of eerie unease she'd not known before. Dena tried not to think of it, and was pleased when she noticed Ethelin's large storage chest abandoned at an odd angle across the aisle by the wall. She could imagine the scene as clearly as if she'd witnessed it — Ethelin and Wybert locked in a battle of words as the unfortunate boys ordered to move it stood looking on.

She checked her thoughts: this was no time for reverie. She had to cross the open ground on the other side of the hall and pass through the eastern gate — or climb the palisade. The forest beyond would be her sanctuary, giving her cover until she could catch up with the others from the hall. She hoped Wybert wouldn't be too angry about the loss of his horse, but she knew she had little cause for worry. Unlike Ethelin, he was more concerned with losing people than possessions.

The small door in the eastern wall of the hall was also unlocked. This was a puzzle, but she was pleased to find it. She'd save time by not needing to run round the outside of the building, and she passed through into the open porch. After no more than two steps, she grasped the timber frame for support and flattened herself against the carved wood panelling. Were her eyes deceiving her? She peeped round the corner of the porch, and bit her lip to stop herself from crying out. Men were cutting at the palisade with axe and sword, men on foot and on horse. They had come not from the north or the south, but from the east, where Wybert had led the people to safety.

Dena re-entered the hall like an apparition slipping between the logs which made up the walls. She had to hide — but where? The hall was so large and airy that it offered no secret places at all. She crossed to the great door, hoping to steal across to one of the outbuildings with their various hay-lofts and grain-bins, but one cautious glance outside told her she was too late. The Welsh were throwing ropes round the barricade across the lane, ready to clear the path. She was trapped. There was nowhere to go.

In a state of near frenzy, she ran to the one private place she had made her own since coming to live in Edwulf's household, her sleeping-chamber. The smallest of the three

partitioned cubicles adjoining the south wall, it offered no more comfort than a narrow bed and a storage chest, but the bed was close up against the wall and she slotted herself beneath it, curling into a trembling ball as a small hedgehog might. She lay there in that cramped position for a near eternity, fighting the ever-present vision of Ethelin crossing and re-crossing herself by the great door at noon. It seemed a lifetime ago. Perhaps it would be — when the Welsh found her.

The first noise Dena might have imagined, but then she knew that it was real. They were in the hall, moving stealthily, expecting an ambush. She closed her eyes again as she heard the footsteps gaining strength. There was a pause when she heard nothing, when prying eyes drew back the thick tapestry curtain which served as a door to her chamber.

Go away! she prayed. Go away! And she thought they had.

The crack above her head was so sharp and unexpected that she cried out for fear of being crushed by the collapsing bed, and squirmed on to her back in a feeble attempt to use her arms as support for its weight. There was no need. Only one narrow slat had been split, the fibre-like grain tenuously refusing to let it snap completely. Dena's eyes widened as she saw what must have happened. Someone had jumped on her bed — someone who could not possibly have missed the sound of her cry. She held her breath, not daring to move, her eyes fixed on the shallow gap between the edge of the bed and the stone floor.

First there came a booted foot, then a mass of tangled chestnut hair and a pair of wild brown eyes; next, she saw a grinning mouth, and a hand reached into the tiny space to grab at her.

Dena fought like a fury, kicking and screaming and beating out with her fists, but she was caught like a fish on a hook and hauled from her crevice-like hiding place. Free from the confined space, she fought more furiously than ever, kicking and biting at anyone who came within her reach, until a pair of strong hands pinned her arms behind her back and hustled her through the chamber doorway into the main room of the hall.

The sight of so many bearded faces jostling to peer at her stole her remaining courage and left her weak-legged. Words were bantered back and forth, words she didn't understand, and then slowly, horrifyingly, the barbarous Welshmen advanced on her.

Dena opened her mouth to cry out. She made a feeble attempt to struggle from her captor's grip, but her resistance was gone. She sagged against him in her helplessness, but he wouldn't let her fall.

A short command rent the still air in the high-roofed hall. She recognised that it was a command, both by its stern tone and the way the men stood still, almost in unison. She began to take heart as she watched them turn their heads towards the open west door, and when they moved aside to allow passage through their ranks, her relief was complete.

He was a nobleman, she could tell from his dress and his bearing: a wealthy man skilled in the military arts. Over his pale green tunic he wore a vivid short-sleeved coat of mail which glistened iridescent as he moved through the shafts of sunlight falling from the high window. Except for two thin braids which swung across his cheeks, his dark hair was hidden beneath a low-browed helmet. Coming to a halt before her, he laid a gaudily-ringed hand on the pommel of the sword hanging in its scabbard at his belt, and rested his weight back on one foot to eye her curiously.

'Who might you be?' he demanded in perfectly vowelled English.

Dena swallowed both her surprise and her fright, and tried to stand as upright as her captor's iron grip would allow.

'I am the Lady Dena, niece to Thegn Edwulf, lord of this hall and accompanying lands.'

The Welsh nobleman bowed a little, to her she thought, though her captor showed no sign of loosening his grip. But the Welshman was merely raising his hands to grip and push the tight helmet from his head. She watched him rake open fingers through his shoulder-length

hair, releasing its dampness from his skull. He looked at her again, through tawny eyes of deepest brown flecked with chips of gold, and he lifted an eyebrow in a mocking gesture of disbelief. His laughter was full and hearty, a sound that might greet the antics of a Fool worthy of the name. With the laughter still echoing about the rafters above them, the smile fell away for the mask it had been and his expression grew tense.

‘Speak the truth of it, woman, or suffer the consequences.’

Dena blinked in stunned astonishment, but as a translation of her response rattled round the hall to the hoots and calls of the assembled men, she realised, with a growing sense of hopelessness, that if she could not convince this Welshman of her identity, she was lost.

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