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opening extract from

Wolf Girl

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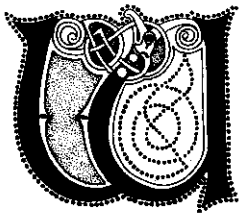


prologue

The western horizon was flooded with bright orange light, intensifying to a deep blood-red as the sun began to sink behind the hills. A column of thunderous black clouds bridged the sky from east to west, marring the gorgeous colours of the evening. Six riders urged their horses down the steep hillside and onto the beach. They clattered across the shingle, their weapons and armour glinting red and gold in the dying light.

The first warrior turned to shout back at his companions. 'Too late,' he cried.

He pointed to a blazing beacon high on the cliff-tops to the east. The astounding news from the battlefield had flown ahead of them.

Both men and horses were lathered with sweat, for they'd ridden fast since noon. They reined in their steeds and stared at the choppy grey sea, growling out their anger. They could just see the small dark shape of a ship in the distance, its sail

billowing out with the wind in its favour; then the image shrank, blurring into a dot.

'They've got away!'

'Bound for Kent, do you think?'

'Where else would they be bound for?'

The tallest man ground his teeth in frustration and drew his sword. He glared up and down the beach, which seemed to be empty but for a few small upturned fishing boats and a trail of deep indentations in the sand where horses had galloped eastwards. 'Not all have flown – some have taken their horses away towards Whitby.'

They all turned again to where the beacon could be seen in the distance, blazing away on the high cliff-top. 'Someone has given them aid and if Cadwallon or Penda find out who it is, they'll wish themselves at the bottom of the sea. They will not be pleased with us either,' said the tall man.

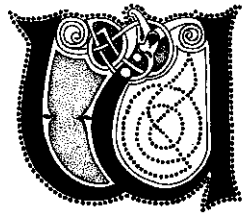
His companion shrugged. 'They have victory. Edwin's young cub is no threat to them, not yet! They've plenty of time.'

'Aye. No threat yet, but he will be!'

The beach was not as deserted as it seemed, for a young girl watched them through a tiny space, her cheek pressed into the bruising wet shingle beneath her father's upturned boat. The bottom of her skirt was soaked and she gritted her teeth against the freezing cold. She knew that she must not move or make a sound, for should the warriors

notice the trail of wet shingle that led up from the water's edge to the boat, her life would be over.

Then, as she crouched in that painful position, there came a gentle sound that made her sigh with relief: a light pattering on the wooden hull that sheltered her. It was beginning to rain and the rain would wash away the trail, soaking the whole beach and all the upturned boats. This rain was blessed; it would hide her guilt. She closed her eyes and smiled. If she could just keep still a little longer, she would be safe.



Chapter 1

The Keeper of Secrets

Wulfrun looked out through the shutter of the webster's hut towards the wooden stockade that marked the inner monastic boundary. The new wooden church at Whitby rose high inside the stockade and ditch, its roof thickly thatched. Its pediment was carved with intricate patterns of fish and fowl, making it look like a powerful warlord's feasting hall, were it not for the simple wooden cross above the entrance. The ancient watchtower with its beacon, set just outside the stockade, towered high above everything. Seagulls swooped and mewed around it. That watchtower had been there on the high cliff-top long before the coming of the royal abbess, with her following of devoted monks and nuns.

The peace of the morning was broken by the sound of lowing cattle. 'Here they come,' Wulfrun murmured, as the cowherds led their eager charges out through the small side gate to graze in

the steeply sloping meadows above the river Usk.

She smiled as she watched them go. For the moment she must stay here and work, combing raw wool until her arms and fingers ached. But later, when the sun was high in the sky and her mother Cwen had returned from the abbey, her job would be to take the geese out into the upper pasture. She'd be able to join her friend Cadmon, the cowherd, there.

She watched them as the last calves vanished round the curve of the stockade, then checked carefully that nobody else was coming down the path towards the webster's hut. While her mother was away, she might allow herself just one small treat before she returned to the dreary work of combing and spinning wool.

As she turned away from the doorway, Wulfrun's heart beat fast with guilty anticipation. She lifted the heavy lid of Cwen's marriage chest, thrusting aside the hanks of dyed wool to slide her hand down the side, searching for the special board. She had done this many times since last autumn, when she'd discovered the secret of this carefully crafted box.

There it was: she knew just where to press so that she could lift the loose board, making it fall forwards to reveal a dark hiding place. Her fingers closed about the heavy, clunky prize, and with shaking hands she lifted the necklace out of the

shadows, smiling as she always did at the bright glint of the heavy gold beads shaped like shells from the beach and the richness of the many deep red stones that hung down from them, each in its own gold setting. She carefully lifted the treasure up into her hair like a crown, loving the weight of it against her brow; then stooped to pick up the small round of flat polished jet that they used as a looking glass.

Wulfrun moved warily to the window hole and opened the shutter just a little bit more, holding up the mirror so that she could admire herself. The sun struck deep into the stones and set them blazing with the ruddy shades hidden in their depths. Above her forehead hung a central pendant in the shape of a cross, supported from above by a beautifully crafted bird with wings spread in flight. Both cross and bird were fashioned from heavy, gleaming gold. On either side of the cross blood-red stones glowed with colour against her white skin, despite the darkness of the glass.

She stood there enjoying a moment of pure happiness, gazing at her reflection, but then a movement in the distance caught her eye and she heard her mother's voice. They were back much sooner than she'd expected. She snatched the jewels from her head and replaced them in their hidey-hole. Moving quickly, she spread the tangled raw wool back on top, then grabbed the hank that

she was supposed to be combing.

Wulfrun had never spoken to Cwen about the hidden necklace that she'd found; some deep instinct told her that she must not. She felt sure that her mother could not know of the existence of the richly jewelled treasure that had been so carefully hidden away. The weight of the gleaming beads must surely mean that they were real gold. She thought that the blood-red stones were garnets, for she had seen just such jewels set into a gold reliquary box that was kept in the monastery church. The reliquary was said to contain a toe bone from the saintly King Oswald, who'd been killed in battle with the pagan King Penda. On special occasions people lined up to kiss the golden box and swore that it healed sickness. Only last Christmas the reeve's little daughter had been saved from a terrible fever by having the golden box brought to her bedside. Everyone spoke of it as a great treasure, and yet here were just the same gold and precious jewels on the necklace. Such a thing could not rightly belong to a simple weaver woman like Cwen. But who it really belonged to and how long it had been there was a mystery. At night Wulfrun dreamed of the jewels, and in her dreams she saw the shadowy, queenly shape of a mysterious woman who wore them.

Cwen the webster opened the strong wooden door of their hut. Gode, her younger daughter, jumped

down the two steps that led onto the earthen floor. The walls of the hut were built from wattle hurdles, plastered with a daub of dried mud and dung. The floor was a sunken pit that had been dug out of the shale and ironstone layers on the cliff-top. It was a poor place compared to the fine new timber halls and guesthouses that the abbess was building above them on the windy cliff-tops, but Cwen was saving every bit of payment that she earned.

'That's another bag of grain.' Cwen was smiling broadly as she heaved the heavy sack up onto the wooden shelf that hung from one of the posts. She was so pleased with the sale she'd made that she didn't notice that Wulfrun looked a little flushed. 'There's more than we can eat so we can sell most of it.'

'We could buy another goose,' Wulfrun suggested.

But her mother gave her head a sharp shake and Wulfrun wished at once that she'd never spoken.

'They want another wall hanging,' Cwen went on cheerfully, ignoring the brief moment of tension. 'Twice the size of the last one, and I can use my own patterns. The guest-mistress begs me work as fast as I can and they'll buy every bit of weaving that I produce. They're hoping to get the new guestrooms furnished before the abbess returns.'

Everyone in Whitby knew that Abbess Hild had

gone off in a great fluster at the beginning of the Month of Weeds to see Oswy, High King of Northumbria, in his fortress at Bamburgh. It was rare for the abbess to display anger, but a message from Oswy's eldest son Alchfrid, Sub-king of Deira, had made the abbess's cheeks burn with rage. It seemed he wished all of Deira to adopt the Roman style of Christianity that he preferred.

Alchfrid was Oswy's son by his first wife, Rhienmellth of Rheged, and resented by many Deirans, who called him Alchfrid the Stranger. It was whispered that they would have preferred Oswy's younger son Ecfrid as their overlord, as he was grandson to the great King Edwin, through Oswy's second queen, Ianfleda.

Abbess Hild stuck resolutely to the simple ways of worship that she'd learned from Bishop Aidan and his Lindisfarne monks, but as Whitby was part of Alchfrid's sub-kingdom of Deira, it seemed the abbess might be forced to change against her will. She'd ordered the *Royal Edwin*, the twenty-oared galley that was always kept in readiness down in the harbour, and had gone by sea to beg support from Oswy, who had long been her friend. It was now the Month of Flies and there was still no sign of the royal boat returning.

'Every new guestroom is to have wall hangings on three sides,' Cwen told Wulfrun. 'What do you think of that?'

Wulfrun nodded and smiled. 'They'll need them, with the draughts they get up there.'

'They will!' her mother agreed.

Whitby folk looked on with amazement at the new buildings that were being raised high on the cliffs, exposed to every winter gale. Local people swore that when the wind came straight off the sea from the north, it was the bitterest known to man.

'You can't tell rich folk anything!' Cwen said, shaking her head. 'They'd have been warm and protected if they'd built snugly into the land folds down by the ford. I know it, you know it, the whole of Whitby knows it – but you can't tell them anything! Well, what do I care if it means they need more wall hangings and they're willing to pay me well?'

Four years ago the family had lived in Fisherstead, a little hamlet up the coast to the northwest. One terrible stormy night Wulfrun's father had been drowned while out in his fishing boat, and just a few days after the tragedy little Gode had been born. It had been a year of great bitterness mixed with this one small joy, for Cwen had lost many babies over the years. But to everyone's surprise Gode was born strong and healthy. This miracle had somehow forced Cwen to struggle through her sorrow, determined that they should all survive. Wulfrun had been ten years old at the time and she could remember only too well

the hard winter that followed their loss. The family had lived very meagrely on their neighbours' charity, and when that had dried up, Cwen had done the thing they never spoke about, though Wulfrun knew she grieved over it every night. She had sold her son Sebbi to a passing thane to work as a slave at his villa near Catterick.

This was what made Wulfrun sure that Cwen could not know about the treasure hidden away beneath her wool and flax, for her mother saved every spare bit of her earnings so that one day they might manage to buy Sebbi back. Sometimes Wulfrun wondered guiltily if she should show Cwen the treasure, so that they could use it to reclaim her brother at once, but a deep sense of dread and uncertainty held her back.

The slave price for Sebbi had seen them through the winter, and then the following spring it seemed the fates had begun to weave a brighter thread into their lives. Cwen had packed her baby and her marriage chest onto a handcart and pushed it over the steep hills to Whitby, where she'd heard Abbess Hild was looking for women who were skilled at weaving. It had been a hard journey and ten-year-old Wulfrun had tramped sore-footed beside her mother, but when they arrived at the monastery and Abbess Hild discovered that Cwen was truly skilled, their fortunes changed at once for the better.

Cwen and her family were given temporary accommodation in the growing guesthouse and provided with a loom and wool. The sample work that Cwen produced had filled the abbess with delight.

'Why send over to the Frankish lands?' she had asked, staring intently at Cwen. 'Why bother with that, when there are women here like you, Cwen, who can do good strong work like this?'

Since that time they'd been given the small hut set just outside the stockade, along with the other weavers, dyers, washerwomen and hurdle makers. They'd been paid decently for the weaving they produced and were able to hold their heads high as respectable workers. Cwen kept six geese in the small wattle close outside the hut, and they sometimes sold their eggs to the monastery kitchens. They were allowed to graze the geese in the upper pasture, where the birds could scavenge for slops and waste from the granary and the abbey kitchens. They'd also bought a heavy iron cauldron for dying wool and flax, though just at the moment it bubbled with a thin barley broth for their meal. Despite their improved fortune Cwen still saved all she could.

Cwen set up her new wall hanging and Wulfrun combed wool, until Gode began complaining that she was hungry. They supped their broth, then sat back for a few moments of rest. Gode lay down by the hearth, her eyes heavy with sleep; Wulfrun and

her mother nodded in the warmth, while the smoke curled up and escaped through a small hole in the heather-thatched roof. At last Cwen moved and yawned. 'Ah well . . . that wall hanging will not weave itself, I suppose.'

She struggled to her feet and lifted the wooden loom with its heavy dangling weights down from the wall, then went to unfasten the shutter on the southwest side of the hut, so that the afternoon sun came flooding inside to light her work. Wulfrun stretched and got up from the fire without being told, reaching down the goose-herding crook from its nail.

She squeezed past her mother. 'Come on, my old cacklers!' she called.

The upper pasture sloped gently downhill from the little side gate in the stockade, catching the afternoon sun. Wulfrun's stomach was full of broth and she still felt sleepy, but she knew she must not let her head droop and her eyes close until she'd set the hungry geese feeding.

Fat Sister Mildred, who worked as cook in the abbey kitchens, came out through the side gate and threw two buckets of slop onto the grass. 'There you are, my honeys,' she said, nodding kindly towards Wulfrun. She went back inside as the geese ran squawking towards the pile of vegetable peelings and boiled oats.

Wulfrun wasn't sure if it was she who was being

called 'honey' or the geese, but it didn't matter; it was a fine afternoon and she felt contented. The geese were feeding well; perhaps she could rest now and listen to the soothing buzz of Sister Fridgyth's bees, whose hives were kept in a corner of the upper pasture.

She loved this part of the day as the land was sheltered from the sea and the cold north wind. There was a fine view of the surrounding countryside and the many visitors who made the long journey to Whitby town, travelling down from the heather moors towards the ford that crossed the winding river Usk. A skein of lapwings fluttered and looped above the water. Wulfrun watched them lazily as Sister Fridgyth came out from the vegetable garden with charcoal smoking in a little pot; she blew smoke into one of the hives to make the bees drowsy, so that she could steal honey from them.

Wulfrun shaded her eyes, looking for Cadmon, who usually came and sat in comfortable silence beside her, while his cows cropped the grass and their calves suckled. She knew he must be somewhere below her, for she'd seen him setting out that morning. Then she spotted him in the distance and waved as he wound his way slowly up the steep zigzag path. Cadmon drove his beloved cows and calves before him with strange whimpers and grunts that his charges seemed to understand

perfectly. He was older than most of the cowherds and some people called him 'simple', but Wulfrun had learned that it was only the humiliating stammer in his speech that made him seem slow-witted. Sometimes, when nobody else was near, he sang sweet songs to his beasts; at those times his words would flow like honey and Wulfrun loved to listen.

'Hurry!' she bellowed, as he came towards her. 'The sun will soon be gone!'