



THE WIHTWARA AGE OF THE AVATAR

Inside our women's sacred place, I sat, or rather kneeled to push myself forward to get closer to her. I hung on every word she uttered. Amidst the smoke-filled place, the fire embers casting low shadows on her crumpled form, I tried to grab the meanings for her words which came slow with great breaths in between. Life was ebbing from her: she knew this to be her last utterance and for her, it was so very important. We had heard it before, but somehow at this time of the full moon, and the Nerthus awakening time, she needed to impale it on our spirits, for us to hold it in times to come, to make it legend.

I am Wahl of the Warinni. My people belong to the confederacy of the seven tribes, we are the defenders of Nerthus, and my people, the Warinni, are defenders of the Stones. And in turn, our defenders are the nearby Geats, the warrior lords of Gotland and beyond. I am no longer in my Ancestors' given land. That is far from here, across the large sea and then many weeks' walk again to be within the rising cliffs and tall tree forests and the islands.

But here on our island home in the warmer climes, our high elder woman, whose life is ebbing, tells of a time there in our true ancestral lands.

The full moon brings the winds, whispering its own story on top of our lady's words. The sky gods are giving her strength as she lifts her arms up onto the wood and leaning forward, her eyes, glazed over with white film, non-seeing, now views a world beyond this one.

"So many, many women years ago, our god was left: a foundling near the water's edge. The water gently rippled over the rush mat that covered his tiny form. As if Nerthus still wanted hold of him. He is Hers always: we know that: he is goddess given and that he will only spend the time in our realm that she permits. Oh, but what a courageous, golden time it was.

"At that sacred time of our year, when we heard Her call: in the midst of the tall tree forest that protected Her domain, kept Her waters hidden from the warrior damage of men, she came to know us for a short time. And we came to worship and love Her. All the men and the warrior women lay down their iron. It was forbidden to fight or even say an angry word. Our Earth Mother, creator of all, surfaced from the waters deep. She greeted us and brought us to her.

"Nothing can be said of that time with Her. It is secret. Only the feeling of supreme love and nurturing stays and is remembered till the next time we are honoured."

Our Elder woman paused to take breath. She coughed with the smoke that now swirled around the women's space, the wind blowing it in spirals towards the high roof and out through the smoke hole. My mother, Gudrun, reached to the dwindling fire and laid fresh dry kindling to spark more flame. We huddled ever closer to our

High Elder to keep her with us, to help her in the story telling that would mark our tribe here in foreign lands. She leaned forward to throw a small branch over to the fire: her will to live this moment so strong.

I saw the thin strands of her hair glisten in the firelight, wisps of white that showed her skull silhouetted against the dark. The woven wool shawl hung from her skeletal form: a puff of wind would send it cascading to the dirt floor.

She bent her head into her arms resting on the wooden table. For a moment, we thought she was spent, then with a deep audible breath she lifted her head to the heaven once more and continued.

She called out in a voice not her own:

*“Hal wes thu, Folde, fira modor,
Thu Gebletsod weorth!
Wè cumað to gebrèman þa halig wihtes
Ond bewægnað bèdu for þas earþan þe we on lifiaþ,
Hir eorðtùdor ond hir eallwihta.”*

Greetings to you, Earth, mother of men,
You shall be blessed!
We come to honour the sacred Ones
And offer prayers for the earth that we live on,
Her peoples and all her creatures.

“Your forefather’s ancestors spied upon the foundling due to his lusty cries! His lungs were fully formed, so they say and could summon the gods before he had learnt our language. Nerthus, our mother reluctantly gave him up. She trusted the elder men of our tribe more than others. We were a peaceful people and it was important to give the babe a foundation of care and love within which to grow. He was to be perfect in all ways and this responsibility of his care was taken so very seriously.

“This Elder father walked out of the tall tree forest that dawn morning to glittering bright sunshine that suddenly flooded our small village. People stopped their work to stare at the noisy bundle, as the man made his way to the woman’s round house and lifted the hide flap. Inside, women were already about their work, spinning, weaving and scraping skins. And talking. The noise suddenly stopped: all went quiet for men did not usually enter the women’s house.

That only left the hearty bawling of the infant swaddled in a wet rush mat.”

“Freyja. Giefan me strengu. Hwaet is þeos!” (Freyja, give me strength. What is this?)

Hjördis, the elder grandmother heaved her frame from the stool, where she was overseeing the young Frídr who was weaving the weft thread of assorted coloured yarn into the cloak being made for her. Her long grey hair, braided, still nearly touched her ankles and as she straightened her bent spine into a walking stance, groaned in a deep voice. Her bones were bent out of shape now and all she could productively do was watch over the younger woman and offer advice with very few words.

But she moved fast at the sight before her and ushered him outside. She took the screaming bundle from Godwulf.

Godwulf released his charge with lowered head. He was the chieftain warrior king of this tribe, part of the great Geats. He was a big, big man. The sun shone through his mass of curled

hair and looked like he was a haloed warrior. His grin, now absent, was like a full quarter-moon and his laugh could reach the hinterland of the village. He had fought with so much courage and skill, he had earned the chieftain name early in his life, but he had never hardened his heart and was compassionate to all who deserved it.

Now he was lost for words.

Hjördis stared at him, her intense blue eyes boring a hole in his downturned head.

"Godwulf, beorn Ealdor, beseon aet me!" Warrior Chief, look at me!

"Have you been consort to Nerthus," she asked softly, "and is this the child-god we have been blessed with and has been foretold?"

Godwulf raised his head and stared with piercing truthful eyes at his grandmother elder.

"Giese!" he replied simply.

"Then we have much to prepare!" she said and turned towards her women, closing the hide flap behind her.

The flames flickered low, casting smaller shadows around us and our elder grandmother took a deep breath, and remained silent in her telling. Everyone paused in her silence until she slowly turned her head out towards us, her sightless eyes looking, feeling for the person she needed.

"Where is Dagrún Wahl", she whispered breathlessly, "come to me so you alone may hear."

I shuffled forward. She heard me and turned to the noise I made.

"Come closer Dagrún," she whispered, "you need to hear me".

I bent over her wispy skull and gently kissed her. She smiled and sighed and turned to face me.

"Listen and listen well to what I am about to tell you. For you and you alone must carry this knowledge to your children and to their children's children. It is the true legacy of our people and it must never be forgotten. You are Wahl, defender of the stones. The stones carry the knowledge. Listen well dear one."

The high Elder Grandmother gently lay the screaming boy child down onto soft fur. Taking a wool bundle, she gently wiped the water and rush detritus from him. What a lusty child! she thought. The women's hall had become silent since their entry, they had stopped their weaving spinning and scraping to gather round in a semi-circle.

With her head bent low over the child-god, her braids coiled around his muscled little legs, she spoke without looking up: "This child will need two cildfëstre mothers. His thirst will drain just one." She turned then and her eyes moved around the circle of women.

"Bergdis", she looked sharply at the young women half hiding behind Eir, the immensely tall statuesque woman with long flaxen hair, braided and twisted round her head. She was the healer who passed on her knowledge to the worthy young ones. Bergdis was her worthy young one but all things herbs had ceased for Bergdis who had entered the birthing house and her term was not yet finished. She had brought a beautiful daughter into the early summer light.

"How is your flow, child?" Hjördis asked.

"Very plentiful, grandmother," Bergdis replied softly, "She is sweet and placid my little daughter, she sleeps many hours and does not disturb my nights".

"Hmm," Hjördis was thoughtful, eventually she spoke, "For now, young Bergdis, you may be his first cildfëstre mother, for our child-god. Bless him with your milk and he will bless you more than you may ever dream!" She looked around and spied Brynhildr. She was a strong

warrior woman with a sturdy build and tree stumps for legs. Never could she be called pretty but her flowing auburn hair spoke of a warrior race to the north who were fierce and valiant in war. She was holding her wriggling babe on her ample hips.

"Brynhildr, are you still giving milk to this monster of a boy?" Hjördis, always straight with her words, gave a sideways grin.

"Gíese", Brynhildr replied reluctantly. For her, her cildfëstre time was nearly at an end. She was not a natural mother and wished with all her heart to join the men in the field with shield and spear. She, who could dismount her gelding, run and leap back on effortlessly, with shield and spear, did not relish months more of giving milk to this giant of a baby, even if he was a god in the making.

"Brynhildr", Hjördis spoke sharply, "You cannot seem to see beyond the end of your nose child! Suckle this baby, tend to his needs. He will tax you beyond your knowing, but you will be the one to gift him with your warrior courage, your talents with horse and shield will protect him in times to come. But you will also teach him the true warrior way, of going to the killing fields with honour and care only a woman warrior can teach."

"Here! He is yours. Frigga, we pray: Silence this young one with your love".

The level of his bawling had reached new heights: he was already making his mark in the realm, reducing everything and everyone to silence. Brynhildr, for all her reluctance made a beautiful start for this child-god. He quietened almost immediately and soon fell asleep on her breast.

Hjördis turned and sat on her haunches, staring into the fire a long time. The women gradually removed themselves back to their work, knowing their elder grandmother would give them a sharp tongue if they dared to ask any questions. The flames reflected in her eyes, and they moved in understanding. She knew their language. She emitted a low "hmmm" in understanding and slowly, with great pain levered herself to standing.

"Eir," Hjördis turned to see her companion appear from the dark of the house. "Come with me to the sacred pool, and we need to find Heidrun. There is a great work we need to do for the naming ritual and all must be with the gods and goddesses' consent".

There were only two places where she might be, for she was either with her bees, or with her goats. She had been chosen at an early age, for both had become her familiars and spoke to her in ways neither man nor woman of the tribe could fathom. She was keeper and guardian of the sacred Mead, and she was needed for this gathering of elders to name the child-god.

Hjördis shuffled out into the mid-morning sun, the ground dust dry for there had been little rain on this, the eve of planting. There were still deep cuts in the ground from the last heavy rains and her skeletal large feet dipped into one and she silently screamed.

"Eir", she hissed, "fetch my staff. It is where it always is." And Eir hurried back to the women's house to find it. Hjördis' place of rest was deep within the house, the mound of fur hides was high to rest her aching bones. To the far extreme corner lay her familiars from her initiation rite of long ago, her spear and shield. There resting against the shield was her twisted beech staff, as high as she was many moons ago. Now she was dwarfed by it. It held magic. It would see her across the village without harm now her sight was failing.

Hjördis stamped it on the ground three times, as was her way to wake it up. There were women, now outside with their high upright looms, she could hear and feel the swish of yarn through the warp, and wondered on the design. There were woman now carding wool by the sheep holding house where knives rasped against skin and grunts and shuffles could be heard from both sheep and men. It was the busiest time of year, outside of harvest. She made a prayer to Nerthus for rain, knowing that the women needed to come together and make offerings very soon.

The sun was hot for this time of year, and little breeze. She made her way to the side of the encampment, where the wooden palisade had been created, huge impacted wooden spikes running the full length of the village perimeter. There were hostile tribes to the north that sent warring parties to steal stock and sometimes women. It was, Hjördis thought thankfully, not often and certainly not now, when the call for planting was paramount. Never the less she banged the palisade at intervals three times to protect her people.

She passed by the shade of the giant ceremonial house which shielded her from the afternoon sun. For a moment, her mind went back to the far-gone days when it was being built. A whole wood was felled to build the walls and a further copse of sturdy beech with willow ties to create the roof. She remembered, as a young woman, just initiated and being given the tribute of carving her animal familiars into the wood. Eagle was her first and most powerful friend. She had gone climbing up to the towering cliff, high above the pine forests. There on a lay, amongst the branches, sat her Eagle. She stayed there for days. And watched, not moving until the Eagle looked straight into her eyes and spoke. She then realised she could understand, for thoughts came into her head which Eagle had put there. She learnt to recognise each cry and even the twist of her head. Expressions came next. If she obeyed the distance imposed, her familiar taught her many things.

So, in carving her most precious friend, Hjördis had to be winched and tied to the tree post for the length of time it took to carve her symbol. Then, lower came Raven. It had always been that way; her challenge and test of courage came in the extremes she had to face. She became the Elder Grandmother by living through many of them. But she was not, although she had earned her spear and shield, a warrior woman. Now, in the evening of her years, she felt glad.

Hjördis felt that the gods and goddesses had chosen this tribe and these people to teach the child-god the ways of Nerthus, the ways of compassion and true melding with Nature. But he will be a force of Will to teach! She thought.

Heidrun was at the very edge of the village, past even the forge, which was stone built and facing west. The heat of the forge made Hjördis gasp, and sparks flew as the slæn wyrhta drymänn, created metal from liquid and beat the pattern into the blade.

We will teach him this, thought Hjördis, for there is magic here and he must master it.

Heidrun was another female giantess, who was a head taller than most men in the village. She was broad and strong with a mass of wheat coloured hair that cascaded down her back tied loosely by a leather thong. Her long woollen tunic was a loose weave, tied at the waist, and buttoned at the shoulders. She dressed simply because most of her time was outside with her goats and bees. Now she was with the bees who were her familiars. Her name Heidrun was older than old: meaning true rune after the goat that made mead for the Einherjar, the spirits of the warriors who died in battle.

So, she was given the tribute of caring for both the goat herd and the bees. And it was with the bees that Hjördis and Eir found her, sitting cross-legged between two hives, bees traveling to and fro around her. Suddenly they flew en-masse away to find nectar.

"They never sting you!" Eir exclaimed, "Why do they not? They would certainly plant a few on me!"

"Why would they?" Heidrun smiled in a full way. "I show them the way to the best flowers and they give me grand honey!"

Hjördis sat down with the help of her staff beside her friend and pupil, looking her straight in the eye, a look that could pierce right through to the soul. No one dare say anything but the truth to the Elder Grandmother.

"Heidrun, my dear, the foretelling has come to pass. The child-god has come and we three must prepare now for the naming and a rite of passage: for this babe is like no other. He will

advance faster than any of us are accustomed to and we must be prepared. Come with us now to the sacred pool. I need to speak with the Ancestors directly and to Nerthus. There are sacred things we need to collect: herbs and stones, tree parts and clay. Everything must be in readiness for the full moon. It's close and we do not have much time."

All three women began walking, at a slow pace for the elder Grandmother, and it would certainly be a long journey for her. They were travelling to the most secret of places. Where no man was permitted. Only when the rare consorting times arrived did chosen men make that journey to meet Nerthus.

"Are you sure you can make this journey, Grandmother?" Eir queried.

Hjördis stopped suddenly and hit the ground with her staff six times each one sharper and with more force than the previous one. Her eyes went dark as night and she turned to Eir, who was frozen to the spot, silenced.

"Do NOT make that hole you are digging for yourself any bigger than it is now child, as I for one will not be helping you out!"

"I am sorry." Eir whispered.

"Of course, I can make this journey," Hjördis hissed, "otherwise it would not be taken!"

They continued in silence, no talk was needed or indeed required, for each were deep in their own thoughts. They walked through the deep tall forest of trees that hid the sacred lake of Nerthus; close to this they veered left into a spinney of trees that thinned to make a glade, full of sunshine and flowers and the waterfall that spilled into a deep, deep pond.

The tall grass caressed their legs, and now barefoot they felt the warmth of the earth. Deep contact with their earth mother was needed to focus. A wren sped past Hjördis's nose, she felt the whisper of its wing on her cheek. She smiled slowly and nodded. The goddess was here, she was answering her unspoken prayers and her heart opened and love flew in.

Eir came to stand by the pool first, her head bent, looking into the deep water. Slowly she started to sway to an unheard rhythm. The pool's surface rippled and the waterfall sang as it touched the water.

"My sisters, Hjördis whispered," We need to join in blood oath before we enter the sacred water".

They all came together, slowly untied their shoulder clasps and stood naked, feeling the sun's warmth all over their bodies. And they languished in that for long moments. Hjördis's frame was almost skeletal now her skin parchment thin, loose skin hanging from her arms as she lifted them to the sky.

*"Oðdin, ðacem Dryhten fram æll:
Fyllan ùre Sāwol wíþ þín ðacem wisdom
Ðæt lytlíng-dryhlem has cwícian on þeos ærðríce
Èower fōstrian ond èower fæðm hè wáðdligend*

Odin, Great god of all,

Fill our souls with your great wisdom

The child-god has come alive in this earthly kingdom.

Your nurture and protection, he needs.

Your courage and valour he needs.

Permit we become your way to his soul, heart and mind

For your wisdom to become his wisdom.

Hjördis lowered her arms, bowed to the earth and walked slowly over to the sacred spring, the others followed her. They all knelt together by the edge of the water, holding hands and silently praying. They knew the huge importance of their combined task. And they all felt apprehension.

Hjördis spoke up clearly:

“Wes ðū hāl, Folde Mōdor

Framfíras, æt þu Nerthus.

Ályfan þes sunu weaxan ðærl in Nerthus onwærdness.

Willan hè bèon finn frèondlíc ond wisdom.

Ðearl in feorhbold ond in ferhð.

Hail to thee, earth, and mother of men, to thee Nerthus.

Grant this son grows strong in Nerthus' presence.

Willing he be filled with your love and wisdom, strong in body and in mind.

And so, the wise women knelt beside the water for some time. Silence. Everything was hushed. The only movement was the gentle ripple on the water and the moving of their long hair in the gentle breeze.

Suddenly the tiny messenger bird, the wren, broke out of her hiding place and whisked past the women, touching each cheek with her gossamer wing.

“It is time”, said Hjördis.

Take each a piece of your hair as gift to the goddess. I will take the forelock, you, Eir, take from the nape of your neck, and Heidrun, you, dear one, are double sided...take from both sides of your temple hair. We will make the blood oath before we submerge.

Each wise woman took a tuft of their hair, silently wincing. Hjördis then produced a small knife, never used or seen in daylight except for now.

“Your palms, please,” she whispered, then slowly slashed across each palm, the blood flowing freely.

“Now we join, blood to blood, hair to hair,” she intoned in a flat voice as they held hands together.

“Now!”

They jumped in perfect unison disappearing beneath crystal waters, their hair momentarily floating and swirling around each making a perfect circle. Then that too disappeared.

Everything was silent. Not a chirrup or a swish of wind could be felt. The mother too was holding her breath. The animals and trees silent for this time. But how long a time it seemed.

Seconds turned to minutes and even they added to each other. The little wren suddenly flew over the deep spring. And then again back to its hiding place. Suddenly she broke into her beautiful full song, lilting and precious. The silence was indeed broken.

A splash of water saw an arm reach for the surface. Then Eir appeared, opening her mouth and taking a precious big breath of air into her aching lungs. She immediately turned to find her sisters. She was about to heave back underwater, when Heidrun appeared, gasping for air. They both looked at each other in dismay.

"Hjördis. Get her!!" Eir shouted.

They both dived, knowing in their hearts that this was a terrible ordeal for such an old woman to face. That she was nearing her passage to the Otherworld, and that this just may bring her there faster than either of them wanted. That she had not shown any fear, nor anything at all that brought this awful thought to the present time.

The number had to be three. Just had to be!

Deep within those waters, Hjördis lay, her eyes open and her breath slowly leaving her in bubbles rising slowly to the surface. In one hand, she clutched sticks and in the other a bunch of herbs, fresh and newly plucked. But her life was fading. One last huge bubble escaped from her gaping mouth when Eir and Heidrun reached her. With each holding her up, they swam back to the surface.

Eir jumped out first and held her arms to catch their precious grandmother.

"Heave", shouted Heidrun.

When Eir had caught hold, Heidrun leaped from the water and both caught her and brought her up to lie unconscious on the grass. For several heart-stopping seconds they looked down at her in total dismay, shock. Her skin hung from her skeletal body like damp paper. Folds upon folds hung there on her lifeless form. Eyes sunken deep into their sockets, she was near dead, and no pulse could be seen at her temples at all.

Then Eir suddenly became present and heaved the old grandmother to her side, banging on her back to expel the water from her tired lungs. Water hurtled out with great coughing and cries of joy from the women. Hjördis's breathing was so weak, Eir turned her on her back and breathed into her mouth for several minutes, making sure her lungs were moving, her heart getting stronger with each breath.

She saw Hjördis was still holding onto the wood and the herbs, so tightly, her knuckles were white. She tried to lever them open.

"NO!" Hjördis croaked, "They must stay with me. They are for her son and I must give them to him when he is ready. I will teach you their true meaning for I am returning to the Otherworld"

"Not yet", retorted Eir.

Suddenly she realised they were all bone naked.

"Here," she cried, "Cover our mother with her clothes. I will run back to the village to get help"

She stepped back into her tunic, missing several ties, and disappeared into the forest. Heidrun held her Grandmother close, keeping her warm, and waited. She let her rest, no questions, although she was full to bursting with the vision she received and the glimpse into the future.

She had been given message from the Einherjar, the spirit warriors giving her the role of guardian to the child god. To teach him about the mead spirit, about the sacred goat, but most of all show him the heights, where she herself goes with the goats, but then even higher for he must climb the highest mountain and know of it. The goat will be one of his familiars.

She looked again at the herbs and wood. They came from the goddess, for they were not damaged by water at all. There seemed to be eight herbs, some she recognised but most needed Eir's eye for she was a Láríngmáden to the elder grandmother in all things herbs and healing. She had no idea about the nine sticks of wood.

"She nearly had me", came the whisper from Hjördis, "the serpent. I know her now and it is important that I do, for her son must know of the magic. He will, when he is grown turn into a serpent, the water will be no barrier to him and he will return also. He will be given the choice of his Otherworld home."

Heidrun stared at the old woman in silence, lost for words. There were none to be said. Some things just are!

Eir returned with a flurry of helpers, all women, who came with fur hides and woollen wraps, water, food and best of all a horse to carry the elder grandmother home.

"Do not repeat anything I told you, Heidrun. NOTHING!" Hjördis spoke sharply, having retrieved her voice.

"Giese", Heidrun replied, "nothing will pass my lips. We are in a sacred bond here. I know this full well!"

"Hmm", Hjördis was not in an ambient mood at all. The thought of bumping back to the village, however wrapped up did not please her at all. They all sat for a while and ate the food brought for them. Hjördis just drank a little and Eir and two other women lifted her onto the horse's back. They needed to get her back and administer herb potions quickly

The journey back to the village was swiftly done. The mare brought for Hjördis was a wide backed giantess of a horse, able to take both Hjördis and Eir, she trotted with legs held high, making nothing of the troughs and dips, swerving past the branches as if she was a wild forest horse. Eir held her Grandmother against her, folding her arms around her tightly, keeping a firm grip with her legs guiding the horse home. The sun still sparkled through the leaves, bringing the deep sap green of new leaves alive, and the fresh smell of trodden grass reached Hjördis and she breathed in deep, her shoulders lifting at the effort. "I am alive", she sighed as the sun caught the top of her head and warmed her skull, the only part of her showing on this journey home. The warmth of those furs against her skin had stopped the trembling. She was safe. The gods had given her a reprieve purely because she had to stay alive for this child-god. She wished it was otherwise: she was so very tired.

The other women walked back, Heidrun saying nothing and they knew better than to ask. Everything would be revealed when the full council met in the great hall.

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I felt the elder grandmother heave a deep breath. Her shoulders sagged, and she wrapped the fur hide tightly around her. The central fire was nothing more than embers now, and the women just dark silhouettes merging with the wattle and timber walls. No one shifted and there was a great silence within the house, waiting for the following words of this great legend of the Geat and Warinni to be passed on. On this fair Isle of Wihmland, that reminded my elders and grandparents in some part, of their ancestral home, and their other relatives of the Cimbric peninsular, I hungered for the rest of the story, the missing pieces still to be sewn into this sacred cloak.

"I am tired to the bone", muttered the Elder Grandmother, "enough talking Dagrún. I must sleep, so bring the sleeping herbs to me. I wish to vision". I lifted myself off the mound of fur hides and let the elder grandmother lie straight, her bony arms extruding and her head to one side, she said quietly, "Dagrún, dear one, I will tell the

rest of our story when we meet again, and you must use all your wits to remember every detail. It is important to remember. Promise me this.”

“*Giese*”, I replied, “Of course, this is so important to me, Grandmother.”

“And for the next part of the story of our child god, you must see *Wihtlæg*, for it is his forefathers that thread together the weave of the warrior’s tale. This will be a challenge to you *Dagrun*, for you are a young woman seeking the voice of our *Cyng*. You may be tested of course, so keep your wits about you.”

I crept out of the woman’s place, lifting the hide flap, and releasing it slowly and gently, so no draft would disturb the elder Grandmother, as I went to fetch her herb potion of vervain, chamomile and poppy, and I was deep in thought.

Crossing diagonally over toward my own small earth house, that doubled as my home and my apothecary, my mind was swimming between ancient past and problematical present. How to get king *Wihtlæg* to even see me, whose stronghold was situated high on the almost vertical hill, and whose warriors kept vigil against the Romans. It was the most secure place overall of *Wihmland* and of course the king was safe there. These Romans, whom most *Wihmlanders* were wary of, were not trusted and looked upon as an unwelcome intruder. They did not kill or murder hardly at all. No, they had their sights set firmly on the trade and fertile lands that are so abundant on this isle. Trade with people over the big sea was abundant. Skills were so much a part of island life, that people overseas sought our goods. No, these Roman used us, worked us like slaves, even made some of us slaves when it suited them and took all the coin and pottery over to Gaul. And there were far too many of them, legions as they called their army of soldiers, to fight back on this tiny isle. But one day, one day the gods will bring a change, a new breath of wind we will feel and then we will act!!!, I thought as I walked headlong into a tall dark shadow, that felt like a solid oak tree.

“Ahhh!” I cried as my forehead contacted the solid bronze torc this “oak tree” of a man wore.

“*Dagrun*, my child,” said *Eystein*, who was a good four hands taller than me, and I, who was many hands tall myself. “Why out in this darkness? And deep within your thoughts. What is the problem little sister?”

He wrapped his muscled arms around me: he made me smile, my big brother, and I relaxed. He was my big brother *Wahl*, with a shock of the darkest brown hair, curled and massed at a plait behind. Most still escaped around his ebullient features, dimpled and lined with crow’s feet from far too much laughing. He was the chieftain of my tribe and a famous warrior.

“I’m just fetching our Elder grandmother her sleeping potion. She is singing our legend story, brother, and I am being given tribute to keep it for our generations to come. That is why I am in my head! I also need to find a way to see our *Cyng* *Wihtlæg*. And how am I able to achieve that, you may ask!!!”

“*Hwæt!!!*” exclaimed *Eystein*, “I may find a way for you, but it is near impossible for anyone to gain audience to *Wihtlæg* right now”

“Our Elder Grandmother has told me that only he holds the song of the child-god’s warrior days. And I must know of it before the Romans kill all the Geat and Eudose and *Warinni* on this blessed Isle.” I heaved a sigh of exasperation at the thought of even entering to see the great *Cyng*. The responsibility was weighing heavy upon me.

“Bah”, Eystein retorted, “They will never do that. We will spear them all and throw their bloated carcasses to the sea goddess to finish them off!”

Suddenly, rain drops as large as dewdrops began spattering the ground, I raced into my house, leaped down the steps into the earth cavity to find the potion, ran out with my goat hide over my head and skidded straight into Eystein.

“Sleep well little sister”, he said, “I will visit you soon with an answer to your problem, if I can”. I ran to the women’s house.

I slipped into our elder Grandmother’s place, seeing her breathing easy, I nearly left, when she opened her eyes turning towards me, “Dagrun, my potion, dear one”.

I lifted it to her shrunken lips, thinking with some alarm that it may see her to the Otherworld before her telling is complete. Maybe *Cyng* Wihtlæg would know, but then no man was privy to women’s sacred work, ever!

“I will carry on at the sun’s next rising, Dagrun. I will not leave before the story is complete, however much I wish it so.”

“Grandmother, do not speak so”. I replied, my throat swelling and my heart aching.

“Oh, sweet daughter, the Otherworld is not so far away. A deep breath and prayer will see me come to you whenever you call. You know this.” The elder Grandmother sighed in a serene way and drifted into sleep.

I stayed with her. I could not find peace or sleep in my own damp and drafty earth house. I stayed and drifted into a deep sleep also. We kept each other warm and I did not want to miss another word she might say.

I am a dreamer, and the one that visited me this night was lucid and horrifying. Far, far beyond the life that I know now, in a time of a long winter, when copper leaves, curled and crisp, swirl around my feet, wind blowing harshly leaving my hair to sweep across my face. My lips are cold and when I lick them they freeze. They become chapped but more in total fear is my tongue searching comfort and finding none. In a full costume that is fine and beautiful, a style I know not, I am holding onto the Sacred Stone high above the island lowlands. My whole life is freezing into my lungs, and I am fighting for breath. From the sacred Stone, I can see for many miles, over to the downs. On an ordinary day, I would be praying to Nerthus, our Goddess of All, and laying the gifts before her, preparing for ceremony. But not on this day, and I am not who I am now. I am a leader of the people: a queen. And this is the last day of my peoples living on this beautiful Isle, our goddess given home. We are being attacked and we are being wiped from our Earth mother. We are pagan, they are not and they wish us dead.

For over the far horizon come an army of men, soldiers with spears, swords and shields, hardened leather armour and braided thongs on leather leggings. Hundreds of them come to kill everyone. Come to kill me.

In taking my last breath, I see fully the wrought iron mask, engraved and embossed in delicate filigree of copper and silver. I see frozen for all eternity his black eyes, blood crazed and beyond any humanity, the blackest energy, intent on his most important kill. The possession and then ending of my life.

I woke up harshly, inhaling noisily, gasping for breath. Still with that scene fully in my mind, I looked over to see our Elder Grandmother, seemingly serene in her peaceful sleep. “Does she know?” I asked silently: this was a dream of beyond. How far into the future I had no knowledge of that? I decided I needed to ask her.

A thin stream of morning light cascaded into the women's house from the hide flap. A gentle breeze was swinging it back and forward in a slow rhythm. Birdsong accompanied it and I knew the day was as beautiful as my dream was ugly. I crept over to the fire pit in the centre, realising that the ashes still glowed and would rekindle with work and care. Hides all around me moved and shuffled. Women were waking up and starting their day. The sweat that is purely woman arose in the air. Sweet and pungent, it flowed with the incoming breeze.

The kindling I put on yesterday's fire awoke with my breath and I watched the thin swirling smoke rise to the smoke hole. I decided I needed to greet the sun and take in some fresh air. Just as I stood to move over to the big entry flap, I saw a nose and half an eye appear.

"Psst!" the nose hissed. It was my younger brother Eyvindr Wahl, whose nose was as large as his tall, wide frame of a body and I knew it anywhere. He was our giant in keeping with all of us Wahls. We are the "Big People".

"Egil came running to me just now, his mother is in childbirth and struggling!" Eyvindr hissed. No male must enter the woman's place on sufferance of severe pain in many forms from the elders.

"I can't," I replied looking at him, his full face now staring at me, "Go to mother please, I am with our Elder Grandmother. I cannot leave her, really! Ealdor Ealdmōdor is *gesècan þæt ðpereorðe sviðe eftsōna. Nerthus onbīdan.* (Elder Grandmother is going to the Otherworld, very soon. Nerthus waits.)

"Gíese!" replied Eyvindr, "I will tell her. Do not worry." Then turning back, looked at me with a frown, "I think I know, Dagrūn. We must gather a clan meeting, you know this of course!"

Knowing my brother as close as we were in many ways, I wondered if he too had dreamed the future, like me. And if he had, what, in this time, must we do, as the Wahl clan to protect the stone knowledge.

I turned back to the Grandmother to see her move and stretch slowly, her eyes glued together with dried mucus: I watched as she forced them open, eyeballs rotating madly to see the world again for possibly the last time. My heart broke a little more. She turned to gaze rheumy eyes towards me, unseeing, yet knowing, sensing where I was.

"Dagrūn Wahl," she wheezed softly, "Come child, sit beside me. Get close now for I cannot shout above a whisper!"

I levered myself down gently to put my ear close to her mouth so she may not strain any part of her unnecessarily.

She heaved a long deep sigh:

"The child-god bawled and bawled for even Ōdin himself to hear! The two cildfēstre women each took their turn to keep the baby pacified and well fed. They succeeded in the second, but the spirit of the child-god was frustrated in this new small body. He took to walking without even scraping his pudgy hands crawling on the earth. Teaching him to feel the Earth became an important part of his education. The baby/child had other plans! His eyes were already staring at the horses, and most certainly the mountains all around him. His eyes were always focused upwards as if reaching for his Ancestors on high, and he remembered them well.

As the rider jumped effortlessly up onto the horse's back, melded with the horse and became one, he could see and feel the magic, the alchemy happened before him and he knew. He understood.

As the lightning seared down to mate with the Folde Mōdor, on the tip edge of the tallest mountain, he saw and understood that magic, that alchemy. He missed nothing. He would watch the bees talk, communicate, work, gather the nectar and understood the intricacies of working life. They never stung any part of his body. Heidrun would talk to him of all she knew as if he understood every word. Sometimes a look of revelation would cross his small face and she knew he understood every word but had still yet to speak a single human word himself.

People, outside of the elder spiritual community, started to whisper that he was backward. Or that he was strange, not “normal”. These quiet undercurrents grew until it came to the notice of the elder guardian of the clan. A full elder council meeting was called, to be followed by a community meeting of all. The child-god had to be brought into the clan, and be named, this ceremony being the most important to make him legitimate.

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THE WIHTWARA - Chapter 1