

**BALANCING AUTHENTICITY:
GENDERFLUID REPRESENTATION IN
HISTORICAL FICTION**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on authenticity, a concept commonly discussed theoretically by academics of historical fiction, expanding upon the existing literature in two directions. First by showing how the concept of authenticity can be applied to the creation of queer characters. Secondly by exploring how to practically create the affect in a historical fantasy text.


The creative work, a novella titled *Ing's Saga*, takes a practical approach in exploring how authors can create authenticity — both for their historical settings and for unrepresented queer sexualities and genders by focusing on the protagonist, Ing — a genderfluid Viking leader. Centring around a queer romance, the characters navigate social expectations with their true feelings. The novella balances modern conceptions of gender and sexuality with a historical setting to show how the techniques of creating authentic queer characters can help create an authentic historical world, and vis versa. Also, by choosing to focus on a historical subject relatively unknown, this novella demonstrates how fiction can be used to expand historical knowledge by exploring the possibilities of our past.

The exegesis, titled *Balancing Authenticity: Genderfluid Representation in Historical Fiction*, discusses common anxieties about writing historical and queer fiction, analyses how to create an authentic feeling of both a historical world and genderfluid characters, and demonstrates how hybrid genres (historical queer fiction) can use two different types of authenticity to support one another; thus proving that authenticity is a better tool than accuracy for fiction.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university
2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed..........

Date..... 30th May 2023

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ING'S SAGA

Creative Piece by Gabrielle Jones

1 THE ONE-EYED STRANGER

Thór was pleased with the Hearings tonight. Shouting his pleasure into the sky in booming light, he celebrated with us. Our men, returned from a raid in the East, sat shoulder to shoulder on the mead-benches that stretched down the hall. They raised their drinking horns with each of the god's violent cheers. Oh, Uppsala had fought well, as all the tales the warriors had been sharing since their return told, but the gold that now piled in tribute at King Hadingus' feet had not been there the night before

My father sat amongst his brothers-in-arms, and I at his feet. We weren't important enough to sit beside the King, but our loyalty looped in gold upon my father's arm in the form of a ring. I didn't mind sitting further away. The hearth at the centre of the hall was close enough that a fine layer of sweat coated my brow. It was a comforting warmth. My father glanced down at me and I hugged my new doll closer to my chest. It had belonged to another girl once. I could see a worn patch from love-driven kisses pressed to her brow. I didn't care; she'd been mine the moment father had pressed her into my hands. I even liked the red stain on her dress.

“Where's my skald?” King Hadingus called over the noise. “Come, sing us a song.”

As Swithin emerged from the crowd — tall and carrying his lyre — we all fell silent. Well-earned was his fame in music and lyric: when he sang it was like Bragi's runes soared off his tongue. “What tale shall I tell you tonight?” he asked as he wandered around the room, basking in our attention. Everyone followed his progress up and down the hall, eyes locked on his strumming fingers, smiling as he teased while tuning the strings, but I felt a cool draft at my back and turned to see a stranger slip through the door.

Water dripped from the man as fast as the rain fell outside. The hem of his worn cloak was covered in mud. He leaned heavily on his long-spear — its pointed-tip almost dulled — but as he moved to lean on the wall, his cloak shifted and revealed a gleaming sword at his hip. His face was

a secret beneath his hood, yet when his head turned I felt his gaze on me like the pressure before a storm. Slowly, he raised a finger to hover over the darkness of his lips. Outside, Thór rumbled.

Swithin paused his wandering by the hearth, concentrating on the instrument in his hands. Mirrored flames flickered in his dark eyes as the orange glow danced upon his bronze face — highlighting the angles of his cheek and the smooth curve of his lyre. The circle of gold at his shoulder, a cloak-clasp gifted by King Hadingus, shimmered as if competing with the hearth’s light. He ran his fingers along the lyre’s cords, testing, and nodded. “How about a tale of our ancestors? Of Tustio, the first king of Jutland, son of Njorð and his first wife, Nerthus? Or of *his* son, Mannus, the first of mortal blood?” He looked up at his eager audience. “No, let me tell you of Ing Mannusson, lord of the Ingwins and Nerthus’ chosen. Let me tell you of their victory at The Battle of Lencten Hall.”

As the first notes of the song trailed from Swithin’s clever fingers, the stranger tensed. I frowned at him. There was no fault in the familiar music; the tune was sweet as ever as Swithin began to sing.

*Lencten Hall was held by
hostile men — Istio
claimed that prize — but praise of him
Ing proved as silver-tongued lies.*

*Oðin-blessed were his bloodworm's
blows and battle-sweat
fed Nerthus’ fertile
fields — none could hide from him.*

Following the feeder of Fenris' folk

with pride men charged their prey

to prove his faith in them wise.

One hid from the fray, a

faithless friend — Eburwin

was his name. The nithing

saw nothing, that sealed his fate.

In the spear-din Ing, great

Ingwins' lord, met with

Isti—

“Stop!” The shout gored the music like an axe and the song died with a twang. We all stared at the stranger. His body was tense, hand white-knuckled around his spear. With each breath his chest heaved, the air now as thick as water. The hall seemed to shrink with his anger. I pressed against my father's legs and felt his hand stroke my hair.

Turning this way and that, the stranger took in all the eyes that stared at him. I shivered when he held his breath. In the silence, we all heard his exhale, a long, calming gust. The hand wrapped around his spear loosened and the hall felt its usual size again. He strode forward, barely leaning upon his spear, walking quickly enough that his cloak billowed and brushed warriors seated at the mead-benches as he passed. As the fabric swept over me, the soaked wool licked my head like a tongue from the world's largest wolf.

“Your song is full of lies,” the stranger said.

Swithin opened his mouth, but before he could speak King Hadingus' voice cut over him.

“Who are you? A travelling skald?”

The stranger shifted slightly to look at the king. “No. I am just a wanderer.”

King Hadingus leaned forward, thrusting his food at the thrall beside him. “If you can tell it better, then do it.” As he spoke, he picked up a knife, twisting it between light fingers. “Otherwise, stop wagging your tongue or I’ll take the useless flesh.”

“I cannot tell it better,” the stranger admitted. He stood strong, no hint of fear in his frame, “but I can tell it true.”

“True is always better,” my father called, and the warriors around him murmured their agreement. Busy watching a pretty thrall fill his drinking horn, he didn’t notice King Hadingus turn his deadly glare towards him. I pressed back against his legs, holding my doll like a shield.

When my father turned back to the stranger, he offered his own horn. “Here,” he said lightly, “wet your throat and tell us something good.”

The stranger reached to take the mead and firelight crept into the dark under his hood. I craned to see more. Though his face was wrinkled with wisdom and his hair grey, no part of him looked feeble. A scar ran down the side of his face, cutting through a colourless eye. When his gaze snapped to mine the white eye didn’t move.

My breath caught. I knew that face, though I had never seen it. A million songs conjured it in vague descriptions, and a million warriors pictured it as they prayed. He smiled at me and I felt my bones turn to liquid. Wide eyes tracked him as he straightened. When the shadows overcame his face once more I glanced back at my father. He was still relaxing against the table. He can’t have seen. Looking around I realised no one had. I alone had looked upon the face of a god.

The stranger drank deeply and tossed the empty horn away, calling, “Listen!” The word thudded against the walls, like a wild beast struggling to escape the building. “I have heard of the glory found at the battle of Lencten Hall, but first let me tell you of Ing Mannusson and Hertha Hartwigsdóttir. Let me tell you of how that marriage grew from the corpse-dew that fed Nerthus’ field.”

Shifting onto my knees, I leaned forward, eager to hear what divine truth might fall from the High One's lips. If this was a test, I wouldn't fail. I would do as he instructed and listen.

THE SAGA OF LENC TEN HALL

2 THE RUMOUR

I heard that the months before the Battle of Lencten Hall were filled with winter's peace, all warriors forced to lay down arms or freeze in her icy embrace. Sheltered inside the hall now, the Ingwins' laughter grew stronger in the warmth. Ing sat apart from her people. Raised on a dais, she looked down the twin lines of mead-benches that stretched the length of the hall. How had her father borne this? The nearby hearth warming the warriors couldn't reach her, cold seeming to seep from the empty seat beside her. She pushed down chill, burying it at her core until Eburwin could return and bring his fire with him. She'd sent him scouting a month ago. That wasn't too long, and she knew he was careful. He wouldn't be caught or killed...

"Listen." The call drew her attention. One of her retainers stood, swaying with the pleasure of drink. No one else had heard Briggs, they were all too busy ripping into their plates of the boar that roasted over the hearth. Beside him, his brother laughed, pieces of his own dinner speckling the table before them. Briggs slammed his hand down. "Shut up!" The Ingwins grew quiet. He raised his drinking horn as he twisted towards Ing. "A toast to our queen and the goddess she hosts tonight."

The Ingwins cheered. Ing raised her own horn at her men before bringing it to her lips. It was empty, but she pretended to drink deeply. There was no ignoring it any longer: something was wrong. She could feel it in the way Nerthus' spirit trembled in her chest, as though Fenrir stalked her with hungry jaws. The last time the goddess' presence had felt this way, the Aseir and the Vanir had been warring, and Oðin had blessed a warrior's sword so it could strike down Ing's grandfather, Tustio, just to anger Nerthus. Ing hadn't reached her father's knee at the time, but it wasn't a feeling she'd ever forget.

Please let it not be Eburwin. Ing closed her eyes, letting her mind sink deeper into Nerthus' touch. *Let him return safely.* She could endure all else, so long as her secret lover returned to her side.

As if in answer, the door opened. Ing watched as a thrall entered, straightening as he hurried towards her. Only when he was at her chair did he pause, leaning down to whisper, "A horse and rider approach."

Eburwin. Her chair screeched loudly against the wooden floor as she stood. Shoving her horn into the thrall's hands she demanded, "Get me a cloak," then didn't bother to wait for him, her wolf-hide already wrapped around her shoulders. As she passed through the doors into the night, she heard two of her men scrambling to follow her. What sweet fools. Though women didn't often go into battle they all carried weapons and all knew how to use them. She herself was no different, but because Nerthus — the goddess she embodied whenever the deity desired — had power over peace and fertility, the moment Ing was no longer a man, everyone expected her to discard her battle metal. Now she touched the seax strapped to the small of her back, the weapon and magic-aid hidden beneath her fur cloak. Though Nerthus visited as she pleased, seeing with Ing's eyes and hearing with Ing's ears, the goddess had never spoken with Ing's voice or moved her host's hands. The deity was a guest in her vessel's body — whatever everyone else believed, they were not the same person. And whatever gender Ing awoke to on any given day, they were always a warrior.

Ing stepped out into an ocean of white that stretched beyond the borders of the dark. Mud mixed with the thin snow under her boots, leaving a trail of dirty footprints for her guards to follow. The sharp air bit through her clothing; the wolf-hide's growl barely kept the chill away. Trembling under winter's weight, a thrall with scraps of old linen for shoes and a threadbare wool dress carried hay to the barn. Ing strode past her, aiming for the braziers burning like stars along the boundary. They blazed against the pale sea, yet the moon burned brighter still. She stopped by one of the fires, nodding briefly to the men that stood guard there. Beyond the amber glow, there was nothing but black. She squinted, trying to see Eburwin's grey horse among the snow.

“What are we looking for?” Konrad, one of her guards, asked.

Ing glanced at him. Youth still lingered in him despite his bearded cheeks. He stood unnaturally still now, locking shivers within tense muscles.

Beside him his older brother, Agi — both taller and bigger than Konrad — was staring at something over Ing’s shoulder. His hand drifted to the sword on his hip. “Friend or foe?”

She turned back. There, finally, she could see the approaching figure. Despite Nerthus’ anxiety, Ing relaxed. Even blind, she would know the shape of that rider. Whatever the goddess still feared, Ing didn’t care; Nerthus had answered her prayers and Eburwin was safe.

As her lover drew closer, Ing could see a grin stretched across his rosy cheeks. White flakes caught in his flaming curls and his damp cloak clung to his broad shoulders. She had missed those shoulders. He pulled his horse to a stop in the same moment that the thrall from the hall appeared with the requested cloak. His grin widened. “Thank the gods, I was about to freeze my balls off.”

His voice was balm to her heart. What Ing wouldn’t give to have a moment alone, to greet him with a lover’s embrace. Even though she was a woman now, Ing knew what problems would arise if people knew of their relationship. When men lay with men for pleasure, according to the world only the stallion can rise a man again. The other, who spread his legs and accepted his lover inside, would be shamed as an ergi — unmanly — for the rest of his life. There was no worse an insult and the stain would never wash away. Eburwin had once pointed out that they need not hide when she was a woman, but both knew they’d be watched like a hawk as men. They’d never have chance to be close that way again. No, better to love in the dark. So, for now, Ing pushed her desire away and replied, “Good, no one needs you breeding.”

“Fuck off,” Eburwin said with a laugh. The slush squished as he dismounted. The thrall grabbed his horse’s reins as he started fiddling with the buckles of his cloak. “I couldn’t find Istio, but Erminus and his men are protected in a farm north-east from here.” Slipping the wet cloak from

his shoulders, he eagerly grabbed a fresh one from the thrall. “Already they make preparations to leave.”

Ing sighed. Winter had been a welcome reprieve. Raiding was all well and good, but this war between her and her brothers — Erminus and Istio — she had a special hate for. Each of them wanted Lencten Hall for themselves — for status or sentiment, she didn’t know. But memories of them haunted her whenever she crossed blades with their men. Erminus snuck her a sword and started to train her in the glade behind the longhouse long before their father had thought her ready. Istio used to tell her tales of the gods at night — of Thor and Loki dressing as women to retrieve Mjönir from evil giants. No one could make her laugh as he had. And when the other children taunted her before her connection to Nerthus was known — calling her weak, saying she was better suited for wielding a porridge spoon than blade, they’d both drawn blood defending her. Yet all that love seemed to end with their father’s life.

“I’ve got this.” Eburwin’s voice pierced through her ghosts as he took the horse’s reins back from the thrall. What was he doing? He glanced at her. “Walk with me?”

Ing knew him too well to believe that smile. Without hesitation, she dismissed her men. “Go back to the hall,” she ordered, and though Agi frowned at Eburwin, when Konrad slapped his arm he obediently followed his brother away.

They made for the barn. Eburwin’s shoulder brushed hers lightly as they walked. Slowly, the distance between them and the guards seated around the fires grew.

“What is it?” she asked quietly.

“It may be nothing,” Eburwin glanced over his shoulder, “just a rumour I heard.” Leaning in, he lowered his voice even further. “People whisper you are not Nerthus’ true chosen.”

Ing felt the goddess quiver inside her and knew *this* was what troubled her. “You don’t think—”

“No.” Their hushed voices seemed too loud in the night’s muffled silence. They glanced around themselves. No one was there. “But if these whispers arrive here, it won’t be long before some fool calls you ergi.”

Unmanly. Without Nerthus as a shield Ing would be defenceless against such slander. She’d lose her retainers’ support. Their faith. No warrior would risk the shame of following an unmanly man into battle... And without them, the war against her brothers would be lost.

They didn’t speak as they crossed the threshold of the barn. Ing’s eyes swept the room. The shadows were darker here, warring with the lone torch. All was still. Silent. She felt her shoulders relax. They were alone. “Who do they believe is Nerthus’ chosen, if not me?” At the sound of her voice, her stallion, Gullin, poked his head from his stall. His golden face almost glowed. What a fine beast. She gave him an absentminded pat while Eburwin looped his own reins through a hoop on the wall.

“Hertha Hartwigsdóttir,” Eburwin said. “You remember Hartwig? Big bloke. He’s one of Erminus’ retainers now.”

Ing frowned. “Nerthus can’t have chosen her. Her family isn’t descended from the goddess.”

Eburwin slid blanket and saddle from his horse’s back. Grabbing a brush from an abandoned pile, he used it to gesture at Ing. “They think she’s your brother’s bastard.”

“Erminus’?” Ing’s voice rose as it quivered with laughter. “He’s too busy fucking slave boys to sire a child.”

“He has a wife now,” Eburwin said, but his lips were twitching. “Pretty thing, too.”

“Shame he’s only interested in the allies she brings. If they ever have children, Oðin can strike me down.”

“Don’t tempt him.” Eburwin’s tone was light but his expression was serious. “It’s easy for us to see the truth about your brother, but he hides it well.”

“Do I need to be concerned?” Ing asked.

He glanced around, forever cautious, before he reached for her. His hand was solid against her neck as he drew her closer. A rough thumb stroked the soft skin under her jaw. It felt like home. Her eyes fluttered shut and she grabbed his wrist, desperately clinging back. Within her breast, Nerthus shivered in pleasure. Softly, Eburwin whispered, “Whatever comes, I’ll—”

A soft thud from one of the stalls cut him off. They leapt away from each other, spinning to face the noise. Could it have been a horse? Ing met Eburwin’s gaze. Both he and Nerthus were still as the moment before Thór’s rage, waiting for the lightning to strike. She closed the distance in two bold steps, yanking the stall door open. A young thrall crouched within; arms wrapped around her shaking body.

Ing’s fingers tightened on the wooden door. “Get out.”

The thrall stood, hesitantly stepping towards the exit. “Sorr—”

“Leave!”

She fled.

“Should’ve killed her,” Eburwin said. He retreated, putting his horse between them like a shield. Even with the fear still lodged in her throat, it was difficult not to let that hurt.

“Under what law?” Ing asked, placing a hand over Nerthus’ nervous pulsating. “I only kill when it’s lawful. I won’t delve into the secret dealings of murder.”

“Your honour is not the only one in danger,” Eburwin hissed. “I’ll not be called ergi.”

“Nor I,” Ing snapped. “Are you done?” she turned towards the door, ending the discussion. Perhaps she was being a fífl, but one should never sow a field too early; weather and people are equally unpredictable. She won’t make a murderer of herself for a thrall who knew better than to let loose her tongue. Besides, even if the girl did talk, surely it would be about Erminus; she didn’t love the thought of his reputation under the public’s knife, but better his than hers.

#

They should have killed the whore. I heard that barely a week had passed since Eburwin's return and in that time whispers infected Lencten Hall. Passing from man to man, the rumour travelled like a plague. Ing felt them watching him — considering, assessing, doubting. One morning he'd awoken a man, and for the first time his people took the swiftness of this change as evidence of a lie — though Nerthus lingered within him. Everyone assumed it was her presence that shifted his gender, but Ing alone knew this wasn't true. The goddess now felt like a comforting embrace, soothing the pain of their judgment as a mother does for a scraped knee. It wasn't enough. Each look felt like a dagger in his side as his honour bled from him slowly.

Ing stood by the dying hearth in his room. He should be sleeping. The hour was late enough that Máni's chariot had travelled behind the highest clouds, but every time he closed his eyes, his retainer, Agi's, concerned face waited with a warning on his tongue. Ing should have listened to Eburwin. One man can know a secret, but two should not. And if three know, well, so does the world.

Behind him, the door creaked open. He didn't turn; there was only one person it could be. Quicks steps closed the distance between them. As hands settled on his hips, Ing closed his eyes. He was pulled flush to the man's chest — solid and warm. He sank into the embrace.

"You should not have come," Ing said.

"I could not bear to stay away," Eburwin whispered. Fingers drew blond strands away from Ing's neck so lips could kiss the exposed skin. Nerthus shivered within Ing's chest. It did not matter to the goddess that Eburwin didn't know she was there; she knew worship when she felt it. Ing tilted his head to the side to offer the gentle lips more places to explore. They brushed against his skin as Eburwin continued, "My heart aches for you."

Ing pressed back into a growing hardness, smirking as Eburwin's breath caught. "I think you ache elsewhere." He felt Eburwin's lips curve up.

“There too.”

Memories of this afternoon crawled back into Ing’s mind. “Wait.” He turned in Eburwin’s hold, drawing back to see his face. “We must speak.”

“What is it?”

Ing nodded to the nearby chairs and Eburwin threw himself into one. The embers’ light couldn’t reach him there. His sprawling shape, blank of details, was familiar. Ing wished he could reach out and touch him again. Reluctantly, he sat across from him, keeping his traitorous hands clasped in his lap. “Agi warned me of the rumour today. It’s spreading.”

Eburwin tensed.

Ing shook his head. “No mention of us. Just me.”

Eburwin fell back, his relief obvious. A moment passed, then he reached for Ing’s hands. “What you need, I shall do.” A gentle squeeze sealed the oath.

“Agi suggested a plan.” Ing tried to keep his voice light, but it fell flat. “None would believe the girl is Erminus’ bastard if ... I married her.”

Eburwin froze. “You jest.” Ing said nothing. “It will never work. Why would Hertha betray her kin by wedding her enemy? And even if she agrees, people will *think* the marriage is incestuous. This solves nothing.”

“No father would let a daughter marry her own blood,” Ing said, quoting Agi’s words. “If Erminus supports the marriage, the rumours will stop. As for Hertha, they say a woman’s heart turns on a pottery wheel.” The words tasted bitter in his mouth; what lies men like to tell to justify their unfaithfulness. “She’ll be queen. That will count for something.”

Eburwin pulled away. Ing caught his hands before they could fully retreat, and they hovered in the Ginungagap between them. “Am I to lose you?”

Silence stretched like eternity, a spiral of cold nothing, an echo from his future. He should have waited, let Eburwin pull him into bed one last time. He tightened his grip. If this was the last time they touched, perhaps he just wouldn't let go.

He felt Eburwin twist, then interlace their fingers. "You were always to marry one day."

Ing slumped forward, relief's forge melting his bones like raw ore. "I leave our people in your care."

"When do you depart?" Eburwin asked quietly.

"Dawn."

Eburwin's head bobbed once. Tugging at Ing's hand, he pulled them both upright. Ing fell into him, tucking his face in the crevice where shoulder meets neck. He wrapped his arms around him tight enough to bruise. Ing clung back.

No more words were spoken between them that night.

3 A FATED MEETING

It was a long journey to old man Dudda's farm, where Eburwin had seen Erminus sheltering for the winter. I heard that for two days and one long night, Gullin the golden stallion carried his master over hill and through the dying white until they arrived at the large farm tucked in the wooded valley. Dogs with hungry mouths guarded all borders save for the eastern boundary, for the dark forest at its edge warned strangers away. Slowly, Ing dismounted and crossed the tree line. Naked beeches towered over him, spindly branches reaching like fingers for him as he passed. It was too quiet. The wind barely moaned as it kissed the back of his neck with dead lips. He shuddered. *Turn back*, silent voices seemed to scream, *you are not welcome here*. Ing walked on.

The night grew darker, until only his path was illuminated with speckled moonlight. Ing saw something move from the corner of his eye — black fur and a flash of teeth. Gullin shied away, eyes wide and rolling. Ing drew his sword, stepping between horse and danger. Nothing was there. The night was still. After a moment, Ing turned his back to calm his mount with gentle words. Gullin pressed his face into Ing's chest. It was several minutes before they could move on.

Two sharp croaks echoed from above and he looked up. Nothing again. What curse lay on this forest? Finally, he came to a natural arch of oaks and stopped. This was Oðin's grove; a place as sacred to the High One as Nerthus' island was to his goddess. Ing knew himself to be unwelcome. Nerthus had never forgiven the Allfather for taking her husband away and giving him a new bride, and the dislike was mutual. Ing's father had warned him to never enter Oðin's sacred places and to never expect the god's favour. Turning away, Ing led Gullin along a path closer to the forest's edge. It would take longer to walk around the grove, but worth it to avoid further angering the god. Maybe he wasn't angry. One could argue that Ing hadn't trespassed until he'd crossed the arch and followed the winding path beyond. He could only hope... if only that hope didn't feel so much like a lie.

The moon was low before Ing found a safe place to make camp. Tying Gullin to a tree, Ing sat nearby, dragging a saddlebag onto his lap. From it, he pulled his seax and a piece of wood, unadorned and still rough from its cutting, threaded onto a leather string. He steadied the small block against his knee, bringing the tip of his blade to its surface. Leaning over his task, he muttered the secret names of each rune. They fell from his lips without thought, misting into the air. His shoulders relaxed as he concentrated, the knife scraping a calm and familiar rhythm. Ing always found seiðr work peaceful, especially when he was alone. He didn't blame his men for judging him — it's a woman's craft, they said, never mind that Ing was sometimes a woman himself — but that didn't mean he accepted their scorn.

He sat back. The runes were perfect, not a line out of place. He turned his seax onto his thumb, hissing through the sharp pain. Blood welled along the cut. He smeared it over the runes and the carvings glowed through the red like ælfish starlight. It was done. Slipping the leather string over his head and settling the carved bark on his chest, he felt the night fold in around him. Holding up his hand, he saw nothing. Even with his seiðr blanketing him for sight, it was strange to see through what he knew to be solid flesh. Perfect, time to go.

The farm was large. He jumped the first fence, jogging past the tiny groups of sleeping sheep, huddled so closely together their heavy wool looked tangled. When he got to the next field, he paused. In the darkness, raised points burst from the ground like giant spears: the tents of Erminus' men. There were so many — how could he check them all? He shook his head. If Hartwig was as important as Eburwin claimed, he and his daughter weren't likely to sleep in the cold. Ing weaved through the tents towards the barns and longhouse that waited on the other side of the field, creeping past the drunken snores that echoed from within. Finally, he reached the small house. Pressing against the wooden walls, he peered in through the glassless window. Sleeping bodies covered the floor. Limbs tangled with limbs, backs against backs, they pushed at one another for space that wasn't there. He couldn't go in; this spell only hid him from sight, not touch or sound. In the enclosed space, it wouldn't be long before hands found him. Or weapons.

Ing knelt at the door, drawing his seax once more. Keeping his touch light, he carved new runes on the entry, small hidden scratches. He leaned over them until his lips brushed against the marks. “Hertha.” The seiðr caught the name, intertwined with it and became one. Ing felt it float through the gaps of the door and move inside. He fell back and waited.

It didn’t take long for the door to open and a woman to step through. She seemed familiar, though Ing couldn’t remember why. Almost a head taller than him, she was dressed only in a yellow underrobe, the thin fabric covered but did nothing to hide her broad shoulders and arms. He couldn’t help how his eyes trailed over her. She was strong. Strong enough to wrestle cattle, wield a sword... or to crowd him against a wall, bear his weight as he wrapped his legs around her waist, kissing hard enough to bruise. His face burned. Her cheeks were rosy too, flushed with cold. Golden locks framed her face, falling down her back like shimmering waterfall. Ing could feel his seiðr around her. It drew her forward with staggering steps until the door closed quietly behind her. This was Hertha: it had to be; his spell wouldn’t have drawn anyone else from the house. Her eyes were still crusted with sleep, but as the magic faded she rubbed them clear. A shiver shook her as she awoke enough to recognise the chill. Hugging herself, she looked around with small frown marring her face.

“Don’t be frightened,” Ing said, and Hertha startled, her hand jumping uselessly to her bare hip. As she stumbled backwards Ing hurried to add, “I mean no harm.”

Her eyes darted from place to place, never landing on Ing. “Who are you?” Her voice was honey spreading sweetness over warm bread. “What are you? An ælf? Show yourself.” She stepped towards the perceived danger, muscles tense and ready. Drawn tall, she shivered only from the cold.

Ing grinned. She was brave. “I’m just a man. Nothing as glorious as an evil spirit.”

“I don’t believe you,” Hertha said. “Why won’t you show yourself?”

“Perhaps I’m shy,” Ing said, then added with a laugh, “or ugly.”

“Who. Are. You.”

“I am called Skírnir,” Ing quickly lied. With her warrior instincts, Hertha was far too fearsome in her anger to risk revealing himself. “I bring a message from my master. Tales of your beauty have travelled far—”

He cut himself off as Hertha rolled her eyes. “Don’t waste your breath. My beauty always matters more to men than it ever has to me. If your master’s message is filled with such drivel, I won’t be moved.”

“Ah,” Ing rubbed the back of his neck as he chuckled softly, “and I don’t suppose you’re interested in hearing my praise of him either?” When Hertha said nothing, Ing continued, “Where do you suggest I start then?”

“Show me your face.” The words were flat. Raising her chin, she stared resolutely a little to his left. “If you won’t, I’m going back inside.”

“I can’t,” Ing said.

She took an exaggerated step backwards, her eyes bright with challenge. He bit his lip. She took another step and her back brushed against the door. With a shrug she started to turn.

“I’m from the Ingwins’ tribe,” Ing said quickly.

Hertha spun back, eyes wide and burning with anger. “If I had my sword, I’d run you through. I should wake everyone. Warn them.”

“Please don’t,” Ing said quietly. “I’m not here to hurt anyone.”

“That you’re a messenger is the only reason I haven’t,” Hertha said. A laugh broke free, the sound too dark for any joy. “Your master is Ing Mannusson. I’d rather you were an ælf!” A thought crossed her face and she shrunk into the door. “You’ve put a spell on me.”

“No,” Ing said. “I swear it.”

Hertha looked up at the sky. “You don’t have time,” she sneered. “The sun has almost risen. See if your magic lasts in the light of the day. If you try this again tomorrow night, I’ll bury my sword in your gut!” With that, she yanked the door open and disappeared inside.

Ing closed his eyes. “Fuck.”

4 HERTHA'S DREAM

Hertha didn't intend to sleep that night with an Ingwin outside her door, but I heard it found her swiftly — sweeping her away to the land of dreams and nightmares where true prophecies lie. Her spirit unknowingly awoke there, opening her eyes to an endless night. *Where was she?* Hertha spun around, trying to see, but there was nothing; no sound or light, just an empty absence that ached hollow. This must be a mistake. An unlikely hole in the cloth of fate, an error she had fallen through. The darkened void consumed her, or maybe she consumed it; they were one and the same. She drew in a deep breath just to remind herself that she was alive, and the sound was swallowed by silence. Her hand drifted to where her hip should be and felt the absence of a sword. Was this Skírnir's doing? Had he been an ælf after all, and a single conversation was all he'd needed to trap her in his realm?

A murmur broke through the nothingness. Voices? She strained to hear but the words evaded her, too quiet and too far. They washed over her like ripples in a stream, wriggling worms in the water drawing her forward. Louder now, they bounced off her, giving shape to the shade she'd been before. A distant light pierced through the dark like a needle in cloth. Finally, a way out. Squinting, she reached for it and could almost see the outline of her hand.

“Witch.” The word boomed around her, a hook on the line that jerked the world from beneath her feet. Light blazed in painful brightness. Hertha squeezed her eyes shut, hiding behind her hand, but her skin was transparent. “What I ask you now, you will answer,” the voice demanded.

Hertha tried to say, *I'm not a witch*, but the light invaded her throat. She choked on it.

“Who is to be the doom of Baldur, how will the son of Oðin be slain?” The voice belonged to a man. The deep tone spoke of age, but there was no hint of frailty.

“A blind hand will throw the deadly branch that will slay Baldur Oðinsson,” a woman’s voice answered. Her words matched the man’s blade for blade. “You made me speak, but you will hear no more from my tongue.”

As Hertha’s eyes adjusted to the light, two figures swam into focus. She crept closer and the forms solidified into two cloaked people facing one another.

“What I ask you now, you will answer,” the man demanded. “How will death find the one who brings about Baldur’s doom?”

“Vali, son of Rind, will avenge his brother. He will neither wash his hands nor comb his hair until Baldur’s bane burns on the pyre. You made me say this, but I will say no more.”

Hertha looked away. Her surroundings blurred white as though she’d sunk into a cloud. The ground under her feet twisted like a broad river, its banks so wide that there was no fear of falling. Above and around her, oaken arms reached out into the emptiness and beyond her sight. She knelt, pressing her palm to the wood. Her fingers trailed along its deep grooves, older than time itself. Yggdrasill.

How had she come to stand on a branch of this sacred tree?

“What I ask you now, you will answer.” Hertha looked up, compelled. “Who are the weeping maidens that cast their veils into the sky?”

“You are no Wanderer,” the woman spat, and her anger was a physical force that pushed Hertha back. “You are Oðin, oldest of the gods.”

Hertha froze, eyes wide. *That* was Oðin? He wore a simple cloak with simple colours. His face was hidden beneath his hood, but a full beard — wisdom grey — emerged from the shadows. She should look away, bow maybe, but her eyes stayed fixed upon him.

The man drew himself taller at the woman’s accusation. Contempt rolled off him in waves. They crested over Hertha, breaking and forcing her down, grinding her cheek into the wood. Oðin

didn't seem to notice. "And you are no witch," he said coolly, "but a mother who birthed three monsters to doom the worlds. You have no wisdom to offer me."

Hertha covered her ears, screaming soundlessly as the pressure of Oðin's words grew. His voice roared, louder and louder, over her silent pleas and raw throat. Heavier than worlds, it crushed her until she was little more than dust, and still it pushed on.

"Enough," the woman said, and the pressure lifted. Her voice was both kinder and closer than it had been moments before. Hertha pushed herself to her knees, craning to look up at her. Flame-kissed hair, untamed by tie or ornament, ran down to her ankles. She pushed her hood back, but Hertha couldn't hold the details of her face; they slipped away as quickly as she noticed them. The woman reached down and offered a gaunt hand.

Hertha reached for it, but an unseen barrier halted her hand. Even so, long fingers soon clasped her wrist and strength bolted through Hertha's body, chasing away any lingering weakness. She stood. As the woman pulled back, Hertha's eyes drifted over to where Oðin had stood. No one was there.

"Where did—" She cut herself off, disturbed by the non-sound she made.

The woman heard the intent if not the words themselves. "The Wanderer left long before you arrived and will arrive long after you leave. Time means little in this place."

"But how did I get here?" Hertha asked, pushing through the unease of speaking.

"Souls travel far when dreaming, and farther still when divine hands guide them. You are here because the Wanderer drew you here. You are here because I felt a kinship with your choice." *Choice*, Hertha thought. *What choice?* The woman's eyes grew distant, and Hertha felt herself fade at the lack of attention. "I love my children, even knowing their fates..."

As she spoke, Hertha's wispy body warped, sprouting fur, a long jaw and sharp fangs. She turned her snout towards the moon to howl — but it escaped as a baby's cry. Arms wrapped

around her, and she looked up at her mother's half-rotted face. She didn't care; several seasons had passed since she'd buried her mother. She reached up with baby hands.

"...or perhaps because of them," the woman said, and Hertha shifted again. She was on a battlefield: hundreds of men with spears upon a breaking ground. She thrust her weapon forward, sinking it deep into her enemy's side; he died upon its point. Gods battled giants, Asgard burned, and she burned too. Dead men fell and their brethren stepped over them. Rising again, the dead fought with spears.

The woman's gaze settled on her once more, snapping Hertha back to herself. She looked down at her hands, still invisible, but holding the shape she had known since birth. *What was that?* Sickness bubbled in her stomach and slowly climbed up her throat. She swallowed the lump down. If that's what happened when the woman's thoughts wandered, Hertha hoped she never lost her attention again. Wait... what had she been saying before? Something about— "What choice?"

"The choice the Wanderer lays before you," the woman said. "He compels me to give you this warning: your family's actions have set them against the Vanir goddess, and forgiveness is not in Nerthus' nature. If the tapestry is woven how the Wanderer predicts, your father will die by Nerthus' hand."

Hertha's heart swooped from her body. It rolled off the branch and fell, down and down into the depths of the unknown. *This was about Skírnir.* She shouldn't have sent him away, should never have spoken so boldly to a messenger of a goddess' chosen.

"Is there nothing I can do to save him?"

"Nothing is woven yet. The choice that lays before you will shape your father's fate. Now wake."

Hertha sat upright in her bed with gasp, and at the base of Yggdrasill, beside an incomplete tapestry, the Norns looked at each other with grim faces as Skuld stepped forward and threw her bone lots into the air.

5 THE CHOICE

Hertha's dream swirled in her head like a fly drowning in mead, its cries for help resounding in her father's voice. Sol's brilliant chariot glowed through the window and small gaps in the wooden walls. She had overslept. Hands blind and shaking swept the floor, brushing against discarded furs and bedrolls until finally finding the rough wool of her overdress to pull on. Where was her father? Had Nerthus already claimed his life for her mistake?

"You're awake," a voice behind her said.

Busy tying her belt, Hertha turned to face its source. Two women sat at a loom in the corner. She froze; these were two of three Norns. One of the deities' hands hovered above the sacred loom with a prepared weft ready to strike. Staring at her father's fate-thread, pleas scrambled up her throat, tangling in each other to form a lump she couldn't speak past. Then she blinked and realised it was Queen Ceolwynne, not a Norn, sitting before her with hair of autumn red braided and looped around her head like a crown. A wrap of fur, shaggy and brown, rested around her shoulders, pinned in place with a golden ring. Their host's wife, Goda, sat on a stool beside the queen, using a wide toothed comb to prepare the wool in her hands. Ceolwynne set her weft down. "None could wake you this morn. You slept like one struck by a svefnthorn."

Thoughts of the Norns still burned in Hertha's mind, quickening her pulse. "Have you seen my father?"

Ceolwynne's eyes swept over her and Hertha felt exposed, as though she had cut out her heart and held it bleeding for all to see. "My husband planned to take him hunting."

Hertha trembled. A stray arrow, the tusk of a boar, a fall from a horse: a hunt was a good place for the goddess to exact vengeance. "Have they left? I need to speak with him."

“Let us see.” Ceolwynne stood. Glancing down as Goda put away her work, the queen added, “Clear away the men’s sleeping rolls. We’ll be needing the space for cooking soon.”

Goda frowned. Her face was more lined than it had been at the start of winter when King Erminus and his housecarls arrived without warning. She and her husband, Old Dudda, had been honoured to host the Herminone’s king at first, knowing that he had nowhere to winter since Ing held Lencten Hall. But as time passed and their cupboards grew thinner, stress’s spear overwhelmed their hosts; it was a bad friend who lingered past their welcome, and Hertha knew Erminus had. Still, Goda nodded obediently.

Hertha pushed the door open and as Ceolwynne stepped through she asked softly, “What troubles you?”

“Nothing. Just a strange dream,” Hertha lied. Two should never share a secret, for if three learnt it, so would the world. And if Erminus was to learn of Skírnir’s presence the night before, he would send men after him, thinking him a spy. If, as Oðin had warned her, Nerthus was angry because Hertha rejected Ing’s suit, what would the goddess do if Ing’s messenger was killed because of her loose tongue?

Outside felt as cramped as it had in the longhouse. A sea of men filled the space between barns and animal pens, beating the browning grass with their many feet. Out in the fields, rows of warriors — old men and young boys — trained with weapons. Any other day, that was where Hertha would be, watching the forest edge as she fought imagined enemies. Now, she turned her back and followed Ceolwynne as the queen weaved through the mess of bodies.

Laughter rose near the border of the farm. One man was louder than the others, booming in thunderous joy. Hartwig. Hertha closed her eyes as relief flushed through her. When she opened them once more, she caught sight of his friend, Osgar, first — his head towered over everyone else’s. And there was her father, smacking his friend’s arm as he chuckled. Standing with them were Erminus and two other men, their horses saddled and waiting. A hound sat at Hartwig’s feet,

leaning against his leg, staring up with greedy eyes. Hartwig grinned widely as he surrendered and gave the dog's ear a rub. His boar-skin cloak and tunic shifted, revealing a long-healed scar on his collarbone, one of hundreds that littered his body.

A childlike urge to run to him and cling to his shirt rushed over Hertha. If she didn't let go, how could Nerthus take him? Forcing herself to be dignified, she kept her steps even but was unable to stop from calling, "Father!"

He looked up. Happy as he'd been before, pure joy overcame his face upon seeing her. He raised a hand in greeting, but as Hertha drew closer a frown tugged at his expression. Grasping her shoulder, he gave it a light squeeze. "Are you well?" Hertha nodded and he drew her to his side, looping an arm around her shoulders. "We plan to hunt; you should come." He glanced at Erminus. "She has great skill with a bow."

Erminus smiled. The king was a tall man, though not as tall as Hartwig and not half as broad. His beard, a tangle of wood brown, grew like a bush — wide but not long. The clasp holding his cloak in place glittered in the sunlight. As a good king, he gave many gifts to his retainers so that they wore an equal amount of treasure as him. "You are welcome, but we must hurry if we are to bring the evening meal in time for cooking." He turned away, snatching his horse's reins from the thrall.

Ceolwynne's mouth tightened and pity welled in Hertha's chest. He hadn't even looked at her. She wasn't sure what the queen had expected; his disinterest had been plain at their wedding. Yet despite her pity, she felt the hand on her heart loosen. If her father must be in danger, at least she could be the shield on his arm. "I—"

A sharp shriek cut her off. Dark feathers swooped past to settle on a nearby post. Black beady eyes stared at her. Holding her gaze, it called for her.

She forced herself to look away. "Thank you, but I have work to do."

Hartwig's arm slipped from her shoulders. The small gap between them seemed to grow, a distance that promised borders she could not cross. She grabbed him. He raised his brows at her, unspoken concern swelling in his eyes.

"Be careful," Hertha said, and it was almost a plea.

One of the men, silent until now, scoffed. "What's the fun in that?" His friend laughed with him, as though her concern was a joke. Nothing.

Hartwig covered her hand with his larger one, the calluses rough and comforting. "I'll be careful." With his other hand, he drew his Mjölfnir pendant from under his tunic. "Thór watches over me."

"Not sure how much protection that grants, given how chipped it is," Osgar said as he clasped Hartwig's shoulder. He winked. "So I'll keep an eye on him too, don't you worry."

Hartwig shoved him off with a laugh, letting Hertha's hand slip away. "Who saved who from that boar, and who got the ugly scar?"

"I think my hair hides it well," Osgar said, running his hand over his bald head — a contrast to his thick night-dark beard.

Turning to their horses, Hartwig waved as he mounted, leaving Hertha to watch them ride away.

"Go," Ceolwynne said, drawing her attention away from her father's shrinking figure. The queen nodded to the raven. Stillier than stone, it sat on the post intent on Hertha. "Whatever dream haunts you, it's clear that Oðin is playing his part. Only a *fífl* refuses to answer a god's summons."

Silently, Hertha dipped her head in thanks and the battle gull took flight. No time for words, she followed. Wings outstretched, it glided more than flew, opening a path at her feet through the mess of the overcrowded farm. It led her beyond the comforts of home, through crowded beeches

and oaks. The gull melted into the gloom and still it called to her. She stumbled after its cries, head whipping around trying to catch sight of her guide.

And then, light: a deadened glow of smothered fire in the path ahead. I heard that Oðin's minion fell silent as Hertha crept through the undergrowth, her steps falling softly on the uneven ground. The forest thinned. Ducking behind a beech, she peeked out at the clearing. A sun-gold man and horse rested at its centre next to glowing embers. While his beast dozed unsaddled, the man sat upright. A sword gleamed dangerously on his lap, a whetstone abandoned at his feet. Slowly, his hand wrapped around the hilt as he scanned the trees, never landing on her. He was dressed for travel, simple attire under a grey fur cloak, yet still looked like treasure itself. Hard as he was in the jaw and brow, the skin of his bare cheeks was soft, inviting. Twin braids sprouted from his temples, twisted back for a warrior's fight, while the rest of his hair flowed free. She knew of only one other with hair like her own — Ing, chosen by the goddess and lord of the Ingwins.

This was the choice Oðin had warned her about, a chance to undo the mistake she'd made the night before that had offended Nerthus. If marrying her enemy would appease the goddess and save her father's life, she'd do it. She'd do anything for her last living parent. "You lied to me," Hertha called, and despite the lightness of her tone, Ing jumped to his feet with his sword raised between them. She stepped into the clearing, hands held aloft. "I'm unarmed."

Ing didn't relax. "Hertha." He assessed her, looking for the truth of her words. Finally, he said, "I didn't lie."

"So you *are* called Skínir, and not Ing Mannusson?" Hertha asked.

After pause, he admitted, "Okay, I told that one."

Hertha forced a chuckle and took a cautious step forward. When he made no move to stop her, she took another. "I recognise you from Lencten Hall."

Confusion pulled his brows down. "You lived at Lencten Hall?"

“I was younger then, a mere child,” Hertha said. “We never spoke. Those were simpler times.”

Fond memory clouded Ing’s expression, but his sword never wavered. “My father was a good king.”

“He was.” Hertha looked pointedly at his raised weapon. “He taught you better than to strike an unarmed warrior.”

“A good warrior is never unarmed,” Ing said. The statement rang true in the knife hidden up her sleeve. He glanced behind her and added, “And warriors are not always alone.”

“I am.” Then, laughing, she said, “I wouldn’t need help if I wanted to kill you.”

“If?”

“It means something that *you* came to speak with me, and not a messenger,” Hertha lied. That was a good enough reason for her to have changed her mind, right? And she had to seem like she’d changed her mind, if Ing’s pride remained wounded then Nerthus’ anger would still come for Hertha’s father. Ing had to believe she’d fallen for him or her father’s grave would be filled. She risked another step forward. The distance between them was dangerously small now, barely a blade’s length. She pretended she didn’t notice.

“You seemed sure of mind last night,” Ing said. “I’m no fool, so don’t treat me like one. Why are you here?”

Gods curse it. Well, they say the best lies have a seed of truth. “I spoke to you harshly last night. I shouldn’t have. Whether you are the king of my enemies or of my own tribe, you are a goddess’ chosen.”

“Nerthus doesn’t care how people speak to me,” Ing said. Hertha forced herself not to react to the obvious lie. “And she was not with me last night. You have nothing to fear.” As he lowered

his sword, Hertha's shoulders relaxed. The tip grazed the dirt, ready for a quick rise. "I don't want you to fear me."

Tilting her head to the side, she asked, "Do you plan to visit me again tonight? Use your magics to lure me from my bed?"

Ing snorted. "That didn't go so well last night."

She took another step closer. It would be so easy to touch one another, so easy for a blade to sink between her ribs. For her father, she would risk it. She'd risk anything. "You're clever enough to learn," she teased with false lightness, "but you don't plan to give up?"

"No."

"Don't come to the farm again." She made herself sway towards him. He seemed lost, almost dazed. If this was what the goddess desired, she supposed there were worse husbands to have. "I'll come to you."

Spinning away, Hertha retraced her steps through the undergrowth. And though she didn't wait for his answer, I heard that Ođin order the wind to carry it to her.

"I'll be waiting."

6 A SUDDEN NEED FOR WEAPONS

Lencten Hall was asleep. Eburwin left the drunken warriors inside to snore their ale away and displease their wives. Outside, night fled like a coward from his torch. In his other hand was a jug, contents sloshing with every step he took. There was a loneliness to a night such as this; even Máni hid behind smoky clouds.

He glanced at the empty space at his side where Ing should be. They would have reached the farm by now. Had they already spent the night with Hertha? A drop of mead splashed from the jug. He paused, taking a sip from the top and wished he could down the whole thing himself. He knew he had to share Ing but didn't have to like it. It wasn't *fair*. Oh, he didn't doubt the plan would work. Ing would return a married man, honour restored. And once they had her, what need did Ing have of him? Eburwin pushed the thoughts from his mind; only a stupid man lies awake pondering his problems.

He moved over to the guards' brazier; two men sat beside it, backs turned.

"All I'm saying is it's colder than a draugr's arse and just as dead — why do we need to be out here?"

Firelight glared off the other guard's arm ring as he smacked his young partner. "You'll do your watch, same as everyone else."

"Perhaps some mead will cheer your spirits," Eburwin called, and the men looked back at him. He raised the jug and grinned as both guards reach for their drinking horns. As he bent to fill the older man's, he glanced at the younger over his shoulder. "I'm not sure you deserve this, Cenric."

Cenric wilted. "Norns curse it."

"Thanks for this," Pæga, the older one, said. "Sleep evading you?"

Eburwin nodded and waggled the jug at the youth, who gratefully held out his horn.

“It’s too quiet.” Eburwin squinted out through the layers of black, seeing nothing. “As though the gods are holding their breath.”

Cenric, chin-deep in his drink, snorted then immediately coughed. Eburwin slapped him on the back until he waved him off. “I’m good, I’m good. It’s just, tonight is just the same as last night, and the one before that. Both of you are just bein—”

An arrow sprouted from Cenric’s chest, wound mead spilling. He looked down at it, face pale and swaying. Eburwin lunged and caught him as he fell.

Pæga grabbed Eburwin’s arm, yanking him back as an arrow landed with a thud in the ground where he’d knelt moments before.

“Sound the horn.” Eburwin drew his sword, grabbing the guard’s tunic and pulling him to his feet. The horn’s bellow pierced the night, and one by one guards at different braziers added their warnings. The alarm echoed around him, louder than the thunder of rapidly approaching hooves. “Fall back! Back to Lencten Hall!”

They ran. Men spilled from the hall half-dressed, weapons in hand. Behind him, as the enemy’s horses drew closer, battle-cries shredded the sky. Flames flew past his ear, scalding his cheek. He jerked away. The fire-arrow landed in the hay by the stable, setting it ablaze. Inside, horses screamed.

He spun to face the approaching army as fires lit the battlefield like stars, illuminating the destruction. Horse and rider raced towards him. Eburwin rolled out of the way, slashing his sword through the horse's front tendons. It squealed as it crumbled, crashing to the ground as its rider flew over its head. He leapt upon the warrior, sword first, and pierced his gut before he could rise. Beside the corpse, a useless shield bore the emblem of an elm tree.

Istio.

What fools they'd been, so focused on the rumour destroying Ing's reputation that they'd forgotten about their third brother. Eburwin stood, snatching the fallen shield for his own.

A wall of riders crashed into the Ingwins, bodies flying as debris. Following them was a slew of shield-breakers on foot — mud smeared across their faces. The death-dealers seemed endless, though I heard Istio only rode with two hundred men. Eburwin moved through the chaos, vision blurring as he whirled from spear to sword. Around him everything was burning — barns, stables, howling men. He breathed the sooty smell with each panting breath. Lencten Hall alone stood untouched by flame.

An axe swung down from a horse's back as it galloped past, smashing against Eburwin's shield. The force punched the wood into his lip; copper flooded his mouth. He spat red, spraying another warrior's helm. Thrusting his sword, the blade sunk deep. Eburwin didn't watch the body fall.

As he marched forward, he didn't dare look down. Already the corpses of his unprepared friends littered the ground; wound rivers gushed from their gashes, more injury than man. He could smell them; the stink of shit and blood climbing his nose. What sightless eyes may look back if he checked? Pæga? Hild? Konrad? Agi? Friends he'd fought besides, grown beside. No, only men destined for the grave grieve before the battle's won.

Agony exploded in his shoulder. Knees collapsing, he fell, hands sliding in the blood-gorged mud. Peeking back, an arrow protruded between his shoulder blades. And a small distance away, Istio's man lowered his bow. Eburwin lurched to his feet, shaking, hand gripping his sword. If he was to die, Valhalla would open her gates with pride. Bellowing rage, he ran at the warrior as the man aimed another arrow.

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Far away, Ing awoke in a cold sweat.

Nerthus' warning pounded like smith's hammer in his chest.

7 ING'S VISION

I heard that by the time the sky's candle had risen, Ing's camp was long empty. The dream that had woken him floated away with the dawn, but Nerthus' worry lingered in his chest. For the first time her presence felt solid — a lump beside his heart vulnerable to a blade. He struggled to breathe around the great stone of her fear. It weighed heavy next to his own, keeping him from flying to Lencten Hall. He kept imagining his retainers stripped and in shackles, their daughters raped as his home burned. And worst of all, he pictured Eburwin cold and still upon a bleeding ground.

Northern winds whipped at his cheeks as he spurred Gullin on; faster and faster until the dry hills blurred around him. He couldn't dwell on doom-filled thoughts, nor risk acting like a fífl. There was nothing he alone could do to spare them. He knew the difference between prophecy and an event already woven; those that survived the sword-storm would not be saved by rash action. If anyone died... If Eburwin was among them... No matter what, Ing would take his revenge with cold steel. For that, he needed a plan.

He needed Nerthus.

Now the sky burned in flame colour, melting winter's blanket, though the earth remained hard and cold. The rhythmic thud of his steed's hooves steadied Ing's racing heart until they sounded as one. It granted him leave to think: a man could travel from farm to coast in five days. From there, it was five again to reach Lencten Hall. Why hadn't Tustio built the place closer to Nerthus' island? Ing shook his head. Unwelcome on Asgard, the island was where the goddess lingered when she wasn't with Ing. It was a small, lonely speck from the mainland's sight. A natural well holding Yggdrasill's waters hid at its centre: her powers were strongest there. That was where she'd be able to advise him, let him peek into the future and suggest his course. As her chosen, Ing knew he was always welcome, but rarely did he visit. No one travelled to sacred places lightly; the gods always demanded sacrifice. It didn't matter, Eburwin was worth any price.

Though he hated to leave Hertha behind. She had seemed interested at their last meeting. It was a strange turn, but he wasn't going to question it — status, loneliness, his good looks — her motives were her own. Not that her good opinion would survive his surprise departure. But maybe he could revive it, have a chance of marrying her and saving his reputation.

The days seemed to crawl. An ever-present ache settled in Ing's hips caused by rocking with the motion of the stallion underneath him. The pain crept up his spine, down his shoulders. Men weren't meant for riding like this. Nor were horses. Gullin's golden coat darkened with sweat. His laboured breath kept time with his pace, and still he galloped on. That was a loyal horse.

Whenever the ache in his bones grew too strong to bear or when Gullin begun to fail, Ing forced himself to rest. Lying sleepless on the uneven ground, he nursed his anger like a horn of mead. It had to be Istio. A brother once, but if he had killed Eburwin then no longer. Forget the war, it was a feud Ing would gladly sacrifice everything for. Plans flashed through his mind: a sword, a spear, a curse. Or maybe he'd burn Lencten Hall to the ground himself with Istio still inside. No, that was too great a grave. Ing would throw his bones to the hounds: Istio didn't deserve Valhalla.

On the fifth day under the bruising sky of a setting sun, Ing arrived at sandy shores. From his place at the top of a lush hill, he looked down at the beach. White sand trembled in the cold winds, dizzying to watch. Grey water lapped shyly at the shoreline but out in the deep, the whale-road rolled and raged. It demanded attention, dominating the air itself by making it heavy with salt.

He left Gullin grazing — the horse knew not to wander — and walked alone onto that lifeless beach. A familiar boat waited there. Old as Lencten Hall itself, the boat was untouched by time. No rot ate at its wood, no rust on its nails. A proud wyrm was carved on the prow, staring across the water in a frozen snarl. Ing shoved it, his feet scrambling along the sand. It didn't move. Stubborn thing. He tried again and slowly the boat inched closer to the water. He splashed into the shallows. Cold as Jotunheim, the water seemed armed with icy needles eagerly pricking at his legs. Light fingers ran up his spine at the feeling. Climbing into the boat, his pants clung to his legs like a second skin. He ignored it. There was worse to come.

The ocean fought him, sea mountains swelling taller the further he went. Under his breath he muttered, “O Njorð, he who loves the seagulls, deliver me safe to my harbour. Let this ship not sink to the deep.” He sensed Nerthus’ annoyance at the prayer, but he felt her forgiveness too. Her old husband was a powerful god and her anger would not be so great if she did not love him still. Beyond the raging waves, exhaustion ate at him and his arms shook. How good would it be to stop? Lay down the oars rubbing painfully against his calloused hands and rest. Even for a moment? Gritting his teeth, he thought of Eburwin and rowed on.

At last, the island reached for him in welcome: the wind ruffled his hair with Nerthus’ unseen fingers, the air warmed and the ocean calmed. Winter was foreign here, as were summer and autumn. Spring bloomed eternal. He shed his cloak, dropped it behind him. Everywhere he looked was *green*. Moss hugged the curves of the oaks and alders, kings of their forest. Delicate leaves sprouted from their limbs and crowned their heads. Tiny dots of purple, pink and yellow were cradled in its depth, vibrant despite the night’s dullness. Under a sliver of light from Máni’s chariot, he guided the boat to the island’s embankment where the water met lush grass. Tensing, he stepped from boat to shore.

Nerthus’ spirit rushed forth to join with the power of her island. Ing arched as her invisible force exploded from him, running a hand down his chest to ensure it was whole. He gasped and choked on the goddess. She surrounded him, filling him, until he was lost in her. She was life: green fields and good harvests; a lover’s embrace; a womb swollen with child. Beneath it all, her anger simmered. Her fury at the High One for breaking her marriage to Njorð burned through her peaceful nature, scalding his skin. He screamed, but the sound was lost in her black song. Clawing to the surface, he clung to his own anger like driftwood in a storm. She focused on it. I’ve heard of Nerthus’ wrath that mortal would defy her chosen, but for now she guided his steps — one, two, three — until he recovered. He balled his hands into fists, using the pinprick of pain to ground him. This was how one survived the power of the gods.

Plants parted at his feet and he followed the winding path Nerthus revealed, under trees and brushing aside sweeping vines, until he came to a clearing. Nerthus' altar, a lake of the richest blue, waited for him. He stepped into the waters and watched the movement catch the light that shimmered on the lake's surface. Nerthus' power felt of thick oil here, coating his skin and clogging his nose. For his people, for Eburwin, it would be worth it. Freeing his seax from the sheath at his back, he prepared himself.

Once, twice, he struck — long gashes along each thigh. He stared down at them, unfeeling, as blood soaked into his trousers. Then it hit: a throbbing sharpness, burning along each cut. He hissed and sank to his knees. The water closed over the wounds, drawing the blood out like red mist, curling at the wispy edges. It spread slowly until it surrounded him. He shivered.

“Goddess of fertility and spring, I thank you for granting me passage to your scared space. Take this gift I offer you, as you have granted me...” His voice weakened. He cleared his throat and tried again. “You have granted me many. Now, I ask for your wisdom...” The world swayed as though the island was a ship, rocking with the waves. Sickness bubbled in his stomach. He swallowed it down and pushed through. “So that I may defeat our enemies. I...” He could barely whisper now. Barely blink. Barely open his eyes. “I...”

He fell forward into an empty void, an endless darkness without thought, a time that stretched into eternity. It was lifeless; nothing and no one existed here. Ing wasn't even sure he was here, or just a bodiless set of watching eyes.

A black wolf stalked from the nothingness, rings rippling out under its paws. Two more followed: one white and one grey. They circled each other with careful steps, teeth bared, growling. Ing, helpless to do anything but watch, drifted closer. The black moved confidently, almost proud. Its circles took it further away from the other two, whose eyes were fixed upon each other.

Deep red dripped from the jaws of the white beast; largest of the three with thick muscles and huge paws. It moved towards Ing, herding the grey — fur matted red and limping — towards him. This wasn't a fight, but a hunt.

The white lunged and Ing was the grey wolf under its teeth. It pierced his throat, crushing him. He couldn't breathe. Twisting in its grasp, the movement tore at his flesh and a whine escaped him. His paws scrambled uselessly as the ground. He didn't want to die like this; a fearful hare, mere prey. His eyes met the black's. He whined again.

It sprang forward, teeth closing around a white leg. It let go of Ing with a howl and he stumbled away, gasping. His legs trembled under him. Sinking down to the cool ground, he watched the white twist and snap at its attacker. It was too strong to beat alone. He pushed himself to his feet and joined the fray. Tooth and claw ripped at flesh. Black and grey moved as a pack and the white fell easily. They panted over its limp form.

The black wolf shuddered. Ing whined, nosing at it and drawing it away from the battlefield. Licking its wounds, the wiry hairs clung to his bloodied tongue. He felt the black do the same with his own. After a moment, it pulled back. They stared at each other, before the black nodded once and turned away. Ing watched as it disappeared in a cloud of smoke, and through it stepped a man.

He stood tall and wide, broad axe in hand. Blood matted his hair, running down his cheek from a gash at his temple. His eyes were wild with fury. "Die," he spat and hefted his weapon high.

The fur on Ing's back rose as he snarled. The warrior leaped forward, swinging his axe, at the same moment Ing lunged for his throat. Teeth found flesh. Salty red flooded his mouth as he tore throat from body. Eagerly, he swallowed it whole as the man fell. Ing watched him press his hands against the torn flesh. Red seeped through his fingers like tears as he gurgled, drowning. Ing sniffed, catching a familiar smell. He nosed at the body as it stopped twitching. It was already cold, as if long dead though the blood still pooled in a growing puddle beneath them. It stained his paws. He sniffed again and memory exploded inside his mind: when he'd chased after Erminus as a child,

this man had stood at his side; when he'd watched Hertha from the forest edge, these were the comforting arms that wrapped around her. Horror rosed in him, escaping through his teeth as a whine.

This was Hartwig, Hertha's father and Erminus' closest friend.

His ears flattened as he nudged the corpse, shoving his nose into the hole he'd made. There was no use, he already smelt of death, there was no fixing this. Behind him, something growled.

Ing burst free from the vision, out from the shallow water that had closed over his head. Coughing, he crawled to the shore. Where were his paws? What were those hairless misshapen things attached to the ends of his limbs? Hands. That's right, he had hands, was human. Falling down at the lake's shore, he rolled onto his back and squinted against the sun's burning light. How much time had passed? Softly, he ran his hands down his thighs and found two raised lines. He pulled back from them, grunting at the lingering sting. Nerthus had healed him.

The ghost of Hartwig's blood lingered in his mouth. When he closed his eyes, he met the man's dead stare. He shied away from it as his stomach rolled. He knew why Nerthus' vision had shown Hartwig's death — as a warning. If he followed her plan, this was the consequence. Any hope he had of Hertha's love fled. He pushed aside the disappointment: it didn't matter, not if this was how his sword would taste vengeance. Thinking back to the battle of wolves, he recalled the feeling of standing over the white — over Istio — in victory. His lips pulled back over his teeth as he lost himself to the memory, and deep in his cavern of anger, something within him revelled.

Ing drew back from it, leaving it trapped and snarling in his core. He knew what he had to do.

8 ISTIO'S ENEMIES FIND PEACE

Five days later, Ing arrived back at Old Dudda's farm where Erminus had wintered. She did not hide in trees or shadow, and so a hoard of Erminus' men was waiting for her. They stood together, weapons gleaming under spring's first heat. Several held howling hounds, snarling and straining against their masters' grips. Gullin skipped nervously away but calmed under her gentle touch; they were both too tired for fear.

Ing watched their eyes widen, though she carried no visible weapon or army at her back. The dress she wore, forest green flowing down Gullin's side, held back their weapons better than any shield. Fools. Nerthus wasn't with her that day. "I will speak with my brother."

They glanced at each other but didn't move, spears held high. Behind them the farm seemed empty, though Ing could hear the ruffling of hiding people. She dismounted. The action awakened the battle men and one of them inched forward until he was close enough to snatch Gullin's reins from her. Slowly, the rest followed him, forming a circle of steel before leading her into the farm.

Women and children crept out as she passed. Ing kept her head high even as she heard whispering; *pretender*, they hissed — the Herminones had heard the rumour.

The walk was short and soon her ring of guards parted to reveal Erminus. Ing blinked to clear her vision. Wearing Mannus' red cloak, with the fox fur at the neck making his shoulder seem wider, he looked just like their father.

Behind her, someone kicked her knee. She fell hard, dust puffing like smoke at the impact. Glaring over her shoulder, she saw a young man smirking down at her.

"Have him drowned," Erminus said, and the boy paled lighter than milk. "I'll not risk a goddess' wrath."

His face was blank as Ing climbed to her feet. War had aged Erminus: his beard greyer, deeper creases at his eyes, but he wore it well. A woman of beauty stood beside him. This, she supposed, was his queen. On his other side stood Hartwig. Ing forced herself not to flinch; she'd eaten his throat in Nerthus vision, could still taste phantom gore on her tongue. Hartwig folded his arms over his broad chest, nose wrinkling as if she smelled of dung. She couldn't hate him for it, not when the path she walked led to his death.

“Why have you come?” Erminus asked.

“You want Lencten Hall,” Ing said and watched wrym-like greed overtake his battle-mask. “Help me take it back from Istio and it's yours.”

Hartwig scoffed. He turned slightly, shouldering Ing out of the conversation. “We don't need...” his lip curled, “*her* for that. Lencten Hall is ours for the taking.”

“If you will not bargain with me,” Ing interrupted, “I'll end you.”

Flame consumed the greed on Erminus' face, burning into fury. Yanking his blade free from its sheath, he pushed past Hartwig. She forced herself still, ignoring the call of her hidden seax. It would be no help here. He raised his sword, letting the cool edge kiss her throat. “You're in a poor position to threaten, sister.”

Ing forced laughter, amusement her rabbit-heart couldn't feel. “You won't let your men push me into the dirt.” She grabbed his wrist and his retainers jerked forward. Erminus stopped them with a cool look. Behind him, Hartwig's hands curled into knuckle-white fists.

“You won't kill me and you can't hold me. Oðin-runes work under my hands, Nerthus blessed me with seiðr. You know what powers I hold. Bargain with me or I'll destroy you.”

Erminus' fingers tightened on the sword handle. Flush climbed up his neck and bloomed under his beard. As he trembled with rage, Ing felt a sharp sting. A wet drop ran down her neck and his eyes dropped to it. With a snarl he ripped himself from her grip, pacing away.

Ing touched her throat, her fingers came back red. “I cannot do this without you,” she said softly, a balm upon his wounded honour. Erminus shook his head, but Ing knew the truth; Nerthus’ vision proved he’d fail without an ally. “I could avenge my fallen,” she lied, “but I also want to free my people from their fetters. For this you can have Lencten Hall, but you will give us land to live on and that will be mine.”

“It shall be done.”

9 HERTHA AND ING MEET AGAIN

The next day, Erminus lead the Herminones back into war. Hundreds of hooves pounded upon the ground, imitating Thór's battle cry as they cantered through ridges and dips of the landscape. Hertha couldn't see beyond the riders at her front. Her legs brushed against those beside her. The closeness blocked the chilled wind but could do little for the rain. It soaked through her wool cloak, into her tunic and trousers which dragged her down with its slimy weight. She shivered. Hunching over her mare's neck, she wrinkled her nose as the smell of wet horse grew stronger. Through the gaps in the riders, she could see Ing ahead. She looked away. Yesterday was a disaster. The cursed Ingwins' queen hadn't looked at her. Not in the way that one avoids a gaze, that at least would suggest she cared. No, Ing hadn't looked at her the way one doesn't look at a neighbour's fence. It made Hertha want to scream. How dare that vǫmr ignore her remorselessly after departing without word? Her eyes still felt heavy from her sleepless nights. Dreams taunted her with her father's fate, knowing that his saviour was out of reach. She glanced at Hartwig beside her. For him, she couldn't let Ing ignore her again. Hertha would woo the queen if it was the last thing she did.

And wasn't that an odd thought; she'd never imagined having a wife. Annoyingly, Ing was just as beautiful as a woman. Yesterday, Hertha didn't have to fake her awe at the Ingwin's feminine grace. And with the alliance, they were no longer enemies. It made the thought of marriage easier... Perhaps Nerthus was rewarding her for following the deity's will.

At dusk's blush, Erminus signalled to stop. The meadow he'd chosen was large, gentle hills covered with soft grass still glistening from the rain. As Hertha hobbled her mount, she watched Ing part from the group with a waterskin in hand and snatched up her own.

She darted through the camp, passing slow-moving men unsaddling horses and pitching tents. Ing disappeared down a mound. Quickening her pace, Hertha crested the hill, saw the river at its base and slipped. She cried out, arms flailing as she gathered speed, crashing into Ing's back.

Ing stumbled, hand disappearing into her dipping cloak as she spun around. Seeing Hertha's flushed face, tension melted from her. Beneath her fur, she wore her trousers and tunic; signalling the goddess' presence with twin broaches joined by lines of beads. They clicked together as she turned to kneel by the river.

"Sorry," Hertha muttered, joining her.

Ing shook her head, swiping a waterlogged sleeve over her eyes. They were red.

"Are you well?"

"Fine." Ing sniffed. "Cold."

Well, if she didn't want to talk about it. Hertha plunged her waterskin deep into the icy river and shuddered. With false coyness, she looked at Ing through clumps of wet hair. "I am glad you returned." No response. Had a wolf swallowed her tongue? She forced a smile. "I feared I had chased you away."

"No," Ing said, standing. As she plugged her waterskin, she turned towards camp. "You did not."

She couldn't leave! Hertha jumped to her feet, grabbing Ing's arm. Despite the light grip, she tensed under her touch. "I know what you fear, but it won't come to pass."

Ing yanked free. "You know? Was your home breached, with enemies now crawling within its walls? Have your friends been taken as thralls? Do you ride with people who would see you dead, forced to trust the word of a brother who has already betrayed you?"

"Lencten Hall is everyone's home, you took it first," Hertha snapped, "and I fight in this war, same as you. If Istio or *you* captured me, I know what fate awaits me or any woman made a thrall. You may be protected by Nerthus, but the rest of us will be raped before moonrise." She watched the words leech colour from Ing's face, draining her anger. Why had she said that? Oðin's warning meant nothing if she couldn't hold her temper.

Ing sighed, dropping her head and closing her eyes. “You’re right.”

Hertha hid her surprise behind calmness; maybe this wouldn’t be another failure. Slowly, she reached for Ing’s hand and wrapped gentle fingers around it.

Ing didn’t pull away. “I dream my fears as though I have been cursed with a mara. I’m afraid it’s prophecy.”

“Tyr’s blessing rides with us,” Hertha drew Ing’s hand closer, cradling it, “We will free your people and Erminus will keep his word. I swear it.”

Ing shook her head. “What sway do you hold over your king?”

“Only the oath that my sword will be yours if he betrays you,” she admitted and soft fondness spread over Ing’s face. “But don’t trust in me. Trust the goddess you host; there are none that would betray her.”

“You are kind.” Ing squeezed her hand before drawing away.

Hertha followed her up the hill. At its peak, they parted. Ing walked directly to Gullin, hobbled next to a tent. The horse greeted her by shoving his nose against her chest. She watched Ing stroke Gullin’s neck. What a gentle heart she must have; that would work in Hertha’s favour. A few more conversations like the one they just had and Ing would fall for her. Her tribute to Nerthus complete, the goddess would forgive her family and spare her father’s life. Yes, it was all coming together.

“Were you speaking with Ing?” Hartwig asked, appearing at her side.

Hertha spun to face him, hand dropping to her sword. After a moment, she let it fall. “Don’t do that.”

The corner of Hartwig’s lips inched up. Tucking her under his arm, he pressed a kiss to her hair. “Sorry love.” Turning his attention back to Ing, they watched her slip into her tent. “I don’t trust him,” he muttered.

“Her. She still hosts the goddess,” Hertha nudged him, gesturing to her own tunic and trousers. “Riding is easier in pants.”

Hartwig grunted.

They made their way back to their tents together. Osgar was waiting there, sitting on a nearby rock. “What are we talking about?” he asked as he shuffled over, making room for Hartwig.

Pulling his broad-axe from his back, Hartwig ignored him, peering instead at the edge of the blade.

Osgar rolled his eyes.

“He doesn’t trust Ing—” Hertha said as she grabbed her father’s saddlebag and sat by his feet, “—but she needs us more than we need her.”

“That’s true,” Osgar said and Hartwig grunted again.

She dug through the bag, emerging with a small whetstone. Holding it away from herself she upended the waterskin over it. “Besides, Ing’s eager for the war’s end. Which make sense since Nerthus is a goddess of peace.”

Hartwig snatched the stone from her hands. “You haven’t seen the things... *she* can do. It’s unnatural; no man should have that power.”

“Also true,” Osgar nodded. “It’s scary shit.”

Hertha frowned. “Her seiðr comes from the goddess.”

Hartwig ran the stone along the edge of his axe. Under the high-pitch grinding, he muttered, “So Ing claims.”

Hertha straightened, twisting to face him. “Don’t speak such things.” She’d thought her rejection of Ing had offended Nerthus; was it actually her father’s whispers that Ing wasn’t the goddess’ chosen? Her eyes flickered to Osgar; he didn’t seem surprised by Hartwig’s words. Who else had he spoken this blasphemy to? Standing, she raced off, ignoring Hartwig calling after her.

Ing feared for her life, but she knew Erminus would honour his oath. No one trusts the pledge of a man who breaks his word, her king would not risk such a stain. But if others doubted Ing's position as her father did, thought her lying about divinity, was Ing right to fear?

Hertha stopped in front of Ing's tent and sat down, placing her sword across her lap. *See*, she wanted to scream at Nerthus, *I'm protecting Ing. I'll marry her, do whatever you want, just let my father live.*

Inside the tent, Ing saw Hertha's silhouette and thought she cared enough to guard her; I heard that was when the seeds of love first took root in Ing's heart.

10 THE BATTLE OF LENCTEN HALL

Lencten Hall was little more than a small glow across the field. Ing couldn't tear his eyes away; it could almost be any hall. Almost. How had it come to this, invading his own home? He shook his head. This wasn't the time for grief; a distracted man dies quickly on a battlefield. Besides, Eburwin was all that matter right now.

Glancing at the tiny lights circling the boundary, he saw faceless men with battle-axes standing guard; eagle eyes waiting. He turned to Erminus. "It's time."

His brother nodded sharply and held up a hand. Everyone stopped.

As Ing slid from Gullin's back, Hartwig pushed his horse to the front and leaned towards Erminus. "Nerthus abandoned us." The words were a serpent's hiss, venom dripping as he waved wildly toward Ing. "And his plan depended upon her seiðr. What are we to do now?"

"Quiet." Ing reached into his wolf-hide, grasping the hilt of his seax. Gullin pushed into an embrace, fuzzy nose nuzzling foal-like, begging for treats. Ing leaning into the stallion's side as he stroked his neck. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Hartwig sneering at him. *You're going to die because of me*, Ing thought, thinking back to Nerthus' vision with glee. *Whether as a causality of battle or because I rip your throat out, you'll die and I'm not sorry.*

Closing his eyes, Ing pushed Hartwig from his mind. He breathed in Gullin's familiar musk, felt his steady trust as the horse leaned against him. The first time he'd done this spell — back when he met Hertha — he'd only needed a drop of his own blood. Covering an army needed a bigger sacrifice.

Whipping his seax forward, he stabbed the blade through Gullin's neck. The stallion's gurgling scream died before it was born. He strained against tight reins with panic-wide eyes. When his knees buckled, Ing sank with him, cupping his hands under the wound. Apologies quivered his

lips, but he swallowed them. There was no time for regret. Muttering secret runes, magic built as the thick warmth dripped through his fingers. He splashed it on his face, running hands through his hair before shoving them back under red stream. Death chilled the wetness. Liquid meat slid down his throat, into his eyes and the crease of his lips. His tongue brushed against it, and he shuddered at the metallic taste.

Gullin stilled. His spirit bled from him, pooling in Ing's hands. He drank him down. The horse's love and fear sat heavy in his stomach. His loyalty fed Ing's seiðr, the unwilling life powering his words. Rising, he turned to Erminus.

His brother was tense as he marked him — a smear across his eyes, then delicate runes above. As Ing completed the last stroke, his seiðr woke and the night swallowed Erminus, leaving a void in his place. The Herminones shifted uneasily, backing away and raising their weapons.

“Stop it,” Erminus' bodiless voice hissed, and they settled.

Ing felt him step away, aware of him as though he were a phantom limb. At Erminus' order, the rest came to be marked and concealed. Raven's wine seeped endlessly from Ing's skin instead of the abandoned corpse at his feet. He leached Gullin's spirit as seiðr drained him. By the time Hertha stood before him, his hands were shaking. To an outside eye they seemed alone, but Ing could feel hundreds of invisible men through his magic.

“You've done this before,” Hertha whispered, brushing her fingers against his hand. Feeling their weakness, she frowned. “Can you fight like this?”

Ing swept his hand across her eyes. The red line wobbled — there was a reason seiðr-masters didn't fight with weapons and magic both. “I must.”

Hertha kept quiet as he finished the spell. She disappeared and he turned his finger to his own armoured chest. When seiðr blanketed him from sight, he drew his sword and almost dropped it. It seemed heavier than normal.

They crept as one through the field. Ing bore the weight of their silent footfalls, cool sweat dripping inside his leathers. Istio's watchmen didn't notice them passing. He slammed a hand over one's mouth, yanking his head back and silencing him with his sword. He felt Erminus do the same with the other. Dropping them, they moved on.

Ing's mind stretched as the warriors spread, delivering clean death-blows. He kept his eyes forward, fixed upon the hall. Istio was waiting for him.

He stepped over the threshold and into a wall of heat. The hearth at the centre of the hall still crackling despite being unattended. Sleeping bodies littered the floor, the benches. One man used his plate as pillow. Ing adjusted his grip on his sword. That was *his* food, scattered over the tables half-eaten and wasted. It was meant to feed *his* people.

He felt seiðr-hidden fighters cover the room, hovering over the unlucky dreamers. Nearby, Hertha knelt beside a snoring couple, raising their doom high.

Ing looked down at his unconscious victim snuffling into his dinner. "Now."

Together, they struck. Ing stabbed through the man's back to his heart. A mass death wheeze filled the hall. Arms shaking, he pulled the blade free. Behind him, a woman screamed.

Chaos reigned. The living fell into Hel, damned to that endless dark without honour. Mothers shoved their sobbing children under tables. Fathers fell, guts spilling. War-cries trembled as decay choked the air. Ing's next target scrambled along the ground, crawling for his axe. He swung, almost over-balancing, but the man's head thudded to the floor.

"What is this?" one of Istio's man called, thrusting his spear blindly into nothing. He gasped as Ing buried his blade in him.

"It's ælfas!" a woman cried.

"It's Nerthus' revenge," someone else shouted.

Ing staggered through the weather of weapons, feet dragging under the weight of his seiðr. He didn't know how much longer he could hold the spell. Slumping against the rough wooden wall, he watched the slaughter. Half of Istio's retainers were already dead. That was good; when the spell fell, so would he and he doubted anyone would defend his vulnerable body. But he didn't need to live long, just one heartbeat more than Istio.

Across the room, a door slammed open. Istio emerged, dragging limp filth by its hair behind him. "Ing!" He yanked his prisoner forward and Ing froze. Eburwin. Dressed in rags, he almost looked a stranger with his eye swollen shut and blotchy bruising covering his face, but it was him.

Istio put a sword to his throat. "Surrender or he dies."

Ing pushed off the wall and ran. The hall seemed to stretch, keeping Eburwin far away. An axe swung blindly towards him. He ducked and slipped on the bloodied floor. His bones rattled as he crashed. He climbed to his feet. A fleeing woman fell into him. Her dress was torn. She screeched, nails clawing her invisible foe. Ing caught her hands, kicked her stomach. Coughing, she rolled away.

He looked at Eburwin. Eyes closed. Acceptance.

No.

Vaguely, he was aware of Erminus turning away from his kill towards Istio. Hertha was only one step behind him. Ing tried to stand, but seiðr sapped his strength. He fell again. This couldn't be happening. Forcing his heavy limbs to move, he crawled.

He was always going to be too late.

Istio slashed Eburwin's throat. The wound wave crested with his blade, gushing forth in an angry flood. Eburwin's hands clutched the long gash as Istio dropped him into the lake of his lifeblood.

Grief shredded Ing's throat, shattering the air. The building shuddered under its force. I heard that it summoned Nerthus, robust vines of deep pine exploding from the dirt floor. Her thick limbs seized enemies, winding around them. She jerked, snapping their spines, and threw them away broken and unable to move.

Ing barely noticed, staring at his lover's motionless form, sword slipping from his fingers. If he hadn't held the spell — put the lives of Erminus' men above Eburwin's — he might've made it. They fought on, cloaked from sight, without even glancing at the cost. Tears burned in his eyes. How dare they? Swiping his hand through the runes on his chest, he let the spell fail. The Herminones could all die, he didn't care. His seiðr sucked into him as though he were a bog — slurping magic into his waters.

The spell broke as Erminus swung for Istio's head. Istio caught the blade with his own. Ignoring the body at their feet, they moved into their deadly dance.

Seiðr fuelling his strength, Ing scrambled to stand and ran. Nerthus' vines sprouted where his feet fell, leaving a trail of deadly earth. Eburwin was wraith-white, but he lived. Ing dropped to his knees and pressed his hands over blood-soaked fingers, bandage on bandage, but it seeped through his own too. Eburwin face blurred, hot tears trailing down Ing's face.

Around them, Istio's retainers regrouped, fear fleeing upon the sight of mortal men — this they could kill. With battle-raged roars, they hacked at warriors and vines. Behind him, Hertha sang her black song; ringing music of metal against metal.

Eburwin looked up at Ing, eyes shining. His mouth opened, but corpse dew spilled instead of words.

“Shhh,” Ing whispered, head whipping around. There had to be something he could do.

Hertha's war cry drew his attention. She fought over the fallen, adding fresh bodies as she parried towards him.

Nearby, a spearman aimed his deadly thorn at Ing and charged. He watched, helpless, as death approached.

Hertha slammed into the warrior's side. They both crashed into the mead-benches. Nerthus' vines wrapped around Istio's retainer's limbs, pinning him. He screamed in frustration. Rising to her feet, Hertha moved with fierce grace to stop another's attack and position herself between him and the advancing enemy.

To Ing's left, Erminus and Istio still fought, their blades weeping red tears.

At Ing's front, the door from which Istio entered hung open. The hall beyond was empty. Ing's room waited there. Was it untouched? Were his magic-aids there still?

Under his hands, Ing felt Eburwin's grip loosen. Attention snapping back down, he saw the stillness of frost settling over Eburwin face, his spirit leaving in a last sigh.

No. Ing gathered the wisps of Gullin's spirit and shoved them into Eburwin's open throat.

He arched under Ing's palms, legs thrashing. Sightless eyes snapped open, tears of unbearable pain overflowing.

Ing pressed Eburwin's hands harder against the wound. The seiðr from Gullin's sacrifice wouldn't last long. "Hold this. Don't die." Tearing himself away, he ran down the dark hallway. A chest sat at the foot of his bed. He threw it open and dug deep; fingers touching and discarding a bag of herbs, his runic lots, a wand of twisted iron. There! Bark from a branch reaching east, awaiting limb-runes of healing. Snatching it, he fled back to Eburwin. "Hold on," he muttered, carving quick lines into the wood. "Just hold on."

He needed a life to power it. Looking up, he saw the man trapped in Nerthus vines. He would do. Leaping over Eburwin, he stabbed his seax into the man's heart. His sacrifice shrieked as Ing dragged the blade down and out, shoving the runed wood inside. "I call the goddess Frigg and ask for her handmaiden, Eir, goddess of healing. I pray that you take this sacrifice and give life to the one I choose."

A small distance away Erminus roared — the shout of triumph over the white wolf. Istio was dead. Pain and fury drove his men to fight on — that was a loyal warband — but it was over.

Eburwin eyes fluttered shut as his wound sealed, slipping into a healing sleep. The last of Istio's retainers fell and a great cheer rose. Ing bent over, pressing his forehead against Eburwin's chest to feel the rise and fall of his breath.

And so, the battle of Lencten Hall ended the war of brothers.

11 LOVERS: FOR GOOD OR ILL

Shielded by the closed door, Ing's world narrowed to the four walls of his old bedroom. Seiðr tools still littered the ground, chest opened and empty at the end of the bed. Under the blankets, Eburwin lay sleeping on his back. It was unnatural. He never slept like this — curled around Ing or his sword, Eburwin always slept on his side, but now his back. Ing took his hand. Despite the warmth radiating from the hearth, he was cold.

Ing hunched over their hands, hiding where they touched. He shouldn't be here; Eburwin wasn't the only injured Ingwin. Women raped, limbs lost — all devastated. Erminus agreed to host them while they recovered, giving them a mostly unburnt barn to tend their wounded. He wasn't sure why his brother let Ing use his old bedroom, but he was grateful for the privacy. Running his thumb over dry knuckles, Ing squeezed Eburwin's hand lightly, praying he'd wake. Seiðr saved his life, but the wound cut deep; like a dead man's poor reputation, some things never healed.

Solid knocks thudded against the door. Ing jerked away, leaning back in his seat. "Come."

Hertha slipped through. Sounds of drunken joy joined her, echoing down from the hall. She shut the door on Erminus' laughter, muffling it. She'd washed the battle away, her dress clean and her hair still dripping, but her sword still waited at her hip. Holding out a plate piled with meats, she asked, "Hungry?"

Ing nodded his thanks, reaching to take the food from her. It sat in his lap, untouched, as he watched her glide to the hearth and turn her back to the flame.

"Are you all right?"

Ing shrugged.

"The spell took much from you, I half thought you'd be sleeping," Hertha said.

“Only dead men have time for sleep.” Ing’s eyes darted to Eburwin’s still form and he hurried to add, “And those healing.”

The words sat heavy between them. What if he never woke? Please, let that not be true. Dropping his gaze, he poked the plated meat, hissing as it burned him. She must have come straight from her bath to deliver this. How kind. Despite their first meeting, she’d been nothing but sweet since she found him in the wood —comforting and guarding him. Even in battle, Hertha’s sword had turned away the killing blows aimed at his back. His head snapped up. “If you hadn’t protected us in the spear-din, he and I would be dead.”

Hertha shook her head. “Any good warrior protects their lord, that is the path to honour.”

Honour, what a joke. Ing turned away. “Do you mean to mock me?”

“Wha— No!”

“I’ve heard the whispers calling me ergi for using seiðr. For running weapon-less to Eburwin’s side as though I planned to die with him, scorning Valhalla so our souls may reside in Hel together. For weeping in relief at his survival. Why else would I do that unless I let him make a mare of me?”

“They are fools. Everyone knows Nerthus’ visits influence you, but—”

“She has nothing to do with it!” Ing’s eyes widened. What had he done? Only a fool casts aside a shield when swords threaten.

Hertha frowned. Slowly, she asked “What do you mean?”

Could he brush it aside? Lie and pretend he’d never let truth slip from his tongue? No, sitting under her sharp eye, Ing knew it would never work. When rumours doubted his connection to Nerthus, he’d planned to convince Hertha to marry him to save his reputation. Now that people suspected his love for Eburwin, his honour had no hope without her.

“Yes, I am Nerthus’ chosen, but had she not chosen me I would still be as I am.” He whispered the words that he had silenced for so long; a whetstone for her judgment. “There are different rules for women and men, and to have honour I cannot break them. As a woman I must be like the goddess; peace-loving, using my seiðr to heal and grow crops, but as a man that would bring me shame.” He barked a hollow laugh. “So everyone divides me, treating me as two people, even my own kin. But that has never been true.” It felt good to say this. He straightened in his chair, strength gathering in his words. “I am a seiðr-master and a warrior. I love peace and take bloody vengeance. And none of it is affected by how the tide delivers me each morning to the gender I exist in for that day.”

Hertha said nothing, no expression touching her face. He should have lied. A slow death for his honour would have given his people time to recover and choose a new leader. What would happen to them now? And Eburwin, too weak to defend his tattered reputation; would he forgive him?

“They are fools to divide you so,” Hertha said and Ing stared, eyes widening. She closed the distance between them and sank to her knees. “I am honoured by your trust and swear not to betray it. You’re the bravest man I have ever met.”

“You don’t think I’m—”

She killed the insult with a gentle hand upon his arm. “You are as I’ve always known you: a woman or a man. That Nerthus did not grant you *this* blessing makes no difference.”

Ing leaned forward, pressing his forehead against Hertha’s. How could a mortal woman be so perfect? It’s no wonder people saw Nerthus’ divinity in her.

“I wonder if there are others like you, but they stay silent for fear of losing honour,” Hertha mused, and close as they were he felt her words brush against his skin.

“I believe so,” Ing said quietly, “Even the Aesir host Loki, whose gender shifts with the wind.”

Hertha hummed a note, considering. “Loki is not exactly the most honourable among gods.”

“Neither is Oðin, for he didn’t honour his oath on the ring. Yet all pretend Loki is the only flawed god.”

Hertha drew back but kept touching his arm, her thumb rubbing soothing circles. “Of course we ignore it, he’s the Allfather. But I see your point.” She glanced at Eburwin, “As far as the battle for Lencten Hall, Eburwin is your sworn brother. You raced to his side, saved him because you keep your oaths. That is a good king.”

What beautiful lies she spun for him. He covered her hand with his own. “You see me as no one else does. When I first approached you, I hoped eventually we’d be married. Though you did not want me then, the words you speak now—”

Hertha surged forward, kissing him. Her lips were soft against his, warm and smooth. He tilted his head and brought his free hand to cup her face. His breath hitched. She pulled back, whispering, “Yes, marry me,” before falling into his embrace again.

12 THE ANNOUNCEMENT

The next morning, Ing remembered his vision: Hartwig charging with his axe, tasting his thick blood as the rotting decay filled Ing's nostrils. Hartwig hadn't died in battle as Ing had hoped, but Nerthus promised that death still stalked him. It couldn't happen, not if Ing hoped to marry Hertha; no woman would wed her kin's slayer.

Forcing himself from Eburwin's side, he made his way into the main-hall. Signs of the battle still littered the room — broken furniture, blood stains on the floor — but Nerthus' vines were gone. Even the earth from which they'd erupted had healed, closing over as if she had never been there. Blurry eyed men slumped over the remaining mead-benches, dregs of mead dripping from their drinking horns. They groaned as he passed them. Growing closer to the front of the hall, people seemed more alert. They spoke softly to each other over food. In Ing's alcove, raised above his retainers, Erminus sat with Queen Ceolwynne.

It wasn't fair. The whole war Ing had held Lencten Hall for his people. It was home, the only home he'd ever known, and now Erminus draped himself over the chair that should be *his*. It didn't matter that Erminus had a right to it — both by blood and as war spoils — it grated Ing to give it up... But Eburwin was still worth it.

At the table nearest to the Herminone's king sat Hertha and Hartwig. He had his back to Ing, nudging his bald friend — Osgar, Hertha had once called him — and chuckling under his breath.

Hertha raised her horn in greeting and Hartwig spun around. When he caught sight of Ing, he glared.

As Ing approached Erminus, the scattered conversation died. "Morning, brother." From the corner of his eye, he saw Osgar grab Hartwig's shoulder, forcing him to turn away.

Erminus dipped his head. He waved to a thin woman who was tugging at the new collar on her neck. “Get my brother a drink, no guest of mine shall have a dry throat.”

“You are a gracious host,” Ing forced himself to say.

The thrall sneered as she shoved a drinking horn into his hands. Ing recognised her as one of Istio’s warriors. He looked at the drink. She probably spat in it.

“How’s Eburwin?” Erminus asked.

Hartwig snorted, triggering tiny sniggers around the room.

Ing ignored them. “He sleeps deeply, I don’t know when he’ll wake. Since you’ve offered to host my people until we’ve recovered from Istio’s attack, I don’t know how long I’ll be your guest. As such, I must ask another favour from you. Hertha,” he gestured to her, “and I have decided to marry.”

The laughter stopped. From the corner of his eye, Ing watched Hartwig tense. He wasn’t surprised this was bad news. Feigning ignorance, he turned to him. “You raised her well. She’ll make a good queen and if our sons are half the warriors you are, I will be proud.”

Hartwig glanced over his shoulder, face hard. “No.”

Hertha reached across the table, but he pulled away. “Father—”

“You will not marry,” Hartwig interrupted, “I won’t allow it.”

“It is decided.”

Hartwig slammed his hands onto the tables, standing. “I am your father!” The words boomed around the hall. Osgar leaned away, rubbing at his ear.

“And lord Erminus is my king,” Hertha said calmly, rising to her feet. She looked at Erminus.

I heard that Erminus, honourable king that he was, let a moment of thoughtful silence pass. That he looked from his friend to his brother, and in that moment saw a future where their families

were bound by blood, where Ing was no longer an uneasy ally but a true brother once more. It was a thought more tempting than gold. “Ing is my brother and Nerthus’ chosen,” Erminus said slowly as Hartwig’s face reddened. “You couldn’t find a better husband.”

Hartwig shook his head, nostrils flaring as he stabbed a finger at Ing. “Seiðr is a woman’s weapon, yet he wields it in battle like a sword.”

Around the room the Herminones nodded, sneering.

“His seiðr is a gift from Nerthus,” Hertha said, moving quickly to stand between her father and Ing. She raised her hands, a soothing gesture that didn’t match her steely voice. “His using it showed that our victory was her divine desire.”

Her words rippled throughout the hall. Men leaned towards each other, murmuring their agreement. Ing couldn’t believe the effect her words had. From the look on Hartwig’s face, he couldn’t either.

Osgar rose, grabbing Hartwig’s shoulder and whispering in his ear.

Hartwig shook him off. “But it was our victory and not his.” He looked at Ing over her shoulder. “Do you think we didn’t see you as you hid behind my daughter’s skirts while we fought your battle? Istio attacked the Ingwins but it was Erminus who got revenge.”

“So, did I fight with seiðr or did I hide?” Ing snapped. “I don’t deny Erminus won the day, that’s why he is king of this hall. But you cannot say I didn’t fight when it was *my* seiðr that cloaked you from sight, that summoned the vines that ripped Istio’s men apart.”

“You get no honour for forcing your cowardly tactics upon us, staining our victory with your shame.”

Erminus jumped up, face red. “Hartwig!”

Caught in rage’s web, Hartwig didn’t hear. “I will not marry my daughter to an er—”

Hertha's horrified cry cut the insult in half, but the word echoed in Ing's mind: *ergi*. It swept through the room and he knew everyone heard it: *ergi*. He drew his sword.

Hertha spun, pressing herself into his arms. "Please."

"You go too far," Erminus growled. "Even when I fought Ing, I never doubted his position as Nerthus' chosen. I'll not disrespect a goddess in my hall."

Hartwig paled.

"I should drown you," Erminus said, "or let Ing run you through." He turned to Ing.

There was a question in his eyes and Ing hated it. Hartwig was Erminus' friend, more a brother than Ing was. He wanted to spare him. In Ing's arms, Hertha trembled. He didn't need to look to know how desperately she wanted her father to live. If he insisted, Hartwig would die. Erminus wouldn't stand in his way and Hertha couldn't stop him. It was lawful to answer this insult with blood, expected even. But if Hartwig died on Ing's blade, Hertha wouldn't marry him. Without their marriage, he couldn't stop the rumour that he wasn't Nerthus' chosen from spreading.

He met Erminus' eye and sheathed his sword.

"But Nerthus would want peace," Erminus continued, a hint of gratitude hiding in his tone, "so instead I outlaw you for a year. Use that time to make peace with the goddess. You have until sunrise tomorrow to leave these lands or the law no longer protects your life."

Hertha slumped in relief and Ing cradled her, forcing himself to keep his touch light. *A year?* For that insult Hartwig should be dead, yet Erminus only outlaws him for a year? He watched Osgar grab Hartwig's arm, dragging him from the hall. As the door swung shut behind them, he heard that the hall filled with whispers; some surprise that Hartwig lived, others sniggering that they expected no less. And all around the room, from many lips did the word *ergi* fall into eager ears.

A hand touched Ing's face, guiding his gaze to Hertha's. "Thank you" She pulled him in, kissing his mouth.

As sweet as it was, it wasn't worth it.

13 EBURWIN WAKES

Eburwin could barely breathe; his every wheeze sharp, clawing down his throat. He tried to move, but his limbs remained weighted to the bed. What happened? If he could open his eyes... Istio's blade slashed across his memory. Even as he cringed from it, he knew: no one survived that. He'd died weaponless, broken and shamed — Valhalla was out of reach. This was Hel.

Voices murmured around him. He didn't try to catch the words, letting them wash over him. There was something comforting about one of them, about the hand that would sometimes take his. He let the voice soothe him back to sleep and when he woke next, his eyes opened.

A woman of fair hair sat beside him. She seemed familiar... Had she been on the battlefield? He remembered seeing flashes of fierce gold dancing through the dark shapes of his enemies as he lay dying. His eyes widened. A Valkyrie? *No*, he realised, watching her draw a flower from the basket at her feet, *this was Hertha*. He'd only ever seen her from a distance, but there was no mistaking her. Weaving the blossom into a half-finished wreath, she looked the picture of divine grace. It was no wonder people thought her Nerthus' chosen; if he hadn't known Ing, he'd believed it himself.

But where was Ing? He glanced around the room, nothing. Opening his mouth to ask — sharp agony cut through his words. He coughed, throat throbbing, and Hertha's head snapped up. What was this? Why couldn't he speak? Reaching for his throat, he jerked back when the touch burned.

"Be calm," Hertha soothed, "and don't try to speak. The cut went deep and we don't know what's damaged. You need time to heal."

He reached for his throat again and brushed against rough bandages. The wound throbbed with dull heat but pain spiked, stinging, wherever he touched. Gritting his teeth, he bore it and felt thick thread criss-crossing underneath the healer's cloth.

Hertha grabbed his wrist. “Don’t touch.”

He ripped his arm free.

“You’re safe,” she said, raising her palms. “Istio is dead. I know you don’t know me, but I’m a friend. I swear it. My name is Hertha.” She turned away, reaching for a nearby jug. “I’m betrothed to your lord.”

Eburwin forced himself not to react. Of course she was, he’d always known Ing would be successful. Why else would she be here? His eyes dropped to the half-finished wreath in her lap: a wedding wreath. The ceremony must be soon. He felt sick.

“Ing’s going to be disappointed he missed your waking.” Hertha turned back with a drinking horn of water. She handed it to him and, when his hands shook, steadied him with a light touch. He wished she wouldn’t. Wished she’d let him struggle, or that she wasn’t here to see this weakness. Wished that Ing was. Hertha shook her head. “One of the few times he left your side.”

Eburwin swallowed and it felt like liquid fire.

“But he had to leave,” Hertha continued as he drank. “He was running out of time to collect his grandfather’s sword for the ceremony tonight.”

Eburwin jerked, spilling water down his front. Tonight?

“You slept long and deep,” she said gently, “and we were both too eager to wait. But I know how important you are to Ing; I’m glad you woke in time.” She took his hand and he stilled. She didn’t seem to notice. “I look forward to knowing you.” She squeezed it once, then pulled back. “Wait here, I’ll bring a healer.”

Eburwin watched her disappear through the door. She’d left the wedding wreath on her seat. He itched to tear it apart petal by petal; let her walk unadorned into marriage. Everything was happening too fast. He thought when Ing returned he’d have a moment to greet him, to hold him. *Too eager*, she’d said, *both of them too eager*. What did that mean? Was it an act? Or maybe Ing

was only eager to rid himself of that terrible rumour? But if his heart still beat for Eburwin, why wasn't he here? If their positions were reversed, nothing could tear him from Ing's side.

He had to talk to him. Swinging his legs off the bed, he took a deep, rattling breath and stood. His knees buckled. Scrambling, he clung to the bedpost. This was a bad idea, but when had that stopped him? Step by shaking step, he wobbled over to a chest, stealing Ing's cloak from within. Wrapping himself in it, he threw up the hood and slipped from the room. Strange faces filled the hall, chattering lazily. As he weaved through them, he spotted Hertha in the corner talking with three seated women. A flame-haired beauty — Erminus' queen — looked up as Hertha gestured towards the room he'd fled. Their eyes met. Shit. He ducked his head — she wouldn't recognise him, right? They'd never met and why would Queen Ceolwynne visit an injured Ingwin? He quickened his steps anyways, ignoring his trembling legs.

It didn't take long to intercept a thrall with a horse already saddled. He climbed upon its back and kicked it into a canter, waiting until he was out of sight to slump over its neck. That took too much effort, but he'd find Ing soon. Then, everything would be well.

Minutes crawled by and Eburwin rode on. His mount followed the rocky dirt trail without direction, letting him watch the passing gangling trees. They dotted the land's curves, sprouting from yellowing grass that tickled the breeze. He saw carved lines on a trunk flash by and the corners of his mouth rose helplessly. He'd made that mark when he and Ing were children; it was the furthest they'd ever travelled before. He remembered the way their fathers had screamed at them, more fearful than angry, when they'd found them. It was far for children to walk, they'd been so triumphant. Just he and Ing. Would it ever be that simple again?

Someone cried out. Eburwin looked up the trail: two men grappled on the ground. The smaller was pinned, knee on his armoured chest. His feet scrambled, kicking tiny stones that bounced away. The man above him growled, bear arms holding his prey firm. A trail of sweat darkened the back of his tunic, under his vulnerable armpits. Light glittered off his axe as he raised it high.

Eburwin's horse whinnied loudly to the men's waiting mounts. The bigger warrior looked over his shoulder. As he shifted, Eburwin saw his victim's face — Ing! Blood clogged his newly bent nose and stained his teeth. Panting, he smacked the dry grass above him, tips of his fingers brushing against a rusted sword lying just out of reach.

Eburwin kicked his steed's side, urging him faster.

“By Thór's Hammer,” the man groaned and Eburwin recognised him — Hartwig. He turned back to Ing, raising his weapon again.

Eburwin flattened himself against his horse's neck. It wasn't enough, he wasn't going to make it.

Ing spat a red glob. Hartwig reeled back, swiping at his eyes.

As he galloped past Eburwin leapt from the saddle, crashing into Hartwig's side. The man's shoulder stabbed into his stomach, forcing air from his lungs as they slammed onto the ground. Stars danced across his eyes. He felt Hartwig twist under him. A hand wrapped around his throat and squeezed. Stinging agony burrowed deep, whiting his vision as something wet trailed from his stitches.

Hartwig pushed at his throat and rolled them. Bearing his weight down, he growled words Eburwin couldn't hear over the rushing in his ears. He gulped dagger-armed air as Hartwig let go, reaching for his axe. Blindly, Eburwin grasped his arm.

Hartwig swung back, teeth bared, and punched him. Eburwin collapsed, world spinning. Through his shaking vision he saw Hartwig raise his fist again.

Ing grabbed a handful of Hartwig's hair, yanking his head back and slashing his throat open with his seax.

I heard that blood sprayed like rain under Ing's blade. Hartwig's eyes bulged. He pressed his hands against the gaping chasm of his throat, and Eburwin saw himself under Istio's blade. Hartwig

choked, mouth flapping uselessly as he drowned. No, it was worse than that because the air was right there, caressing his face — Eburwin remembered the mockery of it too well. He stared as blood cried through Hartwig's fingers, feeling the memory of his own — thick and gushing — trailing down his wrists to pool at his feet. How cold he'd been. Ing shoved Hartwig away and he fell limply, landing with a thump.

Ing dropped to kneel at Eburwin's side. He reached for him, eyes wide, and pulled. Eburwin crashed against his chest. Frantic hands ran down his back, up his arms and buried in his hair. "I can't believe you're here," Ing whispered.

How had he ever doubted this man? Solid warmth surrounded Eburwin, chasing away the fight's tension to cradle his aching body. He closed his eyes and surrendered his head to Ing's shoulder. The smell of sweat and blood clung to his leathers, filling his nose. He gladly bore the pain of breathing to take him deeper into his lungs.

Hands flew to his shoulder and pushing him back. Eburwin blinked through the dizziness; when his vision settled he saw Ing's eyes darting over his face. They lingered on his eye — still stinging from the hit — before dropping to the red stained bandage on his throat. "You're well? Truly?"

Eburwin nodded, ignoring the way it twinged his stiches.

"You stubborn fucker," Ing laughed breathlessly, "sleep through the boring negotiations but wake when there's fighting to be had. Typical."

Gods, he loved this man. Glancing around; the lonely countryside stretched beyond sight. He couldn't even see Lencten Hall from here, sheltered by hills and a winding path. A cluster of needle trees grew tall and thin nearby, throwing shade onto the path where Hartwig lay still. His hands were slack against the gore of his throat, Eburwin looked away — that could've been him... don't think about it — no living eyes watched them. He reached out, catching Ing by his nape to

draw him in. Soft lips touched his own, almost hesitant, then Ing made a small sound and deepened the kiss. Tongues caressed and Eburwin tasted blood.

When they parted, Ing's hand lingered on his cheek. Softly, he asked, "Can you speak?"

Eburwin shook his head.

"It'll come back," Ing said gently, in a way that suggested he thought it wouldn't. "But if it doesn't, I've heard of people who speak with gestures. We'll learn it. I'll make everyone learn. You won't be without a voice for long."

He covered Ing's hand with his own, leaning into the touch and kissing the meat of his thumb.

Ing glanced up at sky and frowned. "Shit, I'm going to be late."

His hand slipped from Eburwin's as he stood, jogging a few steps to the sword Hartwig had knocked from his grasp. Dirt and time caked the blade, dulling its edges, but upon its handle Eburwin could see familiar runes etched; this was Tustio's sword. But surely he didn't mean to go through with the wedding? He waved his hands wildly until he caught Ing's attention, then pointed at Hartwig's cooling body.

Dark anger clouded Ing's expression as he looked at the corpse. "You needn't worry, he was an outlaw. We could leave him here for the wolves and none would blame us." Turning back to Eburwin, his face cleared. "Still, legal or not, if Hertha learns of this, she'll never marry me."

None of this made sense. Since when was Hartwig an outlaw? Why did Ing hate him? How did this fight start? Dressed in his leathers, Ing was clearly prepared for it while Hartwig, wearing travelling tunic and trousers, wasn't. But most of all, Eburwin couldn't fathom how Ing could think of marrying the woman he'd just orphaned.

"We'll have to hide it." Ing ran his finger through his hair, tugging. "But I don't have time to bury him and you're barely standing... I'll have to come back after the wedding and hope no one

sees.” He grabbed their mounts. “We shouldn’t arrive together, not wearing the evidence of battle. You ride ahead, get cleaned up, and I’ll see you at the wedding.”

Eburwin shook his head.

Seeing his face, Ing’s expression softened. He reached for him, cupping his cheek. “I marry her for you,” he said softly. “Hartwig dared call us ergi for everyone to hear. Hertha is our only shield. Think of our reputations.”

Slowly, Eburwin nodded. He was right, it was why he’d agreed to the marriage in the first place. But if they were going to hide Hartwig’s death, they were going to do it right. Leaning on Ing, he moved towards the horses and pulled free the shovel Ing had used to unearth his grandfather’s sword.

“You want to bury Hartwig?” Ing asked. At Eburwin’s nod, he added, “You’re still weak. If you’re going to do this, then you’ll need my help.” He drew his seax. “Take off your tunic.”

Wincing, Eburwin pulled the garment over his head. He shivered as the cool breeze brushed against his battle-damp skin. Ing stepped closer and Eburwin swayed towards his warmth.

Ing darted forward, pecking his lips, before slicing his own palm, hissing at the sting. Dipping his fingers into the wound well, he painted runes over Eburwin’s heart. Under his breath, he muttered words Eburwin couldn’t understand — deep sounds that twisted in his ear. As his fingers fell away, the runes glowed with heat, branding him.

Eburwin jerked back, but Ing clasped his arm, stilling him. “Give it a moment,” he whispered.

Pulsing dark lines spread like veins from the runes, disappearing into his body. It burned him inside before hardening like metal, granting him cool strength. In front of him, Ing paled.

Seeing Eburwin’s concern, Ing shook his head. “I’m fine. This spell takes strength from me to give to you. Don’t wipe away the marks until you’re back at Lencten Hall, I’ll see you there.”

14 THE WEDDING OF HERTHA AND ING: PART I

The earth broke easily under Eburwin's shovel. He'd pulled Hartwig's corpse away from the path earlier, beyond the trees and just out of sight. The rune on his chest burned as it sapped Ing's strength, delivering it to him. Gritting his teeth, he ignored it and started digging. It was better this way, at least now he wouldn't have to watch as his heart's mate vowed to love and cherish another. Perhaps this was Nerthus' gift to him, a thank you for saving her chosen.

Yet despite saving his eyes the sight, his mind began shaping the wedding for his displeasure. And so, as Eburwin dug he imagined the couple meeting on a field yellow with rapeseeds. Warriors, women and children encircled them. Hertha, in dress of forest green with wildflowers crowning her head, held hands with Ing. Erminus guided the ceremony, his queen at his side. Standing next to the couple were two men chosen to replace those closest to the bride and groom's hearts — for they were in a different field near a track; one dead and one digging. Queen Ceolwynne handed Ing the bridal drink and he swallowed the honey brew before passing it to his bride. They exchanged arm rings and vows all while Eburwin dug. Deeper and deeper, a hole both wide and long, observed only by cold, dead eyes. Sweat trickled down his forehead and soaked through his tunic. He wiped it with his sleeve, leaving a smudge of dirt on his temple. Often, he had to stop with shaking limbs and wheezing breaths, but never for long, Ing's seiðr pulsing strength through him. On and on he dug as the ceremony ended and everyone walked back to Lencten Hall, Tustio's blade held in Hertha's hands. The Ingwins laughed and cheered when Ing kissed his bride upon the threshold, and Eburwin tried again to push the image away.

Time blew out the sky's candle and Máni rode his chariot into the night, the god speckling the ground in soft light. Around him creatures began to wake. A nearby owl called wisdom to the bugs that crawled and chirped; a mouse scampered past Eburwin's shoulder at the edge of the hole; and two battle gulls spoke to one another with sharp cries.

He looked up. The ravens sat in the tree above him, their midnight feathers shining in the moonlight as they stared down at him with beady eyes. It was nice not to be doing this alone.

As if insulted by the thought, one of the birds soared off into the black. The other kept staring. Eburwin let his gaze fall and his eye caught on the hole's edge. This was plenty deep. Throwing his shovel away, he climbed out of the pit.

The body lay where he left it. Eburwin squatted beside it, picking out twigs that were tangled in its hair from the earlier dragging. The back of his fingers brushed against the waxy skin and he shuddered. Nothing of Hartwig was left in this hull. It seemed smaller now, almost child-like with its slack face, unaware of the body's final indignity staining his pants and stinking the air. He stared at the second mouth Ing had cut on his throat, hanging open in a silent scream above a chipped Mjölfnir pendant stained red... That could've been him. Stop. He survived and Hartwig didn't. That ended it.

Grabbing the corpse by its arm pits, he dragged it closer to the hole. It was rigid, fixed like stone in Hartwig's death pose. When his heels hovered at the edge, he stepped over the body and moved its legs so it lay along the length of the hole. As he set his foot on its shoulder and pushed, a raven cried out behind him — I heard that was Oðin's doing. He glanced back and came face to face with a bald man. The body landed with a thump in its grave.

Eburwin turned slowly. The man held Hartwig's discarded axe in a loose grip, his expression hidden behind a beard darker than night. A familiar scar, thick and jagged, ran across his head where his hair should be. Osgar, wasn't it? Eburwin remembered seeing him back when he was spying on Erminus

Osgar strode forward and Eburwin leapt aside, but he didn't follow. Instead, he knelt by the grave, placing Hartwig's axe within and bowed his head. "My friend, we will see each other again in the halls of Valhalla."

Gods curse it, of course he was Hartwig's friend.

“I was sent to find you,” Osgar said flatly. “She said you were too weak to wander alone at night.” Snorting, he glanced at Eburwin, eyes lingering on the dried blood and his swelling eye. “Weak as Thór you seem to me.” He turned back to the grave. “I take it you heard what he said of your lord. I get it. Now go, before I forget that I have no lawful reason to raise my blade against you.”

15 THE WEDDING OF HERTHA AND ING: PART II

Ing left Hertha sleeping in their marriage bed. It was torture tearing himself away. They'd spent most night tangled in each other's embrace — he could still feel softness of curves under hand; taste the sweetness of her sweat on his tongue. She'd held him tightly, pulling him into her again and again. Her song of pleasure was more beautiful than any skaldic verse. He'd tired before her, his seiðr funnelling energy to Eburwin, so she'd climbed on top and rode him until they were both spent. When she'd fallen asleep in his arms, Ing had to fight to keep his eyes open. Eburwin was waiting for him. So he'd dragged himself from their bed, pulled on his under tunic and trousers and sneaked from the hall.

Dry grass prickled his bare feet as he hurried to the ruined stable. The door groaned in protest as he pushed it open. Gaps in the roof let moonlight peep through and dust danced in its beams, spiralling to the floor. Eburwin sat on a milking stool underneath a lone torch that cast his face in shadow. As Ing approached, he stood, revealing a face as white as a draugr. His bandages were stained in spotted red and though he stood without needing to support himself, Ing could see his fingers trembling. He never should have agreed to let Eburwin bury Hartwig alone. Seiðr strength or not, he was weak.

Ing took his elbow and guided him back to the stool. "Sit."

Eburwin shook his head, pulling free of Ing's grasp.

"What's wrong?"

Tapping his face, Eburwin pointed to his own eye.

"You saw something?"

Eburwin shook his head again, harder, like a dog drying itself. Pain twisted his features and he reached for his throat.

Ing caught his wrist. “Easy. I’ll get it.” Stroking the soft skin, he continued, “If you saw nothing... someone saw you?”

Eburwin nodded.

“Shit. Who was it?” he asked, voice urgent.

Eburwin threw up his hands, breaking Ing’s hold. He could see the frustration taking over.

Ing winced. The sooner they learned hand language, the better. “Never mind. Are they a danger to us? Will they tell Hertha?”

Eburwin nodded. Yes.

“Fuck.” Ing rubbed his forehead, pacing away. He knew it was better for his reputation if people knew he’d taken revenge on Hartwig, but the thought of losing Hertha was like a dagger to his chest. She was the first person to accept him and his changing gender without needing Nerthus as a reason. Tonight, she’d held him and whispered love promises in his ear. It was all he’d needed to tip over edge and fall. He loved Eburwin, always would, but Hertha had claimed a part of his heart now too. It didn’t matter that she’d served her purpose, marrying him and thus stopping the rumours that he wasn’t the goddess’ chosen. Now that she was his wife, Hertha couldn’t leave him, but she could hate him. She’d never touch him again except to hurt, never look at him with softness in her gaze. He couldn’t bear it.

Which only left one thing to do. “We can’t let them tell her.” He snatched the torch from the wall. “Come with me.”

Eburwin struggled to keep pace with Ing as he led him away from the hall and Hartwig’s burial site. Too easily had Ing forgotten his lover’s injuries, consumed with himself and his need for Hertha. Forcing himself to slow down, he dropped a hand to Eburwin’s back and let him lean on him as they scrambled up and down hills, out into the wilderness. Coming to a small grove, Ing handed Eburwin the torch. “Hold this.”

Eburwin followed quietly as Ing wandered from tree to tree, inspecting them; healing wood had branches reaching east, to curse they needed to stretch west. Finally, he stopped at a large oak. Its limbs were thick, drooping to the ground to brush against its twisted roots. Olive moss bled from its cracks. It looked sick, dying. It was perfect.

Taking his seax, he sliced a section of rough bark from a westward branch. Turning towards the light, he carved ugly runes upon the wood. Looking up, he placed the bark into Eburwin's hand. "I'm going to cast, but you need to direct it. Focus on the person who saw you. When I reach the end of my chant, light it on fire. Don't think of anyone else, or we could curse them."

Eburwin dropped the wood, backing away with wide eyes.

Quickly, Ing retrieved it from the ground and tried to give it back. "Please, it won't harm you. It's the only way. If Hertha learns what we did to her father, she'll never forgive us. Do you want to live with a snake in our hall, waiting to strike?" He closed the distance between them, shoving the seiðr-wood into his palm. Eburwin tried to tug his arm away, but Ing clung to him. "This all started because I wouldn't kill that thrall to keep her mouth shut. I don't want to make that mistake again."

Eburwin froze, eyes locked on Ing's shoulder.

Ing followed his gaze, the thin fabric of his tunic had slipped from his shoulder, revealing purpling love bites scattered over his skin. Looking at them, he could almost feel Hertha's lips on his neck. He forced himself not to react, if Eburwin knew how he truly felt for Hertha, he'd never help him keep her. "She means nothing to me. It is you I love, we only need her just a bit longer."

Slowly, Eburwin nodded.

Ing grabbed his face and pulled him in. Their teeth knocked together as he kissed him. He pulled back with a gasp. "Ready?"

Eburwin nodded again.

“Remember, think only of the person who saw you.”

He watched Eburwin close his eyes, brows furrowed in thought. Ing pecked his lips quickly before stepping away. Gathering his seiðr, he prepared for the vile chant to fall from his lips.

So it was, with death on the breeze, that the wedding of Hertha and Ing passed.

16 RETURNING TO THE ONE-EYED STRANGER

“So it was, with death on the breeze, that the wedding of Hertha and Ing passed. And thus it should be no surprise what came of them, for all know that which has a bad beginning is likely to have a bad end.”

The stranger spoke loudly over the howling wind as the storm beat upon the door. The hearth crackled, illuminating the back of his shabby cloak orange. He leaned heavily on his old spear, both hands wrapped around it. We all stared at him — warriors, women, children and King — enchanted by the unfamiliar tale of our brave hero. Even our skald, Swithin, whose talent had been insulted, was leaning forward in his seat.

The stranger’s head moved, his one-eyed gaze still hidden by his hood, to look at King Hadingus. “Are you pleased with my telling, or are you taking my tongue?” He asked as if he wasn’t a god, though of course King Hadingus didn’t know that. None did, save I.

“Wait,” my father said, and I twisted in my seat on the floor to look up at him. He shook his head, brow furrowed. “You can’t end your tale there. What of the nothing’s crime against Ing? I thought he betrayed his lord to keep Osgar’s murder secret?”

“And I have always heard that Hertha’s love for Ing was bottomless and true,” a woman across the hall called, “but how could she love her kin’s slayer? Did she never learn that Ing struck her father’s killing blow?”

The stranger shrugged. “You asked me to tell the Saga of Lencten Hall. That ends with the wedding.” He turned to Swithin. “That’s where your song ends, yes?”

Swithin blinked. “I—”

“I wouldn’t want to overstay my welcome—” the stranger smoothly interrupted, “—or tell stories King Hadingus doesn’t want to hear.” He turned back to the King, head tipped slightly to the side, and waited.

King Hadingus laughed, a booming joy that matched Thór’s outside. As his shoulders shook with mirth, he raised his drinking horn. “Pour the man another drink!”

The warriors cheered, raising their own horns and slamming their hands upon the table.

Before any thrall could move, I stood. Sitting my doll in my place, I grabbed a horn from the table and held it with both hands as my father filled it. He winked at me over the pouring mead.

Once full, I closed the small distance between me and the stranger. He stood still amongst the echoing celebration; there was a confident pleasure in that stance. When he bent to accept the horn from me, the firelight snuck under his hood. He smiled with his whole face, good and ruined eye both crinkling at the sides. Under the noise, he whispered, “Thank you, boy,” and straightened.

Warmth burst from my chest and flooded my being even as my eyes widened. Had anyone heard him? Not even my parents knew I felt kinship with Ing, that I loved them for walking as man and woman both as I had dreamed. How had he known despite my dress and doll that over the course of his story I had shifted from a girl to something closer to a boy? I glanced over my shoulder to see my father nodding encouragingly. He can’t have heard. Slowly, I turned back to the High One. Did he think as others in his tale did, that Ing was ergi and thus I was wrong? All knew that Loki suffered such insults in Asgard.

The stranger patted my head gently and I felt his unspoken vow: he wouldn’t expose me. My tension melted, leaving only the glow of his words. Boy, he had called me boy. Grinning up at him, I heard him huff in amusement — taking pleasure from my simple joy. He pushed me lightly towards my father and I almost floated back to my seat.

As I sat, my father clasped my shoulder, squeezing it with pride. I crossed my legs, careful to keep my skirt from rising, and placed my doll on my lap. When I looked up, the stranger was watching me, waiting until I was ready.

Thus settled, he turned to the room at large and began to speak: “Let me tell you now the true story of Hertha and Ing. One year of wedded bliss they had, travelling from Ingwin farm to farm until their new home, Eafor Hall, was built by the sea. And thus our tale begins.”

THE SAGA OF HERTHA AND ING

17 THE TRUTH REVEALED

After a year of travelling, Hertha was glad to be settled in her new home. She stood upon the cliff's edge and stared down at the grey waves crashing upon the rocks, breaking themselves into tiny flecks of white foam. The sounds from the busy hall could barely reach her here, far enough down the trail that they were muffled by the light breeze. She breathed in the quiet. It was so rare that she was alone these days; Ing was always seeking her attention. It was nice, if a little overbearing. She missed Ceolwynne and her father. Even Osgar, poor sod. He had fallen into sickness one night, fever robbing his speech and dragging him deep into dreams. He never woke. She and Ing had spent the first three nights of marriage by his sickbed. Ing was the one to find the small festering cut on his ribs; fool must have thought it not worth his attentions. She pitied the man who had to tell Hartwig upon his return.

And he should return soon, Erminus had only banished him for a year; with winter's passing, he was due to return any day now. She placed a hand on her round stomach. His outlawry had caused him to miss her wedding, her pregnancy, but at least he'd be back before the birth of his grandchildren. It'd be nice to share this with someone she loved.

Arms snaked around her, drawing her back against a strong chest. She forced herself to relax into the hold and hum a greeting as lips kissed her cheek. It seemed her blessed solitude was over.

"How's my son?" Ing murmured as she rubbed Hertha's belly, "Not giving you trouble?"

Hertha laughed and was proud of how natural it sounded now. "If he could stop growing, he'd give me less. I feel like I have a Jötunn in here."

"Maybe there's two babes."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Ing said simply. "A son and a daughter. One to teach the sword, the other my seiðr."

“And if they are like you? If they are both?” Hertha turned in her wife’s arms. “Nerthus can’t claim you both as vessels.”

Ing sank to her knees and pressed a gentle kiss to Hertha’s belly. As she looked up, Hertha could see worship in her eyes. “I’d change the world so they may live free of the scorn I’ve faced.”

Despite herself, a genuine smile stretched across her lips. Ing was a good wife and she’d make a good mother too. Though Hertha hadn’t wanted to marry her and only did it to save Hartwig from Nerthus’ wrath, she couldn’t deny that things could’ve been worse. Maybe in a couple of years, she wouldn’t have to fake her love for Ing anymore. Reaching out, Hertha brushed golden locks away from Ing’s face and caught her chin, using it to draw her to her feet. She kissed her and Ing melted. One hand found her waist while the other tangled in her hair. It pulled and Hertha fought off a groan.

Ing broke the kiss, resting her forehead against Hertha’s. “We must return to this later. For now, you have a guest.”

Had Hartwig already returned? Eagerly, she followed Ing back to the hall, passing men and women planting barley in the field under the warm sun. As they reached the top of a hill, Eafor Hall came into view. I heard that Ing had built it to be greater than Lencten Hall in both size and beauty. Its walls were carved with wild horses racing next to shaggy boars under Yggdrasil’s branches. At the front, spirals decorated the doorframe. Two smaller buildings stood nearby — a barn for thralls and animals, and a sleeping house for the women. Flowers grew in patches in the surrounding area, anywhere that Ing had laid Hertha to love her under the open sky, for ground grew more fertile after being Nerthus’ marriage bed. The few patches Hertha didn’t remember, no doubt Eburwin did.

As they approached, Hertha searched for her father and her eyes caught on a small woman standing at the entrance. Age lined her face, but no grey touched her meek brown hair. She stood unnaturally stiff, back straight as a Völva’s wand. Eburwin leaned on the wall beside her with his

arms crossed, looking pointedly away as her eyes dropped from his face to his sword and back again in quick succession.

“Is this how you treat guests?” Ing called to him. “Didn’t you think to offer her a drink or invite her inside?”

Eburwin’s mouth smiled, but Hertha could see the strain around his eyes as he uncrossed his arms to make the hand gestures for, *She doesn’t speak hands*.

“I’ll have to teach you,” Hertha said to the woman, who startled at being addressed. At her confused look, Hertha added, “To speak with hands. Eburwin hasn’t managed to teach us much either. We spent the last summer learning from a farmer’s daughter who was born without hearing.” She held out her arm, “I’m Hertha. Ing said you were looking for me.”

The woman clasped her forearm. “Wassa, lady. I’m a mid-wife sent by Queen Ceolwynne—” she glanced again at Eburwin “—who is disappointed she couldn’t be here herself.”

“You are welcome,” Ing said as she raised her hands and gestured the words, *What did you do?*

Eburwin waved lazily at his neck. His scar, red and raised, was curved in a permanent crooked grin; it was not the first time it had unnerved someone.

“Let me show you the women’s quarters,” Hertha said, guiding Wassa away and ignoring the nervous looks she threw over her shoulder as they left Ing and Eburwin behind.

As they stepped into the women’s house, Wassa slowly spun, taking it in. Less time had been dedicated to building here, but it was solid and strong. Fur beds lined the wooden walls, edges touching edges so that none slept alone.

Hertha waved to the women gathered around a loom at the far side of the house. They returned to their work with only the occasional curious peek as she guided her new companion to her sleeping spot. “This is you.”

Wassa nodded. “Thank you, lady.”

“That is, if you stay,” Hertha said, carefully lowering herself to sit. Standing for this would have been better, but her Jötunn-sized babe had other plans. She looked forward to the day that standing didn’t require effort.

Wassa’s forehead crinkled further. “What do you mean?”

“I would think, as a mid-wife, you would have seen worse than a scar,” Hertha said firmly. “Yet you acted like Eburwin was a troll come to eat you. That can’t happen again. He is a good man and a trusted friend of my wife. I’ll not have you insulting him over an old injury that impacts his speech.”

“I don’t care about that,” Wassa said quickly, stepping closer to almost curl over Hertha. “I—” she cut herself off, glancing over to the women at the loom. Their heads snapped down, pretending not to listen. Wassa swallowed and lowered her voice, “I should not speak this here.”

Hertha frowned. What was going on? Without looking away from Wassa, she called, “Leave us.”

One by one the women trailed out the door. Wassa waited, her hands twisting in the fabric of her skirt. Once the door closed, Hertha gestured to the spot beside her and Wassa sat. She cleared her throat, eyes darting to the door, before she leaned in and whispered, “Queen Ceolwynne sent me with a message: Eburwin murdered Osgar.”

“What?”

“The day of your wedding, when Eburwin disappeared and Ceolwynne promised to find him for you, she sent Osgar. That night he reported back to her that he had found Eburwin burying your father’s body.”

Hertha pushed herself to her feet. “My father isn’t dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Wassa said, standing as well, “but he is. Queen Ceolwynne swore the truth of this, found the grave herself.” From her pocket, she drew a pendant shaped like Mjölfnir, chipped in familiar places.

Hartwig’s pendant. Snatching it from Wassa’s hand, Hertha held it to her breast. He couldn’t be dead, not after everything she’d done to protect him.

Her legs collapsed beneath her and she covered her mouth to quieten her cries.

Wassa knelt beside her. “Should I fetch Ing?”

Hertha shook her head hard enough that the world spun. She didn’t want Ing. Didn’t want anything but her father. Feeling her distress, the babe kicked. She pressed a hand against the spot. Hartwig would never know her children. “Why? Why would he ki—” A sob stole her words.

“Queen Ceolwynne said that Osgar believed that Eburwin had heard the insult to his lord and sought to avenge it,” Wassa said quietly. “Having been asleep, he didn’t know that Hartwig was outlawed and tried to hide it. When Osgar came upon him, he killed him to keep the crime secret.”

Hertha shook her head. “Osgar died of a festering wound.”

“Poison,” Wassa countered. “Sickness doesn’t overwhelm that quickly and Osgar was no fool. He would’ve sought help long before fever took him.”

None of this made sense. She remembered how weak Eburwin had been when he’d first woken, the way his shaking hands couldn’t hold a drinking horn. Hartwig would’ve crushed him. And poison that disguised itself as a festering wound? No, that sickness was a curse. Cold settled in her bones as she thought back to Oðin’s warning: Nerthus’ hand would kill Hartwig; who else but Ing was the hand of the goddess? But why? She’d made her sacrifice, married her — her womb swelled with her commitment... Only, their betrothal had made things worse. It had been the kindling that sparked Hartwig’s insult which surely guided Ing’s blade. Oðin had warned her of her choice and she had chosen wrong. She was the reason her father was dead.

“Ceolwynne wanted to tell you sooner, but she feared what Eburwin would do if he thought you knew,” Wassa whispered. “She didn’t trust the newness of your marriage to stand against his long friendship with Ing. But as the mother of her child, your words will have more weight now. She’ll listen to you.”

“No.” Hertha swiped her tears away. No one would ever believe that Ing was involved — not Ceolwynne, not Erminus, and definitely not Wassa. If she wanted to avenge Hartwig, it had to be murder. But could she risk it while her child’s life was tied to hers. If she was caught, they’d both die. Though, after the babe was born, Wassa would leave; her only ally. And she had just unknowingly presented her with the perfect scapegoat. “Ing wouldn’t believe my word over Eburwin’s. Not without proof,” she lied, “If we want justice for Osgar, we need his confession.”

“But why would he confess?”

“Because we will make him,” Hertha leaned in. “As mid-wife, you must have some seiðr?”

“I know chants and charms to help with the babe.”

“That’s enough seiðr to summon a mara,” Hertha seized Wassa’s hand. “We’ll drive him insane with guilt. He’ll be begging to confess.” And after weeks of Eburwin’s odd behaviour, no one would doubt her word when she presented Ing’s carcass and Eburwin’s bloody blade.

18 EBURWIN'S NIGHTMARES

Eburwin's heart pounded in his ears as he ran through the looming trees. They reached for him, branches curling like talons to scratch his face. He ducked under them, gasping in the thick air. It was coming. He checked over his shoulder, stumbling and almost fell. There was nothing there. Yet. Legs burning, he kept running.

The pale light of Lencten Hall flittered like a firefly in the distance. If he could reach it, he'd be safe, but the greedy earth sunk his every step. He tore his feet free from its bog-like hunger only to sink again. He was moving too slow, the hall flying further away. It was going to catch him. It was—

A rotting hand burst through the earth, claspng his ankle. He crashed, slamming onto hard ground. The world spun. Spitting out dirt, he rolled onto his back. Bones poked through mouldy skin of his fetter. He cried out as they dug into his flesh — sharp throbbing overwhelming him. Blindly, he clawed at the fingers, trying to free himself as dark scarlet flooded from the gouges. It was still coming. He could feel getting closer. He had to get free. If the hand wouldn't surrender Eburwin's foot, then he would. Choking on his sobs, he grabbed the dead fingers and pushed them deeper. They cut through his muscle, down to bone. Agony spiked up his leg. He screamed.

A drop of ice trickled up his spine, hairs on his arms standing on end. It was here. Slowly, Eburwin looked up. Osgar stood over him. Night seeped from his beard, making his blue-white skin glow brighter. Bloodshot eyes stared down unnatural wide as his hand tightened on Hartwig's axe.

"Please." The hand burrowed deeper and Eburwin whimpered. Curling into a ball, he whispered, "I'm sorry."

Osgar opened his mouth, wider and wider, unhinging it. Spiders fled his cavernous maw, waterfaling onto Eburwin.

He flailed, shrieking, as they crawled over him; into his ears, his eyes. They squeezed past the dead fingers into his wound, travelling as bulging lumps under his skin. And through the millions of hairy legs and bulbous bodies, he saw light glimmer off the edge of Hartwig's axe as it swung down.

Eburwin sat upright, draped cloak falling from his shoulders as he opened his mouth in a silent scream. He rolled off the mead-bench and fell onto something firm.

The thing grunted and Eburwin scrambled away as its eyes blinked open. "Whatisit?"

Eburwin stared at the man, taking a moment to recognise Agi's familiar features. Slowly, he lifted his gaze and looked around the hall. Ingwines were scattered over the floor and tables, snoring blissfully. There were no spiders, no rotting hand, no Osgar. He ran a hand down his face and let out a shaking breath. Another dream. There hadn't been a night this week that he'd manage to sleep peacefully. Old ghosts haunted him — Lencten Hall burning, Istio and his blade, Hartwig's cold and accusing eyes; but always Osgar was there to finish what the others started.

Agi pushed himself onto an elbow and frowned at him. "You alright?"

Eburwin nodded sharply. Lifting his hands, he gestured *Need air. Go back to sleep*, and stood. He should've known it was a dream; that's the only time he regained his voice.

Carefully stepping over the rest of the sleeping Ingwines, Eburwin made his way to the door and slipped outside. Shivering as the breeze touched his sweat soaked tunic, he wrapped his arms around himself and started walking.

Why was Osgar haunting him now? He'd always regretted his death, but it had been necessary. Ing had said... but maybe that was the problem. Ing. Less and less did they find time alone together. He'd barely spoken with them since Wassa had arrived a week ago. What was the point of killing Osgar if not to be with each other?

A pleasure-filled moan cut through the quiet. Looking out at the field, Eburwin saw a couple among the barley. The woman's naked chest heaved as she clutched her partner's head, holding it between her legs. Both of them had hair as gold as the crop that they were surrounded by.

And there was his answer, Eburwin thought as he watched Ing lift their head and start trailing kisses up their wife's body. Osgar died not for love of Eburwin, but for *her*. He turned his back and fled.

19 ANOTHER TWIG ON THE GROWING FIRE

Life could not be better for Ing Mannusson. I heard that Nerthus' blessing bloomed in fruitful harvest for all who lived at Eafor Hall — wombs filled with children and plates were piled with food; everyone praised Ing for their prosperity. Even his own wife seemed brighter since Wassa had arrived two weeks ago. He watched them walking together around the busy hall — movement was good for the babe, so Wassa said — as he drank deeply from his mead-filled horn.

Eburwin threw himself into the seat next to him, bending over the table and catching his head in his hands. Through his messy curls hanging between them, Ing could see dark circling his bloodshot eyes.

In all the happiness at Eafor Hall, Eburwin was the only dark spot marring it. Ing was glad to see him anyway. Hertha had been eager for his company these last few weeks, and for the moment where she was, so was Wassa. He didn't blame Eburwin for avoiding the filf who was frightened of his scar, but he missed him. Reaching for an empty plate, he filled it with carrots, beans and slices of pork — all of Eburwin's favourites. "You look like shit," Ing said lightly, "no women are going to want to kiss that ratted beard."

A nearby warrior chuckled at Ing's words, but Eburwin's expression hardened, glaring daggers at him.

Ing leaned back. What was wrong with him? Pushing the plate towards him, he said, "Eat." Maybe he'd be in a better mood once he had.

Eburwin softened as he looked at the food. Sitting up, he raised his hands. *Walk with me?*

"Of course."

Eburwin led him to the door, glancing back at Ing every few steps.

“Ing!” Hertha’s call was high, shrill with panic. Hand pressed against her stomach, she waddled quickly towards him.

The babe.

Ing ran, heart quivering, sliding to a stop beside her. “What’s wrong?” He turned to Wassa, standing three feet away, watching. Why wasn’t she doing anything?

Hertha snatched his hand from the air, pressing it to her belly. “The babe kicked,” she said, breathless.

Thank the gods, she was just excited. Ing slumped, dropping his head to her shoulder as she held his hand to the spot. Nothing moved. He looked up as Hertha’s face folded in disappointment.

“They did it before. I was sure it would be strong enough for you to feel.”

“It’s early yet,” Ing whispered, rubbing his thumb against her dress, stretched taut over the babe’s bed. “His still growing his strength.”

Catching him by his waist, she drew him closer. “I’ve been thinking of names. I’d like to honour my mother, Freyja.”

“Beautiful,” Ing murmured, kissing her temple. “If we have a daughter, we shall name her Freyja.”

“And Freyr, if it’s a boy,” Hertha added.

Ing chuckled. “And what if we have a son now and a daughter later? You don’t wish to save the name?”

“My mother had good luck,” Hertha said. “This is the child I want to inherit it. Freyja for a girl and—”

“Freyr for a boy,” Ing finished for her. He pecked her lips. “It shall be done.”

And so, Ing failed to notice Eburwin slip out the door without a word — another twig on the growing fire. But Hertha did, and she smiled.

20 LOVER'S FIGHT

It had taken Ing too long to see that something was wrong with Eburwin. She cursed herself for it as she walked down the beach, shoes in hand, feeling the cool sand between her toes. Nerthus revelled in it, her joy rushing through Ing with every heartbeat. Cresting a hill, Ing saw a familiar boat. It looked no different than when she had last sailed it to the goddess' island a year ago. Her shoes slipped from her fingers, tumbling down the white mound. She followed them and moved towards the water. Nerthus' happiness grew warmer as it lapped at her toes. Lifting her skirts, Ing waded deeper and closed her eyes. Yes, this is what Eburwin needed. They'll be hidden here, no one can see the boat from the cliff. Her skin prickled with anticipation. He'd join her soon; whatever was wrong with him, she knew he'd still come.

He'd been distant, she'd thought because of Wassa, but no, Agi had told her three days ago that he'd been withdrawing from everyone — not sleeping, barely eating. It had something to do with Hertha, didn't it? Ing knew she'd been distracted since Hertha's pregnancy, knew Eburwin was unhappy with how little they saw each other, but what else was she meant to do? Hopefully this would help — two days where her time belonged to no one but him. And she had her perfect wife to thank for it.

Late last night, Hertha held him close while the women in the hall slept around them. There was nothing better than sleeping in her wife's arms, yet Ing couldn't relax. Thoughts of Eburwin raided her mind; why was he so unwell? Why hadn't he said anything?

“Why aren't you sleeping?” Hertha whispered.

“Did I wake you?”

Hertha ran her finger through Ing's golden locks gently, soothing. “It's Eburwin, isn't it? I overheard what Agi told you.”

Ing sighed. “He’s been avoiding me for a week now. I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

“Maybe getting away from Eafor Hall will help. You should take him on a hunting trip, just the two of you. I’ll take care of things here.”

And so, at dawn, Ing left a message for Eburwin and started making her way to the beach.

Behind her an empty sheathed clinked against a hip, drawing her from her memories. She turned to see Eburwin coming down the hill. He walked stiffly in his leathers, jaw clenched. His eyes seemed shrunken in the heavy bruises of sleepless nights.

Swallowing her worry, Ing left the water, tiny grains of sand sticking to her feet. Reaching for him, she froze as he stepped back. “You’re angry with me.”

He crossed his arms and waited.

“Hertha has demanded much of my time of late, it has been hard to find my way to you, but I have longed for it,” Ing said softly. “Agi tells me you haven’t been sleeping.”

Rage broke like the dawning of Ragnarök. *Agi told you*, he gestured sharply, hands speeding through the words. *You didn’t see because you don’t care.*

“That isn’t true.”

Eburwin shook his head. *Busy with wife. Busy with baby.*

“Don’t pretend you haven’t pulled away too,” Ing snapped. In her chest, Nerthus’ anger bubbled, a pot waiting to boil. Ing breathed deep, taking them both away from fury’s flame. Calmer, she tried again. “I’m worried about you. I miss you.”

You miss being the mare instead of the stallion, Eburwin gestured.

The arrow of those words buried to the fletching in Ing’s heart. “Why are you saying this?”

Why else would you keep me here?

“Because I love you,” Ing’s voice broke. “I risked everything at the Battle of Lencten Hall to save you. I surrendered our home for you.”

Then you married her, he stepped forward as he signed, towering over Ing. *Then you made me murder because you wanted to keep her.*

“I married her for you, to protect you!”

No.

“Alright, yes, I did it to protect me as well, but not because I wanted to. Not because I wanted her.”

I’d believe that if you— his finger almost hit her nose *—didn’t enjoy it so much.*

“It’s a lie,” Ing said frantically. “I act out my lies for the world, the truth has always been ours alone. You know this.”

He turned away, shaking his head.

She grabbed him, throwing herself into a kiss. He grasped her shoulders, squeezing bruises into her skin. For moment, she thought he was going to shove her away, but then he pulled her closer. She slammed against the hard line of his body, aching as he held her tighter. She slid her hand into his hand and yanked his head back. “You are mine—” she growled breathlessly, “—and I am yours.”

He kissed her in answer, rough hands trying to pull her impossibly closer. Slowly, his touch gentled into worship. Perfect. Only... Nerthus’ spirit was a stone in Ing’s chest. The goddess unmoved, almost disgusted as she felt his hands on her. It rose like bile in Ing’s throat. Since when did Nerthus hate Eburwin?

Hearing the query, I heard the deity guided Ing’s spirit down inside Eburwin. A sapping bog lurked at the base of his mind, Ing could taste its thick bitterness on her tongue. She pulled back.

“What is that?”

Eburwin's brows furrowed, his hands still fisted in her dress.

Gently, she took his face in her hands. "Look at me." There, in the depth of his eyes something lingered. Its formless shape jerked, shifting rapidly into a horse, a woman, a crone, then into nothing at all. It stared back at her and Ing felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. "A mara." Drawing back from the spirit, Ing saw Eburwin's confused frown. "You've been cursed with a mara."

He stepped out of her arms to give his hands room to gesture. *That explains my nightmares.*

"I'll banish it," Ing swore. Nerthus' power rose in her, eager claws waiting; the mara wouldn't survive her and the goddess' joint seiðr. "But by Thór's Hammer, who would do this?"

Eburwin shrugged.

Biting her lip, Ing glanced back towards Eafor Hall; all her seiðr tools were there. As much as she wanted the time away, it wasn't worth it if Eburwin couldn't rest.

An odd whirling noise cut through the air, ending with a thud. Ing turned back to see Eburwin stand frozen, eyes wide.

"What's wrong?"

His hands trembled as he raised them. He coughed and corpse sea erupted from his mouth. It spilled down his chin, splattering his leather.

Ing lunged forward as he swayed, catching him, but his weight sunk them both to their knees. Her hands brushed against the arrow in his back. Eburwin whimpered.

Ing scanned the beach and saw Hertha standing proud forty feet away. She looked a goddess with her white dress fluttering in breeze and a bow in her hand. She bared her teeth in a wolfish grin as she dropped her bow only to draw Eburwin's sword — easily stolen in his sleep-deprived state.

After all, Ing had to die by a blade. Everyone knew Eburwin couldn't shoot and Hertha planned to return to Eafor Hall an innocent widow.

21 THE ONE-EYED STRANGER ENDS HIS TALE

The stranger paused his telling, coughing into his fist. Without his voice, the hearth's crackle was thunderous. Fire danced upon bright embers, warmth dying. The thralls hadn't noticed, caught in the moment of Hertha's revenge. Would she get it? Was Eburwin dead? Leaning heavily on his dulled spear, the stranger hobbled towards the window. The muddied edge of his worn cloak brushed me as he passed. He peeked outside at the still night, Thór silent as if he were listening too.

Hugging my doll tighter, I glanced up at my father. His eyes were on the stranger, a forgotten spoonful of stew frozen halfway between bowl and mouth. Around him, women and men alike sat in eager anticipation — some quivering, others so motionless they barely breathed.

At the front of the hall, King Hadingus gruffly demanded, "Well?"

I shrunk at the rudeness of his tone. No one should speak to a god like that, though of course he didn't know who our guest was. That was no excuse.

Across the room, the stranger slowly turned to face us again. The secrets of his hood hid what he thought of King Hadingus' impatience. I prayed he found it amusing. Clearing his throat, the stranger started speaking again, his hoarse voice still reaching every corner of the hall.

Upon the beach Ing met Hertha's battle fire with her own. Their sword storm thundered with blows, igniting grief and burning it to fury. Within Ing's chest, Nerthus lay waiting. She was not a goddess of war and would not strike against one baring the children of her chosen — for though the parents did not know, Hertha carried twins strong in divine blood. Amongst the flurry, Ing cried: "Why are you doing this?"

Hertha replied: "Because you killed my father. I take your heart as you have taken mine, and I'll blacken Eburwin's reputation to rise from its ashes queen of the Ingwins, unhindered by my crime."

So Ing said: "My heart breaks at your words, though I admit I earned your ire. If you had but left Eburwin alone, I could take your sword and let it be done. But your greedy hands reach for his honour, and that with his life you will never be owed. Now I will sacrifice your life to Frigg's handmaiden so that she may heal his wounds."

And so the married pair fought for loves they did not share. Dew of slaughter wept from Eburwin's heart, soaking the sand, and time bled too. Each drop a second Ing could not waste — for it's only at Ragnarök that dead will rise again.

I heard that Oðin withdrew his blessing from Hertha's bloodworm in that fight, breaking the blade in two. Ing sunk her death deep into her chest and claimed her life before the High One's Valkyries could take hold. Using secret runes and prayer, Eburwin was healed.

But still Ing wept, for within her wife's womb her children waned. Then Nerthus came forth. Guiding her hands, the deity painted runes that were untouchable as the sky, as powerful as the sea. They would hold both babes in the veil between life and death until they could be planted in new soil.

And so the lovers carried Hartwig's daughter to the boat with the wyrm upon its prow, the one untouched by rust or ruin. Following Nerthus' call, Ing rowed them across the island's fetter. They carried the corpse to the deity's altar, where the goddess of fertility worked her seiðr and Ing's belly swelled with the twins her wife had carried.

Back at Eafor Hall, Wassa grew worried when her lady did not return. So she told the Ingwins everything she knew: that Eburwin had killed Hartwig and Osgar, and that Hertha knew it. When Ing left with Eburwin that morning, her lady had followed, sure that Eburwin planned nefarious deeds. So warriors went sent and found the blood gorged beach. They grieved their lord and cursed the nothing who fled. That is how Eburwin earned his fame.

When Ing heard what her people called her lover, she grew neither angry nor sad. Weariness wore at bones, tired of secrets and shadow. So Eburwin said: "Let us remain as Nerthus' guests. We will raise these children as our own and teach them never to shame love."

And so, they withdrew from the world and Nerthus with them. Crops withered and whelps cried. Famine spread far across Jutland and all the tribes suffered.

Twenty years passed before the twins of Ing and Eburwin returned. Freyr and Freyja were their names, and they carried with them the blessing of the land. Fertility defeated famine, and so all praised them as Nerthus' children. Oðin made his peace with them, welcoming them to Asgard. Thus ends the saga of Hertha and Ing.

His tale finished, the stranger turned back to the window.

“Wait—” a woman called from the back of the hall, “—that can’t be true. I’m a descendant of Hertha and Agi, married after Ing’s death.”

“So your drunken mother claimed,” my father muttered under his breath, and the warriors around him chuckled.

She glared at them. “Hertha can’t have died.”

“Alright,” the stranger said, though he continued to stare out at the dark. “There is an ending I know where Hertha lives.” And then he began to tell it.

When Eburwin was slain, Hertha had planned to take Ing’s life as well, but was swayed upon seeing her weeping wife. No torment could match the loneliness of banishing Eburwin to Hel alone. So Hertha said: “I made vows to you and I shall not break them. His life was the wergild you owed me for Hartwig’s death. Now mourn him as I do my father. We both hold the key to one another’s destruction, for you cannot expose this crime without me sharing yours. Thus, our marriage becomes our fetters. Return to your chains ready to tear Eburwin’s honour to ruin, or do not come back at all.” Then she left for Eafor Hall.

Ing’s tears soon dried, for Eburwin had not yet travelled that final road. She carried him across the foam path to Nerthus’ island to the lake where her powers were strongest. It was there Ing became her own sacrifice, letting Eir take her spirit to heal his death-blow. And so ended the life of Ing Mannusson.

As Nerthus grieved, she sheltered her chosen’s heart — now beating in another’s chest. This is how Eburwin was healed. He knew he could not return to Eafor Hall,

for Hertha would have sung her lies and given him sullied fame. So Nerthus told him to sail East, for there she promised his heart would be healed.

And healed it was, some twenty years later when Freyr Ingsson, also known as Freyja Ingsdottir, conquered Uppsala. For though Hertha did not know, Nerthus had bartered for Ing's spirit and placed it safely in the body of her child. Thus, Ing was reborn. When Freyr met Eburwin, he remembered all he had once been. Reunited, the two were never parted again.

When the stranger's voice faded into silence, I looked around the hall. No one seemed pleased by this ending either.

Noticing this, our skald Swithin huffed. Carrying his lyre on his hip, he approached the hearth. "You do tell stories well—" he admitted, sneering, "—but you never tell the tale you promised. If that is the Saga of Hertha and Ing, why do you end it with Eburwin and Freyr?"

"Besides, Freyr's not ergi," my father added, and I could feel contempt rolling off the insult.

I sunk down, burying my face in my doll. If he ever knew about me, would that be how he'd spit the word? I felt his gentle hand stroke my hair, unknowing comforting his son and not his daughter.

Across the room, the stranger sighed. "Very well. What do you think of this—" So he told another ending, and when that did not satisfy, another. His words rocked me to sleep, and when I woke the next day he was gone.

None of us ever saw him again.

To this day I still wonder what really happened, which ending was true. Maybe it doesn't matter. Because now, years later, when my children's children crawl onto my lap and ask me to tell

them Ing's saga, I always end it the same; Eburwin and Ing raising their family on Nerthus' island, untouched by hatred or shame.

**BALANCING
AUTHENTICITY:
GENDERFLUID
REPRESENTATION IN
HISTORICAL FICTION**

Exegesis by Gabrielle Jones

INTRODUCTION

I have always been fascinated by the holes in medieval literary history. Many are caused by forgotten oral stories, damaged manuscripts, and lost texts, such as the sole remaining fragment of the poem *The Battle of Maldon*. Scholars cannot agree on when it was composed (Gordon 21; McKinnell, “On the Date of ‘The Battle of Maldon’” 128), how accurately it depicts the battle in 991, and for what purpose the poem was written (Gordon 4-5; Niles 448-459). Another example is the eight pages cut from the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda, which is thought to have contained stories about Sigurðr and Brynhildr (Shippey xiv). Sometimes the gaps in our understanding of medieval texts occur because of problems with translation, such as the Old English poem *Wulf and Eadwacer*. This poem has been identified as famously difficult to interpret due to its use of rare words, obscure imagery, and lack of context (P. Baker 39-40; Sebo 110; E. Marshall 89).

Another example is the character of Grendel’s Mother from the Old English epic *Beowulf*. In the past, scholars have regarded her as a monster akin to her son, but M. Wendy Hennequin points out that this is due to biased mistranslations; words describing her, such as “heo” meaning “she”, have been translated as “the hag”, “the monster”, and “the hell-dam” (520). She argues that the untranslated poem views Grendel’s Mother as an admirable opponent simply avenging her son’s death as was expected in *Beowulf*’s society (517). This sympathetic view of the character has inspired recent *Beowulf* adaptations including *The Mere Wife* by Maria Dahvana Headley and *Grendel’s Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife* by Susan Signe Morrison, both retelling the events of *Beowulf* while centring the story around Grendel’s Mother. *The Mere Wife* is interesting because it acknowledges Grendel’s Mother as an ambiguous character that straddles the line between monster and woman, just as Renée R. Trilling notes she does in the original poem (9-19). Trilling argues that Grendel’s Mother is designed to make the audience uncomfortable because she reflects the darker side of the heroic identity (Trilling 17). In a similar way, *The Mere Wife* plays with the idea of monsters, arguing that almost every character can be labelled as one. Headley sets the novel

in a modern day Herot Hall (framed as a gated community) in order to highlight this theme. Dana Mills — the modernised Grendel’s Mother — is a traumatised war-veteran. She is simultaneously a victim (captured, raped, disfigured) and a monster (murders Roger Herot, considers killing a child, kills Ben Woolf); however, all of Dana’s monstrous acts spring from her love for her son.

Meanwhile, Willa — the modernised Wealtheow — only cares about image. Her monstrous actions include using her performative grief to incite Ben Woolf to action while simultaneously labelling the innocent Gren as a monster (Headley 122) and killing her own son (Headley 258-262). Kathryn Hume argues that to blame Willa for this is to miss the point, as she has clearly been shaped by the mothers at Herot Hall (n.p), who are monsters in their own right.

The way *The Mere Wife* explores not only Grendel’s Mother, but all the silenced women in *Beowulf*, inspired me to adapt a similar gap in medieval literary history. But while the above examples are interesting and offer a lot of ground to explore, none were more fascinating than Ing, a relatively unknown mythological figure from Anglo-Saxon literary history.

Historical Context for *Ing’s Saga*

Ing’s only appearance in the Anglo-Saxon literary corpus is found in a single verse in the *Old English Rune Poem*:

“Ing among the East-Danes was first
beheld by men, until that later time when to the east
he made his departure over the wave, followed by his chariot;
that was the name those stern warriors gave the hero” (Halsall 90).

It is generally agreed that this verse references a ritual described by Tacitus in *Germania*, involving a fertility deity touring the tribes on a chariot, fertilising both the lands and women through sexual activity (North 49; Lindow 200; Thorsson 64-65). However, the deity that Tacitus describes isn’t

Ing, but instead an Earth goddess called Nerthus. During her tour all weapons are locked away and the people spend the time “rejoicing and merrymaking” (Handford 135). When she tires of men, she returns to her island where her chariot, vestments, and herself are “cleansed in a secluded lake” (Handford 135). The slaves that perform this service are immediately drowned in the same lake. Ing’s verse seems to describe the end of this ritual, returning from a tour — hence he is “followed by his chariot” — over the sea to an island (North 45).

There have been many theories as to how Ing came to be involved in Nerthus’ cult – such as the belief he was her lover (Thorsson 64), he was her descendant (M. Battaglia 5), or that Ing is a title for the chosen human embodiment of the goddess (North 32). Richard North argues that the last example is most likely because there is evidence of the name Ing being used as a title across multiple cultures, such as the Old Norse’s Ingvi-Freyr, Got’s Enguz, and Frisian’s Inguz (North 29-30). To explain the use of a male figure to represent a goddess, North argues that Nerthus was not a goddess but a god. He points to the masculine ending of Nerthus’ name to demonstrate that Tacitus misunderstood, thinking that his source was attempting to give him a Roman equivalent when he heard the name Terra Mater and thus conflated the two deities (20-25). This idea is supported by the widely accepted theory that Nerthus becomes Njorð in Norse mythology, a male sea god (North 20; Schütte 29; M. Battaglia 5; Lindow 237, 242-243; Simek 293). Also supporting the idea that Ing is Nerthus’ human embodiment is the fact that Norse gods are often represented by human equivalents in sagas. Examples include Bárðr as Oðin (McKinnell *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* 172); Gestr, Ormr and Grim as Thór (McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* 127); Hadingus as Njorð (Dumézil 19-38); and Frothi as Freyr (Dumézil 20, 120; Lindow 131).

That these heroes are representatives of the gods is never explicitly stated; instead, the hero’s journey follows patterns related to each individual god and references known myths (McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* 127-129, 147; Dumézil 19-20). A good example of this is seen in Saxo’s account of Hadingus; many scholars note three large similarities between Hadingus’ journey and Njorð’s myths. First, the way Hadingus marries Regnilda recalls

that way Njorð and Skaði's marriage started (Dumézil 19; McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* 67). In *Skáldskaparmál*, the goddess Skaði comes to Asgard to demand compensation for her father's death. She is given a husband of her choice, though she can only choose them by looking at their feet. Thinking the cleanest feet would be Baldr, she chooses them, but they belong to Njorð. In Hadingus' story, Regnilda hides a ring in Hadingus' leg wound when she is healing it to be able to recognise him later. Thus, when her father lets her choose her husband, she inspects the legs of the men gathered and finds her token. Both tales have the unusual circumstance of the bride choosing their husband, and the process of both involves an inspection of legs. The second similarity between Hadingus and Njorð is that both their marriages result in unhappiness because neither wife nor husband can live in the other's preferred environment. In *Gylfaginning*, two stanzas from a lost poem are quoted in which Njorð cannot bear to live by the mountains and longs for "the hooping of swans", while Skaði cannot sleep because of the sea-birds (Young 52). John McKinnell notes that Saxo recreates these lines in Latin for Hadingus' story (*Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* 63). The third commonality is that both are great seafarers and choose to sail despite their wives' wishes (Dumézil 23-26). This example shows how Ing's connection to Nerthus would function.

While it's true that the human representatives and the gods don't share every characteristic and experience, they share the important attributes. This commonality between representative and god is significant for Ing (and his relationship to Nerthus) because it has interesting implications about Ing's gender, for though it's commonly accepted that Nerthus evolves into Njorð, North's theory that Nerthus is male is less recognised. Instead, there is some evidence that Njorð was once female. In Old Norse literature and laws, compensation for a killing often comes in the form of a bride, which means that when Skaði demands compensation for her father's death and receives Njorð, she switches the traditional gender roles – making Njorð function as the woman in this myth (Lindow 242). Also, the form of Skaði's name is traditionally masculine, while Njorð could have originally been either feminine or masculine (Turville-Petre 165; M. Battaglia 6). Turville-Petre

points out that it's possible that Skaði was originally a god and Njorð the goddess; however, he immediately questions this as there is no explanation for the gender reversal (165). I argue that the switch occurs because Skaði is a giant. It is commonly observed in Norse mythology that there is a hierarchy: the gods are the highest class, the Vanir second, humanity third, with giants coming last. While male deities can marry down, they cannot marry a woman from a higher class (Jochens, "The Classical Nordic Pantheon" 63; McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* 81). This is seen in myths such as *Þrymsqviða*, when it's shown as outrageous when Þórr suggests Freyja dress in wedding robes for Thrym, the giant that holds his hammer:

Freyja snorted in such a fury
she made the hall of the Æsir shake,
and broke the mighty Brising necklace:
"I'll have gone mad with hunger for men,
the day I drive to the giants' domain!" (Terry 86).

The more acceptable option is for Þórr to dress as Freyja instead, despite this being utterly degrading to Þórr. This shows how serious it was that a woman never married down; therefore, it's possible that Skaði and Njorð switch genders to enforce this social norm.

In the past scholars have suggested that, rather than Njorð having once been completely female, either Nerthus or Njorð was a hermaphrodite. However, most modern scholars dismiss this due to a lack of evidence (Dumézil 221; M. Battaglia 6; North 20). Georges Dumézil suggests that the confusion of gender comes from the fact sea spirits in the north are sometimes genderless – or rather are attributed both female and male attributes (222). Given both Nerthus' and Njorð's strong connection to the ocean (McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* 66) they could be regarded along the same vein as these sea spirits. As such, Dumézil argues that "the unimportance of their sex, or rather the possibility they have of embodying themselves in either male or female form, seems to be constituent characteristic of these beings" (223). This is particularly fascinating as it could mean Nerthus, and thus Ing, is either genderfluid or non-binary.

While non-binary is defined as anyone who exists outside the gender binary, the genderfluid identify is defined as a single person who doesn't have a fixed gender, but instead has one that flows from man to woman to anywhere and everywhere in between (Richards et al. 96).

Queerness in History

If Ing is genderfluid, that places them in another historical gap – the absence of queer identities throughout history. As a group of marginalised people, it's no surprise that queer history has been censored, suppressed, rewritten, and deliberately destroyed until the late nineteenth century where it got harder to police. These actions have led to the incorrect assumption that homosexuality and gender-queerness are modern concepts (Norton 171-172). Rictor Norton argues that queer historians cannot be as strict as other historians, and that they must work with the evidence of suppression rather than look for infallible proof of queerness (179). He encourages queer historians to fill in the gaps with “pro-queer interpretations rather than an apologetic admission of defeat” (178). By Norton's argument, the hint of evidence I have for Ing's genderfluidity is worth exploring.

Accuracy vs Authenticity

But as someone who has never written historical fiction before, having Ing's story intersect with two large holes in the historical record started to overwhelm me. I wondered how could I be accurate to facts that aren't remembered: how much can I invent before it's no longer based on history? Given that Ing's story is supposed to be mythical, how do I incorporate fantasy while still making it feel historical? Also, as a cisgendered woman, how do I accurately portray a genderfluid character? Did I even have the right to tell this story? Trying to answer these questions lead me to concept of authenticity: “the impression that a text is accurate, even if it is not” (Saxton 128). This thesis argues that authenticity is better than accuracy in fiction – both for historical and genderfluid representations.

The first chapter discusses anxiety about accuracy, both how it shapes the fictions being created and why it shouldn't because authenticity suits fiction better. I start with historical fiction – examining the ways that complete adherence to historical fact is both impossible to achieve and limiting, as without committing to complete accuracy the genre can explore gaps in the historical record, use historical settings to talk about modern issues, and create escapist texts for the sole purpose of entertainment. The chapter then moves into representations of genderfluid characters. I first discuss the issue of authority, as it is commonly agreed that straight and cisgender authors should include queer characters in their work but shouldn't attempt to tell their stories (Brown; Money; Dhar). I conclude that this view is problematic as it leads to bullying and forces authors to disclose their identities. Also, the concept of “including queer characters but not telling their stories” becomes complicated when writing lesser-known gender and sexual identities because these characters are required to explain their identity to unfamiliar readers through what I call a “coming out to the reader” scene. As coming out falls into the definition of queer experiences (Sedgwick 68), this scene counts as telling queer stories. However, not including these scenes often leads to representations that purposely present these identities as an Other. As such, I argue that policing who can tell queer stories is harmful for closeted authors and that the advice for non-queer authors to “include queer characters but not tell their stories” is impossible to follow. The chapter then moves into how to craft good representations of genderfluid characters. Through the analysis of Rick Riordan's character Alex Fierro, I show that authors cannot be accurate to every genderfluid person, and thus authenticity is required instead for good representation. This analysis also shows that the character's gender expression, society's reaction to genderfluidity, and avoiding negative tropes all contribute to authentic representations.

The second chapter discusses different ways to approach crafting authentic historical fiction. Melissa Addey outlines three kinds of historical fiction authors: the ventriloquist, who incorporates quotes from historical sources (3); the mosaic-maker, who uses fiction to patch fragmented history in order to tell a cohesive story (5); and the magician, who weaves in fantasy elements into a

historical setting (8-9). I examine each one and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each approach, and what techniques each use to help foster authenticity, such as quoting historical sources, bygone, and intertextuality. I also use this chapter to expand on how to create an authentic representation of a genderfluid character — with a particular focus on how to mix this representation with historical fiction given the false belief that queerness is a modern phenomenon.

While historical authenticity is a subject that has been greatly explored in recent years, this thesis offers a new perspective by examining its practical application. Also, by applying Saxton's definition of authenticity to representations of genderfluid characters, I show how the concept of authenticity can be broadened into other genres. More importantly, I demonstrate how these hybrid genres (such as historical queer fiction) can use the two types of authenticity to support one another (an authentic historical world helping create authentic queer characters and vice-versa). As such, this thesis shows authenticity to be a better tool in fictional work than accuracy.

ANXIETIES: ACCURACY, AUTHENTICITY AND AUTHORITY

When I first approached writing Ing's story, I was concerned with accuracy on two fronts: historical accuracy, since I intend to write historical fiction, and accurately representing a genderfluid character. There's a tradition of comparing historical fictions to the official record to determine their worth — the closer they are to it, the better they are regarded. This practice has sparked a debate about the importance of accuracy in historical fictions among scholars, authors and readers alike (Satxon, "A True Story" 128). Hilary Mantel, author of the prize-winning *Wolf Hall*, claims that she feels all historical authors have a "historian's obligation to be accurate, to be up to date with research and to be aware of variant versions" (n.p). Philippa Gregory is often criticised for claiming her novels are well researched despite including several anachronisms (Satxon, "The Infamous Whore Forgotten" 96). For example, in *The Other Boleyn Girl* Gregory uses several rumours about Anne as the basis for her plot, causing fellow author Robin Maxwell to express his disappointment:

It seemed to me that all the most hideous rumo[u]rs about Anne (and there were many, put forth by her many jealous enemies and Henry VIII's minions) had been trotted out, and because they made for a spicy, sexy, wildly dramatic story, they were set down for readers as fact. (Maxwell)

Authors around the globe grapple with anachronisms in their fiction, trying to depict historical "reality" when it is impossible to be one hundred percent accurate to the past given the biased records, unrecorded information, and the fact that the past as it truly was is unrecognisable to a modern audience.

The pressure of achieving complete accuracy in historical fiction was already causing me anxiety without adding that I argue Ing might have been genderfluid. Similar to accuracy in historical fiction, there is a lot of debate surrounding what makes accurate queer representation. A common argument is that to get good representation, queer voices should be the only ones to tell

queer stories (Money; Dhar). As a cisgendered woman, I worried not only that I didn't have the authority to write Ing as a genderfluid person, but that this lack of authority would cause me to write an inaccurate representation. However, through my research I've found that authenticity rather than accuracy can further both historical scholarship and create more diverse — and thus, truer to life — representations of genderfluid people. This chapter will first discuss the accuracy vs authenticity debate in the historical fiction field. In doing so I will show how historical fiction can further knowledge of the past by exploring the possibilities of what might have been. I will then move onto the discussion of who has authority to write queer stories, delving into the dangers of policing authors of queer fiction, the importance of good representation, and the failures in limiting queer stories to queer authors. I will then analyse the commonly praised genderfluid character, Alex Fierro, to discuss what makes good representation.

Accuracy vs Authenticity in Historical Fiction

Many critics have argued that there is no room for anachronism in 'good' historical fiction, and Joanne Brown takes this one step further when she argues that the genre has a responsibility to represent history accurately (n.p). From this view, fiction cannot make statements within historical gaps for we cannot be sure if the statement is accurate, and thus fiction would not make a good tool for exploring history. Many believe that the purpose of historical novels, beyond entertainment, is to teach history (Slotkin 222; Brown; Hower 82). If the facts are wrong, then the novel is worthless for this purpose. Historical fiction can play an important part in shaping how the general population imagines the past to be. An example of this is Mary Boleyn; Alison Weir claims that due to her many depictions in fiction, she is commonly romanticised, mythologised and misrepresented (Saxton, "The Infamous Whore Forgotten" 96). As such, inaccuracies could come to be regarded as truth by audiences (de Groot, *Remaking History* 14). This attitude has guided readers' judgements of individual historical novels until the word 'accurate' was practically a synonym for 'good' (Saxton, "A True Story" 128). This led to a phenomenon called "anxiety of authenticity", where

authors feel they cannot get a single piece of information wrong in their stories (Addey 1-2; Margaronis 138-160). To assuage this anxiety, it's quite common for authors to address the additions, exclusions, and modifications they made in their novel: in historical notes, author's notes, and even in footnotes littered throughout the text (Saxton, "A True Story" 127; de Groot, *Remaking History* 31; P. and Paul C. 71; Mitchell & Parsons 23). By these means, authors not only acknowledge the changes, but also defend their reasons for doing so before anyone else can criticise.

I completely understand this anxiety because I felt it too. Originally, I wanted my exegesis to be one long author's note where I defended my choices. However, Jerome de Groot argues that authenticity, rather than accuracy, is what historical novels should really be concerned with, since the inspiration for these stories often exists in the gaps of the historical record ("Imagined History" 217). In the past, the two terms accuracy and authenticity were used interchangeably; however, Laura Saxton argues that they shouldn't be. While accuracy is the perfect reflection of accepted facts, Saxton defines authenticity as "the impression that a text is accurate, even if it is not" and explains that readers may find a novel inauthentic even if it is completely accurate ("A True Story" 128). This is because we cannot conceive of a past that is not built in our own understanding of people and morality (Southgate 128). As such, the past as it truly was is alien to the contemporary reader — it's unrecognisable and foreign (de Groot, *Remaking History* 18). It's also impossible to write an objective representation of the past. Linda Hutcheon points out that the way in which history is written has come under scrutiny in recent years due to its limited view: "thanks to the pioneering work of Marxists, feminists, gays, black and ethnic theorists, there is a new awareness... that history cannot be written without ideological and institutional analysis" ("Historicizing the Postmodern" 95, 91). This means that even when historians are presenting "accurate" facts only, they are still arranging them into a view of history that is subjective (Southgate 115, 49, 151; Brayfield and Sprott 12), which is why it's impossible to write an objective representation of history. Instead, it is the job of the historical author to translate history's otherness into something

recognisable, while still maintaining enough of the past to feel authentic (de Groot, *Remaking History* 15, 18). During the process of translating the past, small unimportant details may be changed, but these “necessary anachronisms” allow authors to express thoughts and feelings of characters towards each other and the world around them in a way that is both recognisable and historically faithful (Mitchell and Mitchell 59, 61-63). For example, in *Ing’s Saga*, the war of the brothers is centred around the ownership of Lencten Hall despite large halls belonging more to the Viking period than the pre-Roman times that *Ing’s Saga* is set. Instead, Tacitus describes the German people living in grouped huts that aren’t built with wood or stone (Beare 65). I chose to base Ing’s living situation closer to the Viking period because they come from Norse tradition, and I wanted to acknowledge that.

de Groot argues that the attraction of historical fiction as a genre is the “dynamic between the ‘authentic’ or factual and the rediscovery of untraceable experience which is the keynote of fiction” (“Imagined Histories” 224). An example of this is Tracy Chevalier’s novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, based on a Johannes Vermeer’s masterpiece of same name. Chevalier introduces the protagonist, Griet (the unknown subject of the painting), as a sixteen-year-old maid. Though everything about Griet is invented, all Chevalier’s assumptions are all based upon surrounding evidence — such as the facts that Vermeer painted maids in his other works; that several of Vermeer’s subjects wear similar jewellery as *Girl with A Pearl*, suggesting that her earring is a costume; and that Vermeer gives workers (such as the baker Hendrick van Buyter) paintings as payment providing authenticity to Griet receiving the earrings as payment (Cibelli 586-590). In the novel, Vermeer disguises Griet’s social class by giving her the pearl despite promising that “I will paint you as I first saw you, Griet. Just you” (Chevalier 190). Julie Voss argues that in a similar way, historical novels change the subject (the past) in its attempt to depict it: “revealing the past and altering it at the same time, telling the story of Vermeer's creation of this painting but also creating that story” (247). Yet it's this interweaving of the known facts of Vermeer with the mystery of who the *Girl with a Pearl* is that makes this novel a success (Cibelli 583). de Groot claims that the

dynamic between factual and invented creates a self-reflective genre (“Imagined Histories” 225), which is why Hayden White sees an opportunity in fiction to expand historical knowledge.

Fiction could be used to solve what White argues is a major problem with the field of history: that historians are only interested in the “true” when it should also be concerned with the “real”, which is “everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be” (147). White argues that without considering the possible, history’s scholarly field becomes too rigid and cannot grow. An example of what White’s idea can look like is seen in how Madeline Miller adapts *The Iliad* in her novel *The Song of Achilles*. Modern scholars have come to recognise that the version we have of *The Iliad* is one that has been changed several times throughout its oral history to accommodate changing cultures and beliefs (Green 13). While we will never know what changes were made to Achilles and Patroclus’ relationship during its oral period, we can assume it likely was changed as there is evidence of the relationship being censored in ancient times after it was recorded (Norton 159). For example, Aristarchus, an Alexandrian editor, omitted lines on the grounds that they were inserted later and were thus not genuine lines of the text, simply because they showed the love of Achilles and Patroclus (Spencer 41; Clarke 384). Many authors after Homer made similar decisions to obscure the depth of their relationship in adaptations and translations — as translators have done for many classical texts (Norton 86, 161). Yet in *The Song of Achilles*, Miller does not leave any room for doubt. The novel is written from Patroclus’ perspective, and it begins well before the original poem, outlining how he and Achilles meet and grow to care for each other. Their relationship is at the centre of the story and everything in the plot moves around it, even the war when the novel catches up to the poem. Miller also shows instances of them having to hide their affection for one another as a way of explaining why their relationship is only hinted at in *The Iliad* (92-93, 165-166, 174). Without the disciplinary restraints that historians face, Miller uses her novel like a thought-experiment, exploring the realm of the possible to “give voice to other identities and behaviours,

uncover the fabrication inherent in all history, propose new concerns and evidence, and ‘keep history creatively alive’” (Hower 96-97; Slotkin 226-227).

Beyond historical fiction’s potential for exploring history, it’s important to remember that these stories are written for audiences of their own time, meaning that all historical fictions have something of the present in them. Duncan Sprott claims that whatever an author’s intentions, they will build their characters from the understanding of how thought and emotion is processed by people today (Brayfield and Sprott 15). One reason this occurs is because little evidence of emotions in history has survived, which is why some historians claim that emotions are not the province of history (Pinto 191; Brayfield and Sprott 26). Sarah Pinto argues that this is another way historical fictions can expand historical scholarship (200); in a similar way to how Miller uses *The Song of Achilles* as a thought-experiment, historical fictions can experiment with why a historical figure made the choices they did and seeing how their emotions might have factored into their decision making. Sprott argues that the other reason that historical fiction authors draw upon modern understanding of emotion is because, consciously or not, authors identify characters with people in their community (Brayfield and Sprott 15). An example of this can be seen in my novella when Ing chooses to hide Hartwig’s death. A similar situation appears in *Volsunga Saga*, when Siggeir plots to kill Volsung and his sons — who are also his wife’s kin — for a perceived insult. The text never shows him taking Signy’s feelings into account (Byock 38-47). Though the saga doesn’t show Siggeir’s thought process, it does show how this situation would be handled in medieval times. Yet when faced with this choice in *Ing’s Saga*, Ing’s decisions were influenced by my own experiences. Though I am cisgender, my loved ones’ acceptance of my sexuality is extremely important to me, and the thought of losing that would devastate me. I’ve witnessed my non-binary friends hide parts of their lives that they know their family wouldn’t accept in order to keep their love. So, though historically Ing should have prioritised their honour by letting others know they’d gotten revenge for Hartwig’s insult, they choose to hide the act because — due to my

own experience with emotions — they valued Hertha’s love and acceptance more than their honour.

Furthermore, many authors use this genre not to expand knowledge about history but to address modern themes or issues (de Groot, *The Historical Novel* 142). Sprott argues that using a historical setting is a way of achieving distance which can make it easier to explore sensitive topics (12). When this is the novel’s purpose, historical accuracy is less important than the novel’s theme, so the author may “choose a lie that enhances illusion over a reality that distracts from it” (Brayfield and Sprott 12). This applies to the approach I’ve taken with *Ing’s Saga*. As I discussed in the introduction, an argument can be made for Ing being genderfluid; however, the evidence is by no means conclusive. My choice to explore the evidence in this way is less about making educated guesses than it is about exploring who Ing might have been. Portraying Ing as genderfluid is important because inaccurate queer representation in media and literature has long been a problem, and it's one I am deeply passionate about. In the beginning queer characters were excluded, and when they finally started appearing in texts it was to ridicule or demonise them (Orellana et al. 2; Byerly 227-228). Though this issue is slowly improving, modern representations are by no means plentiful and perfect (McLaren et al. 173; Dhar; Siebler 321). I will discuss this in-depth later in the chapter; however, my point here is that by making Ing genderfluid in *Ing’s Saga* I’m making a statement: this identity is valid and always has been. Some of the anachronisms I’ve allowed in my writing — such as Nerthus’ presence within Ing’s body, which is an exaggerated interpretation of their connection — are made for the purpose of highlighting this message.

Of course, not all historical fictions are attempting to engage with modern themes or expand our historical knowledge; de Groot claims historical fictions “allow for an encounter with a kind of past that is predicated upon enjoyment” (*Remaking History* 183), which includes escapism, comedy, and desire. Historical dramas — such as *Downton Abbey* and *Bridgerton* — turn away from the harsher realities of history and focus on an over-stylised, hyped-up and nostalgic realism that encourages a passive engagement with the past (de Groot, *Remaking History* 156). In this way,

historical dramas are the tourist's way of visiting the past — hiding the unflattering edges for the purpose of entertainment (de Groot, *Remaking History* 162). However, these dramas are commonly critiqued for promoting a conservative view and de Groot takes this critique one step further by suggesting that historical dramas might manipulate the audience into believing that the Capitalist present is the only path available to them (de Groot, *Remaking History* 159, 161-162). Yet the huge success of these dramas show that audiences desire a passive, or perhaps just pleasurable, connection with history.

de Groot turns to historical comedies as a way of active enjoyment of the past; “Laughter at the past is pleasurable because it confirms the audience in modernity, the present, and distinguishes carefully between then and now” (de Groot, *Remaking History* 167). A great example of this is *Our Flag Means Death*. The show acknowledges the harsher realities of early 18th century piracy such as slavery, violence, homophobia, classism, and common sicknesses such as scurvy. The show pokes fun at issues that characters are the underdogs in — such as classism in “The Best Revenge is Dressing Well” when Stede uses “passive aggression” to create enough chaos to set the boat on fire (00:21:21-00:24:23). Other issues, such as slavery, are acknowledged as something that existed but isn't fully explored in any seriousness (“A Gentleman Pirate”). But the real power of the show is when it sets comedy aside for moment and takes an issue seriously. These moments are brief and are sandwiched between jokes, but for a beat the audience is allowed to feel uncomfortable or horrified. A good example is when Izzy Hands mocks Lucius and Black Pete for being queer (“The Best Revenge is Dressing Well” 00:06:24-00:07:48). The moment Izzy's laugh changes, the camera switches to see the reactions of Wee John, Lucius and Black Pete to show how uncomfortable they are (00:07:03-00:07:04), focusing the scene on that feeling, guiding the viewer to feel the same. This isn't something the audience can laugh at since it isn't behaviour that belongs only to the past. But as the Lucius leaves and scene ends, fun music begins to play, signalling that the serious moment has ended, and that viewer is allowed to move on — thus allowing the pleasure of watching to continue rather than getting bogged down in the misery of historical reality.

Both historical dramas and comedies never intend to be completely historically accurate. Inaccuracies are included for the purpose of adding pleasure, such as costumes in *Our Flags Means Death*, which allow for modern audiences to quickly understand character personalities and differences. de Groot claims that the popularity of historical dramas and comedies prove that viewers desire nostalgic engagement with the past (*Remaking History* 161-162, 183), which requires anachronisms. For all that historical fiction has the potential for (expanding our understand of history, as a vehicle for addressing modern themes or issues), it's easy to forget that historical fiction is, in the end, *fiction*. One of the purposes of all fictions is to entertain: a boring or unengaging story has failed on its most fundamental level (Oakley 18). As such, a historical *fiction* that is completely accurate but devoid of any entertainment value is a failed text.

Whatever intentions authors have for their historical fiction (to explore gaps in history, expand our understand of the past, discuss modern themes or issues, or to engage with a nostalgic view of the past), it's clear that authenticity, rather than accuracy to historical fact, will better suit their purpose.

Authority when Writing Genderfluid Representations

As mentioned above, my accuracy anxiety wasn't limited to perfectly capturing the historical aspects of telling Ing's story because I was also anxious about portraying a genderfluid character. At first, I was resistant to the idea of writing Ing as genderfluid because I wasn't sure if, as a cisgendered woman, I had the right to tell their story. The debate about who has the authority to write the stories of marginalised people has been ongoing since the late 90's (Brown) and there isn't a clear answer. The closest we have to a consensus seems to be that all authors should include marginalised characters, but only authors from that minority should tell their stories (Brown; Money; Dhar). This is both to ensure good and accurate representation and to support the voices of marginalised authors. It is beyond the scope of this exegesis to explore how this rule interacts with each minority group, as each group faces different prejudices that don't necessarily translate to

others. Instead, I will be limiting my discussion of this rule to the LGBT+ community. And while this rule seems straightforward in theory, when it comes to queer identities and stories, following this rule become complicated. Most people in the LGBT+ community are closeted at one point in their lives, and it is at best rude and at worst unsafe to force someone “out of the closet” before they are ready (Sedgwick 67-68; Schwartz et al.; Ettinghoff 583-591). Yet this is exactly what policing authors in queer spaces can lead to. In 2018, Becky Albertalli, author of novels such as *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens* and *Leah on the Offbeat*, started getting harassed online for appropriating queer culture. Her sexuality became the focus of criticism about her work; interviews, think-pieces, and tweets constantly questioned her right to publish queer stories as a straight woman. Yet in 2020, Albertalli came out as bisexual, stating:

Let me be perfectly clear: this isn't how I wanted to come out. This doesn't feel good or empowering, or even particularly safe. Honestly, I'm doing this because I've been scrutinized, subtweeted, mocked, lectured, and invalidated just about every single day for years, and I'm exhausted. And if you think I'm the only closeted or semi-closeted queer author feeling this pressure, you haven't been paying attention. (Albertalli)

This event highlights the main issue with policing authors in queer spaces: no one can tell who is still in the closet. Also, I would argue that an individual does not owe strangers intimate details about themselves such as their sexuality; yet, in the name of “progress” this is what readers, critics, and even other authors seem to demand. It suggests that closeted or private authors – unwilling to turn their sexuality into a marketing product – shouldn't be allowed to have their voices heard. This is clearly not ideal.

Perhaps then the idea to “include marginalised characters but not write their stories” is less a rule for critics than it is advice for authors. Instead, rather than policing the space, we should trust authors not to write the stories that they know they have no authority to write.

But what counts as a queer story? Peter Melville states that any texts that include “the articulation of non-normative desire, the experience of closeted subjectivity, and same-sex

intimacy” is a queer story (282). However, Stephen Kennelly supports the idea that the inclusion of queer characters isn’t enough to make a text queer, meaning that same-sex intimacy alone isn’t enough (Roberts and MacCallum-Stewart 10). That leaves the other two criteria Melville outlines. I define “the articulation of non-normative desire” as a desire the text acknowledges as unconventional. Therefore, any story with a queer character that doesn’t focus on how society regards their desire as “non-normative” is allowing representation without telling their story. Desire is too often taken as sexual, so I want to point out that that I understand transgender desire as the desire to live and be known as their preferred gender. As for “the experience of closeted subjectivity”, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says that though the closet isn’t an experience limited to the queer community, it’s an experience that almost everyone in it has shared (68). She also notes that the closet and coming out are two sides of the same coin (71). This is reflected in queer literature through the large volume of coming out stories (Epstein 74). From this, I conclude that telling queer stories involves focusing on queer experiences: moments such as questioning one’s gender or sexuality, coming out, and dealing with oppression are all queer stories.

The advice for authors to “include marginalised characters but not tell their stories” now seems simple. However, there are still two issues with this rule. First, if only those with the “authority” to write queer stories are the only ones publishing them, the very act of publishing would out them. This would force closeted authors to choose between wanting to share their work and their privacy. As I touched on before, not everyone has the luxury to come out. If people in positions of power are homophobic/transphobic — such as guardians, employers, landlords, social workers, doctors, etc. — it can be safer to remain in the closet when engaging with those people; being out as queer is not the same as being out to everyone (Harper et al. 189; Sedgwick 68). In this scenario publishing would take away that choice. While I don’t think it’s fair that an author should have to choose between literary success and privacy, it also limits the voices telling these stories down to a smaller part of the community. Likely, the only queer voices being heard if an author had to be out to publish would be ones that are white and upper-middle class as they are the “safest”

demographic in the queer community (Harper et al. 190-191; Kim et al. 31-32, 37; Goh). Given that diversity is important, this is problematic.

The second issue with the advice to “include marginalised characters but not tell their stories” is that while the advice seems to be simple in practice, it becomes complicated when representing lesser-known queer identities, such as genderfluid people, because readers can’t be assumed to understand what being genderfluid means. I’ve examined a range of texts published within the last ten years that include a genderfluid character but are not attempting to tell their stories — which we’ve defined above. What I’ve found is that most authors include a scene where the genderfluid character has to explain their gender identity (Holland 92-93; Rector 147; M. Lee 265; Ewing and Aaron; Riordan, *Hammer of Thor* ch. 34; L. Miller ch.8, 13; Simone). This explanation is not always delivered to another character, though it often is. However, the fact that the other character is not always necessary means that these scenes exist to explain genderfluidity to the reader — or in other words, to come out to the reader. These scenes are becoming less common for characters that fall under the “traditional” understanding of transgender identities — moving one way directly across the binary: female-to-male (FTM) or male-to-female (MTF) transitions — whose transness can now be introduced through a throwaway line about a binder, hormone treatment, etc. (C. Lee 66; “Snow Angels” 00:02:39-00:02:52; Thomas ch. 1). Lal Zimman notes that there are two kinds of coming outs for transgender people: declaration and disclosure (60-63). Declaration is similar to the homosexual coming out as it refers to “the initial claiming of a transgender identity” (60). Disclosure, on the other hand, is about sharing the history of their own gender after transition and as such “does not involve revealing a fundamental truth about one’s identity” (61). The lines introducing transness that I described in the MTF and FTM representations can be defined as disclosure as they are quickly acknowledging a fact but not revealing a fundamental truth about their identity. What I have noticed about genderfluid characters’ “coming out to the reader” scenes are that they usually are presented as disclosure but act like a declaration. In most of the narratives, the genderfluid character has been living as their preferred identity before

the text started, which would make these scenes a disclosure. However, the explanations are revealing a truth to the reader about the character's identity. One reason for this could be because Zimman defines disclosure as something that happens after transition, but as a genderfluid person does not transition in the way that MTF and FTM transgender people do, disclosure may be impossible for them. However, that does not reflect the trend that MTF and FTM transgender fictional representations followed.

Genderfluid representations will likely not need to rely on "coming out to the reader" scenes as the identity becomes more normalised in Western culture. This is evidenced by the fact that using a disclosing line rather than a declaration or a "coming out to reader" scene in FTM and MTF stories is a recent development, as popular transgender representations have often relied upon a scene where one character would explain to another (and therefore the audience) how they were born in the wrong body and had to medically transition to feel like themselves. This is known as the wrong body trope, which I will discuss further later (McLaren et al. 183-184). Though FTM and MTF representations are still not perfect, the fact that there are texts beginning to include transgender characters without needing to explain their transness shows that things are moving in a more progressive direction (McLaren et al. 188). But while the "traditional" understanding of transgender has been recognised as a genuine identity in Western society since the early 1900s, the term genderfluid only started being used since the early to mid 2010s (Stryker 11; Epstein 143; Richards et al. 98; Szulc). This shows that the reason these "coming out to the reader" scenes exist is because the genderfluid identity is a phenomenon regarded by many people as something strange or Other; these scenes, therefore, are an effort to familiarise the reader. As such we may see disclosure lines rather than declaration scenes for genderfluid characters in the future, when readers can be assumed to know more about genderfluidity. For now, however, these scenes may be impossible to avoid, and therefore even authors without "authority" must write them in order to accurately portray a genderfluid character.

I did notice, however, that not all texts with genderfluid characters include a “coming out to the reader” scene; however, texts that didn’t often purposely presented their genderfluid characters as an Other (Richards et al. 96). An example of this can be found in one of the first genderfluid characters in the fantasy genre: the Fool from Robin Hobb’s *Realm of the Elderlings* series. In *Assassin’s Apprentice*, when the Fool is first introduced, Hobb’s uses their gender identity as a way of emphasising their strangeness. She begins with their physical characteristics: skin so white it is practically translucent, pale eyes that later evolve into a yellow which invokes a cat, and a complete lack of scent which disturbs animals around them (Hobb, *Assassin’s Apprentice* 45,199, 203; Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest* 430). Several characters are disturbed by their appearance, to the point where they will not touch them (Hobb, *Royal Assassin* 532). This reaction is caused by feelings of abjection, which is caused by “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Roudiez 4). Even beyond their appearance, this is everything the Fool is: a creature who never speaks clearly, whose job is to mock everyone regardless of their class, whose very name is kept secret. The Fool’s gender identity being fluid enhances this effect as genderfluidity breaks down the traditional binary, ignoring the agreed “rules” of gender by existing in the spaces in-between (Szulc). What’s interesting is *how* Hobb introduces this concept: through a chapter introduction. These introductions are written as though they were taken from a history book, written in an omniscient tone concerning itself with the facts only. The passage raises questions about the Fool’s origins, speculating that they are not completely human moments before stating: “The gender of the Fool has been disputed” (Hobb, *Assassin’s Apprentice* 140). This ties the Fool’s gender identity with the fact that they are non-human, which is enhanced by the fact that the Fool’s gender is only explored as a curiosity in *The Farseer Trilogy*, as they use he/him pronouns exclusively during these books; proving that their gender identity was only added to further mark them as an Other.

However, Melville notes that as society in the twenty-first century made strides towards acceptance, the series itself becomes more explicitly queer by including queer storylines central to

the plot (291) and characters such as Ash/Spark. As such, over the course of the series the Fool takes on multiple identities: in *The Liveship Traders* they become Amber using she/her pronouns; in *The Tawny Man* it's back to he/him under the name Lord Golden; finally, in *The Fitz and the Fool Trilogy* they mostly go by Lord Chance using he/him. Despite using different names, each identity is an equal part of the Fool rather than disguises for them to hide behind. This can be seen in the way that the Fool refuses to reject Amber as a part of themselves, even though it sowed discord between themselves and Fitz (Hobb, *Fool's Fate* 51). Though they limit their gender presentation within the limits of the traditional binary — wearing the expected clothing of whatever gender they are presenting as, changing the pitch of their voice, etc. — the Fool also expresses confusion over why someone's perceived gender is important, saying: "That is one thing in all my years among your folk I have never become accustomed to. The great importance that you attach to what gender one is... Mere plumbing, when all is said and done. Why is it important?" (Hobb, *Assassin's Quest* 634). This is significant because it shows that the Fool's strict presentation of woman *or* man isn't because they themselves always feel that way, but because they "must maintain the guise of whichever gender [they] choose in order to be accepted in the human world" (Roberts and MacCallum-Stewart 29). In this way, Hobb offers a good portrayal of a genderfluid character in a transphobic society.

However, as the Fool's genderfluidity becomes more visible, so too does its connection with the fact that they are non-human. In *Fool's Fate*, Fitz uses his magic to swap bodies with the Fool in order to save their life. During this exchange, Fitz is able to come to terms with their gender identity because "He was human only in the same way that I was a wolf" (Hob, *Fool's Fate* 634). This problematically suggests that genderfluid people are not human. I do want to acknowledge that this line isn't as bad as it first appears; in *Royal Assassin* Fitz establishes a magical connection to a wolf known as Nighteyes. He and Nighteyes observe multiple times that neither of them are fully human or wolf anymore but a mixture of both (Hobb, *Assassin's Quest* 342, 400, 542-543; *Fool's Errand* 118). However, while Fitz may have traces of the wolf in his spirit, he is mostly human. By

comparing the Fool's humanity to the wolfish part of himself, he is saying that the Fool is mostly non-human. Lenise Prater claims that Fitz and Nighteyes' bond also lessens the problematic elements because through them Hobb makes an effort to deconstruct the term "human", showing that humanity is not above or better than any other species (Roberts and MacCallum-Stewart 30). Despite this, though Hobb may not mark being non-human as lesser, it still marks the genderfluid identity as non-human. Though the Fool was revolutionary for the time that *Assassin's Apprentice* was first published and should be praised for that, by making their gender identity a part of what makes them non-human, Hobb accidentally contributes to the Othering of genderfluid people. This is a problem as it gives rise to negative attitudes and behaviours toward the group regarded as the Other (Hall 236). As such the Fool shouldn't be considered the standard of accurate representation today.

A more recent example of a text that didn't include a "coming out to the reader scene" and thereby Othered their genderfluid character can be found in Disney's TV series *Loki*, which aired in 2021. In the comics Loki has been genderfluid for years, which was why many fans were excited when it seemed that Disney planned to make him genderfluid in the series (Houghton; Salem; Bone). Michaela Meyer points out that the Loki of the comics was represented as morally ambiguous in addition to being genderfluid, which aligned his representation with "cultural conceptions of queer deviance" (238). Given that the television show's Loki has the same characteristics and villainous history, it's problematic that this is the *only* genderfluid representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This would perhaps be less noticeable if there were different kinds of queer representation, however, queer identities are largely invisible in this movie franchise (Meyer 237-240). Refusing to represent these identities in the media has been the most obvious method of Othering the LGBT+ community in the past, so this isn't a big surprise (Byerly 227). Therefore, the fact that *Loki* promised queer representation was a good first step towards changing this problematic practice. The show seems to confirm his gender identity in the end credits when a picture of his TVA file lists "fluid" under the header "sex"; then it follows through on this promise

with the introduction of the female Loki-variant, Sylvie (“Glorious Purpose” 00:47:31; “The Variant” 00:46:18). Despite this solid set up, the show fails with this representation on two fronts. First, while the concept of variants should have been able to show many aspects of who Loki is, they are all treated as different characters. Despite the show continuing to remind the audience that they are all “Lokis”, the fact that Sylvie becomes Loki’s romantic interest shows that, regardless of their intentions, the series treats them as separate identities rather than two facets of a single character. Though the show tries to present this as proof of his narcissism, fans found the relationship incestuous and felt it ruined the variants concept all together (Schifino). More disappointing than this, however, is that Sylvie is further Othered from the rest of the Loki-variants. This begins with her rejection of being a Loki through her refusal to use the name, which caused fans to speculate on whether or not Sylvie was a Loki-variant at all (Dandeneau). The Othering continues when it’s revealed that she is the *only* female Loki-variant:

Loki: Have any of you met a woman variant of us?

Classic Loki: Sounds terrifying.

Loki: Oh, she is. But that’s kind of what’s great about her. She’s different. (“Journey into Mystery” 00:16:07-00:16:16).

The masculine/feminine, man/woman binary defines itself by the other, but in all binaries there is a power imbalance; the feminine is that which is not masculine (Hall 235). Some scholars have argued this is because man is conflated with the universal person, which makes the woman an Other (Butler, “Subject of Sex/Gender/Desire” 13). In this case, all the male Loki-variants are the universal, and Sylvie is the feminine Other. Adding to this is the Loki-variants’ reactions to the idea of one of them deviating from their gendered norm. Though the line is intended to be comedic, it’s a comedy that relies upon the idea that Sylvie is unnatural. Cheap comedy feeds off prejudice, fear and blinkered vision (Scott 109). This kind of bigoted comedy only works for the “in crowd” and is uncomfortable for those being laughed at. In other words, it relies upon there being an Other, which in this case is Sylvie.

Disney's second failure with genderfluid representation is that none of the Loki-variants are actually genderfluid. Carolyn Byerly states that gay and lesbian characters in the media are often "normalised" by using heterosexual standards for masculine and feminine (228). This trend is also true for trans people, with representations of them remaining "deeply and conflictingly gendered in a binary" (Koch-Rein et al. 4). Looking at the Loki-variants, all of them are strictly man *or* woman — even the alligator is referred to exclusively with he/him pronouns. The very idea of identifying as a woman is, as Classic Loki expresses, "terrifying" to them. As the genderfluid identity is defined as a single person without a fixed gender, but one that flows and changes (Richards et al. 96), the fact that each Loki-variant is fixed in their own gender, and that the Loki-variants can be seen as separate people rather than facets of the same individual, proves that none of them can be identified as genderfluid. Therefore, not only does *Loki* Other Sylvie — the character that the show puts forward as their proof of Loki's genderfluidity — but it fails to provide any genderfluid representation at all.

Both examples show the importance of including the "coming out to the reader" scene, for without it they fail to provide good representation. Thus, authors without the "authority" of being genderfluid must write these coming out scenes in order to include any genderfluid representation in their work.

Accuracy vs Authenticity in Genderfluid Representations

With such poor representation being published as recently as 2021, it is no surprise that the call for accurate representation is still strong within the queer community, especially due to the impact fiction can have. Elsworth Rockefeller notes that fiction is a learning vehicle; contact with transgender-inclusive fiction not only validates those questioning their gender identity, but it also encourages those outside the queer community to be open-minded and can act as a gateway to researching information on their own (288). That said, inaccurate representations of genderfluid characters can be harmful. Negative stereotypes, such as the victim trope — a commonly found

trope which depicts queer youths as victims of violence and sexual abuse — has been found to undermine queer youth agency by fostering the belief that being queer makes you vulnerable and in need of saving (Marshall 65, 67-68). Alongside negative stereotypes is the limited view the media presents of the transgender identity. The continued use of the “wrong body” trope, plus the strict adherence to the masculine/feminine binary — when the character after medically transitioning embraces all the traditional roles and stereotypes of their gender — suggests that there is only one way to be transgender. This is problematic because these representations don’t only educate those outside the community about being transgender, but also but also creates models for transgender people to emulate (McLaren et al. 183-184; Siebler 324). That there are many ways to be transgender isn’t acknowledged by fiction, which may be why shows like *Loki* now struggle with accurate genderfluid representation. Despite this, research has shown that transgender representation does have a positive impact against transphobia. A study conducted by Ligia Orellana, Peter Totterdell and Aarti Iyer found that groups of cisgendered individuals showed fewer transphobic attitudes after being exposed to trans inclusive fictions (5-9). They specified that the text has to be immersive, or the effect would be lessened (Orellana et al. 6, 9). This suggests that the inclusion of transgender characters in stories beyond ones about their queerness is crucial in gaining acceptance outside of the queer community, as they are storylines that are more likely to attract the attention of those who harbor transphobic ideas. While it is true that fictional representations alone cannot solve all transgender issues and commitment to political activism is needed, that these characters have such a positive impact gives these fictions a responsibility to produce accurate representations (Koch-Rein et al. 3-5; R. Carroll 31). Thus, I have a responsibility to produce an accurate representation of a genderfluid person in my character Ing.

What does an accurate portrayal look like? One character that has been consistently praised for her good representation is Alex Fierro from Rick Riordan’s trilogy *Magnus Chase and the God of Asgard* (Witkowski 20). As Alex states soon after her introduction to use she/her pronouns “unless and until I tell you otherwise” and also expresses a dislike for using the gender-neutral

“they” for herself, I will use she/her pronouns during my discussion of her character (Riordan, *Hammer of Thor* ch. 7, 34). When Alex explains her gender identity to Magnus, and in doing so the reader, she makes the point that they must not take her explanation as one that is true for all: “don’t ask me to represent every gender-fluid person for you, okay? I’m not an ambassador. I’m not a teacher or a poster child. I’m just... *me*. Trying to be me as best I can” (Riordan, *Hammer of Thor* ch. 34). This signals to readers unfamiliar with genderfluidity that it is a subjective identity. This, of course, is true of all genders, even those inside the traditional male/female binary (Stryker 10-11). When Alex refuses to offer a singular definition for all genderfluid people, she is signalling this truth to the readers and in doing so, though she claims not to be a teacher, she educates them. It’s also important that she stresses the individuality of transgender people because, as Kay Siebler explains, positive attitudes towards marginalised groups only does any good when people are seen as individuals inside said group (328). This truth brings attention to another important point for the discussion of accurate representation: if there is no one true way of being genderfluid, then there is no one true way of representing them in fiction. This loops back to de Groot and Saxton’s arguments about the importance of being authentic rather than accurate. It’s impossible for an author to be accurate to all who identify as genderfluid if there is no one way of being genderfluid. And even more importantly for my novella, the experience of being genderfluid in today’s society is going to be very different to a warrior’s in 325BCE. However, given that representations of the past begin with our present understanding of the world and morality (Brayfield and Sprott 15; Southgate 128), analysing authentic representation of modern genderfluid characters is crucial to understanding how to represent them in history.

This authentic representation begins by avoiding stereotypical performances of gender. Though Alex is distinctly a man or a woman and never a mix of the two, her clothing rarely reflects this, instead favouring outfits that are gender non-specific (Riordan, *Hammer of Thor* ch. 7, 30, 34; *Ship of the Dead* 6, 134, 178, 249, 338). While this may not be unusual for cisgendered individuals, in the case of those who are gender-nonconforming, people expect stereotypical forms of gender

expression in an effort for those individuals to be “read” by society as the correct gender (Worthen 346; Siebler 322, 326) Judith Butler argues that all gender is a performance, whether consciously performed or not (*Undoing Gender* 1-7). However, she has been criticised for this by Toby Finlay because this performance relies upon recognition, which gives power to others in denying transgender people their identity: “This argument... suggest[s] that when ‘misgendered’... they become members of this non-affirming categorization” (62-63; 64). Susan Stryker proposes that this argument misunderstands Butler. She claims that the performance that Butler talks about isn’t tied to the physical presentation, but instead to speech. Performative speech does not describe or report, meaning that it cannot be true or false; rather, the speech itself is part of the act of doing. Stryker gives the examples of vowing, marrying, and being bar mitzvahed as acts of performative speech (Stryker 10-11). As such, “A woman, performatively speaking, is one who says she is” (Stryker 10). Perhaps this is why Riordan avoids physical presentational ways of acknowledging Alex’s gender. Instead, she encourages verbal confirmations of gender, either by telling people herself or encouraging them to ask for her pronouns, which is the preferred method in the queer community (Richards et al. 96). Riordan goes the extra step by never confirming her biological sex (Witkowski 18-19). This ensures that her fluid gender is all the reader can identify her with. This is enhanced by Magnus’ continuing to notice his perception of her change dramatically when he learns her correct pronouns for the day:

Suddenly my whole perspective had flipped inside out, like when you look at an inkblot picture and see just the black part. Then your brain inverts the image and you realize the white part makes an entirely different picture, even though nothing has changed. That was Alex Fierro... A second ago, he had been very obviously a boy to me. Now she was very obviously a girl. (Riordan, *Hammer of Thor* ch. 6)

This creates an androgynous image of her in the reader’s mind, for it has to be a face that can belong obviously to both a girl and a boy. Lee Witkowski notes that by avoiding assigning Alex a biological gender, Riordan frees her from the “gendered constraints within the story, acting

alternately masculine and feminine regardless of her/his gender at any given moment” (19). This allows for a consistent characterisation throughout the trilogy, displaying that her gender isn’t a masculine part spilt and completely removed from the feminine, but instead is one identity that is forever shifting.

Riordan also fostered authenticity in the way the world reacts to Alex’s gender identity, while making the point not to focus on in order to avoid the stereotype that genderfluid life is only filled with rejection, stress and death. It is a sad reality that many transgender people don’t receive love and acceptance from their families. Studies have shown that a high number of homeless teens are from the LGBT+ community and that non-binary/genderqueer people have been found to face the most stigmatisation (Seaton; Worthen 343). Riordan reflects this through Alex’s past: both with her unaccepting parents and the fact this caused her to run away and become homeless for two years prior to the novel’s beginning (*Ship of the Dead* 143-145,162; *Hammer of Thor* ch. 37). Alex’s past isn’t explored in-depth; however, the dreary reality is acknowledged through Magnus’ reaction upon learning that Alex is genderfluid:

The gender thing wasn’t what surprised me. A huge percentage of homeless teens I’d met had been assigned one gender at birth but identified as another, or they felt like the whole boy/girl binary didn’t apply to them. They ended up on the streets because — shocker — their families didn’t accept them. Nothing says ‘tough love’ like kicking your non-heteronormative kid to the curb so they can experience abuse, drugs, high suicide rates, and constant physical danger. (Riordan, *Hammer of Thor* ch. 7)

The bullying she endured before becoming homeless is also touched upon when Magnus is given a glimpse inside her mind (Riordan, *Hammer of Thor* ch. 42; Riordan, *Ship of the Dead* 143-145). Yet despite the rejection and pain she suffered in the past, most of the characters act with understanding whenever Alex changes pronouns. (Witkowski 19). Too often transgender fictions feature stories that focus on rejection, stress, and death (Epstein 144, 146; Siebler 321). This signals to readers that *all* transgender lives are filled with this pain and nothing else. By leaving the rejection Alex

experiences in the past, Riordan shifts her narrative into a more positive light. He adds to this positive representation by creating a romantic storyline between Alex and the trilogy's protagonist, which is significant because many transgender narratives lack healthy romances (McLaren et al. 173, 176, 179, 185). This challenges the trans/romance dilemma outlined by Traci Abbott. She explains this dilemma is born out of filmmakers' anxiety over a conflation of the transgender identity with sexual deviance, as well as the presumptions that “passing” is related to sexual transgression (32). Passing is defined as being accepted as the gender they are presenting as because strangers cannot tell they are transgender at a passing glance (Girshick and Green 205). The conflation between the transgender identity and sexual deviance comes from the harmful stereotype that men cross-dress to attract male sexual partners. Passing, in this negative stereotype, feeds into a culture anxiety about tricking one’s sexual partner into homosexual acts (Abbott 33-34). To avoid this connection to sexual deviance, filmmakers often expose a transgender character's naked body to reaffirm their birth gender while also making romances — when they exist — chaste (Abbott 34-39). Alex’s romantic storyline is not the first genderfluid romance; however, they are still rare enough for it to be significant. It also reaffirms Riordan’s position that rejection, stress, and death is not the only aspects of genderfluid life.

Given how much there is to navigate when creating an authentic representation of a genderfluid character, it's not a surprise that it causes authors anxiety. This pressure is so great that it is even felt by marginalised authors. Ashia Monet, author of *The Black Veins*, stated that “to be a marginalized creator is to constantly worry over what you are portraying to people outside of your group *about* your group, instead of just telling a story”. She further expresses that the pressure comes not just from educating others outside your minority group, but also from disappointing those within. A story that is accurate to the author could still be deemed unrelatable to the community, and as such can be labelled as bad representation (Marshall 75; Monet). This further shows why the idea that only those with authority should write queer stories fails, as it still does not grant authors the trust from readers that it seems to imply. The only way to combat the pressure felt

by authors is for there to be more representations of minorities that show diverse but authentic ways of existing as that minority (McLaren et al. 189; Monet). This should include characters that are from more than one minority group. B. J. Epstein states that most queer characters are thin, white, able-bodies, middle-class Christians (160). Greater diversity through the intersection of multiple minority groups would not only make more realistic characters, but also more interesting ones.

Conclusion

Despite common anxieties about accuracy for both historical fact and queer representation in fiction, in both spaces authenticity serves the author better. In historical fiction, authenticity allows the author to focus on the “real” to familiarise the foreign truth of history for the contemporary reader, to explore modern themes with the distance of a historical backdrop, and to use fiction as a thought-experiment for what might-have been in history. All of this is important for queer history as evidence of queer existence has often been censored or suppressed, meaning that all of queer history is littered with gaps with little evidence for a historian to decisively fill them. As for queer representation in fiction, an authentic representation acknowledges that there is no one way to be a particular identity — which is especially important for lesser explored identities such as the genderfluid identity — allowing for greater diversity between representations. Furthermore, while I acknowledge that the issue of authority for writing and publishing queer stories is complicated, I argue that the expectation that non-queer authors should include queer characters but not write their stories is dangerous when policed, and an unrealistic expectation when characters of lesser explored identities, such as genderfluid characters, have to come out to the reader in order to familiarise the identity and stop the character from being labelled as an Other. The next chapter explores how to create authentic representations of the past, and how to mix that with an authentic representation of a genderfluid person when the terms we use for queer identities didn’t exist in the past and the false notion that queer identities are a modern phenomenon prevails. I will discuss both the scholarly research as well as my practice-based research from writing *Ing’s Saga*.

Approaching Writing

While the last chapter found that authenticity was more important than accuracy in historical fiction, the question remains; how can writers create this effect? Melissa Addey outlines three kinds of historical fiction authors: the ventriloquist, the mosaic-maker, and the magician. Each category of author approaches writing differently: the ventriloquist relies heavily on quoting historical sources (Addey 3); the mosaic-maker patches together fragmented history to put together a cohesive story (5); and the magician introduces fantasy elements into a historical setting (8-9). In this chapter I discuss each approach and explain why I did or didn't use it when writing *Ing's Saga*. Throughout these discussions I also examine the creative techniques for fostering historical authenticity that is most relevant for each author category. In the ventriloquist section I focus on intertextuality through quoting historical sources, and how it can create a dialogue between the text and history. In the mosaic-maker section I examine bygonese (a highly stylised language used to recreate speech patterns of the past) and the use of nested retellings of myths/folklore. I employ both of these techniques within *Ing's Saga*, and I've found that bygonese in particular is essential not only for my own work, but for all historical fiction novels; regardless of what other creative techniques a text uses to create authenticity, ones that don't use bygonese tend to be deemed inauthentic by readers (de Groot, "Imagined Histories" 221). I also use this section to discuss how to maintain historical authenticity when including genderfluid characters despite the false belief that queerness is a modern phenomenon. I show how to combat this false belief through a close reading of the "coming out to the reader" scene in Lucy Holland's *Sistersong* and from my own attempt in *Ing's Saga*. In the final section, the magician's, I discuss advantages of adding fantasy to historical fiction, including how it helps to turn the problematic traditional belief that queerness was divine (and therefore an Other) into authentic queer representation in historical fiction. Though I didn't draw from all three of Addey's categories when writing *Ing's Saga*, it was important I study them because it offers a useful framework for considering authenticity when writing historical fiction.

The Ventriloquist

Of the three approaches Addey outlines, the ventriloquist is the most historically faithful because of their reliance on “large quantities of material taken verbatim from the historical source” (3). In addition to fostering authenticity in novels, this approach often lessens anxieties about accuracy because it focuses heavily on historical fact and minimises fictional additions. The ventriloquist’s major problem comes when they overquote, as it can lead to a loss of creative voice, which can make novels less exciting (Addey 3-4). There are other issues with this approach as well, such as the fact that the historical record is littered with gaps that only get wider the further back in time you go or when you venture to places that rely heavily on oral traditions (Addey 3). This is the case with Ing, where the closest I can get to a quotable historical source is *The Old English Poem* likely written in the late tenth century (Symons 157), which is roughly 1225 years after my novella is set.

When it comes to retelling myths, acting as a ventriloquist denies the long tradition of adaptation that these stories have. While this tradition exists partially because of the limits of relying on memory, it is also because the myths that survived are ones that change with culture and time (Foley 10, 33; Audley-Miller and Dignas IX; Green 12-13). This evolution of character archetypes and plots occurs because all myths and their retellings are shaped by metanarratives, which John Stephens and Robyn McCallum define as a narrative outline that explains knowledge and cultural experience (6). When there are fundamental shifts in cultures, metanarratives have to change or else they risk being forgotten due to problematic elements. For example, Greek and Roman mythology was grounded in misogynist, elitist, and imperialistic metanarratives until the modern era, where they had to evolve to match Western culture or stop being retold (Stephens and McCallum 9). Beyond this tradition, however, all adaptations involve reinterpretation (Sanders 20). Linda Hutcheon argues that this reinterpretation is necessary because the joy of experiencing an adaptation lies in the desire for the familiar with a bit of change (*Theory of Adaptation* 5). While the familiar is comforting — Hutcheon uses the example of a child asking for the same bedtime story

over and over — a successful adaptation refreshes the original text and makes it new (*Theory of Adaptation* 114-115). Without the changes made to the text, you may as well read the original.

This is not to say that the ventriloquist's approach is terrible for adapting mythological history as it can create a direct connection between the adapted text and the original myth. While adaptations thrive on change, they also rely on the versions of the story that came before. All forms of adaptation have a unique relationship with intertextuality; not only does the adaptation engage with the original text, but the audience's understanding of the original text is changed by its adaptation (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* 121). Once audiences experience both original and adaptation, they cannot think of one without thinking of the other — the memories of both forever intertwined. For popular literature with many adaptations, things introduced in a later adaptation can become viewed as canon (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* 29). For example, the phrase "elementary, my dear Watson" was never uttered in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's work, and the iconic image of him in a deerstalker was owed more to Sidney Paget's illustrations than the text itself (Joyce 80). This phenomenon happens because in some cases an audience will experience the adaptation before encountering the original. Given that folklore and mythology is often adapted into children's stories, it's very common for people to know adaptations of these tales without knowing where it comes from (Stephens and McCallum 67). It should be said that readers don't need to know the original text to get pleasure from adaptations, but knowing it improves and enriches the experience (Sanders 28). But even if someone didn't encounter myths and folklore in childhood, these stories are often adapted into pop culture — using its themes to advance completely unrelated stories. For example, Tolkien incorporates elements of Norse mythology into *The Lord of the Rings* (Attebery 2). More obviously, the television series *Stargate SG1* draws on multiple mythologies, most notably Ancient Egyptian, to create diverse alien cultures. When the ventriloquist author quotes a historical source, they deliberately tap into adaptation's relationship with intertextuality in a way that is obvious to the reader. The fact that it's obvious is important because it focuses the reader's attention on the text's dialogue with the original myth; de Groot argues all historical novels

have some form of dialogue with history (*The Historical Novel* 48). This dialogue occurs because our present shapes how the past is remembered (Josselson 647) — therefore every fact a text focuses on or contradicts, and what point of view the text is written from, shapes the readers perception of the past. By quoting the historical source, the ventriloquist redirects the reader’s attention away from a myth’s many references in pop culture, instead focusing on the dialogue between their text and the original myth.

When a ventriloquist’s quotes have a purpose beyond satisfying an author’s anxieties about accuracy, the dialogue created between adaptation and myth can be a nuanced tool for discussing historical fact. Because the source material I am working from for *Ing’s Saga* is four lines long, this approach isn’t an option for me. However, a good example is found in *The Goddess of Nothing at All* by Cat Rector, which retells Norse Myths from the perspective of Loki’s wife, Sigyn. While Rector does use direct quotes to ground the novel in the Viking period, she also uses them to establish a distrustful dialogue with history. One of the ways she engages with the original Norse myths is by beginning each chapter with a quote; of the thirty-eight chapters and epilogue, thirteen of the epigraphs are direct translations from *Hávamál*, *Þrymsviða*, *Gylfaginning*, and *Völspá*. The rest of the chapters begin with invented quotes that claim they are from official records including but not limited to “Asgard Historical Records”, “Historical Archives” or fictional history books like “God of Lies Revealed”. These fictional quotes are written in the same style and tone as the translations from Eddaic poetry. More importantly, they reflect the story as it is told in the original myths. The first chapter begins with an invented quote from “Asgard Historical Records, Volume 1” which reads:

Odin has many names; Hangi, Grimmir, and Allfather among them. He created the realms and those that dwell in them. He has many children, who are each powerful gods in their own right, and all of them are sons. (Rector 1)

By beginning with Odin, one of the most recognizable gods from Norse mythology, the reader is placed exactly in Asgard at the time of Viking myth, before they even meet the main character. This quote also establishes the novel's relationship with history; the words could almost have been lifted directly from the Prose Edda, yet on the very same page we learn that in this retelling, Sigyn is Odin's daughter. This contradiction immediately makes the reader distrustful of the official record, setting the tone of the novel's relationship with history. Wolfram Bublitz argues that the essential motive for using quotes isn't to merely recycle old words but to "allow the quoter to express his or her stance towards the quoted text" (9). By immediately contradicting the historical record, Rector starts the novel with questions: why was Sigyn left out of the historical record, and can we trust the stories we've already heard? As the novel continues it becomes clear that the official record is biased towards Odin (and his friend's) point of view. Marginalised voices — represented by the outcasts Loki, Sigyn, and their family — never appear in the official record. However, the archivists include many assumptions on Loki's motives or edited his actions, which all paint him in an unflattering light (Rector 61, 68, 79, 93, 112, 119, 134, 146, 167, 190, 216, 228, 257). This reveals the bias in all histories — our records reflect the beliefs and motives of the person recording it. Rector takes this a step further in chapter sixty-eight when Odin orders all traces of his relation to Sigyn be erased (369), showing that powerful voices can deliberately manipulate the historical record to reflect their lies. With the mixture of real and invented quotes, Rector shows one-way ventriloquists can be nuanced by revealing biases in history, causing readers to think more deeply about historical facts and whether they tell the entire truth.

Another way that the ventriloquist's approach can be nuanced is by using direct quotes to extend and enhance the original text. A good example of these is found in the *Beowulf* retelling *Grendel's Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife* by Susan Signe Morrison. The novel is split into five parts; at the beginning of each she includes translated lines from Anglo-Saxon riddles, a poem, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Each quote speaks to the themes of the section and foreshadows what's to come. For example, the epigraph of "The Hall-Queen" (the second section) quotes a riddle found

in the Old English version of *Apollonius of Tyre*. Though there are no major differences between the Old English version and the earlier texts from which it was translated (Goolden XX), Morrison makes a point to say the quote is from the Old English. She does this to further connect the novel to its Old English origin. Since the novel is set in Denmark, as *Beowulf* is, Morrison only uses Anglo-Saxon texts when quoting so that the novel feels like a part of Anglo-Saxon literary history. “The Hall-Queen”’s epigraph reads: “I suffer crime, I enjoy mother’s flesh...I seek my father, my mother’s husband, my wife’s daughter, and do not find them” (Morrison). In *Apollonius of Tyre*, this riddle is presented to the suitors of King’s Antiochus of Antiochia’s unnamed daughter. The answer to this riddle is the incestuous relationship King Antiochus has begun with his daughter in secret (Rupp 228). By referencing this, *Grendel’s Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife* hints to the unknown incestuous relationship between Brimhild (the protagonist and Grendel’s mother), and her husband (Hrothgar) that is discovered in the last chapter of this section. By using these quotes in tandem with the story, rather than opposing it as *The Goddess of Nothing at All* does, Morrison sets her novel as a part of Anglo-Saxon literary history and an extension of the original poem.

Morrison also uses quotes to show how her characters interact with Anglo-Saxon literary history and to connect that history with the reader’s present. In addition to the epigraphs in *Grendel’s Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife*, most of the chapter bodies include quotes from Anglo-Saxon riddles, poetry, or medical charms. Often, this historical material is delivered through dialogue. In most places this feels natural despite the quote being indented, italicised, and in verse; this structure makes it feel as though the character is reciting, drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that these are quotes and not the author’s own words. Bublitz argues that quotes in any body of text changes the reader’s focus, making them actively aware they are reading (8). While this awareness can disrupt the immersive experience found in the rest of the novel, it works to makes the reader aware that the characters are interacting with the literature of the time, which adds to the historical feel. However, there is one reoccurring line quoted at the end of every section, except the last, which is not formatted like the others. The refrain “This once happened; so, too, this will pass”

(Morrison ch. 7, 14, 23, 26) comes from the Old English *Deor*. The poem's subject matter changes with every stanza, briefly retelling parts of famous tales of past sufferings and the refrain acts both as a way of unifying the poem, and as a comforting promise that the poet's newest hardship — introduced in the seventh stanza — will also pass. Kemp Malone argues that it can't be regarded as a true refrain since it's absent from the sixth stanza (17). Other translators have regarded the sixth and seventh stanzas as one, thus maintaining the refrain throughout the poem (Crossley-Holland 7-8; Burch). Morrison mixes these approaches — by not ending the novel with the line, she keeps to Malone's idea that it isn't a true refrain, but instead she titles the only chapter in the last section of the novel "This Once Happened". This connects the idea of the line to the last chapter without committing to the refrain. Morrison also slightly changes the meaning of the line by using it at the end of happier sections. Rather than a comfort, it becomes a fact: life changes. Good times will pass just the same as bad; change, it promises, is the only constant of life.

This idea connects the novel to the reader's present through Anglo-Saxon literary history. History is happening now in the small triumphs and tragedies that occur in the average person's life, despite the fact that the historical record only remembers the big events that someone thought was worth retelling (Sandweiss 94). And what are historical novels if not stories about history? Margaret Atwood suggested that a reason we write and read historical novels is because "the past no longer belongs only to those who once lived it; the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today" (1516). Historical fiction is just as much about the present and the future as it is about the past — it's a shared memory of where we've come from translated into where we are now and where we want or fear to go. By scattering direct quotations consistently throughout her novel, Morrison manages to convey a message of change that is just as relevant to the historical characters as it is to the modern-day readers. That she manages to convey this message through a direct link to history expresses what dialogue she wants the novel to have with history: that it is not removed from life today. Both Rector and Morrison have shown how the ventriloquist can use quotes to radically different effect. These examples show

that creating authenticity through quoting historical material is a useful technique, so long as authors don't let the historical sources speak louder than their own creative voice.

The Mosaic-Maker

Addey's second historical author approach is called the mosaic-maker. She describes this process as "tak[ing] the fragments of an incomplete history and add[ing] their own fictional elements to complete the story" (5). This is the most common process of creating historical fiction. Given the importance that has been placed on historical fact, most authors adopt a methodology of "try not to lie, but remember altering real events is acceptable, as long as these are minor matters, such as personal history, and that the alterations do not affect historical outcomes" (Stocker 333; Rosenstone 592). Of course, as we've seen in the previous chapter, including only correct historical facts alone doesn't mean a text will feel authentic. However, having characters engage with small historical details goes a long way towards creating a believable world (Saxton, "A True Story" 136). These details could be things like festivals characters attend, work they do, or even just the clothing they wear.

Another way to foster authenticity is through a creative technique called bygonese, which is a highly stylised language that attempts to recreate speech patterns of the past (Saxton, "A True Story" 132). For any history that happened before we had the ability to record sounds, there isn't any way to accurately recreate speech patterns of the past because the way we write is different to the way we speak, especially since the writings that have been preserved tend to be official documents and letters which use overly formal language (Flannery 301; Brayfield and Sprott 135). Nevertheless, these sources have shaped how people imagine speech in the past and so tend to find modern language inauthentic (de Groot, "Imagined Histories" 221). A good example of this technique's importance is seen in Suzannah Dunn's *The Queen of Subtleties* because she chose not to use it. Dunn deliberately avoided using bygonese because Anne Boylen was a modern woman who was "forthright/direct, uncompromising and, often, frankly, rude" (Dunn). She felt that writing

in bygonese didn't properly convey Anne's personality; however, many reviews claimed that the language took them out of the story (de Groot, "Imagined Histories" 221). de Groot suggests that the inauthentic language was a large reason that the book sold fewer copies than Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boylen Girl* (de Groot, "Imagined Histories" 221). That the lack of bygonese affected *The Queen of Subtleties*' success negatively shows how important this technique is for creating an authentic historical world.

Paul Kingsnorth's novel *The Wake* heavily uses bygonese and thus is the perfect example to discuss how it is crafted. This book is written in what Kingsnorth calls a "shadow language" — a slightly modernised version of Old English which was understandable but foreign to his twenty-first century audience (Kingsnorth 353). To do this he changed the spelling of modern words — "know" to "cnaw" (Kingsnorth 2), used some Old English words — for instance, daeg meaning day (Kingsnorth 2), and mimics the way Anglo-Saxon manuscripts looked by using minimal punctuation and no capital letters (Walkowitz 101-102) This made his novel seem as though it were written in Anglo-Saxon England and discovered right next to *Beowulf* or the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. However, while the "shadow language" makes to book feel authentic, it also makes the novel difficult to read (Polack 296; Walkowitz 104). Though Kingsnorth added a glossary to lessen this difficulty, Daniel Ransom notes that some words aren't included despite being used regularly, with Kingsnorth assuming the meaning was understandable when they weren't (61). By overusing bygonese, the novel alienates readers to the point where they are put off. As discussed in the previous chapter, the job of the historical author is to translate the past's "otherness" into something understandable to the modern reader (de Groot, *Remaking History* 15, 18). Though Kingsnorth's "shadow language" does convey an authentic view of Anglo-Saxon England, it fails as a translation for many of its readers.

Using words from a dead language in dialogue creates a similar effect to Kingsnorth's "shadow language" without alienating the reader. An example of this can be found in Holland's *Sistersong*. The priest, Gildas, speaks a few lines of Latin, and some of her Saxon character speak

Old English (Holland 25, 377, 384, 397). Holland's use of dead languages work because the point of view characters don't understand these languages, so the context of the unfamiliar words is all they have to go on, just like the reader. This technique is something I use in *Ing's Saga*, but while Holland uses whole sentences to convey a lack of understanding, I limit my use of Old Norse to single words to ensure the reader can follow, while additionally supplying an appendix with the translations. Some, like *fífl* (fool) and *vámr* (loathsome person) I only use for the sake of fostering authenticity; but the uses of *nithing* (coward, wretch) and *ergi* (unmanly) are written in Old Norse untranslated because I feel they don't convey the appropriate weight in modern English. In pagan Scandinavia, to call someone unmanly was a huge attack on their honour and the offended party had to right to kill the insulter (Celik 176-180). Given that Ing's fear of being labelled *ergi* is a driving force behind their actions in *Ing's Saga*, this insult is written in the original Old Norse with a provided translation:

“...if these whispers arrive here it won't be long until some fool calls you *ergi*.”

Unmanly. Without Nerthus as a shield Ing would be defenceless against such slander.

She'd lose her retainer's support. Their faith. No warrior would risk the shame of following an unmanly man into battle... And without them, the war against her brothers would be lost.

(12)

This quote not only provides a direct translation, but also conveys what Ing risks losing if they can't defend themselves against the insult.

Generally, bygone doesn't go to these extremes. More often, authors use a form of hybridisation where the words sound like they are from a time period while also avoiding modern turns of phrase (Stocker 313-314). Modern spelling, grammar, and typesetting are also usually used for the sake of the reader's clarity (Stocker 313). In addition to using Old Norse, this was my main process crafting bygone in *Ing's Saga*. Also, though the novella was set in the pre-Roman era, I use translated Old Norse kennings and paraphrased lines from *Havamal* — such as “one man can know something but two should not, the world knows if three do” (Terry 19) which is used twice,

first by Ing and then by Hertha (14, 28) — to ground it in Viking history for two reasons. First, while *Ing's Saga* is my telling of a faded Anglo-Saxon myth, Ing's verse in *The Old English Rune Poem* references the Hearding, who are possible descendants of the Danish King Hading (North 48). This reference suggests that the myth had Norse origins. Second, the majority of the novella is a retelling of Ing's myth told by the stranger to the Hearding; this means that the language being used to tell the story should be language that the Hearding — or traditional Vikings— used.

Another way the mosaic-maker can foster authenticity in their novel is through imbedded retellings of myths and folklore. As we've seen earlier in my discussion of the ventriloquist, all forms of adaptation have a unique relationship with intertextuality because the original text *and* the adaptation influence each other (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* 121). But while the ventriloquist directs and controls this relationship by using quotes from the original source, the mosaic-maker uses nested stories. Though most historical fictions can be counted as retellings in their own right as they retell historical events or myths — and as such foster authenticity through the events of their plot — the kind I am talking about here are when characters inside the novel retell the myths and folklore of the time to other characters. These retellings tap into the reader's cultural memory, which Hutcheon explains doesn't rely on a direct memory of the original myth, but instead is a mix of all its previous adaptations (*A Theory of Adaptation* 122) and thus helps ground the novel in a historical time and place. The advantage for the reader of a book retelling rather than quoting the original material is that it doesn't break the immersive experience. Also, Julie Sanders argues that retellings engage deeper with the source material as quotes only allows for a “glancing act of allusion” (16). Furthermore, to gain the full experience with the quotes you have to be aware of the original text, an example being Morrison's use of the riddle from *Apollonius of Tyre* which I discussed above. Meanwhile, a nested retelling gives the reader unfamiliar with the original source the context needed to understand why it is being referenced. I don't think one technique is inherently better than the other as both have their advantages. For instance, quoting can ground the text in the time period faster and has the advantage of not needing to side-track the plot.

On the other hand, nested stories can engage deeper with the source material and provides an easier reading experience as it doesn't break the immersion.

Holland takes the nested stories technique a step further in *Sistersong* by using her retellings as a way of tapping into traditional forms of storytelling and thus making the novel feel as though it is a part of Celtic culture. The Celts had a strong oral tradition, refusing to preserve their knowledge in writing; because of this, all-surviving Celtic mythology is recorded by outsiders (Nagy 279; Rogers 6). Therefore, rather than reflecting the structure of original Celtic storytelling (as it has not survived), Holland replicates an Anglo-Saxon scop's technique which Paul Battles and Charles D. Wright call "The Scop's Repertoire". In this technique, the scop weaves the telling of old tales into the new one to enhance the theme (4-7). Throughout *Sistersong*, characters tell various stories based on Irish and Celtic mythology, but only three are written out for the reader. The first, "The Five Rivers of Lir", seems to be a completely fictional tale that is loosely based on Irish mythology. The second is a near unchanged retelling of the story of King Herla, an early British king whose story is told by Walter Map in the Latin text *De Nugis Curilum* (MacKillop 226). The third story, titled "The Twa Sisters", isn't framed as a retelling because it is based on the same ballad that the entire novel adapts. While each retelling has its own function within the narrative — to foreshow Sinne's fate; to form part of Myrdhin's training that proves Keyne's right to rule (Holland 304); and to complete the retelling cycle of the original ballad — they also work to replicate the purpose and form of "The Scop's Repertoire".

Holland furthers the effect of her oral storytelling structure through her use of first-person narration. Ward Parks argues that the "I heard" formula — the use of the expression "I heard" as a way of signalling a textual history (53) — suggests an assumption of oral tradition regardless of whether or not a text was composed for oral performance (51). Though Holland doesn't use this expression, she does evoke the same feeling of "saying and hearing" rather than "writing and reading" with the first line of the novel: "I will *tell* you a story" (emphasis added, 1). This line suggests the presence of a traditional oral narrator, especially given the fact that the use of the "I

heard” formula in poetic dialogue suggests a closer relation between the narrator and characters in traditional oral performances (Parks 58). Holland also reflects the multi-layered stories found in oral tradition suggested by the “I heard” formula by having three protagonists/storytellers. Despite there being multiple perspectives, Holland uses the first-person throughout the novel. John Miles Foley argues that “oral tradition does not recognise the individual text or performance as definitive” (25). By making all three siblings equal narrators, Holland is acknowledging that fact as each of them tells their own version of the story. Though this oral storytelling structure is not always overly obvious, by tapping into this tradition *Sistersong* shows how her story fits with other Celtic myths and legends from post-Roman Britain, which contributes to the novel’s authenticity. A similar effect could be created for a different time period by mimicking letters or manuscripts, thus showing how a text could belong with its historical inspiration.

Though of course not every mosaic-maker uses their structure to help the authenticity of their novel, I was intrigued by this practice. To use this technique in *Ing’s Saga*, I looked at the storytelling practices of both Anglo-Saxons and Vikings and found that both likely have oral storytelling roots (Battles and Wright 19). Given that my novella is set in pagan Denmark, I include a framing device which taps into this oral tradition. Three chapters in the novella are written from a first-person narrator — the first, the sixteenth (which separates the two parts of the novella), and the last. These chapters are set in King Hadingus’ hall as a stranger tells the “true” account of Ing’s sagas. In these chapters I use several markers of the “I heard” formula in both the stranger’s dialogue and in the child’s first-person narration. I also use these markers throughout the body of the story (8, 14, 17, 22, 30, 32, 35, 36, 38, 49, 54, 62, 64, 69, 74, 85, 93, 97). This device already sets up a multi-layer narration similar to *Sistersong*, as the child tells the reader of the stranger telling his story (which takes up majority of the novella); however, his tale is also told from three viewpoints (Ing, Hertha, and Eburwin) who all have different agendas and often misinterpret each other’s motivations. An example of this is Ing’s belief that Hertha is in deeply love with them, when in her chapters the reader learns she is only motivated to marry Ing because she believes it will save

Hartwig's life. This choice reflects Foley's idea that there is not one definitive text or performance in oral tradition.

My use of oral tradition in *Ing's Saga* also influences the novella's dialogue with history, which questions the objective truth of historical fact. Just as there is no definitive performance in oral tradition, there is no true recount of history. The historical record is not the past; it is a record that is subject to the biases of the recorders — that is, the people with power (Brayfield and Sprott 34; Rosenstone 539). As I mentioned in the introduction, Rictor Norton points out that the history of the queer community has been censored, suppressed, rewritten, and deliberately destroyed (171-172). This is true for other minority groups as well, such as the eradication of several Australian Indigenous languages, with information about “food sources, surviving in nature and Dreaming/history” being lost with them (Zuckermann et al. 56). But it's important to remember this is not the only way the past is forgotten. Gaps in history can also occur because records are lost due to natural disasters, manuscripts fading, dead languages becoming indecipherable, and oral histories being forgotten. The fact that our memory of the past is fallible was something I wanted to discuss in *Ing's Saga*, and I do this in two ways. First is the misconception of Eburwin presented in the first chapter when he is called a “faithless friend” and a “nithing” (4). Throughout the novella, Eburwin consistently prioritises Ing, such as his understanding of Ing's plan to marry Hertha (16), saving them from Hartwig (68-70), hiding Hartwig's death (72-75), and helping curse Osgar to keep Ing's secrets (78-79). By the sixteenth chapter, listeners of the stranger's story confess confusion over crimes they believed to be Eburwin's being committed by Ing: “What of the nithing's crime against Ing? I thought he betrayed his lord to keep Osgar's murder secret?” (80). By the end of the novella, it's revealed that Eburwin's poor reputation is caused by a misunderstanding and Hertha's manipulations. This shows how easily the historical record can be falsified.

The second way I use *Ing's Saga* to demonstrate the fallibility of the historical record is the multiple endings the stranger provides for his story. He is first prompted to tell the second ending

by a woman claiming to be a descendant of Hertha, yet that claim is immediately brought into doubt by another character:

“Wait—” a woman called from the back of the hall, “—that can’t be true. I’m a descendant of Hertha and Agi, married after Ing’s death.”

“So your drunken mother claimed,” my father muttered under his breath... (102)

Murray Murphy argues that historians work with theories of history, using observable evidence to prove them (23). The interaction described above seems to mirror the practice of new evidence being uncovered to disprove a historical theory. However, by having the dubiousness of the “evidence” ignored, this interaction actually reflects the argument that there is no objective representation of history, as discussed in the previous chapter. The stranger’s second ending is rejected because of prejudice: ““Besides, Freyr’s not ergi,” my father added, and I could feel contempt rolling off the insult” (103). This links back to Norton’s point about the erasure of queer history. By having the stranger tell multiple endings (including a few that the reader isn’t privy to), *Ing’s Saga* creates a dialogue with history that questions whether anyone can claim to know the “truth” of the past.

The appeal of the historical fiction genre for the mosaic-maker is to explore the gaps of history (Addey 5, 8), which is why this approach is perfect for exploring the large holes in queer history caused by censored, suppressed and destroyed evidence. One of my driving motivations for writing *Ing’s Saga* was the desire to create historical genderfluid representation. Historical representation of queer identities is important because knowledge of history can be unifying and validating (Norton 3; Southgate 126) and queer representation is important for lessening homophobic/transphobic attitudes (Orellana et al. 5-9). However, *historical* queer representation has its own challenges because of the false belief that queerness is a relatively modern phenomenon (Norton 171-172). Holland solves this in *Sistersong* by mixing historical facts into her genderfluid character’s (Myrdhin/Mori) “coming out to the reader” scene. She draws first on the Enarees: Scythian priests that didn’t conform to expected gender norms (Holland 94; Connor et al. 130).

Following this she quickly points out that the followers of Cybele and Astarte were also known for their gender transgressions (Holland 95; Roscoe 203-206, 218). Though there are several other ancient-world third-gender examples Holland could have drawn from, she limits herself to the three that Mori would have known about. This reassures the reader that having gender non-conforming characters isn't making the text modern. However, the purpose of including these examples isn't just making the scene feel authentic; personal narratives are shaped by the culture and context that they exist in (Summerskill et al. 84). The Enarees, and followers of Cybele and Astarte are a part of Mori's world and therefore her own understanding of herself.

In a similar way, Ing uses Loki as an example when coming out to Hertha (59-60). In Norse Mythology, Loki shapeshifts into a woman on multiple occasions. Allison Wolf argues that "Loki's capacity and unashamed willingness to break the boundary of binary sex seems to have the underlying purpose to comment upon fixed cultural ideals of what is male and what is female" (108). She points to the rewards Loki earns due to his readiness to switch genders — such as the birth of Sleipnir, Oðin's eight-legged steed described as the best of all horses (Young 42), and the recovery of Thór's hammer — as evidence of the myths showing Loki's flexibility with the gender binary as a good thing (Wolf 109). But while Loki may not feel shame about switching genders, that doesn't mean he doesn't receive it. In *Locasenna*, Oðin calls him craven for spending eight years beneath the earth as a woman "milking cows and bearing babies" (Terry 76). Later, Njorð adds "I find it strange to see among us a god who gave birth to babies" (Terry 78). Loki's situation of feeling no shame about his gender while living in a society that looks down on him for it mirrors Ing's position, which greatly influences their personal narrative. This is why Ing responds to Hertha questioning Loki's honour by criticising Oðin. Ing has an uneasy relationship with Oðin due to the god's feud with Nerthus (8, 17). Yet, as Loki points in *Locasenna*, Oðin's use of seiðr, a feminine magic, also plays with the gender binary (Terry 76). And unlike Loki, Oðin isn't shamed for it. Logically, this should make Oðin the ideal reference when defending themselves about being too feminine. However, because Ing doesn't see Oðin as an ally, rather than using the god as a way of

understanding themselves they point out one of his well-known flaws. We know that Ing's critique of Oðin is familiar to Norse society because it is paraphrased from this line in *Havamal*: "O[ð]in didn't honour his oath on the ring — what good is any pledge he gives" (Terry 25). Ing's preference to view themselves aligned with Loki and not Oðin in this moment demonstrates their personal narrative, while at the same time reassuring the reader that gender-nonconformity existed in Viking society. The gaps in Ing's history, however, are larger than simply hiding this figure's queerness.

Addey argues that the mosaic-maker's process for authenticity filling in large gaps of history requires the "use multiple small elements (such as words, events, situations, characters) to create a bigger picture" (8). Hannah Kent has written about her process of research for writing *The Good People*. The novel was inspired by two newspaper articles about a court case; though they didn't contain much information, she said it was enough to guide her further research: "I immersed myself in information until I felt saturated with familiarity—if not of the specific facts regarding the lives of these women, then certainly of the world in which they lived" (Kent). As I mentioned in the introduction, despite the work of several scholars — such as Richard North, Marco Battaglia, and Edred Thorsson — there is very little evidence of who Ing was. Simply adapting their existing myth is impossible. Therefore, I looked extensively into the Viking way of life. This included but wasn't limited to the social order, clothing designs and materials, hairstyles, laws, native flora and fauna, weapons, common jobs and tasks, and mythology and folklore. I also found that reading and watching historical fictions set in the Viking Age — including but not limited to the 2022 film *The Northmen*, Genevieve Gornichec's *The Witch's Heart*, Joanne M. Harris' *The Gospel of Loki*, and the TV series *Vikings* — was particularly helpful for understanding what felt authentic to modern audiences about this era.

For the plot itself, I drew heavily on the myth of Freyr's marriage because it is commonly accepted by scholars that Ing evolved into Freyr (Smith 7; North 32; Turville-Petre 258). The myth survives in two sources — *Gylfaginning* and *Skírnsmál* — both following a similar plot with minor differences. It begins with Freyr seeing a beautiful woman — Gerð, daughter of the giant Gymir —

and becoming despondent because he couldn't have her. Njorð or Skaði (depending on which version you're reading) sends Freyr's servant, Skírnir, to find out what's wrong. Freyr tells him of Gerð. In *Gylfaginning* Freyr asks Skírnir to go woo her for him; in *Skírnsmál* it is Skírnir who suggests it. However, in each Skírnir asks for both a horse and Freyr's own sword that "will fight by itself / against any giant" and Freyr doesn't hesitate to give it (Terry 51). When Skírnir meets with Gerð, he first offers her eleven golden apples. She refuses. He then offers her Draupnir, which creates eight golden rings every nine nights. She refuses again. Then Skírnir turns to threats, first threatening her life, then her father's. Finally, he threatens to curse her, and this is what changes her mind. She agrees to meet Freyr in nine nights time. While many elements of these myths were dropped as my plot evolved, it survived in Ing travelling to woo an enemies' daughter, threats swaying her over affection, and Ing's use of the name Skírnir. M. Olsen argues (and most scholars accept) that Skírnir is a form of Freyr rather than a different being (Turville-Petre 253). This is supported by the fact that Freyr is considered "skírr" or "brilliant" (Turville-Petre 252).

Scholars have theorised that Freyr's marriage myth reflects a fertility ritual (Turville-Petre 174; Talbot 35). Loki points out in *Locasenna* that the sword Freyr gives to Skírnir is never returned. In *Gylfaginning*, after Skírnir's journey has been recounted Gangleri wonders at Freyr giving up such an advantage. Óðin remarks that though Freyr is a talented warrior, he'd regret the sword's loss when the sons of Muspell ride out to fight (Young 62-63). Both this and Loki's mocking is referring to Ragnarök. During the final battle, Freyr faces Surt and falls. In *Gylfaginning*, the text makes the point to say "the loss of the good sword that he gave to Skírnir will bring about his death" (Young 88). If Freyr's marriage does reflect a fertility ritual, this supports the idea that death is intimately connected with life. It is Freyr's choice to enter the cycle of life and death when he chose to peruse Gerð, for if he hadn't given the sword away then he wouldn't have died during Ragnarök. This is reflected in *Ing's Saga* when Ing chooses to hide Hartwig's death. Ing had already proven the rumour suggesting they weren't Nerthus' chosen false when Erminus supported their marriage to Hertha. Furthermore, it was better for their reputation at this point to let

everyone know Hartwig's insult hadn't gone unanswered (77), yet Ing hides the death so that Hertha would continue loving them. This choice ultimately leads to the tragedy that occurs in the final chapter (Eburwin's injury and Hertha or Ing's death, depending on the ending). However, it is not only death that is connected to Indo-European fertility rituals, but also rebirth (West 180; Schütte 30-31). This is why in the second ending the stranger offers, Ing is reborn into their child: a character created by mixing Freyr and Freyja into a single being (103). The first ending the stranger offers, where Ing and Eburwin retreat from the world, is a symbolic death that spreads to the world in the form of a famine. The rebirth occurs when their children: the twins Freyr and Freyja, return to Denmark and "Fertility defeated famine, and so all praised them as Nerthus' children" (101). This line also acknowledges that in Old Norse tradition, the gods Freyr and Freyja are the children of Njord with his unnamed Vanir wife, theorised to be Nerthus (North 20; Hopkins 40).

This was just one avenue of research I used to create my plot and characters. Another is the Ingaevones, found in a Germanic myth told in traditional song and generally taken as the earliest reference of Ing (Dickins 20). This myth begins with an earth-born god named Tuisto. He has a son, Mannus, who was the origin of the Germanic race. His three sons founded, and thus named, three groups of tribes: "the Ingaevones, nearest the sea; the Herminones, in the interior; and the Istaevones, who comprise all the rest" (Handford 102). The names of Ing's brothers — Erminus and Istio — are translations of the tribe names (Goffart 111, 118, 119, 120), and their father and grandfather's names and origins are lifted directly from this myth. Thus, I use the mosaic-maker's process in *Ing's Saga* to patch together many directions of historical research (Freyr myths, Mannus myth, Nerthus' connection, genderfluid evidence) to create a cohesive story.

The Magician

The magician is the third and last of Addey's categories for historical author approaches. This category includes all authors of the subgenre historical fantasy, and thus the authors of most mythological adaptations. The magician adds fantasy elements to a historical setting, relying on the

reader's willingness to suspend their disbelief as the text sacrifices fidelity to the historical record in order to explore an issue or theme in more depth (Addey 8-9). Daniel Baker argues that fantasy's potential lies in the ability to go beyond reality to offer new perspectives (438). It's obvious lack of commitment to the historical record allows a text the freedom to playfully explore history. This is especially true for traumatic themes or settings, which "seem to prompt the use of childlike literary forms, such as magic realism and fairytale/fable/folklore-style tropes" (Addey 9). This is not to say that all magical realism text exploring dark themes are child-like. Michael Elliott compares Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* to Seth Grahame-Smith's historical fantasy thriller *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* to show how historical fantasy can be used to tell the traumatic past of minorities in a way that straight historical fiction can't. Despite the academy success *Lincoln* received, the film has been criticised for the lack of agency in its African American characters; in contrast *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* is able to explore a friendship between Lincoln and William Johnson — a black man who historically was Lincoln's valet and barber. In the film, Johnson steps outside the passive narrative of black men presented in *Lincoln* by confronting his oppressors (in the form of vampires) himself. (Elliott 140-141). Elliott claims there is a pleasure in watching "victims of the past enact revenge upon the screen" (141-142). While there are many historical fictions told from the perspective of minorities, not all villains of the past are "punished" and even if they are, it is not always by the people they hurt. This kind of What-If fiction allows minorities active roles in their liberation, and thus shows one way that adding fantasy can explore different perspectives and delve more deeply into a theme or idea. More than this, however, by comparing minority perspectives with fantasy, the unfamiliar is familiarised (Baker 444). This ability gives fantasy the potential for progressive storytelling, though as I will discuss later, it is a potential that has often been wasted.

Though historical fantasy has many advantages, one disadvantage is that it can make historical authenticity more difficult for the author to achieve. This difficulty occurs because fantasy, with its fundamental premise being that magic does not and cannot exist (Attebery 4), works against the believability of a historical setting. Also, the genre often draws upon the past both

for plot and aesthetics (Attebery 41-42; Furby and Hines 9), which means historical details need to be more obvious to make it clear that the text isn't set in "an alternate world with its own logic, landscape and temporality" (Armitt 4). As we discussed in the previous chapter, historical fictions also immerse the reader in a seemingly alternate world because the past as it truly was, especially the pre-Roman era that I work with in my novella, is unrecognisable to those who never lived through it (de Groot, *Remaking History* 15, 18). By taking the reader somewhere foreign to them and then adding magic, it becomes easy to lose the thread of history and to imagine that the story takes place in a secondary world. At least this was my experience when writing early drafts of *Ing's Saga*. I often received feedback explaining that I was confusing Victorian and Viking ideals, that my dialogue didn't suit the era, or that my characters' attitude about queerness was too modern. Eventually, I was asked if *Ing's Saga* was supposed to be just a fantasy. None of these things would have been solved by removing the fantasy elements; however, it turned my early mistakes into a seemingly deliberate attempt to tell a different story than the one I intended. Therefore, without the historical authenticity techniques discussed in the previous sections, fantasy can overtake the setting.

The inclusion of fantasy was important for *Ing's Saga* because the novella is intended to evoke the feeling of a faded myth, and fantasy as a genre is often used to connect traditional myths to the world today (Attebery 9). But given the fact that over the years the genre has made its own traditions from the mythology they were inspired by — for example in the Viking Age dwarfs weren't believed to be short (Price 28-29) — the question becomes how to make magic feel authentic to a particular historical period? When creating the magic-system for *Sistersong*, Holland drew heavily from Martin Wall's book *The Magical History of Britain* which details a land-based paganism, gods, and specific details like the ghost fence which found their way into the book (James 00:29:26-00:31:15). This implies that creating fantasy that balances well with a historical setting is a similar process to creating historical authenticity: the inclusion of specific historical details.

For example, in *Ing's Saga* Ing's magic is called seiðr, which is a collective term for many practices such as rituals for clairvoyance, unveiling secrets, healing, giving strength or heightening wits, bringing good luck, controlling weather, and hunting. The term also covers all rituals that seek to do the opposite; such as cursing someone or an enterprise, making land barren, inducing illness, telling false prophecies in order to set someone on the road to disaster, and to injure and kill" (Price 34, 57). However, even on the battlefield, it never resulted in outright violence, instead it tended to induce the victim's judgement to be clouded or make them hesitate at a fatal moment (Price 34). This is why in the battle for Lencten Hall, Ing's seiðr is used to conceal the warband, causing panic and fear among Istio's warriors rather than to physically attack them. While it's true that in the battle vines burst from the ground to fight, this is a result of Nerthus' anger rather than Ing's seiðr.

Though there is some evidence of men practicing seiðr, it was considered a woman's practice and male practitioners used it with an element of shame (Gardeła 48; Blain 91-92). This is an attitude that is threaded throughout *Ing's Saga*. Though there are other forms of magic in Old Norse pagan belief — such as galdr, gandr, utisetá, an unnamed Oðinnic sorcery, and a general “background noise” of practical magic found in literature — I focused on seiðr because though Oðin is considered the master of this brand of magic, he learned it from Freyja; which means that this was originally a Vanir practice (Price 34, 68). And given that Nerthus is a goddess of the Vanir — as evidenced by her being Njorð's old wife and her fighting in the Vanir/Æsir war opposite Oðin (8, 38) — this means seiðr is the magic she'd pass to her chosen.

By linking all my fantasy elements to seiðr — predicting the future, cloaking people in shadow, healing, giving Eburwin strength after his injury, etc. — I was able to use fantasy as way of weaving an authentic Old Norse mythic experience into my novella. In this way, the fantasy works with my historical details rather than against them.

Despite the fantasy genre's potential for progressive storytelling, it often fails to be inclusive to queer characters. Modern fantasy has been heavily influenced by *The Lord of the Rings* (Furby and Hines 3), which depicts a golden age of honour and chivalry (Baker 439). The works inspired

by Tolkien often continue to use this nostalgic lens; however, this view can be problematic as most of these texts also perpetuate heteronormative, self-sacrificing, and xenophobic attitudes (Baker 439; Roberts and MacCallum-Stewart 8). This ideology happens partially because Tolkien was a product of his time (I. Malone 220), and partially because when writing fantasy authors draw on popular beliefs about the Middle Ages, whether they are the truth or not (S. Carroll 54, 55). While this is similar to what the mosaic-maker does when they tap into cultural memory, they do it intentionally and thus are conscious about what they write. Meanwhile, fantasy authors seem to be unaware of the ideology they're perpetuating (I. Malone 221). Also, authors of pure fantasy (rather than historical fantasy) are not tied to a particular era, and therefore it would be easy to exclude harmful attitudes. The problem is exacerbated by the binary structure of good vs evil that many fantasy texts employ, with the evil being everything which is not us (I. Malone 205). Though these attitudes in fantasy are often included unintentionally (Baker 452), they are so imbedded in the genre that the presence of LGBT+ characters, especially as protagonists, did not overtly begin appearing until the twenty-first century (Roberts & MacCallum-Stewart 8).

Yet throughout history, queerness has often been associated with the supernatural, which lends itself perfectly to the fantasy genre. There are several examples in mythology of gods crossing gender boundaries. Earlier I discussed how Loki shifted their gender in Norse mythology. In Greek mythology Dionysus can be considered transgender — being raised as a girl to protect him from Hera's wrath and afterwards often being depicted wearing feminine hairstyles and dress. He is also bisexual, as evidenced by his many male lovers (Connor et al. 123). Also from Greek myth is Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who is often depicted with having a penis and female breasts (Connor et al. 176). In Hindu mythology Ardhanarishvara is the androgynous form of male deity Shiva and the goddess Parvati (Srinivasan and Chandrasekaran 236) and is often referred to as "The Lord Whose Half Is Woman" (Connor et al. 67). Jumadi, also known as Dhumauathi, is also from Hindu myth, particularly in the Tulu Nada region of Karnatak and Kerala in India. They are a divine deity with the body of a woman and head of a man and is regarded as a

protector of the people of Tulu (Sonawane 17). In Egyptian mythology Hapy is the androgynous god of the Nile who is often depicted with a full beard and female breasts (Connor et al. 170). In the Yoruba-diasporic pantheon Obatala is considered androgynous, dividing themselves into a male and female parts to bring about human reproduction (Connor et al. 253). Lan Ts'ai-ho, also known as Lan Caihe, is one of the Eight Taoist Immortals. The only immortal with an ambiguous gender, they appear sometimes as a man and other times as a woman (Wong 31). Nzambi is the androgynous or transgender supreme being of the Bakongo people from Central Africa (Connor et al. 252). In the Shinto religion Ise Kore Dome No Kami is the transgender deity who tricks the sun goddess, Amaterasu, out of hiding using a mirror and dance (Connor et al. 186). This is only a sample of the many deities that are gender nonconforming. Also, as I mentioned earlier there are many examples of ancient world cults whose participants were considered a third gender. Beyond the examples I listed above (the Enarees, and the followers of Cybele and Astarte) there is also the hijra, the gala, and the assinnu just to name a few (Roscoe 206-213, 213-217; Connor et al. 70). The acceptance of this third gender was tied with the idea that those people were linked to the divine, which marked them as Other (Roscoe 204). While this isn't ideal for today's standards of representation in fantasy texts (as discussed in the previous chapter), it does create a solid launching pad in which authors can use fantasy to create transgender representation in a historical setting.

Given the Viking Age's strong gender boundaries and the fact that their honour was tied to upholding these ideals, Ing's connection to Nerthus was the perfect vehicle for allowing society's acceptance. However, I didn't want Ing's divine blood to be *the reason for* their genderfluidity; which is why when I introduce the concept, I make point to say "[Nerthus] was a guest in her vessel's body — whatever everyone else believed, they were not the same person" (9). Later in the same chapter, I show Ing hosting Nerthus' spirit while as man, stating "Everyone assumed it was her presence that shifted his gender, but Ing alone knew this wasn't true" (14). This outlines for reader that Ing presents an acceptable narrative to their people that doesn't completely fit with their actual experience. This is similar to Myrdhin/Mori's behaviour in *Sistersong*, pretending the two

sides of their identity are different people to everyone but a safe, select few. *Ing's Saga* reiterates this point by showing Ing as woman without Nerthus present (42); showing how Ermines, her enemy at the time, was careful of how he treated Ing as woman for fear of Nerthus' wrath, despite the goddess not being there (42-44); by having Nerthus use her seiðr through Ing when they were a man (35, 54-56); and by Ing outright stating it again when they come out to Hertha (59). While this doesn't change that Ing is Othered by their own people, by making it clear that Ing's connection to Nerthus is not the reason they are genderfluid, they are no longer Othered to the reader. Adding to this is the fact that the unnamed child narrator is also genderfluid. Through them, we see the experience that Ing and Hertha discuss: that there are other gender-nonconforming people who exist but are closeted because they "fear... losing honour" (59). This second perspective demonstrates that Ing's divinity is not what makes them gender-nonconforming while also adding a different view of being genderfluid in this society.

The magician's approach may be the most difficult in terms of creating an authentic historical world, since the fantasy elements fight against its believability. However, by interweaving historical details into the fantasy, such as seiðr in Norse myth retellings, this difficulty is lessened. For those who are successful, this approach has great potential for progressive storytelling, particularly for LGBT+ stories, because history often associated queerness with the supernatural.

Conclusion

The three categories of historical fiction authors outlined by Addey — the ventriloquist, the mosaic-maker, and the magician — each offer unique approaches to interweaving authenticity into a text. The ventriloquist approach shows the value of quoting historical sources, though there risks a danger in overquoting and thus losing your own creative voice. When this technique is balanced correctly, however, quoting directly from historical sources controls the intertextuality so the reader thinks of the original source and not one of its many adaptations. The technique can also create interesting dialogues with history as demonstrated by Rector and Morrison in their respective

novels. The mosaic-maker's approach, filling in the gaps of history with fiction, was the most helpful for my craft due to the lack of information on Ing. The advice to "try not to lie, but changing the small details is okay" was less helpful when constructing my plot but was useful for creating an authentic world. More interesting to me, however, was the wealth of advice for fostering historical authenticity such as the inclusion of small period details, creating authentic dialogue through bygone, and tapping into intertextuality through nested retellings of myths/folklore. The way Holland uses these techniques, particularly in Mori's "coming out to the reader" scene to combat the false belief that queerness is a modern phenomenon, was particularly helpful given that one of my goals for *Ing's Saga* is to create authentic genderfluid representation. The magician's approach taps into the potential power of fantasy to access new perspectives. The lack of fidelity to the historical record allows the magician to explore an issue or theme in more depth. However, the danger, as I found in my early drafts of *Ing's Saga*, is that the fantasy genre draws heavily from history so the added magical elements can confuse the reader into thinking that they are reading a fantasy and not a *historical* fantasy. Beyond the use of the techniques for creating authenticity discussed in the ventriloquist and mosaic-maker sections, one way to avoid this is by including historical details into magic-systems. This technique is also useful when the magician wants to add queer character as there are several examples of queerness being connected to the supernatural throughout history. In the end the ventriloquist, the mosaic-maker, and the magician are all valid and useful approaches to writing historical fiction; the techniques explored in this chapter are critical to know for historical fiction writers and has shaped *Ing's Saga* into a better story.

CONCLUSION

This thesis argues that authenticity is better than accuracy for fictional representations of the past and genderfluid characters. The flexibility authenticity offers allows the creation of more diverse and believable characters, which in turn allows for better storytelling. While many scholars — such as de Groot, Duncan, and White — have explored the idea that authenticity functions better for historical fiction, Laura Saxton’s definition of authenticity — that a text appears to be accurate even if it’s not (“A True Story” 128) — can and should be applied to genderfluid representation.

It’s impossible to be 100% accurate to every genderfluid person’s experience. This identity is unique in how flexible and broad the definition is: a gender which shifts but can exist as a man, woman, non-binary, or anywhere in between for any given amount of time (Richards et. Al 96). This means that every genderfluid person experiences gender differently — and this is of course true for all genders even inside the traditional binary (Stryker 10-11). Therefore, an author can only hope to write an authentic representation. While I did a close analysis of Rick Riordan’s character Alex Fierro, this thesis only to explore the existing scope of fictional genderfluid representations available, and more examples are being published everyday. Further research should expand the sample size and explore the new tropes (both good and bad) unique to genderfluid characters that are emerging. By doing this, authors and readers will become more conscious of how to construct authentic representation.

The true strength of this thesis is in exploring the practical methods for creating authentic representations of both the past and genderfluid characters. Melissa Addey argues that there are three approaches to writing historical fiction: the ventriloquist approach, the mosaic-maker’s, and the magician’s.

The ventriloquist relies heavily on quoting historical sources to grant their text a feeling of authenticity. The danger of this approach is that over-quoting can lead to a loss of creative voice.

The mosaic-maker's approach is the most common process. It involves creating a patchwork of fragmented facts, using invention to weave them into a cohesive story. What I found most interesting was the way mosaic-makers can use the inclusion of queer characters to help create a believable historical world. These authors combat the false belief that queerness is a modern phenomenon by weaving historical details into their character's coming-out to the reader scenes. This in turn adds to the historical setting, creating a sense of a larger world which in turn confirms the text's authenticity.

Addey's final approach for writing historical fiction is the magician's, the process of incorporating fantasy elements into a historical setting. While there are many advantages to this approach, the disadvantage is that fantasy makes historical authenticity harder to achieve. To combat this, magicians weave historical magic beliefs into their fantasy. Furthermore, as multiple mythologies believe that queerness is a sign of divinity, I found this was the perfect vehicle for introducing Ing's gender-queerness into a society with strict gender rules.

By delving into the techniques of each approach, this thesis expands upon Addey's theory, making it a guide for authors learning how to write historical fiction/fantasy. Furthermore, by analysing these techniques in conjunction with creating historical genderfluid representation, it invites authors to write more diverse characters and stories. Thus, encouraging authors to explore the gaps in queer history, filling them with pro-queer thought-experiments in order to establish what the LGBT+ communities' history might have been.

This thesis also addresses concerns about the authority cis-gender authors have to write genderfluid narratives. A common rule in the writing community is that all authors should include marginalised characters, but only authors from that minority should tell their stories. There are three problems with this rule when we discuss it in terms of queer representation. First, this rule requires every author to be out to everyone before they publish. Second, when it comes to lesser known identities (such as genderfluid) the character must "come out to the reader", which counts as telling their story, or risk being misunderstood or Othered. Third, given that only an authentic

representation is possible, even if an author is genderfluid, a story accurate to them can still be deemed unrelatable to the community at large and thus labelled as bad representation. This proves that the rule to “include minority characters but not write their stories” doesn’t grant minority authors the authority it assumes. This conclusion is important as it grants all authors permission to write genderfluid narratives, which in turn will allow for more diverse representation in the market, thus showing more ways to be genderfluid. As fiction is a learning vehicle for those uneducated about the genderfluid identity, this is an important step in helping foster societal acceptance.

This thesis argues that authenticity is better for fictional representations of the past and genderfluid characters. The flexibility authenticity offers allows the creation of more diverse and believable characters, which in turn allows for better storytelling.

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APPENDIX: OLD NORSE WORDS

Ælf/Ælfas	Spirits that can be the bringers of good or bad fortunes (Price 29).
Æsir	Name of the Norse gods (Lindow 49).
Asgard	Home of the Norse gods (Lindow 61-62).
Draugr	Reanimated corpse (Price 31).
Ergi	Unmanly, effeminate (Celik 176-180).
Fífl	Fool, clown, boor (<i>Old Icelandic Dictionary</i>).
Ginungagap	The void that existed before the creation of the cosmos (Lindow 141).
Hel	Named after its ruler, this is the place of the unhonourable dead (Lindow 172).
Jötunheim	Home of the giants (Lindow 206).
Jötunn	Giants (Price 28).
Mara	A creature that “rode” people in their sleep and gave them bad dreams (Price 30).
Mjölñir	Thór’s hammer.
Nithing	A coward, wretch (Celik 184).
Norns	Three supernatural women who represent the past, the present and the future (Lindow 244-245).
Ragnarök	Final battle between the Æsir and Jötunn that ends the world.
Seax	Small sword, knife or dagger.
Seiðr	A form of magic/divination often associated with Oðin.
Skuld	She is one of the three Norns, this sister representing the future (Lindow 245).
Svefnthorn	The thorn used in <i>Volsunga</i> to make Brynhild sleep.

Valhalla	The afterlife for those who died in combat, presided over by Oðin. This is an honourable resting place.
Valkyrie	Serving Oðin, these woman warriors chose which of the slain would be taken to Valhalla (Price 28).
Vámr	A loathsome person (<i>Old Icelandic Dictionary</i>).
Vanir	A group of lesser gods that once warred with the Æsir but ultimately became their allies. Fertility gods such as Njorð, Freyr, and Freyja belong to this group (Lindow 311-312).
Völva's Wand	An instrument of twisted iron used by female practitioners of magic.
Yggdrasill	World Tree, all nine worlds rested on its branches (Lindow 319).