

## Brothers in Arms

"Siward, are you alright?" screamed Theobald above all the noise of pain and clashing of swords and shields.

"I am trying, Theobald, but what about Eadgar and Alfwold?" I shouted back at him.

As we tried to close our shield wall again on Caldbec Hill, we were freezing and frightened. The Normans were closing in on us. Charging with their cavalry, taunting with their spearmen and archers raining their arrows on us, they tried to break our wall. We should never have left our first position. But there were rumours that Duke William had died and those Normans started retreating. In the end, it was all a trick. Luckily I had Theobald close by.

"A minute ago, the two of them were fighting in front of us," Theobald said and gave me his frightened look. "Should we check on them?"

"Yes," I said in my most relaxed voice even though I was as deeply troubled as he was.

It worked. Theobald relaxed a bit, but when we made our way through the crowds there was panic, fear, screaming and fighting surrounding us. We saw our people falling, badly injured with blood everywhere screaming for our help. Some even trying to grab us. Then all of a sudden, we saw a crowd. I tried to make my way through it. "What happened?" I asked.

"The king is down! We are doomed!" a soldier roared. Theobald and I looked at each other in fear.

"If we stay, we die" I hissed, grabbed him by his arm and started running. We had to find Eadgar and Alfwold before it was too late. We were like brothers, almost over-protective over one another. The four of us had become extremely close, since we had joined Earl Eadwine's elite spearmen forces and were assigned a special task at Stamford Bridge. When a brave Viking tried to keep the bridge and slaughtered our best men, and King Harold could not negotiate our way out, he decided to use a trick. He sent me under the bridge to eliminate the Viking by stabbing him with my spear and the others to distract the Vikings by taunting them. This was the beginning of our victory and our friendship. We fought side by side, protecting one another and never losing each other out of sight.

Theobald saw Alfwold first, holding off the Normans desperately. Thank God he was still alive. We immediately drew our swords and started hacking and slashing our way through to help him.

"Where's Eadgar!" I shouted, when I finally reached him.

Alfwold looked at me in fear. "I lost him. The Normans dispersed us," he yelled back at me.

"We have to run then, Alfwold. The King died by an arrow in his chest. We have to head off towards London and warn them that the Normans will come," Theobald screamed.

"But, what about Eadgar? We cannot just flee the battlefield and leave our friend behind,"

Alfwold answered in shock.

We did not answer and looked sadly at each other. We were thinking the same. Eadgar was dead. There was nothing left for us to do here.

“We have to get out of here now. Come on, follow me,” I yelled and started running up Caldbec Hill. The moment we reached the top of the hill, we heard the Normans cheer. They had won the battle. We did not look back, but ran as fast we could. The forest would cover our escape.

Once deep in the forest, we took a break. Alfwold leaned against a tree, breathing heavily.

“I am still not convinced we did the right thing, leaving our friend and fellow countrymen behind,” he started.

“If we can reach London alive and warn them of the threat that is coming up, it was surely God’s choice to flee the battlefield. Eadgar is in a better place now. We have to accept that,” I tried to convince Alfwold.

“There was not much we could have done anyway,” Theobald added.

“Still...Should we not bring back his body and armour to his family, so they can give him a rightful burial?” Alfwold mumbled.

I looked at Theobald. Alfwold was right. It would be dishonourable and disrespectful to Eadgar’s family and especially to his father, Eadwine, Earl of Mercia. It was under his banner that we had come to know each other in the first place.

“You are right, Alfwold,” I answered, “We are carrying his colors and we will not dishonour Earl Eadwine.”

“We owe Eadgar our friendship. The least we can do is to bring him home and give him a proper burial,” Theobald said.

“We have to hurry though, otherwise we won’t make it to London in time,” I said while heading off.

The others followed me. We ran all the way back through the forest. Exhausted we finally reached the battlefield. From the top of Caldbec Hill, we stared down at the bloodbath. It felt like my heart was in my throat. There were corpses everywhere. Faces forever marked in pain. Bodyparts thrown all over the place, as if they were worthless. In the distance, I could hear the Normans celebrate their victory. I felt anger raging in me. Then Theobald grabbed me by the arm.

“Start searching, Siward,” he said quietly.

We all took a different part of the battlefield and began searching for Eadgar’s body. I looked everywhere, turned bodies upside down, even tried to detect a glimpse of Eadwine’s colours. Those staring faces made me feel sick and guilty. Why them and not me. To get hold of myself, I tried to think of the happy moments the four of us had witnessed. The feasts and hunting we

had done together, the victories in battle, the endless conversations. But probably the best moment was when Eadgar became a knight. As son of Earl Eadwine, he was the only one of us with a high ranking. It did not matter, because we reached that goal together. We were proud as brothers can be. Our dream had become reality. I could not stand it any longer and started throwing up.

All of a sudden Alfwold started screaming. "Over here, I found something."

I ran as fast as I could. Deep in my heart, I hoped it was not Eadgar's body, so there was still a chance he was alive.

"He is alive, quickly, come and help," Alfwold shouted.

I stopped and stared at the body. It was not Eadgar.

Theobald was in shock. "It is our King, King Harold. He is still alive," he mumbled.

King Harold was shot in the chest. He was breathing heavily, gasping for air. He could not speak, he was in total shock. Alfwold carefully removed the arrow. Theobald took a cloth of a dead soldier and wrapped it around the wound to stop the bleeding. I finally got a hold of myself again.

"We have to change his armour, put it on another body, to make the Normans think he really died."

We found a body close by, unrecognisably blinded by an arrow in his eye. Quickly we took off the unknown soldier's armour and put the King's shield decorated with his coat of arms on him. We looked at each other.

"The King needs help and soon darkness will fall upon us," Alfwold spoke first.

He was right. The sky was already turning orange. We had to leave. Together we carried the King off the battlefield, making our way to the woods. He was quite heavy and we had to zig zag our way through all those bodies. All of a sudden, my foot got stuck in a horse's rein and I tipped over. I managed to fall on my knee, keeping the King steady. When I looked down, I saw a glimpse of a familiar shield partly hidden under the horse.

"Stop," I yelled, "there is one of our shields."

We put down the King and pulled the shield out. It was undoubtedly Eadgar's, with his coat of arms. Nobody said anything. We stared at the shield for a while. Theobald was the first to speak again.

"Where is his body," he screamed and started searching frantically.

We all started looking for our friend, turning almost unrecognizable bodies around, grabbing arms and legs, searching for somebody so familiar to us, but there was no sign of Eadgar. With terrible sadness, we moved on, taking turns in carrying Eadgar's shield as an encouragement. We had to bring King Harold to safety.

We stumbled our way through the woods, longing for food and water, feeling exhausted. We did not stop walking, until the sun rose and we found a little stream. Gently we laid the King on the grass and threw ourselves in the water.

“This is the best water ever,” I laughed out loud.

We splashed around, washed our faces and drank as much as we could, unsure when we would find water again. Suddenly Theobald pointed at something. We turned around and saw a grey building, hidden away, blending in perfectly with the rocks. It was a monastery. We managed to cross the river without the King getting wet and knocked on the wooden door. Hollow footsteps sounded and the door was opened. There was standing an old monk, looking very surprised to see us. The news of William’s victory had not traveled this far yet.

The monks welcomed us with food and wine. King Harold was taken care of immediately. We did not have time to stay and wait for him to recover, so we left the following morning with the shield. We promised the King that we would only inform the Earl of his existence out of safety reasons and that we would come back for him, after we had warned our fellow Englishmen for the Normans.

We walked for three days in a row, without crossing a living soul. The third night, something woke me up. I heard voices in the woods, not far away from us. I quickly shook the others awake.

“There are people in the forest, stand up,” I whispered.

We crawled towards the noise and saw warriors sitting around campfires, eating and drinking. There were hundreds of them.

“The Normans have caught up,” Alfwold panicked, “What to do?”

Theobald put his finger on his lips. “Sssh, quiet you fool, you’ll wake the whole army.”

“We have to go around them immediately and continue our path to London,” I whispered.

Silently, we sneaked around them. When we were out of Norman sight, we started running like animals being hunted. We travelled another two days without sleeping or even resting, to make sure the Normans would not catch up. Finally, at the end of the second day we reached the London bridge.

“We lost the battle, the Normans are coming and are not far away!” we all shouted. “Take your battle positions and defend London!”

Soldiers started running around, taking up their armour and weapons and closing the bridge. Some women took care of us, gave us food and wine and put us to rest. But we did not stay long, since we had to warn Earl Eadwine of the Normans marching up and inform him of his beloved son’s death.

While encouraging the soldiers to fend off William’s forces, we crossed London and left for

Gilling in Mercia, where Earl Eadwine had his seat.

We walked for another four moons, when we finally arrived at the town of Gilling and made our way to the castle. In the dining hall, Earl Eadwine surrounded by his family and soldiers welcomed us with open arms. We kneeled in front of the Earl and when we were just about to tell him of the grave news, we suddenly saw Eadgar walking towards us.

“You’re alive!” Alfwold shouted.

I waved his shield in the air. “Eadgar, we thought you were dead!”

“How did you survive?” Theobald asked.

“Well, I was knocked out mid battle by a sword, but some of my men got me out of there on time. I was unconscious for a while and when I woke up, we were already on our way back to Mercia. Once I recovered, my Dad told me to stay here and wait for you, since he feared the worst for you. I feel so sorry for leaving you behind and in fear of my death.”

I put my arm around Eadgar’s shoulders. “It’s so good to have you back!” I smiled, “No matter what happened! War cannot destroy friendship. We will be brothers in arms forever.”

The others joined us. That night we told them about our adventure and feasted till early morning. The following day, Earl Eadwine gathered up all his forces to set up a camp in the North of England to rebel against William. The four of us left for King Harold who was going to lead the rebellion. Our next quest as brothers in arms was about to begin.

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Year 8b