

Prologue: Lille, Flanders

April 1048 CE

Whack! Another angry slash of red crisscrossed Avicia's back. Crimson rivulets stained the remnants of her robe. Once more, the red hide leather whip arced and bit deep into the flesh. Raw, guttural sounds escaped her mouth, as another brutal lash snaked across her shoulder. She jerked against the whipping post and pressed her cheek tighter against the splintered wood.

Defiant, she stared straight ahead. Her slate grey gaze locked with Edric's own. When they first met six weeks before, his eyes called to mind the pale shade of a robin's egg. Now, they flamed bright blue with frustration and anger. She struggled to hold her gaze steady, but the pain coupled with faintness overwhelmed her. In the blink of an eye, her world faded to black.

Edric's stare never wavered throughout Avicia's punishment. Each arc of the whip across the girl's delicate back battered his soul. She endured a punishment meant for him to suffer too.

She sagged against the whipping post. Edric looked to the unrepentant

faces of her tormentors. Matilda, the selfish daughter of the Count of Flanders bawled against one of her attendants, distraught over the loss of her falcon. Her reddened face held no pity for the girl who suffered. Avicia's uncle spat in the dirt, turned on his heel and stalked away with shoulders hunched.

None of them intended to help Avicia. Edric took a step toward her, before sharp fingernails dug into his shoulder beneath the tunic. He followed the lily-white hand from where it disappeared under a billowy green sleeve until he met the stern gaze of his mother.

“You will not dare help her now, not when you shamed all of us this day.”

Harsh, ragged sobs filled the dimly lit chamber. Avicia wept on a pallet in a corner of the room. Her nurse Biota tended her with gentle care in the dim light of a tallow candle. The brutal whipping shredded the top half of her robe, which now hung in tatters at her narrow hips. Wisps of cloth clung to the torn flesh. She winced and shuddered at each fiber the nurse peeled away from raw skin.

The linen curtain at the entrance rustled and crisp air intruded. Gisele, countess of Aalst entered the room. She padded across the earthen floor. Her dark blue garments shuffled the dank straw on the ground. The folds of her headdress framed her heart-shaped face, while from beneath it two gold plaits peeked. She pressed her lips firmly together in disapproval. The countess expelled the breath from her fleshy lips in a huff of annoyance.

“You took Matilda's favorite merlin from the mews and attempted to fly it with the Saxon boy. How could you risk it, child? Risk everything your uncle did to secure your place in the household of the Count of Flanders?”

Avicia cried harder at the rebuke. She winced when her nurse applied a cold poultice of crushed marigold and fresh comfrey leaves to prevent infection and reduce the threat of fever.

“Without God’s pity, you would be dead by now. Indeed, it was fortunate when you fainted.” Countess Gisele paused for a moment. “You shamed your uncle before the Count of Flanders. Do you forget all he has done for you? We raised you in our household after the deaths of your parents. We obtained Count Baldwin’s permission for you to reside here, as an attendant to Matilda. How could you betray her trust and presume to touch her hunting bird? You knew better.”

“Edric wanted to see her. I didn’t know there was a goshawk in the sky.”

“You considered his desires only, not the offense you made or the punishment. You are a thoughtless, stubborn child. Only a fool takes such risks. Now, the merlin is dead because of your vain attempt to impress a boy. ”

“Edric’s not just a boy.”

The countess rolled her eyes toward the timber ceiling. “Saint Jude, grant us hope.” She glared at Avicia. “I blame my husband. He has spoiled you overmuch, girl. His love for his sister has made him sentimental. He has allowed you too many freedoms and indulged your every whim in the hopes you might prove useful to us.”

Avicia shook her head. She did not understand how she might be useful to her uncle, but she needed his favor.

“I’m sorry, Lady Gisele, I know without his generosity I would not be here. Truly, I did not seek to go against you or my uncle.”

“Be silent, Avicia. We shall say no more of this. You survived your

punishment. Be thankful Matilda's father listened to my pleas not to cut off your hand. Be grateful you still serve among her attendants, though I do not know if she will ever forgive you. You will remain here and do your duty to the count's daughter. Do you understand me?"

Avicia lowered her gaze and nodded. Biota bound the poultice with clean cloths and patted her arm. The comfort of the nurse's familiar touch did not lessen the pain. Her foolhardiness caused her to risk another clandestine visit to the mews, to see the new merlin. Edric's compliments about her skill with the merlin dared her to do it. His desires commanded her will.

"With the betrothal negotiations of the count's sister Judith concluded," Countess Gisele said, "the Saxons can return to England in a few days. This Edric of Newington goes with them. He is a Saxon lord's son. His home is in England and for now, yours is here. Put this boy from your mind."

She paused with a sigh. "He influenced you, but still you bore the punishment alone." She knelt beside the pallet and stroked a fingertip across Avicia's brow. "You should remember he did not suffer for his part in such foolery."

Avicia met her austere expression. "Edric suffered too."

Countess Gisele drew back. She dug her nails into her palm and pressed her lips tight. "Pray there are no further consequences of your folly. If you have damaged our relations with the Count of Flanders, you will be sorry."

She glared at Avicia's nurse. "Leave her. You will not coddle her."

Biota followed the countess out of the room. She paused at the entrance and looked over her shoulder, her gaze full of sympathy. Alone, Avicia turned her face to the wall. The tears she struggled with now trickled down her cheeks.

“Oh Edric.”

In misery, she kept her face to the wall. Then a draft pervaded the room. Heavy, familiar footfalls pounded the straw.

She raised herself up on one elbow. Hellfire blazed along the seams of shredded skin on her back. She tucked the front of the shredded robe under her arms for modesty. Her uncle towered over her.

Count Rudolf of Aalst raked a hand through his black hair. Eyes that mirrored her own searched her face in a resolute stare. She shrank back against the wall, despite the pain that stabbed her back.

“I didn’t mean to disgrace you before the Count of Flanders, my lord.” Perhaps if she spoke first, she might lessen the terrible anger in his expression.

“Then why did you?”

He advanced on her, with fists tightly closed. She whimpered in fright.

He stopped and clenched his fingers clenched tight. Harsh breaths tore from his chest.

“I’ve never endured such shame before today. Do you know the value of just one of the count’s hunting birds? He acquired the creature as a special gift for his daughter. Now, it is dead because of your carelessness!”

“I didn’t mean for the merlin to die.”

“Why did you touch her? It is by God’s mercy alone she did not peck your eyes out. How could you be so foolish? The Saxon boy made you do it. Do not think I don’t know about your shameful behavior with him. Matilda told us all!”

Avicia gasped. Matilda’s spite and fury knew no bounds. This morning, fear compelled her to run rather than face Matilda’s wrath. Edric convinced her to return with the dead bird and admit their transgression. His status as a

guest and the power of his overlord protected him. He earned little more than censure. She suffered alone for what they did.

Count Rudolf continued, "She told us how he looked at you when he first arrived. His eyes followed you everywhere. You encouraged his attentions!"

"I didn't!" Her breath escaped in a ragged sigh of relief, tinged with fear.

"Do you deny he spoke to you alone in the mews today? Tell me how often you evaded your nurse and arranged to rendezvous with this boy."

"It didn't happen that way. I often went to the mews and found him there. We always spoke in the presence of the falconer. We shared a love for falcons. Today, he wanted to see the new merlin. I told him she belonged to the count's daughter. He knew I was one of her attendants. Please, don't blame Edric, my lord."

"Oh, Edric is it? You've grown overly familiar with this Saxon!" Count Rudolf grabbed her wrists. He hauled her up against him. Pungent ale soured his breath. Built stronger than a bull, with massive arms and legs and a barrel-shaped chest, his strength frightened her.

"What did you do with him in the darkness of the mews? Did he touch you?"

Her shock outweighed the pain-filled flames along the ragged flesh on her back. She lowered her gaze.

"You refuse to look at me because you fear to betray the truth."

Edric kissed her this morning while she struggled against his hold.

Count Rudolf grasped her chin and forced her gaze to his. "If he has touched you, not even Godwin of Wessex shall protect him from my wrath."

He left her without another word.

Avicia shuddered and collapsed in despair on her pallet. She shamed her family with her dim-witted actions. She acted the fool for a boy who would never know the anguish and humiliation she now endured.

In the chapel at Lille, Edric's Nordic blue eyes turned from the Crucifix at the altar to his mother, Lady Emmeline. She paced the length of the chapel again and stirred the rushes in her wake. A silk girdle wound about her hips and smoothed the lines of her garments. A silver filigree circlet held her headdress in place and concealed hair the same color of Edric's own.

She halted and strode toward him. She met his stare and placed her bejeweled fingers on his shoulders. Her heart-shaped face framed green eyes, a sculpted nose upturned at the tip and a pert mouth.

“You are a thegn's son. Women of loose morals will try to tempt you.”

“Mother, is the girl's punishment not enough? Must you call her whore too?”

Six weeks before, his father insisted Edric accompany his mother to Flanders. They joined the retinue of Aelfwig Wulfnothson, Abbott of Winchester and younger brother of Earl Godwin of Wessex. Edric's father Tunwulf Grim served the earl, who wanted a marriage between his third son Tostig and Judith, half-sister of the Count of Flanders. Lady Emmeline helped influence the successful negotiations. She had once attended Judith's mother before her marriage to Tunwulf Grim.

Since their arrival, his mother spoke only Flemish, despite her fluency of the Saxon tongue. She wanted her son acquainted with his Flemish heritage,

but since the disaster with the merlin, he believed she regretted her decision to come.

She continued, "I saw your regard for her while she stood at the whipping post. The infatuation is beneath you. What did you do in the mews, alone with her?"

His silence seemed all the answer she needed. The intensity of her green-eyed glare made him ashamed but he rebelled against regrets. He acknowledged guilt about only one thing. Avicia took the punishment meant for him. He convinced her no one would see them leave the mews with the merlin. He failed to anticipate what happened afterward, or how she suffered for it.

"We only talked. I told you the full truth of our encounter."

Guilt slammed him in the stomach. Something else happened in the fields, when he kissed Avicia.

He began, "Neither of us meant for the bird to die. It was an accident. Avicia is not to blame."

"You will not speak her name again."

A low growl escaped his throat and he turned away. His mother stroked his shoulders with an audible sigh.

"Dearest, you know the value of a hunting bird. The girl is fortunate she did not lose her hand. Only her relationship to the Count of Aalst prevented it."

Edric stared, incredulous. "I cannot believe you condone such brutality."

His mother gave a flippant wave of her hand. "The girl learnt her lesson. I believe you learned from this incident too. Consequences ensue for every action in life. Now come, it is time for dinner."

"I am not hungry."

“Edric of Newington, you will not shame me further! Dine with us and forget the girl. I insist upon it, my son.”

He stared her down and did not flinch. When she returned his gaze steadily, he sighed. “Allow me a moment’s peace, Mother. I shall follow directly.”

After she left, Edric expelled a heavy, weary sigh. He cupped his face in his hands with a groan. “Avicia.”

“It will do you no good, young master, no good at all.”

He turned at the voice of his father’s chaplain, Wymarc of Newington, who spoke in their native Saxon tongue. The chaplain accompanied them across the Channel at the behest of Edric’s father. No harsh disapproval reflected in those doe brown eyes, but then, he did not expect censure from his paternal great uncle and tutor.

“The girl took the whipping for my sake.” Pain knifed Edric’s heart.

Father Wymarc entered and clasped his shoulder in a gentle grip. “Do not lay blame upon yourself or the maid. There will be pain and penitence enough for both.”

Edric followed the chaplain to the hall, which bustled with activity. The scent of roasted boar and stewed pheasant mingled with the pungent aroma of ripened cheeses and freshly baked breads. The rest of their retinue sat at the trestle tables.

Edric strode toward the high table. He studied the thick, timber-framed trusses supporting the roof. Woven tapestries hung on the wall. Servants scurried past him with jugs of wine and beers. Yet the stares of condemnation followed him. The courtiers, his fellow Saxons, and Avicia’s uncle Count Rudolf watched him.

Two vacant seats at Emmeline's right waited for the chaplain and Edric. He approached the trestle table. He took his seat, Father Wymarc beside him.

Edric fought against the urge to gag with every swallow. If his mother noticed his discomfort, she gave no indication. Her slim fingers picked the bones from the pheasant. The greasy flesh barely soiled the tips. Though little conversation occurred at their table, other courtiers showed no such reserve. Over the din of their exchanges, hounds yelped and scrambled for scraps from the table. Some snatched a few choice morsels from an unfortunate diner's hand.

An hour later, Count Rudolf stood. He raised the jasper and bloodstone encrusted chalice to his lips and downed the wine in one gulp. He scanned the room's occupants and his severe gaze pinned Edric. The censure in those green eyes spoke volumes. Edric ducked his head and sopped up the last of his stew with a piece of bread.

After the meal concluded, Edric lingered. The servants removed the remnants of food and wiped down the trestle tables. When they eyed him pointedly, he left the hall.

Edric walked without direction and stumbled on a stone in his path. He kicked it aside in frustration. He stood in front of the mews where he first met Avicia. Here, he shared his love for the peregrine and fell in love with her.

Edric clenched his fists. Above, the sky darkened and villagers hurried away into their houses. He remained, although the rain broke through the clouds and pelted him with heavy drops. He stood immobile and held his face up to the sky. The rainwater mixed with his tears.