

## The Tanist's Wife

The pilgrims saw the defaced sign as their horses breasted the top of the hill. It should have read "Y Dref Wen" but someone had covered the Cymric words with white paint.

One traveller paused and leaned down to read the scrawled letters. "1000, 930 and W something." His voice had a slight accent that marked him as German. He turned as Aldwyn rode up alongside and asked, "What does it mean Brother Aldwyn?"

Aldwyn pushed the hood of his cape back to see better and the cold wind struck at the tonsure across the front of his head. "It's a political slogan, a thousand for the one thousand years since the Cymric broke the power of the Englisc at the battle of Heavenfield, and nine hundred and seventy years since the Great Synod under Abbess Hilda broke with Rome and the Roman church. The last word is simply the word 'Whitby', the old name of the city in Englisc." Aldwyn saw the puzzlement on the German's face and added, "They only use Cymric on public signs here. It's not like Germany where everything is in Cymric and the local version of German.

"And the Englisc here resent it, that it is not also in their language, even though your next queen will be an Englisc girl?"

It was one of those moments when you feel you've got to make a stand, so Aldwyn chose his words deliberately, "Yes," he said, "even so, we do feel resentment."

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He left it at that, as they turned down the steep valley sides to Y Dref Wen. There didn't seem any point in saying that he knew the Tanist and his Englisc wife extremely well indeed. But the exchange had revived the old hurts and it was an effort to remind himself that his duty as a priest was to foster reconciliation, not revenge.

He left the pilgrims at the bridge. They took the road down to the West side of the Town, where the hostels and hotels were. He rode across to the East side and the narrower lanes leading to the poorer streets where the Englisc speakers lived in the shadow of the Abbey and Royal Palace on the hill above.

He found an inn, hired a room and left his luggage there. He could have afforded better but it felt safer to be amongst his own kind. Then, as the sun began to sink, he climbed the steep slope to the upper town.

The Royal Palace sat to the right of the main road on a level patch of ground just below the Abbey itself. The ornate gates were closed but a few yards further on the entry to the offices was open. At the gate a sentry had obviously been primed to expect him. He was frisked, politely but thoroughly, and his dagger was taken from him. The Tanist's letter was perused briefly and a soldier from the Royal Bodyguard was called to lead him across a corner of the vast courtyard and across a small link bridge into the first floor of the palace. At the end of a short corridor the soldier opened a door into a reception room, bigger than most houses, and led Aldwyn in.

She was waiting by the window. She hadn't changed, still impulsive, her brimming optimism only slightly tempered by experience. She turned at his coming into the room and ran to him.

"Your Highness," he spoke in Englisc. From the corner of his eye he saw the guard frown disapprovingly at his choice of language.

She ignored the soldier as she hugged him as she would have hugged a brother. "No, I will not be 'Your Highness' to you. Not to the boy I spent years with scrumping apples from my father's orchard. I'm Marian and when we talk in Cymric you'll use the familiar 'ti' not the formal 'chi'. You're family to me. And if you don't then I'll tell everyone about all the times you got into

trouble.”

“And you’re not worried I might tell them about the scrapes you got into?” He could feel something hard along both her forearms and he held her at arm’s length, partly to see what it might be, partly to placate the disapproving soldier.

She saw him looking at her arms and impulsively pulled her left sleeve up, showing a finely crafted throwing knife in a quick release harness. “That, it’s Cei’s idea. He felt we should carry a weapon, just in case someone gets past the Royal Bodyguard and I told them how I used to beat you every time at knife throwing.” She hesitated, as if she wanted to say more. “It’s traditional as well. Cymric Queens and Princesses have fought and led armies for centuries, so why shouldn’t I now I’m one.”

He felt there must be more but he knew Marian, she could be trusted to tell him when it was necessary. “And how’s Cei and the baby?”

“Cei’s well, though he’s tired. There’s still opposition because of me. People who don’t think a Cymric Tanist should marry an Englisc woman. The King is fine but some of the older members of the Senedd give him a bad time.” Her face darkened for a moment, then brightened again “But how’s Irene?”

“Good health, though no baby yet, but she still looks beautiful, at least I think so.”

”And me. We both picked well, with my Cei and your Irene.”

She suddenly switched subjects in that mercurial way he remembered. “Where are you staying?”

“A small inn in the Englisc quarter.”

She opened her mouth to speak, then appeared to think better of it. Instead she said, “I understand but you know you have a place here as well, if you want it.”

“No, I know I’d have a good welcome from you and Cei. I’d even trust the King now, after the last few years, but I think I’d prefer to do without the mute hostility I think I’d get from a lot of the other people at court.”

Marian gave a small smile of understanding, then she turned to the soldier and switched to Cymric. “Gwydion, could you inform the Tanist that our guest has arrived?”

He bowed stiffly, and departed.

“He disapproves of Englisc people on principle. He spent months guarding Cei before we were married, in case this wild Englisc woman turned on him. Now I’m officially a Royal Princess and he’s supposed to guard me against wild Englisc men. And if we speak Englisc he disapproves even more because he doesn’t understand what we are saying.”

“Well I’m used to Cymric people disapproving of me but I don’t usually have the next Queen to defend me. That’s novel, at least.”

“Aldwyn.” They both turned as the Tanist entered, followed by the soldier. “Good to see you, I hope that Irene is well.”

His Englisc was a little stilted but Aldwyn accepted the gesture the Tanist paid by using it. “Your Highness.” he started to bow

“No, not anyone’s Highness. You are family. Or do you want me to call you Reverend Brother Aldwyn? And if you still want another reason you can say it’s a matter of State Policy that we will no longer have second class citizens in the empire.”

“Very well then, Cei it is.” Aldwyn admitted defeat, “And, yes, I do appreciate it.”

“Then you must be tired. It’s some three hundred miles to Caer-wynt. Come and join us in our private apartment for the evening. It’s not far and more friendly. You can meet our son and the chairs are much more comfortable.”

They led him out of the richly decorated room and down a long corridor. There were pictures on the walls commemorating past Kings; images of Cymric victories over Englisc forces at Caeredin in Alba, Alfred surrendering Caer-wynt and the last Englisc Kingdom of Wessex, pictures of Frankish and German princes offering submission, Madog claiming the New World for King and Empire.

Cei must have noticed Aldwyn's reaction, because he smiled. "And one day there will be a portrait of an Englisc Queen, to mark the reconciling of enemies."

"May God make it so." Aldwyn answered.

The private apartments were just that, private. Warm, comfortable chairs and low tables and a small fire to keep the evening's chill away. A young girl brought the baby Prince in her arms and Aldwyn admired him in the slightly worried way of men who have not yet had their own child.

Then the girl took the baby away for his evening bath, and Gwydion sent for food and wine at Cei's request. He still guarded them, waiting immobile by the door, his face registering disapproval of the Englisc conversation whilst the servants brought the meal and laid it out on the table.

Aldwyn had forgotten just how hungry he was until he saw the food. They ate together talking of Aldwyn's wife and Marian's brothers and sister far away in the Wessex capital of Caer-wynt. Finally Aldwyn sat back, filled to contentment.

"So then, enough of family chat. You asked me to come because you needed me for something." The Tanist looked across at his wife, questioningly.

"No, you tell him Cei. It's an official request after all," she said.

"Very well," Cei sat back, "I'll try to say it in Englisc, but forgive me if I make mistakes."

That was the first time any Cymric official apologised to Aldwyn for his poor command of the language of some twenty five percent of the population of Southern and Eastern Britain. That was a measure of the man, Aldwyn reflected.

"It is what, four years, since the King persuaded the Senedd to apply Equal Citizenship laws to the Englisc in the same way as we do to the other nationalities in the Empire. We've gone a long way, but there's a long legacy to overcome. For example you could have slept here in the Palace but you chose to stay in an inn and, I suspect, it was an inn in the Englisc suburb on this side of the river. Not out of any hatred but just to be surrounded by your own people."

Aldwyn nodded wryly, "It's good to hear my own language," he said.

Cei nodded, "I understand. Well, I had reports from our intelligence service and there's information, I can't put it more detailed than that, information that there are at least two separate groups opposing Equal Citizenship that are ready to use violence and that someone is passing information to them."

Cei pulled out a dagger from his jacket. "There's been threats against the King and against me as his chosen successor. So we decided we needed an extra precaution, and one we don't mention in public. Marian and I carry concealed weapons at all times – so does the King"

Aldwyn nodded, "Yes, I've seen Marian's knives, she's pretty accurate with them as well."

Cei nodded, "One group is obvious. Prince Edryd has opposed all the changes we've made. If anything happened to me, then he's the only candidate for Tanist, unless the Senedd elect someone from outside the Royal Family, which is something they've not done for five centuries. There's no evidence my brother is involved in any plot against me but that doesn't stop others trying to make him next to succeed to the throne."

"That I'd guessed but I'm not sure I can help too much there. My contacts amongst the more conservative Cymric nobility are limited for obvious reasons."

"True, although your advice is always good. But we have evidence of another group, an Englisc

group who want to see me dead. They call themselves Us Alone.”

“Us Alone I’ve heard of, but why?” Aldwyn asked, “Surely you’re the one any Englisc group would want to keep alive?”

“Think about it,” interrupted Marian, “What Cei and the King are offering is equality and peace between Englisc and Cymric. What if what you really want isn’t peace but war. What if your aim is to provoke distrust and hatred, so that when a rebellion comes all Englisc will feel they’ve got to support their side, because the hatred between Englisc and Cymric is just too great for any other choice?”

“If that’s what you want, hatred and fear between the two sides, then my husband isn’t a hero. He’s the greatest threat imaginable to their plans, a just and honourable man who can defuse the hatred and bring us together as one nation. Worst of all, a man who’s a Cymric yet married to a descendant of the old Englisc kings. It’s something that would ruin their vision of a separate Englisc state built on some imagined racial purity.”

Cei nodded, “Kill me and the risk of civil war in the Englisc speaking areas within the next decade or so becomes that much greater.”

“So does your intelligence suggest any names?” asked Aldwyn .

“No. That’s the problem. There’s three obvious possibilities; the three Englisc representatives on the Senedd that the King nominated, Ecgbert, Raedwald and Hereward. They all have a past history of violent opposition to the Crown but that was before the peace conference and, let’s be honest, some of the Crown forces were not being too particular about what they did either. But all three swore to uphold the agreement, and they swore loyalty to the King’s policies, even if they couldn’t all bring themselves to swear loyalty to the King.”

“But someone somewhere is leaking information,” said Marian. “Things said in private discussions between the Privy Council and the Englisc representatives have got out, and there have been attempts on Cei’s life and on the King’s.”

“And that’s why you asked me to come to Y Dref Wen.”

“Yes,” said Cei. “We kept it quiet for now but that can’t last. Someone is a traitor and we need to find out who it is.

“Intelligence has done everything it could. We’ve checked all messages, done quite a few other things I’ll not go into, and we’ve got nowhere. The three Englisc representatives are all gathering here for the enthronement of the new Bishop of Y Dref Wen. It’s a chance to question them all. The new laws say they can ask to be questioned in Englisc and that’s best done by a native speaker who could pick up things a Cymric speaker might miss. Can you do it?”