

# Chapter One

## *The Iron Man*

Hugh had little time for women. As the Lord of Corfe and Earl of Dorsetshire, his duties and responsibilities kept him too preoccupied to spend much time on the subject. That wasn't to say he *disliked* women, but Hugh considered himself far too burdened with the duties of his office to bother with the subject of female companionship.

He was known as “Isarnon,” or “the Iron Hand,” a cognomen he had carried all his life, by way of his Celtic ancestry, and a coming from a family of iron prospectors and quarriers. Hugh had been of marrying age for nearly two decades, but the prospect of matrimony seemed as tempting as trying to teach a dog to ride a horse: in a word, it felt *unnecessary*.

Therefore, when the news arrived that his friend Æthelwald was making a surprise visit to Corfe that evening, Hugh never would have guessed that it had anything to do with a woman. Æthelwald was another earl, a lord of East Anglia, and a favorite of King Edgar himself. He was a favorite of Hugh's too — he liked the man, rascalion or not. When the nobleman rode up Corfe's main street with his entourage, Hugh was waiting in the courtyard at the top of the hill.

Winter was breaking late over England that year, and the nights were still a bit too chilly for Hugh's liking, but that day was bright and clear and it was as pleasant an evening as anyone could hope for. Birds were still chirping and there wasn't a cloud in the sky; the sun wouldn't set for another hour or so. Æthelwald rode at the head of a small group, less than twenty in all, and his cloak was loose around his throat. The red-haired lord gave it a bit of a flip as he dismounted from his horse.

Hugh was the taller of the two by at least a head or more, but the two men embraced one another as Æthelwald laughed. “Hugh! By Edgar's own beard, it's good to see you.” The smaller man grinned, his smooth face framing a pair of bright eyes, shining with mirth and mischief.

“You should've sent word ahead that you'd be coming so I would have been better prepared for your arrival. Come, come.” There was a great flurry of activity in the yard as the two lords passed within, all while the servants saw to helping Æthelwald's retinue.

“I haven't had the pleasure of visiting Hugh's Hall for quite some time,” Æthelwald said as they entered the great doors and into the common area. A fire was burning in the pit, with a long, thin column of dark smoke that passed up and out through a chimney hole in the ceiling.

The walls were bright lime wash, slashed with gold and crimson by the sunlight that came in through narrow windows, framed by tall timber columns. “Was that a second floor I saw on the ride in?”

Hugh nodded. “Finished it last autumn. I’m quite pleased with how everything it turned out.”

Æthelwald grinned again. “You’re still the life of the party, Hugh, as always.”

“That’s no little praise, coming from you.” The men ascended a stairwell to the second floor, where Hugh’s living quarters and a private sitting room had been constructed. The walls and floors were built of oak, heavy and solid, whose joints were so snug that they refused to creak, even in a summer storm. It also had the luxury of a second story fireplace, with a set of low seats. Æthelwald took one while unfastening the tie about his neck, and Hugh took another. “Why the sudden visit? I was set to return to the capital in a few more days.”

“Ah, but that’s why I’m here to begin with!” Æthelwald pointed at him with a dramatic flourish. “Haven’t you heard the news?”

“News? What news? The townsfolk around these parts still talk about the time the tannery burnt down and that was almost ten years ago. If it’s not a sick sheep or a bumper wheat crop, it’s not worth talking about here.”

Æthelwald seemed to think about that. “I suppose a place like this would suit someone like you, Hugh.”

“I *like* the quiet, Æthelwald. Corfe’s a boring place, and that suits me just fine.” A servant brought in a pair of tall cups. “Thank you, Isolda,” Hugh said, taking the first offered cup from the woman.

Æthelwald took the other with a smile, and then slowly turned his head as the serving girl left, wiping her hands on the white apron tied around her waist. After a taking a moment to appreciate the view, the younger lord turned back and found Hugh staring at him.

Æthelwald tilted his head. “What?”

Hugh shook his head and took a drink. The beer was dark and thick with a hint of honey. “I wouldn’t,” he interjected. “Isolda can become very ... vocal, and her man Gerard’s a very jealous sort.”

Æthelwald scrunched up his face. “You’re already taking all of the fun out of this trip, Hugh.”

“It’s good for you.”

Æthelwald took a long sip of his beverage, and sighed. “At least you know how to treat a guest right. Edgar does nothing but drink wine these days.”

The pair drank and talked of other things for a time, as Æthelwald filled him in of events at Winchester, but soon Hugh’s patience wore out. “You mentioned some kind of news earlier. What news?”

Æthelwald took a long drink from his cup and wriggled his eyebrows at the other lord. “I was wondering how long you’d hold out.”

“Well, out with it, then.”

Æthelwald finished his beer, licked his lips clean, and set the empty cup to one side. “You’ve heard the name ‘Ordgar’ before, haven’t you?”

“Lord of Exanceaster.” Hugh shook his head. “If this has to do with those rumors of him wanting to start a war, I don’t think there’s much truth to them. Ordgar’s a very private sort, but that’s a far step from treason.”

“Those aren’t the rumors I’m talking about.” Æthelwald had that glimmer in his eyes again, the sort of satisfaction that comes with knowing something. “He’s a widower, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“Well, apparently his Lady did him one good service before she died. Ordgar has a daughter and there’ve been stories swirling through the capital for weeks now about how she’s the fairest damsel to be found from here to Bernicia.” He wiggled his red eyebrows again as Hugh finished draining his glass. “Edgar got wind of it.”

“Yes, and?”

“And he’s decided that he wants to know if it’s the truth or not. If it *is* the truth, he’s prepared to offer her nothing less than his hand in marriage.”

“He *what?*”

“Come now Hugh, you can hardly blame him. Our Edgar’s been stuck in a melancholy ever since Ethelfled died, and no King is prepared to lose his Queen so early.”

“Nor a man his wife, I suppose.” Hugh rubbed at his chin and realized that his beard was in need of a trim. “But still, to be willing to offer up a prize like *that* on nothing more than a rumor.... What on earth is Edgar thinking?”

Æthelwald shrugged. “He’s a King with no legitimate heir *and* he’s lonely. What better reason is there for getting married than that?”

“You’re one to talk, Æthelwald. We’ll see a western sunrise before I see you settle for keeping just one woman in your bed.”

The other man grinned again. “A man only gets one life, Hugh. I’m just living mine a little more vigorously than others might, that’s all.”

Hugh shook his head and stood up, scooping up both cups to set on a small table by the door where they’d be fetched and cleaned later. “So what about our king’s momentary rush to madness brings you to my door?”

“Don’t be so heartless, Hugh.” Æthelwald put a hand to his chest and sighed. “It’s almost a whole day’s trip by boat from Winchester to get here. A man needs a little rest before he starts the next leg.”

“Well surely you didn’t come here just to tell me about Edgar’s lovesickness.”

“No, indeed. I’m on my way to Exanceaster to find out the truth about whether Ordgar’s daughter is as much a sight to behold as the stories say.” The true devilry in Æthelwald’s smile came to the surface as he stood up and clapped Hugh on the shoulder. “And you’re coming with me.”

Hugh felt his mouth go slack for a moment, as anything he could have said vanished from his mind. Before he had the chance to recover, there was a knock on the door, and they both turned to see the new arrival.

It was an enormous man, black-haired like Hugh, but darker still, and robed all in black. The sight of him was both a relief and an unexpected joy to the Lord Isarnon. “Oswolf!”

The clergyman bowed. “A thousand pardons, Milord, tis not my habit t’ intrude, but I didn’t want t’ keep ye waiting any longer this evening.”

Hugh’s relief suddenly turned into more confusion. “Waiting on wait?”

Oswolf straightened again. “For the spring festival, Milord — ye asked me t’ pay ye a visit for discussing the thing in more detail, if you’ll recall.”

“Oswolf!” Æthelwald sidestepped around Hugh and reached out a hand towards the priest. “You old devil. It’s been too long.”

Oswolf permitted himself a wide smile and took the lord’s offered arm, grasping it in a strong grip. It was not the greeting of a proper man of the cloth, but then, there were a number of

things about Oswolf that were hardly proper. Hugh and Oswolf went a long way back together and had a great many secrets to share with one another. Oswolf's introduction to priesthood was a matter of survival, not of choice. "Tis good t' see ye again, Milord Æthelwald. I hope good King Edgar's well and all?"

"Spry as ever. Don't trouble yourself apologizing, my visit was an unexpected one, I'm afraid, so the fault lies with me this time."

"That's certainly *never* happened before," Hugh said, taking a seat again as he tried to compose his thoughts. "Come in, Oswolf, we can talk things over in here."

Æthelwald took his seat once again before the priest came inside. His body was large, but it was a bulk of muscle, not fat; the wooden seat creaked under his weight.

"Who's your friend?" Æthelwald asked.

Hugh hadn't noticed anyone else, but lost in a half-dozen thoughts at once, that was no surprise. He looked up, catching a flash of something chestnut at the door and had to blink before it came into view. A young woman was standing in the shadow of the doorway, just out of the light of the setting sun. Hugh could hear the birds still singing through the window. Her hair was long and matched her eyes, but it was bound upon her head, keeping it short and above her shoulders, save for a wisp or two that drifted down across her temples. She was pale, her face unlined and smooth, and her small hands were folded in place across her lap.

Hugh felt a hand at his shoulder, and started when he looked up and saw Æthelwald looking back at him. "Wake up, man. Nap on your own time." Æthelwald looked over to the silent woman at the door and back again.

Oswolf, either not noticing his friend's distraction — or because of it — waved the young woman in. "Come in, Elena. This's Milord Æthelwald, a gentry man of East Anglia, and one of King Edgar's own. Milords both," Oswolf extended a hand and set it on the woman's shoulder as she stood next to his seat "this is Elena, a woman o' good standing and proper bearing, to be sure. She's a good help t' a poor, addle-brained sort such as me self."

"And you're training her for the veil, then? Such a pity." Æthelwald seemed almost disappointed, and the looks he gave Elena were a little too curious.

Hugh and Oswolf both shared a glance, likely too quickly for Æthelwald to catch. "Ah no, Milord, she's simply under me protection for now, as it were."

Elena seemed to catch the look, and there was a slight, downward twitch at the corner of her mouth.

Hugh thought it best to change the subject. “So tell us more about this woman we’ll be looking for in Exanceaster. What if she just turns out to be the figment of someone’s overactive imagination?”

Æthelwald turned back. “So you’ve decided you’ll come along after all?”

The Lord of Corfe sighed. “Edgar will be sore at me if I don’t go, so I may as well grit my teeth and make the best of it.”

“I thought you might see it that way.” Æthelwald grinned and shifted in his seat. “Given what they’re saying about her at court, she *is* a beauty. Fair of face, long golden hair, eyes to make a man weep and such things. It’s any wonder that Ordgar hasn’t married her off already, but for all anyone knows he’s biding his time and waiting for the best suitor to show his hand first.”

“You seem to know a great deal about a woman nobody’s even seen before.”

“Why do you think Edgar’s sending us to get to the bottom of things? These stories have been floating about for a while now, and it’s our job to get to the bottom of them, one way, or another.” He coughed. “Of course, on the other hand, it’s possible that Ordgar looks like a horse and his daughter inherited the wrong end of it, but we’ll find out the truth before much longer. There’s a ship waiting for us down at Swanwich to take us there in the morning.”

Hugh closed his eyes for a moment, trying to summon back some ethereal memory of England’s southern coastline. After a moment, he gave up. “How long of a journey is it?”

“I’d wager another day or so by sea, two, if the weather’s poor.”

“Sounds like ye’ll be right busy for a while,” Oswolf said.

“Think you can spare him for a little while, Father?”

“Think nothing of it, Milord. Lord Hugh’s the sort what ne’er strays too far from home for very long.”

Hugh rolled his eyes while the other two shared a smile. He caught sight of Elena’s face, and that stopped him from speaking up. He found himself watching her, even while she watched all of them— never speaking, but listening intently and looking disapproving, somehow. On a whim, he spoke to her. “And what do *you* think, Elena?”

To her merit, she didn't stare or look surprised at his calling on her. "I think that any woman who relies solely on her beauty will be found lacking in a myriad of other ways." Elena nodded, as if to emphasize the point. She had a pleasant voice, soft, and with a touch of something he couldn't put his finger on.

Æthelwald laughed, but it was a bark, somewhere between surprised and mocking. "This little bird of yours has talons, Oswolf."

"She's a wee bit young, Milord, but I' hoping t' teach her a thing or two before she has t' leave the nest."

Out the nearby window, Hugh could see a flock of starlings on the bare branches, picking at the green buds that were starting to bloom. He stared for a moment, and then turned back again. "It's late. You and your Starling are welcome to stay for supper if you like, Oswolf. We'll be of a better mind to discuss that festival with something warm in our bellies, too."

"Your hospitality is something t' be admired, Milord, and we'll be glad to take ye up on your offer."

For her part, Elena nodded and showed a faint smile of agreement. There was something about her that the Lord couldn't put his finger on — whether she was intimidated or not, or if she understood just what those hungry looks of Æthelwald really meant.

Hugh Isarnon decided that he had better keep a close eye on his friend for the rest of that evening.