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My Perfect Cousin

by Richard Rewell

The woman's long black hair cascaded down upon her white shoulders as she rose from under the fur skins from the Norse lands and soft wool from the Mediterranean countries far to the south. Her bare feet swung out of the bed and landed upon the sweet grasses, lavender and apple blossom that provided a pleasing fragrance as well as insulation from the cold granite floor slabs.

The woman padded to the window, opened the wooden shutters, briefly watched the geese flying over the marshlands beyond the castle walls and looked down into the courtyard.

"So that's why you got up husband" said the woman to herself, observing from 100 feet above, a wounded man being helped from his horse. The woman then rapidly dressed, left the bed chamber and descended a damp stone spiral staircase.

At the bottom of the staircase she met one of her husband's guards who opened the door to the great hall. "Thank you, Edwin" she said

"Madam" nodded Edwin, and the woman entered the great hall, her sandals crushing horse chestnut blossom, rose petals and more lavender until she reached the wolf skin rug before the blazing fire where stood her husband.

The woman's husband wore black breeches and a simple white shirt, its sleeves rolled to his shoulders displaying the scars of past battles. His hair was yellow.

At the opposite end of the great hall the mighty oak doors opened, and the wounded man limped in, assisted by a man with long grey hair and a grey beard that stretched to his waste.

The wounded man on approaching the couple at the fire fell to his knees saying "Your cousin is dead majesty."

"Then may the Lord grant him eternal peace" said the man by the fire as it spat grit and splinters onto the wolf skin rug and he turned and stared into the flames saying "He was a perfect cousin you know. He was a fine swordsman, always let me beat him, he could outrun me too. He was brave and true. Looked after me when I was ill. Unlike my bloody parents."

"Darling I'm so sorry. But what now?" said his wife.

The woman's husband spun around and looked at the man with long grey hair "Egbert, get the friars to say mass for my cousin." And turning to the wounded man said "Will you come with us?"

"Yes, Sire I will"

"Good. We ride tonight. With my reputation intact, I hope."

"Husband will you explain to me what is happening"

"Well, I promised William of Normandy the throne of England. Then, being a bit naughty I reneged on that. But after my great victory over the northern barbarians I thought, as I travelled back that no I'll lose the next fight against William. My army was exhausted, so I contacted William and we agreed I can't lose face so we thought we'd get someone to stand in for me. Doing that means, I Harold Godwinson King of England dies a hero. But in fact I don't die, I simply disappear. And my perfect cousin dies for my worthy cause. Bless him."

"Oh, how clever dear" said the former king Harold's wife Ealdgyth.

"William has asked me to head west. Cornwall, Wales, places like that. Got to deal with pirates, ruffians, outlaws. A fine challenge. Take you, the children and my best men."

"You fancy coming along?" said Harold to the man with the long grey hair and beard"

"Yes Sire. I've always been interest in the west, the druids you know."

Ealdgyth and the wounded man stifled their yawns.

"Really?" said Harold "But good that's settled then. And maybe we'll have a chance to do some good. I suppose we'll have to change our names." Said Harold before sliding his arm around Ealdgyth's waste saying "We might become famous dear. When we are far away in Cornwall, I'm going to call myself Arthur Pendragon. And you can be Guinevere."