

Home-cresting

by Louise Carr

Sand Heath, Rendlesham, 650AD

Sky still as bones. Storm is approaching the sand-ling. Bracken whorled like snake, tense in this purple haze-scape. The man has finally allowed Tate heather-rights, to repair the hole in her roof, and that should mean relief, but Enna has come too. Unexpected, after their words this morning. Eyes vivid-dark, auburn cloaks swaddling her tiny body despite the middle-summer stifling, she snatches at stems until Tate can bear her no longer.

‘Pick heather, not gorse.’

‘What’s the difference?’ Enna pouts.

‘Colour. And gorse catches fire just breathing on it.’

‘Yet I prefer gorse. Smell of warmed butter, and poison-yellow suits my hair.’

‘Do you want to burn down my hearth?’

Enna clutches Tate’s sleeve as a night-bird lets loose its thought-rattling chur.

‘I *want* you to know,’ she warns.

Scud of mutton feet over the hollow brown ground and Tate’s head begins to ache. ‘We must beat the rain, Enna. We’ve collected nothing.’

Enna ignores her, waving a pale arm across the heath, over colonies of sheep chewing the wheat-grey ground, the silvery, heaven-blue butterflies roosting on the tussocks. 'I want you to *know*... how badly your home-crested fares against mine.'

'Home-*crested*?'

Whatever Tate expects to hear, it is not this.

'Home-coming to these goose-turd flatlands of the east. Vision it. When you're wrung out from journeying, into a... *swatch* of yourself –'

So triumphant over 'swatch'. Tate laughs, regrets it.

'Yes,' she frowns, 'I too have many words, Tate. When you finally arrive, but you'll never feel such giddy relief on cresting the last hill, looking down on your valley, your treetop tufts, the glint on your water. You'll never see your life so hoarded.'

'I know what it's like to come home.'

'*You* never know when your journey ends. Could pass Rendlesham, obscured by trees. You lose. You're never satisfied. All because *you* are of the Angles, and I am Northumbria.'

'Why must one win, one be defeated?'

'We claim we know one another, Tate, but we're so different.'

Enna draws her hand away and Tate feels its absence as soft earth from a lifted fingertip. Pitch of thunder in the purpling gloom and as it subsides, such stillness. Enna is hushed to the depths, all hissing, spinning passion felled, so Tate can vision the glistening thought in Enna's head, balanced on the needle-sharp between submission and attack.

Tate sets her jaw tight; ready.

‘Why?’ Enna demands. ‘Won’t you fight for me?’

There it is.

Words, like swords, must be chosen wisely.

‘Enna, think how impossible it would make us.’

‘We are impossible already,’ she spits.

But she is unspooling. She smiles. A lullula warbler bubbles the air with the freshness of water-song, soothing and sweet. Tate watches her lover stretch, peel white slivers of arms away from her sides and hold them over her head.

‘Tate,’ she says, reaching to the bone-still sky, the first petal of rain. ‘Tate.’

Tate waits.

Waits.

‘Tate.’ Her voice insubstantial as smoke.

‘Do you love me?’