

Elfrith's Ghost

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Anglo-Saxon is still my favorite language. Ever since I started writing, I've played a bit with the conventions of prosody, but this was the first time I felt it was at all successful. This was published in *Realms of Fantasy*.

Elfrith stood from her spinning and stretched, her hands nearly touching the thatch of the roof overhead. "I've worked enough," she said to her mother, fair Frithe. "I heard from the herder who sold us the wool yesterday: in the chalk hills to the west is a villa. It was built by the ancients, he said."

"It's dangerous, daughter," said Frithe. She looked round the room at their spindles and looms. "Here is safe."

Fractious, the age of fifteen: Elfrith laughed: "I wear a knife, sharp as words. The wolves wake at dusk, and the bears not at all until spring. And the northland invaders cannot come 'til winter seas calm. The villa is near. I can run there and back and be home before dark." So Elfrith said.

Frithe left her loom, stood to stare out the door. The cold grassy downs had no wonders to hide, and no neighbors nearby: only herders, as humble and shaggy as sheep.

A mother fears much, for each moment has risk. She learns to leave be, to let children learn. Still, she dares not ignore certain threats. The villa was like that. "A ghost haunts its halls. It will hurt you," said Frithe.

"I have this charm," Elfrith said. Between her new breasts lay a scratched copper coin. As a child gleaning grain after harvest she'd found it, and augured a hole, caught the coin on a cord. She held it up high, showed the face on one side, worn almost away. She loved ancient things. "It will guard me, the charm."

But Frithe was wise. "Your charm will not work on the old ones. They made it; their ghosts do not go at its sending."

"Were they demons, the ancients?" Elfrith asked.

Her mother laughed, a sad sound. "No. Men from far Rome, with dark hair and gold skin, and brown eyes like hounds': small-seeming but handsome. But their ghosts can destroy. I can't save you from them. Please do not go." Upset, Frithe wept, and touched by her tears, Elfrith swore not to go there that day.

But other days came. At fifteen, the fevers that seep through the skin are fiercer than fear or long-fingered love. So Elfrith went, but in silence. She ran the long path under dull, sullen skies spattered with rain. She saw no wolves, no bears and no Northmen – saw nothing but sheep, much-grazed grass, and far trees. Safe and rain-soaked, Elfrith came up the long chalk hill to the villa.

The villa was old. The ancients had made it, the dark men of Rome. Centuries ago, they had sailed from the south to steal silver and dogs, came arrayed in their armies to claim the long land. Clever in craft, the

dark ones created: they built the bermed road she'd seen to the east, which marched across copses and swamps to the sea. And stories were told, of a city of stone ten days' travel west: ten thousand might dwell there, each with a roof and a room of his own. And north was a wall that straddled the land, its ends sunk in sea.

So they said, and Elfritha believed this. What wonders might hide in the many-roomed home of men great as gods?

Beneath the hill's brow, rooms surrounded a yard, now waist-deep in weeds. Windows were there, dark holes in the golden-white walls. Elfritha ducked into ghostless gloom.

Dull light and rain dripped through the ruined roof. The girl walked warily, picking her path through rubble and dirt. The dim forms of frescoes filled the pale walls, their blurred lines lost, without sense in the dusk. There were no ghosts.

Into the next room. Here the roof was intact, the walls well-preserved. Painted on one was an urn filled with herbs, the brush strokes so fine that when she looked closely, she saw dew on each leaf. Beneath her feet, a mosaic on the floor was a maze of bright tiles, all gray through the dirt. She knelt near the maze, traced its path with her hands, leaving stripes in the dust but finding no end. Still no ghosts.

Into another. No windows were here, but cold light seeped through a handful of holes left by lost tiles. Except for a stain where water soaked through in one darkened corner, these walls were unweathered, still white.

And a hunt poured across them, a fair-painted fresco that filled all the walls. Across a bright field fled a russet-furred stag, its antlers like trees. Long legs stretched out, a half-score of hounds ran behind. And following all came a man, archer's bow in one hand.

Her mother spoke truth. The ancient was dark, and short as Elfritha: well-shaped, gold-skinned and bright-eyed, with black curls on his brow. His clothing was simple: a tunic and sandals that tied to mid-calf. The pale fabric's movement was frozen, but Elfritha saw the limned shape of his thigh. Her chest ached, as though she'd run far.

His mouth laughed: all paint. When she stood close, she saw the brushstrokes that shaped eyes, brown and black and a single white dot. She stepped back: the paint vanished and the eyes came to life.

Elfritha yearned, with a pang like the sharp taste of plums. His skin would be rich with summer's hot smell, and taste salty-sweet. The lips would be firm and then soft. His hands would put down the bow and embrace her, his clever long fingers caressing her skin. She shivered and wept, and caught up the coin, held it tight to her heart.

Closing her eyes, she stroked the man's image, creating the shadow of form in her mind: this his thigh, this his chest. And wrapped in her hand, his flesh would feel--thus. She kissed the cold wall, pressed her face to his throat.

But a wall does not warm. She stepped back at last, and saw paint on her wet, dirty hands. The bright art was blurred; blinded, his eyes.

Five hundred years dead, the man on the wall.

A mother hopes much, but knows more. Elfritha fled home, and found Frithe waiting, fire at her hearth. Frithe gathered her close; but still the girl wept, from a pain that no mother can ease. This Frithe knew: she had once been fifteen, and walked the chalk hills and been haunted, as well.

