



ON THE HIGH MOOR OF ELMET, ghostly in the pale winter light, wind hissed like grit through frozen bracken. Hild eased Cygnet to a halt, loosened the reins, and hooked one foot up across the saddle to wait. The big mare turned her rump to the wind, but Hild drank deep of the cold, clean air, unbreathed by any but lost sheep and soaring birds.

Below her, seven riders picked their way up the slope: six striplings, alike in coarse grey cloaks and plain leather caps, and Wilfram, her Hound. In this world of silvery lichen and snow-dusted rock, Wilfram, in the gleaming glory of a warrior gesith, was the only splash of colour: blue cloak, silvered war hat, and great shield, big enough to cover a man from collar to shin in a shield wall, its leather cover painted half with the white-on-green hazel tree of Elmet and half in purple with her own Yffing boar. He was keeping the younglings to a deliberate pace, no doubt to give the lady time to whisper with the wind, or walk with the wights, or whatever else her Hounds thought she did to gain uncanny knowledge. So many songs, so many stories: Hild Yffing, light of the world and godmouth; hægtes and freemartin; Butcherbird and king's fist.

Old songs, all of them. Time for new ones.

She turned in the saddle, gauging the distance to the top of the moor. From there she could see for miles, and, as new-made lady of Elmet, everything she saw was hers—or would be when she had the spears to defend it.