



**KING
ALFRED
AND
THE ICE COFFIN**

*Kevin Crossley-Holland
illustrated by Chris Riddell*



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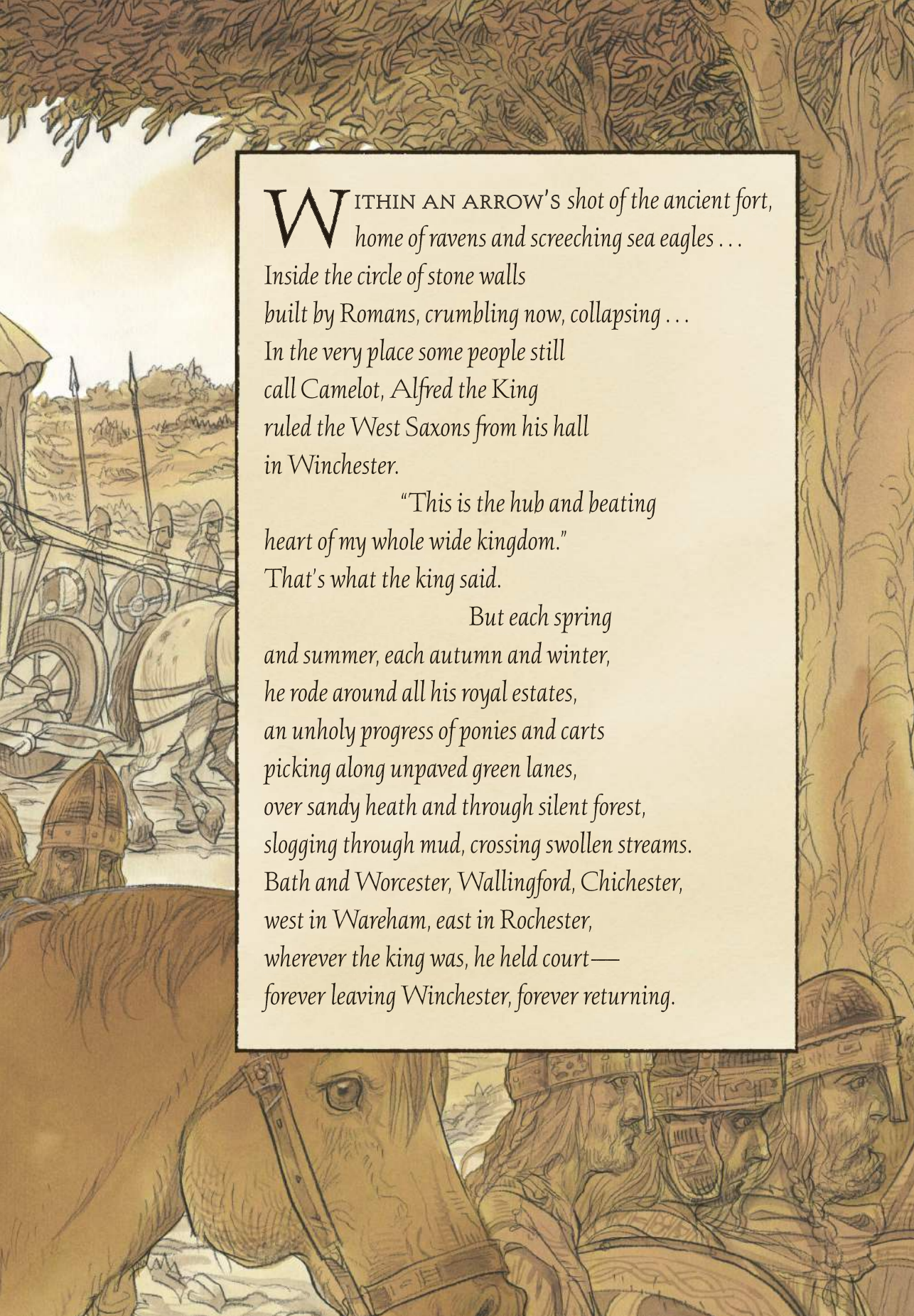
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*During my life I have done my best.
I trust that all of you who live
after me will remember me.*

—KING ALFRED





WITHIN AN ARROW'S shot of the ancient fort,
home of ravens and screeching sea eagles . . .

Inside the circle of stone walls
built by Romans, crumbling now, collapsing . . .
In the very place some people still
call Camelot, Alfred the King
ruled the West Saxons from his hall
in Winchester.

*"This is the hub and beating
heart of my whole wide kingdom."
That's what the king said.*

*But each spring
and summer, each autumn and winter,
he rode around all his royal estates,
an unholy progress of ponies and carts
picking along unpaved green lanes,
over sandy heath and through silent forest,
slogging through mud, crossing swollen streams.
Bath and Worcester, Wallingford, Chichester,
west in Wareham, east in Rochester,
wherever the king was, he held court—
forever leaving Winchester, forever returning.*

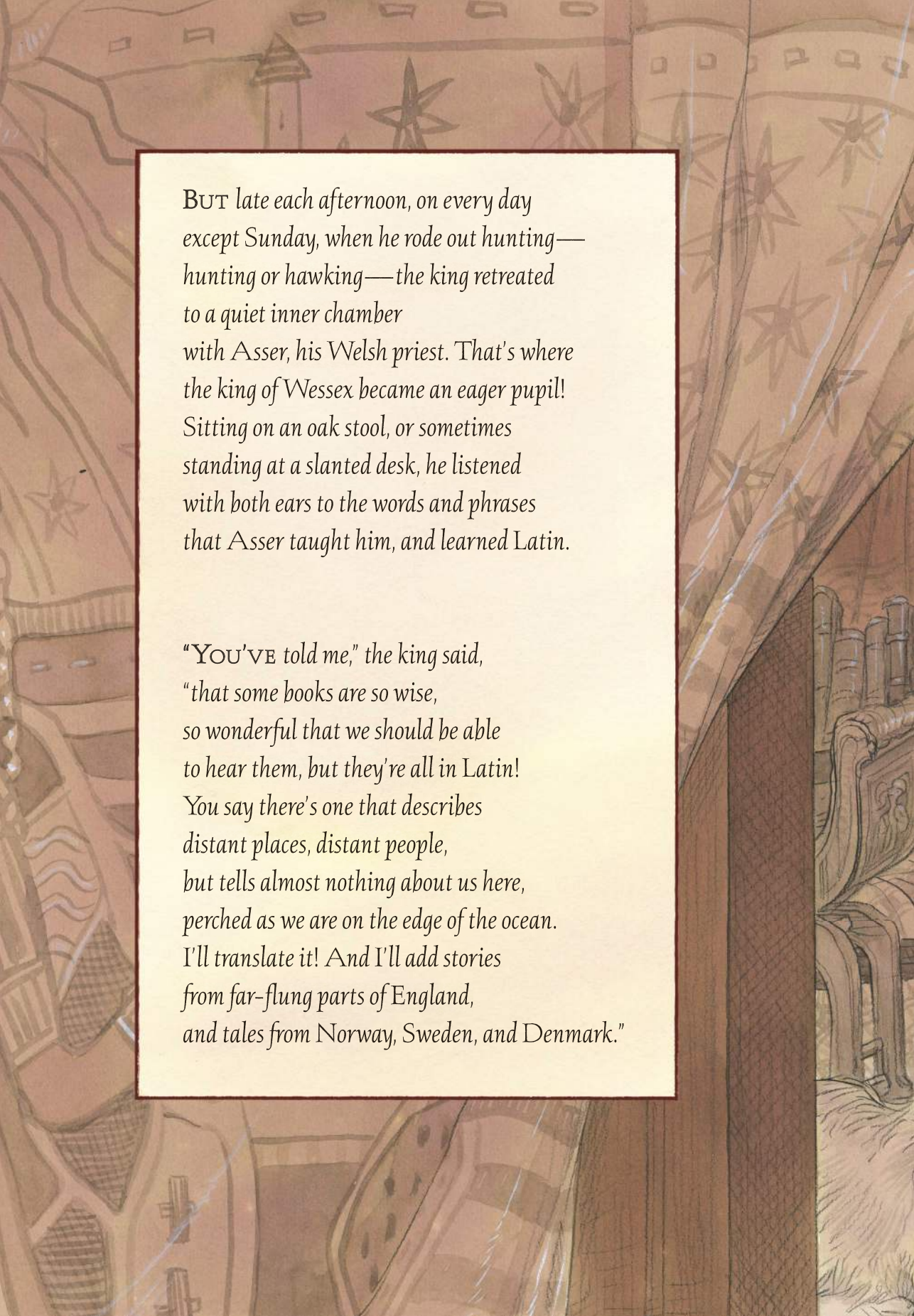






AT dawn all the king's duties began. As soon as he heard his day-trumpeters, Alfred dressed, proceeded to the hall, and held court. He conferred with advisors and heard messengers; he listened to arguments and petitions, handed down decisions, and gave grants of land, rewards, punishments. And on many days the king met members of his household and thanked them for their work—his weaponsmiths and craftsmen, his falconers, huntsmen, and kennelmen.





BUT late each afternoon, on every day except Sunday, when he rode out hunting—hunting or hawking—the king retreated to a quiet inner chamber with Asser, his Welsh priest. That's where the king of Wessex became an eager pupil! Sitting on an oak stool, or sometimes standing at a slanted desk, he listened with both ears to the words and phrases that Asser taught him, and learned Latin.

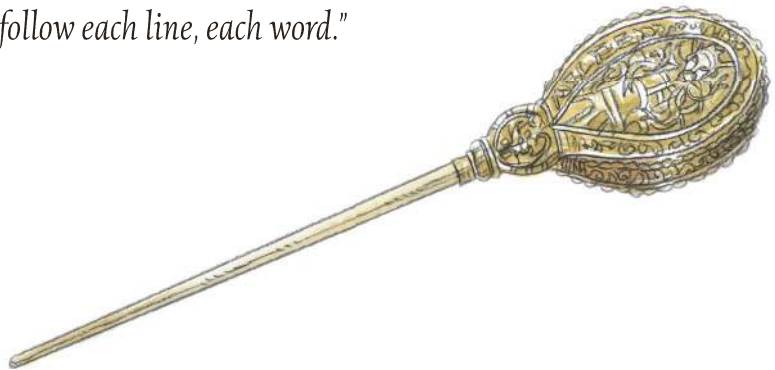
"YOU'VE told me," the king said, "that some books are so wise, so wonderful that we should be able to hear them, but they're all in Latin! You say there's one that describes distant places, distant people, but tells almost nothing about us here, perched as we are on the edge of the ocean. I'll translate it! And I'll add stories from far-flung parts of England, and tales from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark."





ASSER smiled and tugged his black beard.
"As if you're not already too busy
ruling a kingdom, laying down new laws,
to-ing and fro-ing, fortifying towns,
and always keeping a sharp eye on the Danes
since you and their leader, Guthrum, made peace
and promised to share the land between you."

"EVEN so, I want my people to hear and to learn,"
the king replied. "They're not animals.
And how can they do that without
any books in our own language?
I want them to grow close to God.
I'll have my scribes make copies
and send them to all my bishops
with precious pointers made of ivory
and crystal, enamel and gold, so that they
can follow each line, each word."



ÆTHELWOLF



OSBURH



ÆTHELSTAN



ÆTHELBAID



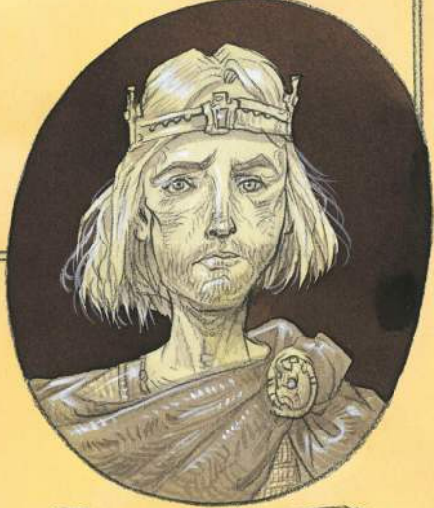
ÆTHELBERHT



ÆTHELRED



EALHSWITH



ALFRED

THEN King Alfred asked Asser, "There's a saying, isn't there? 'Only God knows what's in store for a growing child.' When I was a boy, I never imagined that all four of my elder brothers would die before I did. I never supposed that I would be crowned king.

"I was only twenty-two then and no one thought I'd last very long. No, no, not with all the Viking attacks and this daily pain in my poor gut. It feels like a tangled cat's cradle."

THE king smiled. "I was a weakling. You must have heard how, when I was nineteen, I collapsed at the altar on the very morning I married my bride, Ealhswith of Mercia. I was nearly dead before I was wed! But here I am, still alive. And however long I live, I vow that I will serve my people."

