

Hilda

Hilda 1. A family secret. 876 AD

I looked out across the misty creek. The reeds ruffled gently in the summer breeze. After four years of planning and negotiation it is my wedding day. The preparations have been underway since I was eight. All the food is ready along with the mead and the ale.

My father has promised he'll give me away without making endless speeches and exaggerations, but I'm not so sure. He can't resist an audience and us South Folk are known to be boastful and proud. Everyone, but everyone, will be there: All quests have been paused for the week. The swords have been prepared for exchange, one from Sten's family, one from mine, and the silver ring with its distinctive interwoven design.

My own hair was braided last night, I have a new set of clothes, and a new future awaits. Sten will have had a shave and a fresh tattoo. I don't know what styles and settings *The Creed* will have chosen for him, but I'll soon find out.

I was about to turn back along the grassy path that led to the village when I noticed something on the horizon. I squinted and looked again. Then I heard a faint but familiar click. Oh no. Not today! Please not today! But there was no mistaking it: a raiding ship, heading this way. I checked the tide and the wind.

We had a bit of time. I raced back and raised the alarm. Everyone knew the drill but we had so much food – boiled meat, bread and nettles – too much to carry. And the *mundr* (this is called 'bride price' in the manual: edition 6.2), the *heiman-fylgia* (the 'dowry') and the *morgden-gifu* (the 'morning gift'). What to do with that?

Sten, suddenly a man, stepped in and made the decision: bury the silver and take the animals and as much food as we can manage. Without food we cannot live. My father agreed. Just do it, but don't let anyone see you and don't tell anyone where you put the treasure.

So that's what we did. We hid the whole lot: 200 ingots in one spot. There were too many roots to dig close to the oak, so we had to move a bit further into the open field where the pigs snuffled around and where the soil was already disturbed. I paced the distances. We would be back.

Then we vanished into the shadows of the forest leaving 30 casks of liquor behind. We ran through the thick green leaves, in and out of the dappled light, we ran on to the edge of the terrain and we crossed over into another zone.

I was sure we would return. One day there would be another little click and we'd be allowed home. Sometimes times the raiders stay for years, sometimes just a few weeks. To be honest, no one really knows who they are or where they come from. Legend has it that we are all of Viking blood: names, and traditions mingled. Our currencies and ingots are much the same, and so are the scores we settle.

That early morning is etched on my memory. I never did get back to Astrbrú. Sten and I were married, but in another settlement and after another two year's preparation (just 100 ingots this time). Now, 30 years on, I am old. I am sick and I know I don't have long to live. The coordinates are logged in *The*

Creed, but in real life only Sten and I knew where the silver was buried, and Sten was disappeared by a vicious algorithm many moons ago.

I shouldn't let our secret die. I decided it was time to tell my eldest daughter, also called Hilda – the warrior. Maybe, one day, she'd be sent across the border. If she found the old oak tree, and if she followed in my footsteps we'd be back in the game.

Hilda 2. A big surprise. 2021 AD

The tractor was brand new. A bright red Massey Ferguson 8S Exclusive, bundled with the MF precision farming package. After months of indecision I had finally gone for a model at the top of the range. I was tempted by the John Deere, 7R 270 but in the end, I went for the Fergie. I had done my research and at the end of the day there is not much to choose between the two.¹ I know farmers who say 'If she isn't red, keep her in the shed. I'm not as prejudiced as that, but to be honest, I've never really liked the green. In any case, Massey Ferguson is a good brand. The 8S had just won a prestigious award for design. The cab was beautifully laid out: 360 degrees visibility, a multi-pad joystick, total comfort and unrivalled control and connectivity. No wonder it had been named tractor of the year.

It was early March, and still cold enough to see your breath. I spent what seemed like half the morning setting up the Stanhay pro air 785. I have learned the hard way that you have to get the calibration just right. I went through the process methodically, one step at a time. I positioned the seed disc and the singulator, adjusted the gearing and filled the hoppers. Finally, I was good to go. I climbed up into the cab and started the engine. The radio came on (always radio 4) and the digital display sprang into life. I was still getting used to the new software it but I'd programmed the precision farming settings and downloaded the database.

I sometimes wonder if I really need all these gadgets. I know the land like the back of my hand. I know the gentle curves of the fields and the way they dip down towards the creek, I know where the soil is still a bit gravelly and I know where the water lies after heavy rain. The farm has been in my family for as long as anyone can remember. Some say my ancestors were from here, and some say we are of Viking descent.

I pulled in to a large layby to let some cars pass. It was not far to go now, next gate on the left, but people get so impatient these days. Once I was in the field it was easy work. I fixed the depth of the drill and set off, birds in tow. Today's job was to plant the onion seed. Sometimes I grow potatoes, but this year it will be onions. The 8S was a dream: it almost drove itself. I settled into the rhythm and my thoughts wandered.

I had been widowed for a long time now. It was over ten years since the accident. Who would have thought I'd be running the whole farm on my own, or spending so much money on a fancy tractor? Things change. And not just for me. In a few weeks' time, Stan will be married. They've been planning the wedding for ages. The party will be in the village hall and from what I hear, everything is organised: the food, the drink and even the table decorations. Just the ring left to choose. I still can't quite believe it. Stan, my cheeky little fair-haired boy, now a grown man and planning to have children of his own. And what then? Will my grandchildren want to be farmers too? Youngsters nowadays spend all their time playing with computers – what future is there in that?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1kpZBYUAHo>

I was about half way across the southern edge of the field when a warning light flashed on the display screen to the left. Two linked circles. What could that mean? I loaded the manual and checked the icons. Fault 241. Disengage part 56 under the chassis to access the reset. Turn 90 degrees with screwdriver No. 12. Damn. Everything had been going so well.

I found part 56 easily enough but as I reached behind for the screwdriver, I caught sight of something else. A small hoop poking out of the earth. I pulled. It was a complete ring. I gave it a rub. It was not rusty. I rubbed again and a faint pattern began to grin through. I slipped it into my pocket. I'd give it a proper wash when I got home. The tractor started up immediately, automatically recording the fault and my location in its digital log.

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The delicate interwoven design brushed up beautifully. The ring was perfect. Stan could have it for his bride - it would be my gift. Come rain or shine, Stan always calls round for sausage and lentil casserole on a Thursday night. Although I say it myself, I am a rather good cook. After dinner I cleared the dishes away and showed him what I had found. He turned the ring around slowly in his big hand. Then he looked up: 'where did this come from? If this is what I think it is, then there will be more.' I explained about Fault 241, near the old oak tree. He jumped up. 'The tractor log' he said, 'let's check the tractor log'.

It was already dark, but there was no stopping him. The tractor led us to the exact location. I reversed a bit, adjusted the controls and put the headlights on full beam. Stan began to dig. He was right! With the second spade full he brought up a pile of metal pieces. Coins. Silver coins. There were dozens of them.

Next morning, I called the East Suffolk Archaeology service. The young lady from the portable antiquities team came right away and I took her over to the field. She was absolutely thrilled. She said it was the most significant find of her life, and soon it was in all the papers as well. 'A big surprise! Viking hoard discovered near Eastbridge.'

The silver coins, some 200 ingots in all, and two highly decorated sword hilts are now in the British Museum but to tell the truth, I never did hand over the wedding ring. I gave it to Stan and it remains in the family – linking us to each other, to our ancestors and to our land.

Hilda 3: the ghost 2035 AD

Everyone knows me as Alice but my real name is Hilda. I am twelve and a half. I was named after my grandmother who died when I was quite young. I live with my parents on a farm near Eastbridge. Sometimes they grow potatoes, sometimes onions. They have a shed of tractors and my dad is always busy, but I am bored. There is nothing to do – and when I say nothing, I mean nothing, absolutely nothing. Just the fields and the creek beyond.

Thank goodness for my computer. I love my computer, and I love my character in *the Creed*. I decided to call her Hilda, and I gave her long golden hair, just like mine. Sometimes I am so engrossed I think I am possessed by Hilda. I have to plan for the year ahead, store food, manage her tribe, gather crops, and organize quests and raids. I selected metal work as their special skill. There is a library of objects they can make, and lovely designs to choose from. It takes time to build up enough ingots to pay for a

wedding, but that's what you have to do. If there are no weddings, there are no children, and no more points.

I decided that Hilda should marry Sten, who is another character I invented. In this game you have to arrange everything. You have to pick the ring, and a sword hilt and you need at least 100 ingots for even a basic wedding. I decided to go for a more lavish option: 200 ingots and a huge stash of food. You get a seasonal allowance, but you can add to this by careful trading. I set the number of guests. I decided there would be drinking contests after the ceremony, and I spent more on mead and ale than I should have done.

Then there were the outfits. I picked a new set of clothes for Hilda and I decided that her hair should be plaited. And for Sten I went for a fresh tattoo. Everything was set, but then we ran into trouble. A random raid from the East. These happen from time to time, and if you are not careful you can lose everything. Points and ingots down the drain. You have to make a decision: fight or flight.

It is not easy. If you stay and fight when you don't have enough weapons and skill ratings, your population will be wasted. If you run into another zone, you lose the credit you've built up but you can start again. I pressed pause. That's the good thing with this game, you can stop and start when you like.

I could bury the treasure. I'd still lose all the food and drink, but if I could get the tribe back to the zone, and if I kept the coordinates I could pass the details to another character, later in the game. Or I could make them bury the treasure and then fight. But no, there wouldn't be enough time for that. Best make them hide the ingots and run for it. The animation in this version is excellent and I could almost see my little figures sprinting through the trees, in and out of and the dappled light.

When the raiders landed, they had huge a feast and a drunken brawl and they smashed up everything that I had built. The whole village was razed to the ground. This game is so unfair.

I started Hilda and her tribe off again in the next zone. Farming, raiding, working hard. But to get anywhere at all I needed a new generation. I had to fix another wedding. A smaller affair this time round, but I figured I'd stick with the same couple: Hilda and Sten. Maybe there would be a time warp. Maybe I'd be able to send one of their children to find the hoard? Then I'd be back in the game.

I heard the door slam downstairs. It was my dad, in from the shed. He shouted up: 'Alice, your homework: don't forget you've got to do your history tonight. And supper will be ready soon. If you are playing that game, it's time you stopped.'

My mother ladled out the lentil and sausage stew. We always have that on Thursdays, I don't know why. I was still lost in the game, thinking about what I needed to prepare for the second wedding. 'Alice, pass your plate over'. My mother reached across with a big spoonful of steaming stew. As she did so, I noticed – probably for the first time – the pattern on her wedding ring. It was identical. It was Hilda's ring. The woven strands skillfully threaded together.

'Alice, what's wrong, are you ok? You look like you've seen a ghost'.
I said, 'It's the ring. I have seen your ring before'

Dad turned around from the sink. 'Oh no you haven't, there is only one ring like that.'
'No' I said, 'It's in the game, it's in *the Creed*. Hilda and Sten buried it. They were about to get married and then there was this raid from the East and they had to hide it quick. I made them put it in a spot next to an oak tree, by a creek – but so far no one has found it. I don't think I'll ever get it back.'

This time it was dad's turn to be surprised.

'They buried the ring near an oak tree by a creek? That's where your grandmother found the hoard. You are getting the game mixed up with what actually happened. I've told you before about how the tractor broke down and how we discovered the Viking treasure, right here on our land. Your mother's ring is for real, this is our wedding ring, it's not something from one of your fancy computer games.'

After dinner dad went to his study to download the latest updates for his precision farming software. I went back to my room. It was time for homework. I opened the set text: 'Introduction to history: a beginner's guide to the modern era', and began to read.

'History is not the past. It is constructed in the present. We carry the ghosts of previous generations with us. We are our history and that is why history is always being rewritten.'

What could that possibly mean?

I looked up from my little desk in the bedroom and gazed out across the fields. It was starting to fall into place. *The Creed* was not just a game, it was our family history. I made Hilda the Viking. She had to bury the ring, but my grandmother found the ring, my parents got married and now I am here. *The Creed* had linked me to the mind of my ancestors, just as Ubisoft promised, but it wasn't that simple. If Hilda was a character in a computer game, what about granny? Was she real? To be honest, I can't remember much about her. But if she didn't exist, what about dad? And what about me?