

BLOOD ROYAL

screenplay excerpt
by Joe Fordham and Mark Ellis

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BLACK SCREEN

A woman's VOICE:

SWAN-NECK (V.O.)

11 years after the Norman conqueror took the crown of England, the Bishop of Bayeux presented his king with an embroidered linen banner, 80 yards long and 20 inches high, celebrating the fall of Anglo-Saxon England....

FADE UP:

INT. CATHEDRAL -- DAY

An embroidered frieze framed by Latin text FILLS FRAME depicting a wizened King dispatching Anglo Saxon noblemen on a mission. The CAMERA PANS along revealing further images of the vibrant, colorful characters depicting an intricately detailed story.

SWAN-NECK (V.O.)

The banner told the story of the conqueror of England, showing the defeat of the English king, from the Norman point of view....

A middle-aged woman in a hooded cloak stands looking up at the tapestry in the mostly empty cathedral. This is Edith Svanneshals -- 'SWAN-NECK', mid-30s, her elegant, aquiline features hardened with age. Staring up at the frieze, she is overcome with emotion, but cannot show it here. A few people praying look round. A TEENAGE BOY, standing just behind Swan-Neck, looks nervously about him and then whispers in French, anxious to leave:

TEENAGE BOY

Mama, allons-y!

As the CAMERA CLOSES IN on Swan-Neck's face we see her eyes are full of tears.

SWAN-NECK (V.O.)

I was married to that man, Harold Godwinson, the last Anglo-Saxon king. He gave me five children and a promise of hope that has been replaced by a reign of terror. This is his story.

Swan-Neck allows her son to lead her out of the cathedral, passing a suspicious clergyman. As they exit, Swan-Neck looks up one last time:

An embroidered frame depicts a longboat full of men sailing out to sea and the SOUND OF THE OCEAN begins.

On a CRASH OF THUNDER,

CUT TO:

EXT. STORM -- NIGHT

Lightning flashes, illuminating a wooden LONGSHIP caught in the storm.

EXT. SHORELINE -- DAWN

Drenched by freezing rain, a banner depicting a red dragon on a white background flutters on the longship's mast. Under a leaden sky, the longship rows towards a broad deserted beach.

SUBTITLE: *Normandy, France, October, 1064.*

EXT. BEACH -- CONTINUOUS

Crewmen leap into the surf bare-legged and haul the longship up onto a beach backed by steep dunes.

HAROLD GODWINSON -- longhaired, steel-eyed, early 40s, with a drooping moustache -- wades ashore and takes stock of the bleak surroundings. GYRTH -- a burly man, a few years Harold's junior -- awaits orders. The shrill WHINNY of a horse draws everyone's attention.

OVER THE DUNES

Six MEN ON HORSEBACK swoop down to surround the survivors of the storm.

Gyrth and his men draw their swords.

The horsemen -- beardless, the backs of their heads shaved in the local fashion -- ride around the men on the beach.

Harold stands unmoving, his own sword undrawn, then addresses his crew.

HAROLD

Hold!

The lead horseman -- a stern young NORMAN BARON, wearing an embroidered cape -- rides forward and gives a predatory smile.

EXT. FOREST -- DAY

The spires of a stone cathedral are just visible beyond a giant swath of forest.

SUBTITLE: *Estate of Duke William of Normandy, Rouen.*

ANGLE ON A WILD BOAR

Darting through the trees, terrified, pursued by hunting dogs.

Leading the hunt on horseback, WILLIAM OF NORMANDY -- a powerful, close-cropped man in his middle 30s -- closes in for the kill.

The dogs corner the boar. William reigns his horse to a stop, pulls out a bow, can't get a clean shot. He leaps off his mount, draws his sword, steps in and skewers the boar in the back of its neck. The boar SQUEALS.

WIDE ON FOREST

A lone MESSENGER rides toward the trees.

THE HUNTING PARTY

Servants finish tying the dead boar by its feet to a pikestaff, while William and his hunting companions drink wine. ODO -- a boisterous nobleman, the top of his head shaved bald in the manner of a monk -- regales the group with an exuberant tale IN FRENCH.

The Messenger rides up. Armed guards block his path until he presents a sealed parchment, then they allow him to approach William.

William breaks away to read the parchment just as Odo delivers his punch line. Everybody laughs, except William.

WILLIAM
(in French, subtitled)
Bishop Odo!

The group immediately falls silent. Odo joins his Duke to view the message. Both men show great interest.

EXT. BEAURAIN CASTLE -- DAY

ARMED HORSEMEN crest a hill, flying a banner depicting two gold lions against a red background.

A young WATCHMAN on the battlements of the castle reacts to the sight of the banner and runs to warn an elder officer. They both peer down, afraid.

The riders enter the castle, unimpeded.

INT. BEAURAIN CASTLE -- DUNGEONS

Keys jangle in the lock, the door is thrown open and the young Baron from the beach, now looking grim-faced, steps into the cell. He quickly points to Harold, without meeting his gaze. The leader of the horsemen shoves past and seizes Harold by the arm.

BARON

(in French, subtitled)

But what of my reward? I went to great expense to feed Duke William's guests!

ARMED GUARD

(in French, subtitled)

Your reward is that Duke William lets you live.

Harold and his men are marched out of their cell.

EXT. BEAURAIN CASTLE -- DAY

HIGH ANGLE

The armed men ride away from the castle, flanking Harold and his men who occupy additional horses.

The Baron watches from the battlements.

BARON

Merde.

CLOSE ON HAROLD

Gyrth rides up to Harold and speaks under his breath.

GYRTH

William the Bastard has influence.

HAROLD

Have faith, my young brother. I will use that influence to get us back to England soon.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE -- DAY

Storm clouds are gathering over a rolling pastoral landscape, where a large, thatched-roofed wooden building -- an Anglo-Saxon manor house -- dominates one hill.

SUBTITLE: *Bosham, Wessex, England.*

SWAN-NECK -- early 20s, pure Scandinavian features and bright intelligent eyes -- sees the impending storm and calls her children in from where they are playing with an older woman -- GYTHA (60). Gytha herds the children inside as it starts to rain. She sees Swan-neck looking troubled, then pats the younger woman's arm. THUNDER rumbles.

EXT. ROUEN -- DAY

The armed riders lead Harold and his men toward a stone castle that overlooks a seaport and cathedral.

EXT. ROUEN CASTLE -- COURTYARD -- CONTINUOUS

Harold's men gaze around as they are escorted in through an impressive vaulted archway. Gyrth speaks to his FIRST-IN-COMMAND, who is gaping like a fish.

GYRTH

Close your mouth.

Harold's eyes are on an entourage ahead, which is gathering to meet them. William appears from a doorway, Odo close behind.

The armed riders bring the group to a halt. Harold and his men dismount.

William approaches. He pauses before Gyrth, then continues to Harold. Harold and William survey each other without a word, then William embraces Harold, kissing him on each cheek, surprising everyone. William addresses Harold in an obviously rehearsed statement.

WILLIAM

(heavily accented)

Earl Godwin, permit me to apologize for the inhospitality of my neighbor, the Baron of Beaurain.

HAROLD

With respect, Duke William: my father was Earl Godwin. I am Godwinson.

William looks to Odo, who quietly translates, then smiles and nods at Harold.

ODO

I am Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, Duke William's half-brother. We have planned a feast to celebrate this unexpected visit. The Baron tells us you were blown off course on a fishing expedition?

HAROLD

The Baron was mistaken. We are here on a diplomatic mission from King Edward of England. But a feast is not necessary, we have already eaten. If you have rooms for my men...

William interrupts, speaking to Odo in French.

ODO

(to Harold)

No man refuses Duke William's hospitality and lives.

Harold is momentarily taken aback, until Odo LAUGHS with William and other courtiers.

ODO (CONT'D)

Forgive the Duke his morbid sense of humor. You shall all be our guests, and you, Earl Godwinson, our guest of honor.

William offers the way ahead. Harold smiles uneasily and nods to Odo, who steps back to watch them pass.

EXT. ROUEN CASTLE -- NIGHT

MUSIC can be heard coming from the castle.

INT. ROUEN CASTLE -- MAIN HALL -- NIGHT

The boar from William's hunting party roasts on a spit, smoke filling the torch-lit hall. A small army of servants attend members of William's COURT gathered around a group of tables. Harold is seated with William's family at the main table, Odo and William on either side. Harold's men occupy a lower table, Gyrth suspiciously eyeing a plate of Norman cheeses.

PERFORMERS re-enact the saga of Saint George and the Dragon. Courtiers cheer as the actor portraying the Dragon receives a pikestaff to the ribs.

William lets out an appreciative dragon-like roar, embarrassing his beautiful teenage daughter, EVELYN, who is seated beside her mother. Odo smiles. MATHILDE -- an attractive, petite, redheaded woman -- pulls a scolding face, speaking better English than her husband:

MATHILDE

William! Don't frighten your child!

William roars again, close to Evelyn's face.

EVELYN

No man frightens me, mother. Not even my father.

Evelyn smiles coyly at Harold. Odo laughs.

The performers end their play and receive applause from all around, including Harold. Odo pours him wine.

ODO

Let us drink to the English Earl who sliced off the head of the Welsh dragon.

MATHILDE

Oh, please, let's not.

ODO

Is it not true, Earl Godwinson, you presented your King with the head of his enemy, the rebel leader Griffith?

MATHILDE

Must we, while we are eating?

WILLIAM

Drink then to King Edward of England!
To his health. May it improve.

Hemmed in from all sides, Harold raises his goblet.

HAROLD

As your honored guest, perhaps I should offer the toast?

Odo bangs the table, halting the music, and beckons Harold to stand. Harold does so and raises his glass.

HAROLD (CONT'D)

To King Philip of France, who surely must be in fear of his position in light of Duke William's rise to power in Normandy.

There is an awkward silence. Evelyn puts a hand to her mouth, suppressing a gasp of surprise. Odo translates Harold's speech for William, who loses his smile until Odo laughs even louder than before. Mathilde smiles and encourages William to do the same.

As festivities continue, Odo leans forward and seizes Harold's hand.

ODO

(intently)

Earl Godwinson, you are still fishing in dangerous waters. Do not mock the Duke. He is more powerful than you imagine.

HAROLD

I would never underestimate Duke William.

William boisterously interrupts.

WILLIAM

Earl Godwinson, you want to see my 'kingdom'? Tomorrow you shall!

EXT. HILLS ABOVE ROUEN -- DAY

A peregrine FALCON glides through the sky, then tucks its wings and dives.

The bird swoops and plucks a morsel of meat from William's gloved hand. William is seated on his horse alongside Harold, the forest of Rouen stretching beneath them. William gestures at the landscape and struggles to express himself in English.

WILLIAM

C'est impressive, non? Now you understand why your King, he loves my home? He spent many years in this land.

HAROLD

King Edward is still very fond of Normandy. I know he was a favorite of your father's.

WILLIAM

I know nothing of my father.

William becomes introspective, looks away. Harold notices Odo grazing his horse at a discreet distance, Gyrth guarded by a small group of armed Norman horsemen nearby.

HAROLD

Duke William, Edward sends me to ask you to release the hostages he surrendered to you.

WILLIAM

I was guest of King Edward. Your people, they insulted me.

HAROLD

A regrettable incident, but that was a long time ago. Twelve years.

(pause)

One of the hostages, Earl Wulfnoth, he is my brother.

WILLIAM

Another brother? How many do you have?

HAROLD

Four brothers. One sister.

WILLIAM

King Edward, he has your sister as wife, but no children? What is it they call him?

HAROLD

The Confessor.

William laughs. Pats his own chest.

WILLIAM
Two sons. One daughter. You?

HAROLD
No wife. Five children.

Both men smile and nod, eyeing each other competitively.

WILLIAM
You like to ride? Come!

William takes off down the hill. Harold spurs his own horse after William's, leaving the attendants dumbstruck.

ODO
Allez, allez! Vite!

Odo leads the others racing after William and Harold.

MOVING ANGLE

William's horse gallops at high speed. He glances back as Harold overtakes him. William spurs his own horse faster.

Odo and the others struggle to catch up.

Harold's horse leaps a fallen tree. William's follows.

William closes on Harold's horse. The two ride neck and neck. William spies a stone wall up ahead, steers towards it, leaving Harold behind. The horses' hooves thunder on the soil. William and Harold approach the wall and leap, almost simultaneously, sailing high.

William's mount lands hard, he almost falls. Harold lands firmly and pulls his horse to a halt. He sees William recovering, laughing uproariously.

Odo and the others ride up to the wall behind them, but their horses refuse the jump.

WILLIAM
Godwinson, you must join me on my
next hunt!

William catches his breath, then suddenly stops laughing, peering off at the horizon. Harold turns to see where William is staring.

ANGLE ON COUNTRYSIDE

A plume of black smoke coils above a distant town.

EXT. ROUEN CASTLE -- STABLES -- DAY

A company of stable-hands meet William's riding party and start removing tack as riders dismount, perspiration steaming

off the horses. Servants hurry over with beakers of hot drinks, but William ignores them, bellowing.

WILLIAM

Mathilde! Où est ma femme?

Mathilde arrives, pulling on a cape. She kisses her husband and smooths his hair, gently scolding his bad temper.

MATHILDE

My gentle Duke is back so soon?
Good morning, Earl Godwinson. Would you care for some hot cider? A local specialty, William's favorite.

WILLIAM

(in French, subtitled)

There is smoke in the West. Are the children inside?

MATHILDE

(in French, subtitled)

Yes, and you have a visitor.

Odo steps up close to join in the discussion in French.

Harold accepts a cup of cider. Gyrth refuses his and speaks close to Harold.

GYRTH

The 'gentle Duke' smells trouble.

HAROLD

Drink. It's good.

GYRTH

Forgive me, Harold, but our mission for the King -- I would like to know if the men we have come to free are still breathing. Or if we will be by nightfall.

HAROLD

Our mission for the King has never left my mind. Be patient. We are guests in a gilded cage.

William argues in French with Odo, raising his voice, then breaks away.

WILLIAM

Earl Godwinson, suivez-moi. Follow me.

Harold hands his cider to Gyrth, bows to Mathilde, then exits with William. Odo follows, exasperated. Mathilde smiles sweetly at Gyrth and sips from her cider.

INT. ROUEN CASTLE -- MAIN HALL -- DAY

RAYMOND, a prematurely balding nobleman, is wracked with grief, wringing a kerchief and pacing beside William's empty chair. William breezes in, raising his voice.

WILLIAM

Raymond, êtes-vous ici encore?

Raymond begins prattling emotionally in French, casting nervous glances at Odo and Harold. William flops into his chair then barks a loud dismissive noise, as if admonishing a child. Raymond stops speaking, terrified.

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

Odo, en anglais.

Reluctantly, Odo translates for Harold.

ODO

The Duke of Brittany, our neighbor to the West, has once again attacked Count Raymond's home of Dol, to the north.

(lapsing into French)

Mon Duc, je ne le pense pas est approprié...

WILLIAM

Raymond, continuez.

Raymond resumes babbling, close to tears, but halts as William signals for Odo to translate.

ODO

(flatly)

The Duke of Brittany has threatened to burn Dol to the ground if Count Raymond does not surrender his land. Count Raymond begs Duke William to fight for him, a debt he cannot repay.

William regards Harold inquiringly.

ODO (CONT'D)

Duke William seeks Earl Godwinson's opinion.

HAROLD

My opinion?

Raymond stops sniveling, as surprised as Harold.

RAYMOND

'Godwinson'?

EXT. ROUEN CASTLE -- HIGH TOWER -- DAY

Gyrth peers from a barred window, high up in the castle.

INT. ROUEN CASTLE -- HIGH TOWER -- CONTINUOUS

Guards open a door and admit Harold to where Gyrth and his men are waiting in surroundings much more dignified than the dungeon at Beaurain, but no less fortified.

Harold waits for the guards to exit and close the door.

HAROLD

The hostages are alive, in Bishop Odo's custody at Bayeux.

GYRTH

Bishop my eye.

HAROLD

Duke William has agreed to negotiate their release and our passage home on one condition. He wants us to help him stop a local land war. We are to ride with him tomorrow.

GYRTH

(incensed)

This bastard son of a tanner's daughter is making fools of the King's messengers! Why not ride to Bayeux and take our brother tonight?

HAROLD

(stern)

I gave my word.

Gyrth falls silent. Harold faces his men, who look in fear of their lives.

HAROLD (CONT'D)

Our host is a powerful and dangerous man. If we rode from here tonight, we would be hunted like wild pigs by every madman out to win his favor.

GYRTH

Harold, why must you always be right?

HAROLD

(smiling)

Because I am the eldest. If William wants to put us to the test, I know you will not disappoint him. We will watch and learn from them -- and I will get you back to England.