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Death of Kings

Written by Bernard Cornwell

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DEATH OF KINGS

BERNARD CORNWELL



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The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it while at times based on historical
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Death of Kings is for
Anne LeClaire,
Novelist and Friend,
who supplied the first line.

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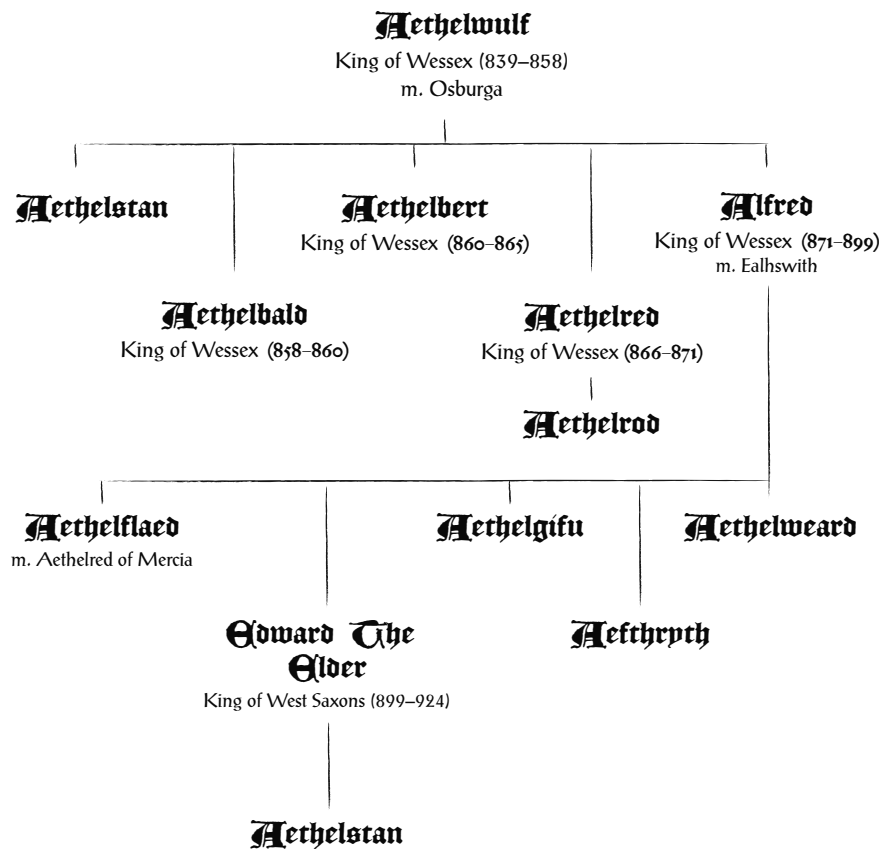
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The Royal Family of Wessex



PART ONE

The Sorceress



One

‘Every day is ordinary,’ Father Willibald said, ‘until it isn’t.’ He smiled happily, as though he had just said something he thought I would find significant, then looked disappointed when I said nothing. ‘Every day,’ he started again.

‘I heard your drivelling,’ I snarled.

‘Until it isn’t,’ he finished weakly. I liked Willibald, even if he was a priest. He had been one of my childhood tutors and now I counted him as a friend. He was gentle, earnest, and if the meek ever do inherit the earth then Willibald will be rich beyond measure.

And every day is ordinary until something changes, and that cold Sunday morning had seemed as ordinary as any until the fools tried to kill me. It was so cold. There had been rain during the week, but on that morning the puddles froze and a hard frost whitened the grass. Father Willibald had arrived soon after sunrise and discovered me in the meadow. ‘We couldn’t find your estate last night,’ he explained his early appearance, shivering, ‘so we stayed at Saint Rumwold’s monastery,’ he gestured vaguely southwards. ‘It was cold there,’ he added.

‘They’re mean bastards, those monks,’ I said. I was supposed to deliver a weekly cartload of firewood to Saint Rumwold’s, but that was a duty I ignored. The monks could cut their own timber. ‘Who was Rumwold?’ I asked Willibald. I knew the answer, but wanted to drag Willibald through the thorns.

‘He was a very pious child, lord,’ he said.

‘A child?’

‘A baby,’ he said, sighing as he saw where the conversation was leading, ‘a mere three days old when he died.’

‘A three-day-old baby is a saint?’

Willibald flapped his hands. ‘Miracles happen, lord,’ he said, ‘they really do. They say little Rumwold sang God’s praises whenever he suckled.’

‘I feel much the same when I get hold of a tit,’ I said, ‘so does that make me a saint?’

Willibald shuddered, then sensibly changed the subject. ‘I’ve brought you a message from the ætheling,’ he said, meaning King Alfred’s eldest son, Edward.

‘So tell me.’

‘He’s the King of Cent now,’ Willibald said happily.

‘He sent you all this way to tell me that?’

‘No, no. I thought perhaps you hadn’t heard.’

‘Of course I heard,’ I said. Alfred, King of Wessex, had made his eldest son King of Cent, which meant Edward could practise being a king without doing too much damage because Cent, after all, was a part of Wessex. ‘Has he ruined Cent yet?’

‘Of course not,’ Willibald said, ‘though . . .’ he stopped abruptly.

‘Though what?’

‘Oh it’s nothing,’ he said airily and pretended to take an interest in the sheep. ‘How many black sheep do you have?’ he asked.

‘I could hold you by the ankles and shake you till the news drops out,’ I suggested.

‘It’s just that Edward, well,’ he hesitated, then decided he had better tell me in case I did shake him by the ankles, ‘it’s just that he wanted to marry a girl in Cent and his father wouldn’t agree. But really that isn’t important!’

I laughed. So young Edward was not quite the perfect heir after all. ‘Edward’s on the rampage, is he?’

‘No, no! Merely a youthful fancy and it’s all history now. His father’s forgiven him.’

I asked nothing more, though I should have paid much more attention to that sliver of gossip. ‘So what is young Edward’s message?’ I asked. We were standing in the lower meadow of my

estate in Bucingahamm, which lay in eastern Mercia. It was really Æthelflaed's land, but she had granted me the food-rents, and the estate was large enough to support thirty household warriors, most of whom were in church that morning. 'And why aren't you at church?' I asked Willibald before he could answer my first question, 'it's a feast day, isn't it?'

'Saint Alnoth's Day,' he said as though that was a special treat, 'but I wanted to find you!' He sounded excited. 'I have King Edward's news for you. Every day is ordinary . . .'

'Until it isn't,' I said brusquely.

'Yes, lord,' he said lamely, then frowned in puzzlement, 'but what are you doing?'

'I'm looking at sheep,' I said, and that was true. I was looking at two hundred or more sheep that looked back at me and bleated pathetically.

Willibald turned to stare at the flock again. 'Fine animals,' he said as if he knew what he was talking about.

'Just mutton and wool,' I said, 'and I'm choosing which ones live and which ones die.' It was the killing time of the year, the grey days when our animals are slaughtered. We keep a few alive to breed in the spring, but most have to die because there is not enough fodder to keep whole flocks and herds alive through the winter. 'Watch their backs,' I told Willibald, 'because the frost melts fastest off the fleece of the healthiest beasts. So those are the ones you keep alive.' I lifted his woollen hat and ruffled his hair, which was going grey. 'No frost on you,' I said cheerfully, 'otherwise I'd have to slit your throat.' I pointed to a ewe with a broken horn, 'Keep that one!'

'Got her, lord,' the shepherd answered. He was a gnarled little man with a beard that hid half his face. He growled at his two hounds to stay where they were, then ploughed into the flock and used his crook to haul out the ewe, then dragged her to the edge of the field and drove her to join the smaller flock at the meadow's farther end. One of his hounds, a ragged and pelt-scarred beast, snapped at the ewe's heels until the shepherd called the dog off. The shepherd did not need my help in selecting which animals

should live and which must die. He had culled his flocks since he was a child, but a lord who orders his animals slaughtered owes them the small respect of taking some time with them.

‘The day of judgement,’ Willibald said, pulling his hat over his ears.

‘How many’s that?’ I asked the shepherd.

‘Jiggit and mumph, lord,’ he said.

‘Is that enough?’

‘It’s enough, lord.’

‘Kill the rest then,’ I said.

‘Jiggit and mumph?’ Willibald asked, still shivering.

‘Twenty and five,’ I said. ‘Yain, tain, tether, methier, mumph. It’s how shepherds count. I don’t know why. The world is full of mystery. I’m told some folk even believe that a three-day-old baby is a saint.’

‘God is not mocked, lord,’ Father Willibald said, attempting to be stern.

‘He is by me,’ I said, ‘so what does young Edward want?’

‘Oh, it’s most exciting,’ Willibald began enthusiastically, then checked because I had raised a hand.

The shepherd’s two dogs were growling. Both had flattened themselves and were facing south towards a wood. Sleet had begun to fall. I stared at the trees, but could see nothing threatening among the black winter branches or among the holly bushes. ‘Wolves?’ I asked the shepherd.

‘Haven’t seen a wolf since the year the old bridge fell, lord,’ he said.

The hair on the dogs’ necks bristled. The shepherd quietened them by clicking his tongue, then gave a short sharp whistle and one of the dogs raced away towards the wood. The other whined, wanting to be let loose, but the shepherd made a low noise and the dog went quiet again.

The running dog curved towards the trees. She was a bitch and knew her business. She leaped an ice-skimmed ditch and vanished among the holly, barked suddenly, then reappeared to jump the ditch again. For a moment she stopped, facing the trees, then began

running again just as an arrow flitted from the wood's shadows. The shepherd gave a shrill whistle and the bitch raced back towards us, the arrow falling harmlessly behind her.

'Outlaws,' I said.

'Or men looking for deer,' the shepherd said.

'My deer,' I said. I still gazed at the trees. Why would poachers shoot an arrow at a shepherd's dog? They would have done better to run away. So maybe they were really stupid poachers?

The sleet was coming harder now, blown by a cold east wind. I wore a thick fur cloak, high boots and a fox-fur hat, so did not notice the cold, but Willibald, in priestly black, was shivering despite his woollen cape and hat. 'I must get you back to the hall,' I said. 'At your age you shouldn't be outdoors in winter.'

'I wasn't expecting rain,' Willibald said. He sounded miserable.

'It'll be snow by midday,' the shepherd said.

'You have a hut near here?' I asked him.

He pointed north. 'Just beyond the copse,' he said. He was pointing at a thick stand of trees through which a path led.

'Does it have a fire?'

'Yes, lord.'

'Take us there,' I said. I would leave Willibald beside the fire and fetch him a proper cloak and a docile horse to get him back to the hall.

We walked north and the dogs growled again. I turned to look south and suddenly there were men at the wood's edge. A ragged line of men who were staring at us. 'You know them?' I asked the shepherd.

'They're not from around here, lord, and eddera-a-dix,' he said, meaning there were thirteen of them, 'that's unlucky, lord.' He made the sign of the cross.

'What . . .' Father Willibald began.

'Quiet,' I said. The shepherd's two dogs were snarling now. 'Outlaws,' I guessed, still looking at the men.

'Saint Alnoth was murdered by outlaws,' Willibald said worriedly.

‘So not everything outlaws do is bad,’ I said, ‘but these ones are idiots.’

‘Idiots?’

‘To attack us,’ I said. ‘They’ll be hunted down and ripped apart.’

‘If we are not killed first,’ Willibald said.

‘Just go!’ I pushed him towards the northern trees and touched a hand to my sword hilt before following him. I was not wearing Serpent-Breath, my great war sword, but a lesser, lighter blade that I had taken from a Dane I had killed earlier that year in Beamfleot. It was a good sword, but at that moment I wished I had Serpent-Breath strapped around my waist. I glanced back. The thirteen men were crossing the ditch to follow us. Two had bows. The rest seemed to be armed with axes, knives or spears. Willibald was slow, already panting. ‘What is it?’ he gasped.

‘Bandits?’ I suggested. ‘Vagrants? I don’t know. Run!’ I pushed him into the trees, then slid the sword from its scabbard and turned to face my pursuers, one of whom took an arrow from the bag strapped at his waist. That persuaded me to follow Willibald into the copse. The arrow slid past me and ripped through the undergrowth. I wore no mail, only the thick fur cloak that offered no protection from a hunter’s arrow. ‘Keep going,’ I shouted at Willibald, then limped up the path. I had been wounded in the right thigh at the battle of Ethandun and though I could walk and could even run slowly, I knew I would not be able to outpace the men who were now within easy bowshot behind me. I hurried up the path as a second arrow was deflected by a branch and tumbled noisily through the trees. Every day is ordinary, I thought, until it gets interesting. My pursuers could not see me among the dark trunks and thick holly bushes, but they assumed I had followed Willibald and so kept to the path while I crouched in the thick undergrowth, concealed by the glossy leaves of a holly bush and by my cloak that I had pulled over my fair hair and face. The pursuers went past my hiding place without a glance. The two archers were in front.

I let them get well ahead, then followed. I had heard them speak as they passed and knew they were Saxons and, by their accents,

probably from Mercia. Robbers, I assumed. A Roman road passed through deep woods nearby and masterless men haunted the woods to ambush travellers who, to protect themselves, went in large groups. I had twice led my warriors on hunts for such bandits and thought I had persuaded them to make their living far from my estate, but I could not think who else these men could be. Yet it was not like such vagrants to invade an estate. The hair at the back of my neck still prickled.

I moved cautiously as I approached the edge of the trees, then saw the men beside the shepherd's hut that resembled a heap of grass. He had made the hovel with branches covered by turf, leaving a hole in the centre for the smoke of his fire to escape. There was no sign of the shepherd himself, but Willibald had been captured, though so far he was unhurt, protected, perhaps, by his status as a priest. One man held him. The others must have realised I was still in the trees, because they were staring towards the copse that hid me.

Then, suddenly, the shepherd's two dogs appeared from my left and ran howling towards the thirteen men. The dogs ran fast and lithe, circling the group and sometimes leaping towards them and snapping their teeth before sheering away. Only one man had a sword, but he was clumsy with the blade, swinging it at the bitch as she came close and missing her by an arm's length. One of the two bowmen put a string on his cord. He hauled the arrow back, then suddenly fell backwards as if struck by an invisible hammer. He sprawled on the turf as his arrow flitted into the sky and fell harmlessly into the trees behind me. The dogs, down on their front paws now, bared their teeth and growled. The fallen archer stirred, but evidently could not stand. The other men looked scared.

The second archer raised his stave, then recoiled, dropping the bow to clap his hands to his face and I saw a spark of blood there, blood bright as the holly berries. The splash of colour showed in the winter morning, then it was gone and the man was clutching his face and bending over in pain. The hounds barked, then loped back into the trees. The sleet was falling harder, loud as it struck the bare branches. Two of the men moved towards the shepherd's

cottage, but were called back by their leader. He was younger than the others and looked more prosperous, or at least less poor. He had a thin face, darting eyes and a short fair beard. He wore a scarred leather jerkin, but beneath it I could see a mail coat. So he had either been a warrior or else had stolen the mail. 'Lord Uhtred!' he called.

I did not answer. I was hidden well enough, at least for the moment, but knew I would have to move if they searched the copse, but whatever had drawn blood was making them nervous. What was it? It had to be the gods, I thought, or perhaps the Christian saint. Alnoth must hate outlaws if he had been murdered by them, and I did not doubt that these men were outlaws who had been sent to kill me. That was not surprising because in those days I had plenty of enemies. I still have enemies, though now I live behind the strongest palisade in northern England, but in that far-off time, in the winter of 898, there was no England. There was Northumbria and East Anglia, Mercia and Wessex, and the first two were ruled by the Danes, Wessex was Saxon while Mercia was a mess, part Danish and part Saxon. And I was like Mercia because I had been born a Saxon, but raised as a Dane. I still worshipped the Danish gods, but fate had doomed me to be a shield of the Christian Saxons against the ever-present threat of the pagan Danes. So any number of Danes might want me dead, but I could not imagine any Danish enemy hiring Mercian outlaws to ambush me. There were also Saxons who would love to see my corpse put in its long home. My cousin Æthelred, Lord of Mercia, would have paid well to watch my grave filled, but surely he would have sent warriors, not bandits? Yet he seemed the likeliest man. He was married to Æthelflaed, Alfred of Wessex's daughter, but I had planted the cuckold's horns on Æthelred's head and I reckoned he had returned the favour by sending thirteen outlaws.

'Lord Uhtred!' the young man called again, but the only answer was a sudden panicked bleating.

The sheep were streaming down the path through the copse, harried by the two dogs that snapped at their ankles to drive them fast towards the thirteen men and, once the sheep had

reached the men, the dogs raced around, still snapping, herding the animals into a tight circle that enclosed the outlaws. I was laughing. I was Uhtred of Bebbanburg, the man who had killed Ubba beside the sea and who had destroyed Haesten's army at Beamfleot, but on this cold Sunday morning it was the shepherd who was proving to be the better warlord. His panicked flock were tightly packed around the outlaws, who could hardly move. The dogs were howling, the sheep bleating and the thirteen men despairing.

I stepped out of the wood. 'You wanted me?' I called.

The young man's response was to push towards me, but the tightly packed sheep obstructed him. He kicked at them, then hacked down with his sword, but the more he struggled the more scared the sheep became, and all the while the dogs herded them inwards. The young man cursed, then snatched at Willibald. 'Let us go or we kill him,' he said.

'He's a Christian,' I said, showing him Thor's hammer that hung about my neck, 'so why should I care if you kill him?'

Willibald stared at me aghast, and then turned as one of the men shouted in pain. There had again been a sudden flash of holly-red blood in the sleet, and this time I saw what had caused it. It was neither the gods nor the murdered saint, but the shepherd who had come from the trees and was holding a sling. He took a stone from a pouch, placed it in the leather cup, and whirled the sling again. It made a whirring noise, he let go one cord and another stone hurtled in to strike a man.

They turned away in pure panic and I gestured at the shepherd to let them go. He whistled to call the dogs off and both men and sheep scattered. The men were running, all but the first archer who was still on the ground, stunned by the stone that had struck his head. The young man, braver than the others, came towards me, perhaps thinking his companions would help him, then realised he was alone. A look of pure fright crossed his face, he turned, and just then the bitch leaped at him, sinking her teeth in his sword arm. He shouted, then tried to shake her off as the dog hurtled in to join his mate. He was still shouting when I hit him

across the back of the skull with the flat of my sword-blade. 'You can call the dogs off now,' I told the shepherd.

The first archer was still alive, but there was a patch of blood-matted hair above his right ear. I kicked him hard in the ribs and he groaned, but he was insensible. I gave his bow and arrow-bag to the shepherd. 'What's your name?'

'Egbert, lord.'

'You're a rich man now, Egbert,' I told him. I wished that were true. I would reward Egbert well for this morning's work, but I was no longer rich. I had spent my money on the men, mail and weapons that had been needed to defeat Haesten and I was desperately poor that winter.

The other outlaws had vanished, gone back northwards. Willibald was shaking. 'They were searching for you, lord,' he said through chattering teeth, 'they've been paid to kill you.'

I stooped by the archer. The shepherd's stone had shattered his skull and I could see a ragged, splintered piece of bone among the blood-matted hair. One of the shepherd's dogs came to sniff the wounded man and I patted its thick wiry pelt. 'They're good dogs,' I told Egbert.

'Wolf-killers, lord,' he said, then hefted the sling, 'though this is better.'

'You're good with it,' I said. That was mild, the man was lethal.

'Been practising these twenty-five years, lord. Nothing like a stone to drive a wolf away.'

'They'd been paid to kill me?' I asked Willibald.

'That's what they said. They were paid to kill you.'

'Go into the hut,' I said, 'get warm.' I turned on the younger man who was being guarded by the larger dog. 'What's your name?'

He hesitated, then spoke grudgingly, 'Wærfurth, lord.'

'And who paid you to kill me?'

'I don't know, lord.'

Nor did he, it seemed. Wærfurth and his men came from near Tofeceaster, a settlement not far to the north, and Wærfurth told me how a man had promised to pay my weight in silver in return for my death. The man had suggested a Sunday morning, knowing

that much of my household would be in church, and Wærfurth had recruited a dozen vagrants to do the job. He must have known it was a huge gamble, for I was not without reputation, but the reward was immense. 'Was the man a Dane or a Saxon?' I asked.

'A Saxon, lord.'

'And you don't know him?'

'No, lord.'

I questioned him more, but all he could tell me was that the man was thin, bald and had lost an eye. The description meant little to me. A one-eyed, bald man? Could be almost anyone. I asked questions till I had wrung Wærfurth dry of unhelpful answers, then hanged both him and the archer.

And Willibald showed me the magic fish.

A delegation waited at my hall. Sixteen men had come from Alfred's capital at Wintanceaster and among them were no less than five priests. Two, like Willibald, came from Wessex, and the other pair were Mercians who had apparently settled in East Anglia. I knew them both, though I had not recognised them at first. They were twins, Ceolnoth and Ceolberht who, some thirty years before, had been hostages with me in Mercia. We had been children captured by the Danes, a fate I had welcomed and the twins had hated. They were close to forty years old now, two identical priests with stocky builds, round faces and greying beards. 'We have watched your progress,' one of them said.

'With admiration,' the other finished. I had not been able to tell them apart when they were children, and still could not. They finished each other's sentences.

'Reluctant,' one said.

'Admiration,' his twin said.

'Reluctant?' I asked in an unfriendly tone.

'It is known that Alfred is disappointed,'

'That you eschew the true faith, but . . .'

'We pray for you daily!'

The remaining pair of priests, both West Saxons, were Alfred's men. They had helped compile his code of laws and it appeared they had come to advise me. The remaining eleven men were warriors, five from East Anglia and six from Wessex, who had guarded the priests on their travels.

And they had brought the magic fish.

'King Eohric,' Ceolnoth or Ceolberht said.

'Wishes an alliance with Wessex,' the other twin finished.

'And with Mercia!'

'The Christian kingdoms, you understand.'

'And King Alfred and King Edward,' Willibald took up the tale, 'have sent a gift for King Eohric.'

'Alfred still lives?' I asked.

'Pray God, yes,' Willibald said, 'though he's sick.'

'Very close to death,' one of the West Saxon priests intervened.

'He was born close to death,' I said, 'and ever since I've known him he's been dying. He'll live ten years yet.'

'Pray God he does,' Willibald said and made the sign of the cross. 'But he's fifty years old, and he's failing. He's truly dying.'

'Which is why he seeks this alliance,' the West Saxon priest went on, 'and why the Lord Edward makes this request of you.'

'King Edward,' Willibald corrected his fellow priest.

'So who's requesting me?' I asked, 'Alfred of Wessex or Edward of Cent?'

'Edward,' Willibald said.

'Eohric,' Ceolnoth and Ceolberht said together.

'Alfred,' the West Saxon priest said.

'All of them,' Willibald added. 'It's important to all of them, lord!'

Edward or Alfred or both wanted me to go to King Eohric of East Anglia. Eohric was a Dane, but he had converted to Christianity, and he had sent the twins to Alfred and proposed that a great alliance should be made between the Christian parts of Britain. 'King Eohric suggested that you should negotiate the treaty,' Ceolnoth or Ceolberht said.

‘With our advice,’ one of the West Saxon priests put in hastily.
‘Why me?’ I asked the twins.

Willibald answered for them. ‘Who knows Mercia and Wessex as well as you?’

‘Many men,’ I answered.

‘And where you lead,’ Willibald said, ‘those other men will follow.’

We were at a table on which was ale, bread, cheese, pottage and apples. The central hearth was ablaze with a great fire that flickered its light on the smoke-blackened beams. The shepherd had been right and the sleet had turned to snow and some flakes sifted through the smoke-hole in the roof. Outside, beyond the palisade, Wærfurth and the archer were hanging from the bare branch of an elm, their bodies food for the hungry birds. Most of my men were in the hall, listening to our conversation. ‘It’s a strange time of year to be making treaties,’ I said.

‘Alfred has little time left,’ Willibald said, ‘and he wishes this alliance, lord. If all the Christians of Britain are united, lord, then young Edward’s throne will be protected when he inherits the crown.’

That made sense, but why would Eohric want the alliance? Eohric of East Anglia had been perched on the fence between Christians and pagans, Danes and Saxons, for as long as I could remember, yet now he wanted to proclaim his allegiance to the Christian Saxons?

‘Because of Cnut Ranulfson,’ one of the twins explained when I asked the question.

‘He’s brought men south,’ the other twin said.

‘To Sigurd Thorrson’s lands,’ I said. ‘I know, I sent that news to Alfred. And Eohric fears Cnut and Sigurd?’

‘He does,’ Ceolnoth or Ceolberht said.

‘Cnut and Sigurd won’t attack now,’ I said, ‘but in the spring, maybe.’ Cnut and Sigurd were Danes from Northumbria and, like all the Danes, their abiding dream was to capture all the lands where English was spoken. The invaders had tried again and again, and again and again they had failed, yet another attempt was

inevitable because the heart of Wessex, which was the great bastion of Saxon Christendom, was failing. Alfred was dying, and his death would surely bring pagan swords and heathen fire to Mercia and to Wessex. 'But why would Cnut or Sigurd attack Eohric?' I asked. 'They don't want East Anglia, they want Mercia and Wessex.'

'They want everything,' Ceolnoth or Ceolberht answered.

'And the true faith will be scourged from Britain unless we defend it,' the older of the two West Saxon priests said.

'Which is why we beg you to forge the alliance,' Willibald said.

'At the Christmas feast,' one of the twins added.

'And Alfred sent a gift for Eohric,' Willibald went on enthusiastically, 'Alfred and Edward! They have been most generous, lord!'

The gift was encased in a box of silver studded with precious stones. The lid of the box showed a figure of Christ with uplifted arms, around which was written '*Edward mec heht Gewyrcan*', meaning that Edward had ordered the reliquary made, or more likely his father had ordered the gift and then ascribed the generosity to his son. Willibald lifted the lid reverently, revealing an interior lined with red-dyed cloth. A small cushion, the width and breadth of a man's hand, fitted snugly inside, and on the cushion was a fish skeleton. It was the whole fish skeleton, except for the head, just a long white spine with a comb of ribs on either side. 'There,' Willibald said, breathing the word as if speaking too loud might disturb the bones.

'A dead herring?' I asked incredulously, 'that's Alfred's gift?'

The priests all crossed themselves.

'How many more fish bones do you want?' I asked. I looked at Finan, my closest friend and the commander of my household warriors. 'We can provide dead fish, can't we?'

'By the barrellful, lord,' he said.

'Lord Uhtred!' Willibald, as ever, rose to my taunting. 'That fish,' he pointed a quivering finger at the bones, 'was one of the two fishes our Lord used to feed the five thousand!'

'The other one must have been a damned big fish,' I said, 'what was it? A whale?'

The older West Saxon priest scowled at me. 'I advised King

Edward against employing you for this duty,' he said, 'I told him to send a Christian.'

'So use someone else,' I retorted. 'I'd rather spend Yule in my own hall.'

'He wishes you to go,' the priest said sharply.

'Alfred also wishes it,' Willibald put in, then smiled, 'he thinks you'll frighten Eohric.'

'Why does he want Eohric frightened?' I asked. 'I thought this was an alliance?'

'King Eohric allows his ships to prey on our trade,' the priest said, 'and must pay reparations before we promise him protection. The king believes you will be persuasive.'

'We don't need to leave for at least ten days,' I said, looking gloomily at the priests, 'am I supposed to feed you all till then?'

'Yes, lord,' Willibald said happily.

Fate is strange. I had rejected Christianity, preferring the gods of the Danes, but I loved Æthelflaed, Alfred's daughter, and she was a Christian and that meant I carried my sword on the side of the cross.

And because of that it seemed I would spend Yule in East Anglia.

Osferth came to Bucingahamm, bringing another twenty of my household warriors. I had summoned them, wanting a large band to accompany me to East Anglia. King Eohric might have suggested the treaty, and he might be amenable to whatever demands Alfred made, but treaties are best negotiated from a position of strength and I was determined to arrive in East Anglia with an impressive escort. Osferth and his men had been watching Ceaster, a Roman camp on Mercia's far north-western frontier where Haesten had taken refuge after his forces had been destroyed at Beamfleot. Osferth greeted me solemnly, as was his manner. He rarely smiled, and his customary expression suggested disapproval of whatever he saw, but I think he was glad to be reunited with the rest of us. He was Alfred's son, born to a servant girl before Alfred

discovered the dubious joys of Christian obedience. Alfred had wanted his bastard son trained as a priest, but Osferth had preferred the way of the warrior. It had been a strange choice, for he did not take great joy from a fight or yearn for the savage moments when anger and a blade make the rest of the world seem dull, yet Osferth brought his father's qualities to a fight. He was serious, thoughtful and methodical. Where Finan and I could be rashly headstrong, Osferth used cleverness, and that was no bad thing in a warrior.

'Haesten is still licking his wounds,' he told me.

'We should have killed him,' I grumbled. Haesten had retreated to Ceaster after I had destroyed his fleet and army at Beamfleot. My instinct had been to follow him there and finish his nonsense once and for all, but Alfred had wanted his household troops back in Wessex and I did not have enough men to besiege the walls of the Roman fort at Ceaster, and so Haesten still lived. We watched him, looking for evidence that he was recruiting more men, but Osferth reckoned Haesten was getting weaker rather than stronger.

'He'll be forced to swallow his pride and swear loyalty to someone else,' he suggested.

'To Sigurd or Cnut,' I said. Sigurd and Cnut were now the most powerful Danes in Britain, though neither was a king. They had land, wealth, flocks, herds, silver, ships, men and ambition. 'Why would they want East Anglia?' I wondered aloud.

'Why not?' Finan asked. He was my closest companion, the man I trusted most in a fight.

'Because they want Wessex,' I said.

'They want all of Britain,' Finan said.

'They're waiting,' Osferth said.

'For what?'

'Alfred's death,' he said. He hardly ever called Alfred 'my father', as though he, like the king, was ashamed of his birth.

'Oh there'll be chaos when that happens,' Finan said with relish.

'Edward will make a good king,' Osferth said reprovingly.

'He'll have to fight for it,' I said. 'The Danes will test him.'

'And will you fight for him?' Osferth asked.

‘I like Edward,’ I said non-committally. I did like him. I had pitied him as a child because his father placed him under the control of fierce priests whose duty was to make Edward the perfect heir for Alfred’s Christian kingdom. When I met him again, just before the fight at Beamfleot, he had struck me as a pompous and intolerant young man, but he had enjoyed the company of warriors and the pomposity vanished. He had fought well at Beamfleot and now, if Willibald’s gossip was to be believed, he had learned a little about sin as well.

‘His sister would want you to support him,’ Osferth said pointedly, making Finan laugh. Everyone knew Æthelflaed was my lover, as they knew Æthelflaed’s father was also Osferth’s father, but most people politely pretended not to know, and Osferth’s pointed remark was as close as he dared refer to my relationship with his half-sister. I would much rather have been with Æthelflaed for the Christmas feast, but Osferth told me she had been summoned to Wintanceaster and I knew I was not welcome at Alfred’s table. Besides, I now had the duty of delivering the magic fish to Eohric and I was worried that Sigurd and Cnut would raid my lands while I was in East Anglia.

Sigurd and Cnut had sailed south the previous summer, taking their ships to Wessex’s southern coast while Haesten’s army ravaged Mercia. The two Northumbrian Danes had thought to distract Alfred’s army while Haesten ran wild on Wessex’s northern border, but Alfred had sent me his troops anyway, Haesten had been stripped of his power, and Sigurd and Cnut had discovered they were powerless to capture any of Alfred’s burhs, the fortified towns that were scattered all across the Saxon lands, and so had returned to their ships. I knew they would not rest. They were Danes, which meant they were planning mischief.

So next day, in the melting snow, I took Finan, Osferth and thirty men north to Ealdorman Beornnoth’s land. I liked Beornnoth. He was old, grizzled, lame and fiery. His lands were at the very edge of Saxon Mercia and everything to the north of him belonged to the Danes, which meant that in the last few years he had been forced to defend his fields and villages against the attacks of Sigurd

Thorrson's men. 'God Almighty,' he greeted me, 'don't say you're hoping for the Christmas feast in my hall?'

'I prefer good food,' I said.

'And I prefer good-looking guests,' he retorted, then shouted for his servants to take our horses. He lived a little north and east of Tofeceaster in a great hall surrounded by barns and stables that were protected by a stout palisade. The space between the hall and his largest barn was now being blood-soaked by the slaughter of cattle. Men were hamstringing the frightened beasts to buckle them to the ground and so keep them still while other men killed them with an axe blow to the forehead. The twitching carcasses were dragged to one side where women and children used long knives to skin and butcher the corpses. Dogs watched or else fought over the scraps of offal thrown their way. The air stank of blood and dung. 'It was a good year,' Beornnoth told me, 'twice as many animals as last year. The Danes left me alone.'

'No cattle raids?'

'One or two,' he shrugged. Since last I saw him he had lost the use of his legs and needed to be carried everywhere in a chair. 'It's old age,' he told me. 'I'm dying from the ground up. I suppose you want ale?'

We exchanged news in his hall. He bellowed with laughter when I told him of the attempt on my life. 'You use sheep to defend yourself these days?' He saw his son enter the hall and shouted at him. 'Come and hear how the Lord Uhtred won the battle of the sheep!'

The son was called Beortsig and, like his father, was broad-shouldered and heavy-bearded. He laughed at the tale, but the laughter seemed forced. 'You say the rogues came from Tofeceaster?' he asked.

'That's what the bastard said.'

'That's our land,' Beortsig said.

'Outlaws,' Beornnoth said dismissively.

'And fools,' Beortsig added.

'A thin, bald, one-eyed man recruited them,' I said. 'Do you know anyone who looks like that?'

‘Sounds like our priest,’ Beornnoth said, amused. Beortsig said nothing. ‘So what brings you here?’ Beornnoth asked, ‘other than the need to drain my ale barrels?’

I told him of Alfred’s request that I seal a treaty with Eohric, and how Eohric’s envoys had explained their king’s request because of his fear of Sigurd and Cnut. Beornnoth looked sceptical. ‘Sigurd and Cnut aren’t interested in East Anglia,’ he said.

‘Eohric thinks they are.’

‘The man’s a fool,’ Beornnoth said, ‘and always was. Sigurd and Cnut want Mercia and Wessex.’

‘And once they possess those kingdoms, lord,’ Osferth spoke softly to our host, ‘they’ll want East Anglia.’

‘True, I suppose,’ Beornnoth allowed.

‘So why not take East Anglia first?’ Osferth suggested, ‘and add its men to their war-bands?’

‘Nothing will happen till Alfred dies,’ Beornnoth suggested. He made the sign of the cross, ‘and I pray he still lives.’

‘Amen,’ Osferth said.

‘So you want to disturb Sigurd’s peace?’ Beornnoth asked me.

‘I want to know what he’s doing,’ I said.

‘He’s preparing for Yule,’ Beortsig said dismissively.

‘Which means he’ll be drunk for the next month,’ the father added.

‘He’s left us in peace all year,’ the son said.

‘And I don’t want you poking his wasps out of their nest,’ Beornnoth said. He spoke lightly enough, but his meaning was heavy. If I rode on north then I might provoke Sigurd, then Beornnoth’s land would be thudded by Danish hooves and reddened by Danish blades.

‘I have to go to East Anglia,’ I explained, ‘and Sigurd’s not going to like the thought of an alliance between Eohric and Alfred. He might send men south to make his displeasure known.’

Beornnoth frowned. ‘Or he might not.’

‘Which is what I want to find out,’ I said.

Beornnoth grunted at that. ‘You’re bored, Lord Uhtred?’ he asked. ‘You want to kill a few Danes?’

'I just want to smell them,' I said.

'Smell?'

'Half Britain will already know of this treaty with Eohric,' I said, 'and who has the most interest in preventing it?'

'Sigurd,' Beornnoth admitted after a pause.

I sometimes thought of Britain as a mill. At the base, heavy and dependable was the millstone of Wessex, while at the top, just as heavy, was the grindstone of the Danes, and Mercia was crushed between them. Mercia was where Saxon and Dane fought most often. Alfred had cleverly extended his authority over much of the kingdom's south, but the Danes were lords of its north, and till now the struggle had been fairly evenly divided, which meant both sides sought allies. The Danes had offered enticements to the Welsh kings, but though the Welsh nursed an undying hatred of all Saxons, they feared the wrath of their Christian God more than they feared the Danes, and so most of the Welsh kept an uneasy peace with Wessex. To the east, though, lay the unpredictable kingdom of East Anglia, which was ruled by Danes, but was ostensibly Christian. East Anglia could tip the scales. If Eohric sent men to fight against Wessex then the Danes would win, but if he allied himself with the Christians then the Danes would face defeat.

Sigurd, I thought, would want to prevent the treaty ever happening, and he had two weeks to do that. Had he sent the thirteen men to kill me? As I sat by Beornnoth's fire, that seemed the best answer. And if he had, then what would he do next?

'You want to smell him, eh?' Beornnoth asked.

'Not provoke him,' I promised.

'No deaths? No robbery?'

'I won't start anything,' I promised.

'God knows what you'll discover without slaughtering a few of the bastards,' Beornnoth said, 'but yes. Go and sniff. Beortsig will go with you.' He was sending his son and a dozen household warriors to make sure we kept our word. Beornnoth feared we planned to lay waste a few Danish steadings and bring back cattle, silver and slaves, and his men would be there to prevent that, but in truth I only wanted to smell the land.