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The Pagan Lord

Written by Bernard Cornwell

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THE PAGAN LORD

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PART ONE

The Abbot



One

A dark sky.

The gods make the sky; it reflects their moods and they were dark that day. It was high summer and a bitter rain was spitting from the east. It felt like winter.

I was mounted on Lightning, my best horse. He was a stallion, black as night, but with a slash of grey pelt running down his hindquarters. He was named for a great hound I had once sacrificed to Thor. I hated killing that dog, but the gods are hard on us; they demand sacrifice and then ignore us. This Lightning was a huge beast, powerful and sullen, a warhorse, and I was in my war-glory on that dark day. I was dressed in mail and clad in steel and leather. Serpent-Breath, best of swords, hung at my left side, though for the enemy I faced that day I needed no sword, no shield, no axe. But I wore her anyway because Serpent-Breath was my companion. I still own her. When I die, and that must be soon, someone will close my fingers around the leather-bindings of her worn hilt and she will carry me to Valhalla, to the corpse-hall of the high gods, and we shall feast there.

But not that day.

That dark summer day I sat in the saddle in the middle of a muddy street, facing the enemy. I could hear them, but could not see them. They knew I was there.

The street was just wide enough for two wagons to pass each other. The houses either side were mud and wattle, thatched with reeds that had blackened with rain and grown thick with lichen.

The mud in the street was fetlock deep, rutted by carts and fouled by dogs and by the swine that roamed free. The spiteful wind rippled the puddles in the ruts and whipped smoke from a roof-hole, bringing the scent of burning wood.

I had two companions. I had ridden from Lundene with twenty-two men, but my mission in this shit-smelling, rain-spitted village was private and so I had left most of my men a mile away. Yet Osbert, my youngest son, was behind me, mounted on a grey stallion. He was nineteen years old, he wore a suit of mail and had a sword at his side. He was a man now, though I thought of him as a boy. I frightened him, just as my father had frightened me. Some mothers soften their sons, but Osbert was motherless and I had raised him hard because a man must be hard. The world is filled with enemies. The Christians tell us to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek. The Christians are fools.

Next to Osbert was Æthelstan, bastard eldest son of King Edward of Wessex. He was just eight years old, yet like Osbert he wore mail. Æthelstan was not frightened of me. I tried to frighten him, but he just looked at me with his cold blue eyes, then grinned. I loved that boy, just as I loved Osbert.

Both were Christians. I fight a losing battle. In a world of death, betrayal and misery, the Christians win. The old gods are still worshipped, of course, but they're being driven back into the high valleys, into the lost places, to the cold northern edges of the world, and the Christians spread like a plague. Their nailed god is powerful. I accept that. I have always known their god has great power and I don't understand why my gods let the bastard win, but they do. He cheats. That's the only explanation I can find. The nailed god lies and cheats, and liars and cheaters always win.

So I waited in the wet street, and Lightning scraped a heavy hoof in a puddle. Above my leather and mail I wore a cloak of dark blue wool, edged with stoat fur. The hammer of Thor hung at my throat, while on my head was my wolf-crested helmet. The cheek-pieces were open. Rain dripped from the helmet rim. I wore long leather boots, their tops stuffed with rags to keep the rain from trickling down inside. I wore gauntlets, and on my arms were

the rings of gold and rings of silver, the rings a warlord earns by killing his enemies. I was in my glory, though the enemy I faced did not deserve that respect.

'Father,' Osbert began, 'what if . . .'

'Did I speak to you?'

'No.'

'Then be quiet,' I snarled.

I had not meant to sound so angry, but I was angry. It was an anger that had no place to go, just anger at the world, at the miserable dull grey world, an impotent anger. The enemy was behind closed doors and they were singing. I could hear their voices, though I could not distinguish their words. They had seen me, I was certain, and they had seen that the street was otherwise empty. The folk who lived in this town wanted no part of what was about to happen.

Though what was about to happen I did not know myself, even though I would cause it. Or perhaps the doors would stay shut and the enemy would cower inside their stout timber building? Doubtless that was the question Osbert had wanted to ask. What if the enemy stayed indoors? He probably would not have called them the enemy. He would have asked what if 'they' stay indoors.

'If they stay indoors,' I said, 'I'll beat their damned door down, go in and pull the bastard out. And if I do that then the two of you will stay here to hold Lightning.'

'Yes, Father.'

'I'll come with you,' Æthelstan said.

'You'll do as you're damned well told.'

'Yes, Lord Uhtred,' he said respectfully, but I knew he was grinning. I did not need to turn around to see that insolent grin, but I would not have turned because at that moment the singing stopped. I waited. A moment passed and then the doors opened.

And out they came. Half a dozen older men first, then the young ones, and I saw those younger ones look at me, but even the sight of Uhtred, warlord draped in anger and glory, could not stifle their joy. They looked so happy. They were smiling, slapping each other's backs, embracing and laughing.

The six older men were not laughing. They walked towards me and I did not move. 'I am told you are Lord Uhtred,' one of them said. He wore a grubby white robe belted with rope, was white-haired and grey-bearded and had a narrow, sun-darkened face with deep lines carved round his mouth and eyes. His hair fell past his shoulders, while his beard reached to his waist. He had a sly face, I thought, but not without authority, and he had to be a churchman of some importance because he carried a heavy staff topped with an ornate silver cross.

I said nothing to him. I was watching the younger men. They were boys mostly, or boys just turned to men. Their scalps, where their hair had been shaved back from their foreheads, gleamed pale in the grey daylight. Some older folk were coming from the doors now. I assumed they were the parents of these boy-men.

'Lord Uhtred.' The man spoke again.

'I'll speak to you when I'm ready to speak,' I growled.

'This is not seemly,' he said, holding the cross towards me as if it might frighten me.

'Clean your rancid mouth out with goat piss,' I said. I had seen the young man I had come to find and I kicked Lightning forward. Two of the older men tried to stop me, but Lightning snapped with his big teeth and they staggered back, desperate to escape. Spear-Danes had fled from Lightning, and the six older men scattered like chaff.

I drove the stallion into the press of younger men, leaned down from the saddle and grasped the man-child's black gown. I hauled him upwards, thrust him belly-down over the pommel and turned Lightning with my knees.

And that was when the trouble started.

Two or three of the younger men tried to stop me. One reached for Lightning's bridle and that was a mistake, a bad mistake. The teeth snapped, the boy-man screamed, and I let Lightning rear up and flail with his front hooves. I heard the crash of one heavy hoof into bone, saw blood bright and sudden. Lightning, trained to keep moving lest an enemy try to hamstring a back leg, lurched forward. I spurred him, glimpsing a fallen man with a bloody skull.

Another fool grasped my right boot, trying to haul me from the saddle, and I slammed my hand down and felt the grip vanish. Then the man with long white hair challenged me. He had followed me into the crowd and he shouted that I was to let my captive go, and then, like a fool, he swung the heavy silver cross on its long shaft at Lightning's head. But Lightning had been trained to battle and he twisted lithely, and I leaned down and seized the staff and ripped it from the man's grasp. Still he did not give up. He was spitting curses at me as he seized Lightning's bridle and tried to drag the horse back into the crowd of youths, presumably so I would be overwhelmed by numbers.

I raised the staff and slammed it down hard. I used the butt end of the staff as if it were a spear, and did not see it was tipped with a metal spike, presumably so the cross could be rammed into the earth. I had just meant to stun the ranting fool, but instead the staff buried itself in his head. It pierced his skull. It brightened that dull gloomy day with blood. It caused screams to sound to the Christian heaven, and I let the staff go and the white-robed man, now dressed in a robe dappled with red, stood swaying, mouth opening and closing, eyes glazing, with a Christian cross jutting skywards from his head. His long white hair turned red, and then he fell. He just fell, dead as a bone. 'The abbot!' someone shouted, and I spurred Lightning and he leaped forward, scattering the last of the boy-men and leaving their mothers screaming. The man draped over my saddle struggled and I hit him hard on the back of his skull as we burst from the press of people back into the open street.

The man on my saddle was my son. My eldest son. He was Uhtred, son of Uhtred, and I had ridden from Lundene too late to stop him becoming a priest. A wandering preacher, one of those long-haired, wild-bearded, mad-eyed priests who gull the stupid into giving them silver in return for a blessing, had told me of my son's decision. 'All Christendom rejoices,' he had said, watching me slyly.

'Rejoices in what?' I had asked.

'That your son is to be a priest! Two days from now, I hear, in Tofeceaster.'

And that was what the Christians had been doing in their church, consecrating their wizards by making boys into black-clothed priests who would spread their filth further, and my son, my eldest son, was now a damned Christian priest and I hit him again. 'You bastard,' I growled, 'you lily-livered bastard. You traitorous little cretin.'

'Father . . .' he began.

'I'm not your father,' I snarled. I had taken Uhtred down the street to where a particularly malodorous dung-heap lay wetly against a hovel wall. I tossed him into it. 'You are not my son, I said, 'and your name is not Uhtred.'

'Father . . .'

'You want Serpent-Breath down your throat?' I shouted. 'If you want to be my son you take off that damned black frock, put on mail and do what I tell you.'

'I serve God.'

'Then choose your own damned name. You are not Uhtred Uhtredson.' I twisted in the saddle. 'Osbert!'

My younger son kicked his stallion towards me. He looked nervous. 'Father?'

'From this day on your name is Uhtred.'

He glanced at his brother, then back to me. He nodded reluctantly.

'What is your name?' I demanded.

He still hesitated, but saw my anger and nodded again. 'My name is Uhtred, Father.'

'You are Uhtred Uhtredson,' I said, 'my only son.'

It had happened to me once, long ago. I had been named Osbert by my father, who was called Uhtred, but when my elder brother, also Uhtred, was slaughtered by the Danes my father had renamed me. It is always thus in our family. The eldest son carries on the name. My stepmother, a foolish woman, even had me baptised a second time because, she said, the angels who guard the gates of heaven would not know me by my new name, and so I was dipped in the water barrel, but Christianity washed off me, thank Christ, and I discovered the old gods and have worshipped them ever since.

The five older priests caught up with me. I knew two of them, the twins Ceolnoth and Ceolberht who, some thirty years before, had been hostages with me in Mercia. We had been boys captured by the Danes, a fate I had welcomed and the twins had hated. They were old now, two identical priests with stocky builds, greying beards and anger livid on their round faces. 'You've killed the Abbot Wihtred!' one of the twins challenged me. He was furious, shocked, almost incoherent with rage. I had no idea which twin he was because I could never tell them apart.

'And Father Burgred's face is ruined!' the other twin said. He moved as if to take Lightning's bridle and I turned the horse fast, letting him threaten the twins with the big yellow teeth that had bitten off the newly ordained priest's face. The twins stepped back.

'The Abbot Wihtred!' the first twin repeated the name. 'A saintlier man never lived!'

'He attacked me,' I said. In truth I had not meant to kill the old man, but there was small point in telling that to the twins.

'You'll suffer!' one of the twins yelped. 'You will be cursed for all time!'

The other held a hand towards the wretched boy in the dung-heap. 'Father Uhtred,' he said.

'His name is not Uhtred,' I snarled, 'and if he dares call himself Uhtred,' I looked at him as I spoke, 'then I will find him and I will cut his belly to the bone and I will feed his lily-livered guts to my swine. He is not my son. He's not worthy to be my son.'

The man who was not worthy to be my son clambered wetly from the dung-heap, dripping filth. He looked up at me. 'Then what am I called?' he asked.

'Judas,' I said mockingly. I was raised as a Christian and had been forced to hear all their stories, and I recalled that a man named Judas had betrayed the nailed god. That never made any sense to me. The god had to be nailed to a cross if he was to become their saviour, and then the Christians blame the man who made that death possible. I thought they should worship him as a saint, but instead they revile him as a betrayer. 'Judas,' I said again, pleased I had remembered the name.

The boy who had been my son hesitated, then nodded. 'From now on,' he said to the twins, 'I am to be called Father Judas.'

'You cannot call yourself . . .' either Ceolnoth or Ceolberht began.

'I am Father Judas,' he said harshly.

'You will be Father Uhtred!' one of the twins shouted at him, then pointed at me. 'He has no authority here! He is a pagan, an outcast, loathed of God!' He was shaking with anger, hardly able to speak, but he took a deep breath, closed his eyes and raised both hands towards that dark sky. 'O God,' he shouted, 'bring down your wrath on this sinner! Punish him! Blight his crops and strike him with sickness! Show your power, O Lord!' His voice rose to a shriek. 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I curse this man and all his kin.'

He took a breath and I pressed my knee on Lightning's flank and the great horse moved a pace closer to the ranting fool. I was as angry as the twins.

'Curse him, O Lord,' he shouted, 'and in thy great mercy bring him low! Curse him and his kin, may they never know grace! Smite him, O Lord, with filth and pain and misery!'

'Father!' the man who had been my son shouted.

Æthelstan chuckled. Uhtred, my only son, gasped.

Because I had kicked the ranting fool. I had pulled my right foot from the stirrup and lashed out with the heavy boot and his words stopped abruptly, replaced by blood on his lips. He staggered backwards, his right hand pawing at his shattered mouth. 'Spit out your teeth,' I ordered him, and when he disobeyed I half drew Serpent-Breath.

He spat out a mix of blood, spittle and broken teeth. 'Which one are you?' I asked the other twin.

He gaped at me, then recovered his wits. 'Ceolnoth,' he said.

'At least I can tell the two of you apart now,' I said.

I did not look at Father Judas. I just rode away.

I rode home.

* * *

10

Perhaps Ceolberht's curse had worked, because I came home to death, smoke and ruin.

Cnut Ranulfson had raided my hall. He had burned it. He had killed. He had taken Sigunn captive.

None of it made sense, not then. My estate was close to Cirrenceastre, which was deep inside Mercia. A band of horse-Danes had ridden far, risking battle and capture, to attack my hall. I could understand that. A victory over Uhtred would give a man reputation, it would spur the poets to taunting songs of victory, but they had attacked while the hall was almost empty. They would surely have sent scouts? They would have suborned folk to be spies for them, to discover when I was there and when I was likely to be absent, and such spies would surely have told them that I had been summoned to Lundene to advise King Edward's men on that city's defences. Yet they had risked disaster to attack an almost empty hall? It made no sense.

And they had taken Sigunn.

She was my woman. Not my wife. Since Gisela died I had not taken another wife, though I had lovers in those days. Æthelflaed was my lover, but Æthelflaed was another man's wife and the daughter of the dead King Alfred, and we could not live together as man and wife. Sigunn lived with me instead, and Æthelflaed knew it. 'If it wasn't Sigunn,' she had told me one day, 'it would be another.'

'Maybe a dozen others.'

'Maybe.'

I had captured Sigunn at Beamfleot. She was a Dane, a slender, pale, pretty Dane who had been weeping for her slaughtered husband when she was dragged out of a sea-ditch running with blood. We had lived together almost ten years now and she was treated with honour and hung with gold. She was the lady of my hall and now she was gone. She had been taken by Cnut Ranulfson, Cnut Longsword.

'It was three mornings ago,' Osferth told me. He was the bastard son of King Alfred, who had tried to turn him into a priest, but Osferth, even though he had the face and mind of a cleric, preferred to be a warrior. He was careful, precise, intelligent, reliable and

rarely impassioned. He resembled his father, and the older he got the more like his father he looked.

'So it was Sunday morning,' I said bleakly.

'Everyone was in the church, lord,' Osferth explained.

'Except Sigunn.'

'Who is no Christian, lord,' he said, sounding disapproving.

Finan, who was my companion and the man who commanded my troops if I was absent, had taken twenty men to reinforce Æthelflaed's bodyguard as she toured Mercia. She had been inspecting the burhs that guarded Mercia from the Danes, and doubtless worshipping in churches across the land. Her husband, Æthelred, was reluctant to leave the sanctuary of Gleawecestre and so Æthelflaed did his duty. She had her own warriors who guarded her, but I still feared for her safety, not from the Mercians, who loved her, but from her husband's followers, and so I had insisted she take Finan and twenty men and, in the Irishman's absence, Osferth had been in charge of the men guarding Fagranforda. He had left six men to watch over the hall, barns, stables and mill, and six men should have been more than enough because my estate lay a long way from the northern lands where the Danes ruled. 'I blame myself, lord,' Osferth said.

'Six was enough,' I said. And the six were all dead, as was Herric, my crippled steward, and three other servants. Some forty or fifty horses were gone, while the hall was burned. Some of the walls still stood, gaunt scorched trunks, but the hall's centre was just a heap of smoking ash. The Danes had arrived fast, broken down the hall door, slaughtered Herric and anyone else who tried to oppose them, then had taken Sigunn and left. 'They knew you'd all be in the church,' I said.

'Which is why they came on Sunday,' Sihtric, another of my men, finished the thought.

'And they would have known you wouldn't be worshipping,' Osferth said.

'How many were there?' I asked Osferth.

'Forty or fifty,' he replied patiently. I had asked him the question a dozen times already.

Danes do not make a raid like this for pleasure. There were plenty of Saxon halls and steadings within easy reach of their lands, but these men had risked riding deep into Mercia. For Sigunn? She was nothing to them.

'They came to kill you, lord,' Osferth suggested.

Yet the Danes would have scouted the land first, they would have talked to travellers, they would know that I always had at least twenty men with me. I had chosen not to take those twenty into Tofeceaster to punish the man who had been my son because a warrior does not need twenty men to deal with a pack of priests. My son and a boy had been company enough. But the Danes could not have known I was at Tofeceaster, even I had not known I was going there till I heard the news that my damned son was becoming a Christian wizard. Yet Cnut Ranulfson had risked his men in a long, pointless raid, despite the danger of meeting my men. He would have outnumbered me, but he would have taken casualties that he could ill afford, and Cnut Longsword was a calculating man, not given to idiotic risks. None of it made sense. 'You're sure it was Cnut Ranulfson?' I asked Osferth.

'They carried his banner, lord.'

'The axe and broken cross?'

'Yes, lord.'

'And where's Father Cuthbert?' I asked. I keep priests. I am no Christian, but such is the reach of the nailed god that most of my men are, and in those days Cuthbert was my priest. I liked him. He was the son of a stonemason, gangly and clumsy, married to a freed slave with the strange name of Mehrasa. She was a dark-skinned beauty captured in some weird land far to the south and brought to Britain by a slave-trader who had died on the blade of my sword, and Mehrasa was now wailing and screaming that her husband was gone. 'Why wasn't he in church?' I asked Osferth, to which his only answer was a shrug. 'He was humping Mehrasa?' I asked sourly.

'Isn't he always?' Osferth sounded disapproving again.

'So where is he?' I asked again.

'Perhaps they took him?' Sihtric suggested.

‘They’d rather kill a priest than capture one,’ I said. I walked towards the burned hall. Men were raking at the ashes, dragging charred and smoking timbers aside. Perhaps Cuthbert’s body was there, shrivelled and black. ‘Tell me what you saw,’ I demanded of Osferth again.

He repeated it all patiently. He had been in Fagranforda’s church when he heard shouting coming from my hall, which lay not too far away. He left the church to see the first smoke drifting in the summer sky, but by the time he had summoned his men and mounted his horse the raiders were gone. He had followed them and had caught a glimpse of them and was certain he had seen Sigunn among the dark-mailed horsemen. ‘She was wearing the white dress, lord, the one you like.’

‘But you didn’t see Father Cuthbert?’

‘He was wearing black, lord, but so were most of the raiders, so I might not have noticed him. We never got close. They were riding like the wind.’

Bones appeared among the ash. I walked through the old hall door, which was marked by burned posts, and smelt the stench of roasted flesh. I kicked a charred beam aside and saw a harp in the ashes. Why had that not burned? The strings had shrivelled to black stubs, but the harp frame looked undamaged. I bent to pick it up and the warm wood just crumbled in my hand. ‘What happened to Oslic?’ I asked. He had been the harpist, a poet who chanted war-songs in the hall.

‘They killed him, lord,’ Osferth said.

Mehrasa began wailing louder. She was staring at the bones that a man had raked from the ashes. ‘Tell her to be quiet,’ I snarled.

‘They’re dogs’ bones, lord.’ The man with the rake bowed to me.

The hall dogs, the ones Sigunn loved. They were small terriers, adept at killing rats. The man pulled a melted silver dish from the ash. ‘They didn’t come to kill me,’ I said, staring at the small ribcages.

‘Who else?’ Sihtric asked. Sihtric had been my servant once and was now a house-warrior and a good one.

‘They came for Sigunn,’ I said, because I could think of no other explanation.

‘But why, lord? She’s not your wife.’

‘He knows I’m fond of her,’ I said, ‘and that means he wants something.’

‘Cnut Longsword,’ Sihtric said ominously.

Sihtric was no coward. His father had been Kjartan the Cruel, and Sihtric had inherited his father’s skill with weapons. Sihtric had stood in the shield wall with me and I knew his bravery, but he had sounded nervous when he spoke Cnut’s name. No wonder. Cnut Ranulfson was a legend in the lands where the Danes ruled. He was a slight man, very pale skinned with hair that was bone-white though he was no old man. I guessed he was now close to forty, which was old enough, but Cnut’s hair had been white from the day he was born. And he had been born clever and ruthless. His sword, Ice-Spite, was feared from the northern isles to the southern coast of Wessex, and his renown had attracted oath-men who came from across the sea to serve him. He and his friend, Sigurd Thorrson, were the greatest Danish lords of Northumbria, and their ambition was to be the greatest lords of Britain, but they had an enemy who had stopped them repeatedly.

And now Cnut Ranulfson, Cnut Longsword, the most feared swordsman in Britain, had taken that enemy’s woman. ‘He wants something,’ I said again.

‘You?’ Osferth asked.

‘We’ll find out,’ I said, and so we did.

We discovered what Cnut Ranulfson wanted that evening when Father Cuthbert came home. The priest was brought by a merchant who traded in pelts, and he had Father Cuthbert on his wagon. It was Mehrasa who alerted us. She screamed.

I was in the big barn that the Danes had not had time to burn, and which we could use for a hall until I built another, and I was watching my men make a hearth from stones when I heard the scream and ran out to see the wagon lurching up the lane. Mehrasa was tugging at her husband while Cuthbert was flailing with his long skinny arms. Mehrasa was still screaming. ‘Quiet!’ I shouted.

My men were following me. The pelt-trader had stopped his wagon and fallen to his knees as I approached. He explained that he had found Father Cuthbert to the north. 'He was at Beorgford, lord,' he said, 'by the river. They were throwing stones at him.'

'Who was throwing stones?'

'Boys, lord. Just boys playing.'

So Cnut had ridden to the ford where, presumably, he had released the priest. Cuthbert's long robe was mud-stained and torn, while his scalp was crusted with blood clots. 'What did you do to the boys?' I asked the trader.

'Just chased them away, lord.'

'Where was he?'

'In the rushes, lord, by the river. He was crying.'

'Father Cuthbert,' I said, walking to the wagon.

'Lord! Lord!' he reached a hand for me.

'He couldn't cry,' I told the trader. 'Osferth! Give the man money.' I gestured at the priest's rescuer. 'We'll feed you,' I told the man, 'and stable your horses overnight.'

'Lord!' Father Cuthbert wailed.

I reached into the cart and lifted him. He was tall, but surprisingly light. 'You can stand?' I asked him.

'Yes, lord.'

I put him on the ground, steadied him, then stepped away as Mehrasa embraced him.

'Lord,' he said over her shoulder, 'I have a message.'

He sounded as if he was crying, and perhaps he was, but a man with no eyes cannot cry. A man with two bloody eye-holes cannot cry. A blinded man must cry, and cannot.

Cnut Ranulfson had gouged out his eyes.

Tameworþig. That was where I was to meet Cnut Ranulfson. 'He said you would know why, lord,' Father Cuthbert told me.

'That's all he said?'

'You'd know why,' he repeated, 'and you will make it good,

and you're to meet him before the moon wanes or he'll kill your woman. Slowly.'

I went to the barn door and looked up into the night, but the moon was hidden by clouds. Not that I needed to see how slender its crescent glowed. I had one week before it waned. 'What else did he say?'

'Just that you're to go to Tameworþig before the moon dies, lord.'

'And make good?' I asked, puzzled.

'He said you'd know what that means, lord.'

'I don't know!'

'And he said . . .' Father Cuthbert said slowly.

'Said what?'

'He said he blinded me so I couldn't see her.'

'See her? See who?'

'He said I wasn't worthy to look on her, lord.'

'Look on who?'

'So he blinded me!' he wailed and Mehrasa started screeching and I could get no sense from either.

But at least I knew Tameworþig, though fate had never taken me to that town, which lay at the edge of Cnut Ranulfson's lands. It had once been a great town, the capital of the mighty King Offa, the Mercian ruler who had built a wall against the Welsh and dominated both Northumbria and Wessex. Offa had claimed to be the king of all the Saxons, but he was long dead and his powerful kingdom of Mercia was now a sad remnant split between Danes and Saxons. Tameworþig, which had once housed the greatest king of all Britain, the fortress city that had sheltered his feared troops, was now a decayed ruin where Saxons slaved for Danish jarls. It was also the most southerly of all Cnut's halls, an outpost of Danish power in a disputed borderland.

'It's a trap,' Osferth warned me.

I somehow doubted it. Instinct is everything. What Cnut Ranulfson had done was dangerous, a great risk. He had sent men, or brought men, deep into Mercia where his small raiding band could easily have been cut off and slaughtered to the last man. Yet

something had driven him to that risk. He wanted something, and he believed I possessed it, and he had summoned me, not to one of the great halls deep in his own land, but to Tameworþig that lay very close to Saxon territory.

'We ride,' I said.

I took every man who could mount a horse. We numbered sixty-eight warriors, mailed and helmeted, carrying shields, axes, swords, spears and war-hammers. We rode behind my banner of the wolf, and we rode northwards through chill summer winds and sudden spiteful showers of rain. 'The harvest will be poor,' I told Osferth as we rode.

'Like last year, lord.'

'We'd best look to see who's selling grain.'

'The price will be high.'

'Better that than dead children,' I told him.

'You're the hlaford,' he said.

I turned in my saddle. 'Æthelstan!'

'Lord Uhtred?' The boy quickened his stallion's pace.

'Why am I called a hlaford?'

'Because you guard the loaf, lord,' he said, 'and a hlaford's duty is to feed his people.'

I grunted approval of his answer. Hlaford is a lord, the man who guards the hlaf, the loaf. My duty was to keep my people alive through winter's harshness and if that took gold, then gold must be spent. I had gold, but never enough. I dreamed of Bebbanburg, of the fortress in the north that had been stolen from me by Ælfric, my uncle. It was the impregnable fort, the last refuge on Northumbria's coast, so grim and formidable that the Danes had never captured it. They had taken all of northern Britain, from the rich pastures of Mercia to the wild Scottish frontier, but they had never taken Bebbanburg, and if I was to take it back I needed more gold for men, more gold for spears, more gold for axes, more gold for swords, more gold so that we could beat down the kinsmen who had stolen my fortress. But to do that we would have to fight through all the Danish lands, and I had begun to fear I would die before I ever reached Bebbanburg again.

We reached Tameworþig on the second day of our journey. Somewhere we crossed the frontier between the Saxon and the Danish lands, a frontier that was no fixed line, but was a broad stretch of country where the steadings had been burned, the orchards cut down, and where few animals except the wild beasts grazed. Yet some of those old farms had been rebuilt; I saw a new barn, its timber bright, and there were cattle in some of the meadows. Peace was bringing men to the frontier lands. That peace had lasted since the battle in East Anglia that had followed Alfred's death, though it had ever been an uncomfortable peace. There had been cattle raids, and slave raids, and squabbles over land boundaries, but no armies had been raised. The Danes still wanted to conquer the south, and the Saxons dreamed of taking back the north, but for ten years we had lived in morose quiet. I had wanted to disturb the peace, to lead an army north towards Bebbanburg, but neither Mercia nor Wessex would give me men and so I too had kept the peace.

And now Cnut had disturbed it.

He knew we were coming. He would have posted scouts to watch all the tracks from the south and so we took no precautions. Usually, when we rode the wild border, we had our own scouts far ahead, but instead we rode boldly, keeping to a Roman road, knowing that Cnut was waiting. And so he was.

Tameworþig was built just north of the River Tame. Cnut met us south of the river, and he wanted to overawe us because he had more than two hundred men standing in a shield wall athwart the road. His banner, which showed a war axe shattering a Christian cross, flew at the line's centre, and Cnut himself, resplendent in mail, cloaked in dark brown with fur shrouding his shoulders, and with his arms bright with gold, waited on horseback a few paces ahead of his men.

I stopped my men and rode forward alone.

Cnut rode towards me.

We curbed our horses a spear's length from each other. We looked at one another.

His thin face was framed by a helmet. His pale skin looked

drawn, and his mouth, which usually smiled so easily, was a grim slash. He looked older than I remembered and it struck me at that moment, watching his grey eyes, that if Cnut Ranulfson were to achieve his life's dreams then he must do it soon.

We watched each other and the rain fell. A raven flew from some ash trees and I wondered what kind of omen that was. 'Jarl Cnut,' I broke the silence.

'Lord Uhtred,' he said. His horse, a grey stallion, skittered sideways and he slapped its neck with a gloved hand to still it. 'I summon you,' he said, 'and you come running like a scared child.'

'You want to trade insults?' I asked him. 'You, who were born of a woman who lay with any man who snapped his fingers?'

He was silent for a while. Off to my left, half hidden by trees, a river ran cold in that bleak summer's rain. Two swans beat up the river, their wings slow in the chill air. A raven and two swans? I touched the hammer about my neck, hoping those omens were good.

'Where is she?' Cnut spoke at last.

'If I knew who she was,' I said, 'I might answer you.'

He looked past me to where my men waited on horseback. 'You didn't bring her,' he said flatly.

'You're going to talk in riddles?' I asked him. 'Then answer me this one. Four dilly-dandies, four long standies, two crooked pandies and a wagger.'

'Be careful,' he said.

'The answer is a goat,' I said, 'four teats, four legs, two horns and a tail. An easy riddle, but yours is difficult.'

He stared at me. 'Two weeks ago,' he said, 'that banner was on my land.' He pointed to my flag.

'I did not send it, I did not bring it,' I said.

'Seventy men, I'm told,' he ignored my words, 'and they rode to Buchestanes.'

'I've been there, but not in many years.'

'They took my wife and they took my son and daughter.'

I gazed at him. He had spoken flatly, but the expression on his face was bitter and defiant. 'I had heard you have a son,' I said.

'He is called Cnut Cnutson and you captured him, with his mother and sister.'

'I did not,' I said firmly. Cnut's first wife had died years before, as had his children, but I had heard of his new marriage. It was a surprising marriage. Men would have expected Cnut to marry for advantage, for land, for a rich dowry, or for an alliance, but rumour said his new wife was some peasant girl. She was reputed to be a woman of extraordinary beauty, and she had given him twin children, a boy and a girl. He had other children, of course, bastards all, but the new wife had given him what he most wanted, an heir. 'How old is your son?' I asked.

'Six years and seven months.'

'And why was he at Buchestanes?' I asked. 'To hear his future?'

'My wife took him to see the sorceress,' Cnut answered.

'She lives?' I asked, astonished. The sorceress had been ancient when I saw her and I had assumed she was long dead.

'Pray that my wife and children live,' Cnut said harshly, 'and that they are unharmed.'

'I know nothing of your wife and children,' I said.

'Your men took them!' he snarled. 'It was your banner!' He touched a gloved hand to the hilt of his famed sword, Ice-Spite. 'Return them to me,' he said, 'or your woman will be given to my men, and when they have done with her I'll flay her alive, slowly, and send you her skin for a saddlecloth.'

I turned in the saddle. 'Uhtred! Come here!' My son spurred his horse. He stopped beside me, looked at Cnut, then back to me. 'Dismount,' I ordered him, 'and walk to Jarl Cnut's stirrup.' Uhtred hesitated a heartbeat, then swung out of the saddle. I leaned over to take his stallion's bridle. Cnut frowned, not understanding what was happening, then glanced down at Uhtred, who was standing obediently beside the big grey horse. 'That is my only son,' I said.

'I thought . . .' Cnut began.

'That is my only son,' I said angrily. 'If I lie to you now then you may take him and do as you wish with him. I swear on my only son's life that I did not take your wife and children away.

I sent no men into your land. I know nothing of any raid on Buchestanes.'

'They carried your banner.'

'Banners are easy to make,' I said.

The rain hardened, driven by gusts of wind that shivered the puddles in the ruts of the nearby fields. Cnut looked down at Uhtred. 'He looks like you,' he said, 'ugly as a toad.'

'I did not ride to Buchestanes,' I told him harshly, 'and I sent no men into your land.'

'Get on your horse,' Cnut told my son, then looked at me. 'You're an enemy, Lord Uhtred.'

'I am.'

'But I suppose you're thirsty?'

'That too,' I said.

'Then tell your men to keep their blades sheathed, tell them that this is my land and that it will be my pleasure to kill any man who irritates me. Then bring them to the hall. We have ale. It isn't good ale, but probably good enough for Saxon swine.'

He turned and spurred away. We followed.

The hall was built atop a small hill, and the hill was ringed with an ancient earth wall that I supposed had been made on the orders of King Offa. A palisade topped the wall, and inside that wooden rampart was a high-gabled hall, its timbers dark with age. Some of those timbers had been carved with intricate patterns, but lichen now hid the carvings. The great door was crowned with antlers and wolf skulls, while inside the ancient building the high roof was supported by massive oak beams from which more skulls hung. The hall was lit by a fierce fire spitting in the central hearth. If I had been surprised by Cnut's offer of hospitality I was even more surprised when I walked into that high hall, for there, waiting on the dais and grinning like a demented weasel, was Haesten.

Haesten. I had rescued him years before, given him his freedom and his life, and he had rewarded me with treachery. There had

been a time when Haesten was powerful, when his armies had threatened Wessex itself, but fate had brought him low. I had forgotten how many times I had fought him, and I had beaten him every time, yet he survived like a snake wriggling free of a peasant's rake. For years now he had occupied the old Roman fort at Ceaster, and we had left him there with his handful of men, and now he was here, in Tameworþig. 'He swore me loyalty,' Cnut explained when he saw my surprise.

'He's sworn that to me too,' I said.

'My Lord Uhtred.' Haesten hurried to meet me, his hands outstretched in welcome and a smile wide as the Temes on his face. He looked older, he was older; we were all older. His fair hair had turned silver, his face was creased, yet the eyes were still shrewd, lively and amused. He had evidently prospered. He wore gold on his arms, had a gold chain with a gold hammer about his neck, and another gold hammer in his left ear lobe. 'It is always a pleasure to see you,' he told me.

'A one-sided pleasure,' I said.

'We must be friends!' he declared. 'The wars are over.'

'They are?'

'The Saxons hold the south, and we Danes live in the north. It is a neat solution. Better than killing each other, yes?'

'If you tell me the wars are over,' I said, 'then I know the shield walls will be made very soon.' They would too if I could provoke it. I had wanted to kick Haesten out of his refuge in Ceaster for a decade, but my cousin Æthelred, Lord of Mercia, had always refused to lend me the troops I would need. I had even begged Edward of Wessex, and he had said no, explaining that Ceaster lay inside Mercia, not Wessex, and that it was Æthelred's responsibility, but Æthelred hated me and would rather have the Danes in Ceaster than my reputation enhanced. Now, it seemed, Haesten had gained Cnut's protection, which made capturing Ceaster a much more formidable task.

'My Lord Uhtred doesn't trust me,' Haesten spoke to Cnut, 'but I am a changed man, is that not so, lord?'

'You're changed,' Cnut said, 'because if you betray me I'll extract the bones from your body and feed them to my dogs.'

'Your poor dogs must go hungry then, lord,' Haesten said.

Cnut brushed past him, leading me to the high table on the dais. 'He's useful to me,' he explained Haesten's presence.

'You trust him?' I asked.

'I trust no man, but I frighten him, so yes, I trust him to do my bidding.'

'Why not hold Ceaster yourself?'

'How many men does it take? A hundred and fifty? So let Haesten feed them and spare my treasury. He's my dog now. I scratch his belly and he obeys my commands.' He nevertheless gave Haesten a place at the high table, though far away from the two of us. The hall was large enough to hold all Cnut's warriors and my men, while at the farther end, a long way from the fire and close to the main door, two tables had been provided for cripples and beggars. 'They get what's left over,' Cnut explained.

The cripples and beggars ate well because Cnut gave us a feast that night. There were haunches of roasted horse, platters of beans and onions, fat trout and perch, newly baked bread, and big helpings of the blood puddings I liked so much, all served with ale that was surprisingly good. He served the first horn to me himself, then stared morosely to where my men mixed with his. 'I don't use this hall much,' he said, 'it's too close to you stinking Saxons.'

'Maybe I should burn it for you?' I suggested.

'Because I burned your hall?' That thought seemed to cheer him. 'Burning your hall was a revenge for *Sea Slaughterer*,' he said, grinning. *Sea Slaughterer* had been his prized ship, and I had turned her into a scorched wreck. 'You bastard,' he said, and touched his ale-horn to mine. 'So what happened to your other son? Did he die?'

'He became a Christian priest, so, as far as I'm concerned, yes he died.'

He laughed at that, then pointed to Uhtred, 'And that one?'

'Is a warrior,' I said.

'He looks like you. Let's hope he doesn't fight like you. Who's the other boy?'

'Æthelstan,' I said, 'King Edward's son.'

Cnut frowned at me. 'You bring him here? Why shouldn't I hold the little bastard as a hostage?'

'Because he is a bastard,' I said.

'Ah,' he said, understanding, 'so he won't be King of Wessex?'

'Edward has other sons.'

'I hope my son holds onto my lands,' Cnut said, 'and perhaps he will. He's a good boy. But the strongest should rule, Lord Uhtred, not the one who slides out from between a queen's legs.'

'The queen might think differently.'

'Who cares what wives think?' He spoke carelessly, but I suspected he lied. He did want his son to inherit his lands and fortune. We all do, and I felt a shiver of rage at the thought of Father Judas. But at least I had a second son, a good son, while Cnut had only one, and the boy was missing. Cnut cut into a haunch of horsemeat and held a generous portion towards me. 'Why don't your men eat horse?' he asked. He had noticed how many had left the meat untouched.

'Their god won't allow it,' I said.

He looked at me as if judging whether I made a joke. 'Truly?'

'Truly. They have a supreme wizard in Rome,' I explained, 'a man called the pope, and he said Christians aren't permitted to eat horse.'

'Why not?'

'Because we sacrifice horses to Odin and Thor and eat the meat. So they won't.'

'All the more for us,' Cnut said. 'A pity their god doesn't teach them to leave women alone.' He laughed. He had always been fond of jokes and surprised me by telling one now. 'You know why farts smell?'

'I don't.'

'So the deaf can enjoy them too.' He laughed again and I wondered why a man who was so bitter about his missing wife and children could be so light-hearted. And perhaps he read my thoughts because he suddenly looked serious. 'So who took my wife and children?'

'I don't know.'

He tapped the table with his fingertips. ‘My enemies,’ he said after a few heartbeats, ‘are all the Saxons, the Norse in Ireland, and the Scots. So it’s one of those.’

‘Why not another Dane?’

‘They wouldn’t dare,’ he said confidently. ‘And I think they were Saxons.’

‘Why?’

‘Someone heard them speaking. She said they spoke your foul tongue.’

‘There are Saxons serving the Norse,’ I said.

‘Not many. So who took them?’

‘Someone who’ll use them as hostages,’ I said.

‘Who?’

‘Not me.’

‘For some reason,’ he said, ‘I believe you. Maybe I’m getting old and gullible, but I’m sorry I burned your hall and blinded your priest.’

‘Cnut Longsword apologises?’ I asked in mock astonishment.

‘I must be getting old,’ he said.

‘You stole my horses too.’

‘I’ll keep those.’ He stabbed a knife into a hunk of cheese, cut off a lump, then gazed down the hall, which was lit by a great central hearth round which a dozen dogs slept. ‘Why haven’t you taken Bebbanburg?’ he asked.

‘Why haven’t you?’

He acknowledged that with a curt nod. Like all the northern Danes he lusted after Bebbanburg, and I knew he must have wondered how it could be captured. He shrugged. ‘I’d need four hundred men,’ he said.

‘You have four hundred. I don’t.’

‘And even then they’ll die crossing that neck of land.’

‘And if I’m to capture it,’ I told him, ‘I’d have to lead four hundred men through your land, through Sigurd Thorrson’s land, and then face my uncle’s men on that neck.’

‘Your uncle is old. I hear he’s sick.’

‘Good.’

'His son will hold it. Better him than you.'

'Better?'

'He's not the warrior you are,' Cnut said. He gave the compliment grudgingly, not looking at me as he spoke. 'If I do you a favour,' he went on, still gazing at the great fire in the hearth, 'will you do one for me?'

'Probably,' I said cautiously.

He slapped the table, startling four hounds who had been sleeping beneath the board, then beckoned to one of his men. The man stood; Cnut pointed at the hall door and the man obediently went into the night. 'Find out who took my wife and children,' Cnut said.

'If it's a Saxon,' I said, 'I can probably do that.'

'Do it,' he said harshly, 'and perhaps help me get them back.' He paused, his pale eyes staring down the hall. 'I hear your daughter's pretty?'

'I think so.'

'Marry her to my son.'

'Stiorra must be ten years older than Cnut Cnutson.'

'So? He's not marrying her for love, you idiot, but for an alliance. You and I, Lord Uhtred, we could take this whole island.'

'What would I do with this whole island?'

He half smiled. 'You're on that bitch's leash, aren't you?'

'Bitch?'

'Æthelflaed,' he said curtly.

'And who holds Cnut Longsword's leash?' I asked.

He laughed at that, but did not answer. Instead he jerked his head towards the hall door. 'And there's your other bitch. She wasn't harmed.'

The man dispatched by Cnut had fetched Sigunn, who stopped just inside the door and looked around warily, then saw me on Cnut's dais. She ran up the hall, round the table's end and threw her arms around me. Cnut laughed at the display of affection. 'You can stay here, woman,' he told Sigunn, 'among your own people.' She said nothing, just clung to me. Cnut grinned at me over her shoulder. 'You're free to go, Saxon,' he said, 'but find out who hates me. Find out who took my woman and children.'

‘If I can,’ I said, but I should have thought harder. Who would dare capture Cnut Longsword’s family? Who would dare? But I did not think clearly. I thought their capture was meant to harm Cnut, and I was wrong. And Haesten was there, sworn man to Cnut, but Haesten was like Loki, the trickster god, and that should have made me think, but instead I drank and talked and listened to Cnut’s jokes and to a harpist singing of victories over the Saxons.

And next morning I took Sigunn and went back south.