

Halfdan of Jorvik

The Jorvik Trilogy, Volume 1

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HALFDAN OF JORVIK

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Written by Christopher Webster.

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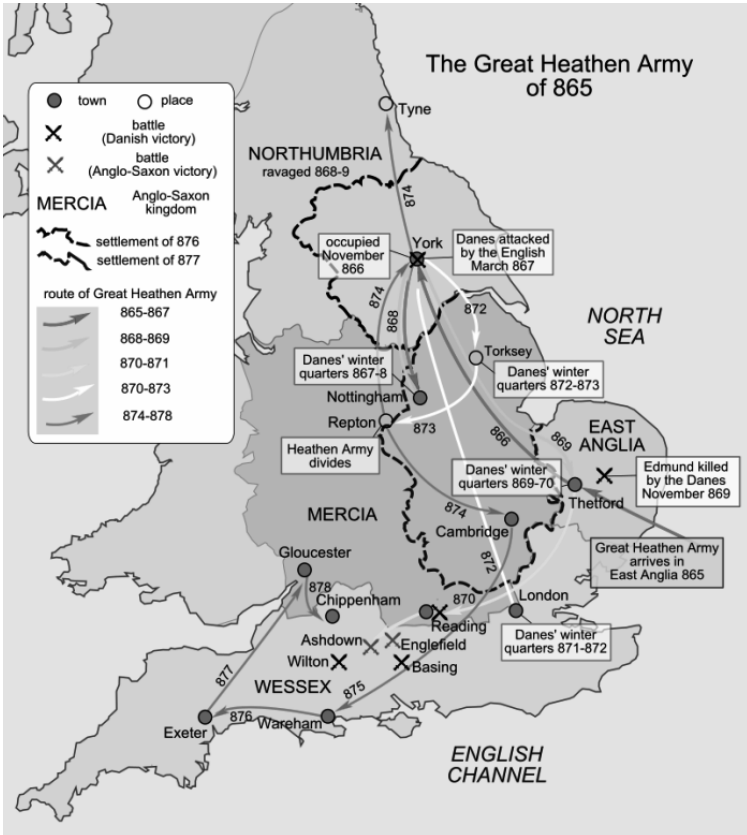
In memory of my best friend, John Whittles (d. 7th May 2010). He was also a Viking fan, and wrote a novel entitled Beorn's Saga.

Ok Ellu bak / At lét hinn's sat / Ívarr, ara, / Iorví, skorit.

(At Ella's back / Ivar, who lived in / Jorvic, cut.)

—Knútsdrápa

Map of the Great Heathen Army



This map (courtesy of *Wikimedia Creative Commons*) shows the movements of the Great Heathen Army from 865 to 877. Place names are in modern English. It is important to note that there is some disagreement, and even confusion, among sources and scholars over the dates and sequence of key battles. An approximate timeline, with notes, can be found at the end of the book.

Snake Pit

It begins with a Viking, his voice echoing from the dank walls of a snake pit in Bamburgh, reciting his death song. He had been thrown there by Aella, King of Northumbria, after the battle. His huskarls had been hewn by the enemy, hacked to pieces, but he suffered no harm, for over his mail was the shirt which Aslaug had made for him; a shirt of white, woven with silk and spells, and so smooth and slippery that the sword edge slid from it.

He had killed a great many of Aella's men, but he was outnumbered, and was soon surrounded with a ring of shields and taken prisoner. They asked him who he was, but he did not answer, so Aella said, "Throw him in a snake pit. That will loosen his tongue."

They lowered him into a pit of horned vipers, each about a yard long and highly poisonous. But though he stayed there all afternoon, the snakes avoided him, thanks to the spells in Aslaug's shirt (or perhaps that shirt was so slippery, they couldn't get a grip). And while he sat there he sang his death song:

*"I swung the sword
bravely, in my last blood-dance,
where I did much slaughter,
with the snakes of war,
the blood-red blades,
that sought my life –
I never dreamed
that snakes would kill me!"*

He paused after the first stanza and said, "But perhaps my Norse kennings are too much for you. I'll tell you my story plainly, in your own language."

"I have lived valiantly; triumphed in battle and in the bedroom with those three *skjaldmarar* who were my wives: Lagertha was the first. I met her in battle; she was trying to hack my head off, but her beauty beguiled me.

"Impressed with her courage, I courted her from afar, sending her a *mansongr*, a love poem, in skaldic verse – for a warrior must also be a poet, or he is just a brute. Then I went to win her. But her home was guarded by a hound and a bear, and she set them on me to test my strength.

"The bear was stronger than ten strong warriors. He growled defiance, but I dared not grapple him, for each of his claws was like a dagger four inches long. He lunged at me, tearing my flesh, but I sprang aside and speared him through the breast.

"My spear was stuck there when the hound sprung at me, his jaws agape, going for my throat. I had no time to draw my *knifr*, so with my bare hands, I choked him to death.

"Then Lagertha appeared. 'You have passed the test,' she said, 'and now you must do battle with me in bed!'

'But these wounds!' I cried, motioning to the deep gashes on my chest and my right arm."

'A hero does not care for such a slight grazes,' she challenged.

'No, but perhaps you care for your sheets. They will be bloodied.'

'So much the better!'

'As will your body!'

‘I am a virgin, so I can add my blood to yours!’

“We wrestled all night and many times thereafter, and I married her, and she bore me a son and two darling daughters.”

Seeing that the snakes were doing nothing, Aella ordered the Viking to be stripped. The guards hauled him out of the snake pit and pulled off his war-gear, his enchanted shirt and also his hairy breeches, leaving him naked and vulnerable.

Aella sneered as he spoke again. “He will not last long without his byrnie and breeches. When the snakes start to bite, he’ll scream out his name, then we’ll know for sure who he is.”

The vipers slithered over the Viking’s chest and began to bite. Their sting was bitter, and he cried out, revealing his name at last. “I am Ragnar! My by-name is Loðbrok – ‘hairy breeches’ in your tongue. But let me tell you how I earned that name:

“I loved a thegn’s daughter, called Thora, but her father’s mead-hall was plagued by a monster; an enormous serpent – the great grandfather of these vipers – though they are vicious enough!”

“I knew that my ringmail would not resist the deadly poison in his fangs, so I clothed myself in hairy hides and thrust my spear into a soft spot in his slimy belly.

“I killed the worm and I won my wife thanks to the protection afforded by the hairy breeches, and that’s why I’m known as Ragnar Loðbrok. Yes – I am Ragnar!”

“I thought as much!” Aella gloated, leaning over the snake pit, savouring the moment. “Now I have got you – my old arch-enemy – the great Ragnar!”

But Ragnar only laughed. “The warrior who wails for his life is a weakling. Death is the door to Valhall for a warrior.

“You are deluded, Viking,” mocked Aella. “Your gods are false. There is only one True God and he will send you to Hell!”

Ragnar cried out again as the serpents snapped, but he grimaced against the pain and continued his death song.

“My deeds are well-deserving of a bench-place in Odin’s high hall. Let me describe them:

“I was only thirteen when I led my first raid at the head of thirty Vikings in a ring-prowed war-keel. Like a storm, we descended upon Lindisfarne. Those minster-men were caught off guard. They were snivelling cowards, dressed in womanish robes instead of manly mail. We hacked them down where they stood, reddening the floor with their blood, their cries of terror drowned by our roaring. Their treasures – gold crosses, candlesticks and suchlike – glittered in the dim light, as easy to take as apples from a tree, but it was the slaughter that brought us the most delight.”

Aella gritted his teeth as he listened to this litany of brutality.

“That was not the first monastery you raided. I was a young *dreng* then, but I vowed revenge, for it was sacrilege – an act of blasphemy against the One True God.”

Ragnar replied with a scornful laugh. “If your God is the true God, why did he not strike us down? He didn’t, and we won a fortune without a man lost – so – Odin must be the true god!”

Aella shook his head in denial. He had heard this argument before and knew the answer. “Those monks had sinned, and God sent you as their punishment.”

“Ha! They must have done some pretty bad things! What did they do – rape the nuns? I wish I’d been with them!”

Aella was disgusted at this additional blasphemy and said, spitting with rage, "You are an instrument of the devil and deserve to die!"

And dying he was, gasping and grimacing with pain, much to Aella's delight. The poison was working, though he fought off the snakes as best as he could, crushing them in his blood-stained hands, but, as in his last battle, there were too many. He felt his life slipping away, so he gathered his strength and uttered his last words:

*"I swung the sword.
It emboldens my mood
to know that Baldr
is preparing a banquet.
The champion who comes
by the valkyries' choosing
into Odin's dwelling
does not lament death –"*

"But remember this," he spluttered his voice withering to a croak, "my sons shall avenge me! Halfdan, Ivar, and Ubba will have the last word. They will black their swords with the blood of Aella!"

The thought brought a satisfied smile to his lips, even in the face of death.

"*Læjandi skalk deyja!*" he chuckled, his chest rising in one last gasp. "I die laughing!"

Eoforwic

“It was badly done,” said Fulberht. He was a canon at the minster, old and not long for this world. A fringe of silver hair clung to his balding scalp, and his thick eyebrows gave his eyes a perpetually thoughtful expression. “He should have executed him honourably, with a single stroke of the sword, but such a death – in a snake pit, for heaven’s sake! – is likely to provoke vengeance. What does it say in *Hosea*? – ‘For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.’”

“What can you expect from a tyrant?” commented Cynewulf.

He was a deacon of the minster. His flaxen hair, cropped short in the style of his order, framed a face that was fresh and eager, though his cassock, a plain black robe, frayed and faded, showed signs of hard work and humble living.

“Shhh!” hissed the old canon. “Kings – I will not use the word you used – have spies everywhere. Speak of other matters.”

Following the advice of his elder, Cynewulf changed the subject to the lodging that was offered.

“My father is a thegn, but he said he would have no more to do with me when I left the *fyrð* for the church, so I’m afraid that I have little to offer in return.”

The canon clapped him warmly on the shoulder. “But you have! For learning is riches, and I will confess that, when I offered you lodging, I had that in mind.”

“What do you mean?” said the young man, mystified.

“My niece has expressed a desire to be educated. I told her that good needlework was all that was needed for a good wife, but she insisted.”

Cynewulf was well aware that, when a cleric described a young girl as his niece, she was usually, in reality, a love-child. But Fulberht had such a reputation for righteous behaviour that he could hardly credit it. Perhaps she really was his niece. Instead, he repeated the common belief of the time, that women have no propensity for learning: “Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,” he said, quoting a poet.

Fulberht looked surprised. “What about Cleopatra? She spoke nine languages and could read the old hieroglyphs; or Theodora of Constantinople? She is remembered for her exploits in the field of Cupid, but she was an accomplished rhetorician; or, in our own Northumbria, Hilda of Streonshalh? She taught Latin language and literature and her counsel was sought by kings. But I am getting carried away! My niece is nothing compared to those shining lights of learning. See for yourself.”

Fulberht led him to a hall not far from the minster in a street called Goodramgate where many of the minor clergy were accommodated. It was larger than the other buildings, being built end-on, with its high triangular gable facing the street.

“Eowyn!” he called as they entered, and moments later, a young woman appeared from an inner chamber. She was well-proportioned, with regular features and sparkling eyes. Her lips were a rich red, shaped like Freya’s bow, and her complexion was as glowing as a peach. What truly set her apart, though, was a demeanour of such grace and charm that anyone who knew her couldn’t help but be captivated.

Cynewulf was quick to revise his opinion that women have no propensity for learning, and could think of no better way of paying his rent than sitting head to head with Eowyn over a Latin manuscript.

“She can read and write,” said Fulberht, though only in our homely vernacular.”

“Very well. I will try her. Eowyn,” he said, turning to the girl with a polite bow, “would you be so kind as to read this for me.” He felt about inside his robe and drew out a *schedula*, a scrap of parchment. “It is a poem I have been working on,” he explained, handing it to her.

‡ *City of Eoforwic,*
 † *You are my home.*
 † *Nowhere on earth is so fair,*
 † *Even the City of Rome.*
 † *We have the largest minster*
 † *Under the sun,*
 † *Larger than Canterbyrig,*
 † *Fashioned in stone.*

Eowyn read it easily, while her uncle looked on, beaming with pride.

“Is there anything else you notice about it?” Cynewulf asked.

She scrutinised the parchment again then said, “The runes down the side are harder to read, but – wait a moment – I think they spell a word. Yes – ‘Cynewulf’! Is that your name?”

“Well, done!” said Cynewulf, thinking that she would be a pleasure to teach, quite apart from those red lips and sparkling eyes.

Later, Fulberht showed him to his lodgings, which were little more than a dark cupboard at the back of the hall. But there was a pallet bed and a lectern with an inkwell and a quill – what more could a deacon want?

Latin is very different to Northumbrian, and, at first, Eowyn struggled with it.

“Repeat after me,” said Cynewulf:

“Mensa, nominative, a table

Mensae, vocative, O table!

Mensam, accusative, a table

Mensae...”

“But why would I want to talk to a table?” exclaimed Eowyn, interrupting him.

“It’s the usual way of learning the first declension. Anyway, you might – just – want to address a table one day.”

She raised her beautiful, arched eyebrows in an unspoken question.

“Let me think of an example. Suppose there was a famine and your cupboard was bare. You might look at the table and say – ‘O table! You were groaning with good things this time last year!’”

“I suppose so,” she said, “though it’s hard to imagine.”

“Never mind that. Let’s get on. Here is the rest of the declension.” He pushed a parchment towards her. “Now, learn it and repeat it to me.”

She frowned over the page for a while (so beautifully!) then, pushing it back, declined "*mensa*" from memory.

"Well done!" he said. "You learn quickly."

"But what's the point? It's a stupid language."

"Don't say that! It's the most beautiful language in the world, as well as being the language of the Bible."

"All those endings!"

"They make the language more concise. Latin doesn't need all those little words that we need, like 'of', 'to', 'by', 'with' or 'from', and, don't forget, Latin is understood throughout most of the world, whereas Northumbrian is only spoken here, in Northumbria."

"So why did you write your poem in Northumbrian?"

Cynewulf smiled and looked heavenward, as though appealing to his muse. "Because I have a project..."

"Oh, do tell me," Eowyn urged, thinking that anything to do with this handsome young man must be more interesting than declensions and conjugations.

"It is to write poetry in Northumbrian that can rival the best of the classical authors, like Ausonius."

"Ausonius?"

Cynewulf wished he had not mentioned Ausonius, since his masterwork, *De Amore*, was not suitable for a young innocent like Eowyn. Canto I was about the philosophy of love, especially the comparison between God's love and human love (which was the excuse for including it in the minster library). Canto II was about courtship and marriage, but it was Canto III that fascinated him, since it described sexual techniques – 69 of them! When he had discovered that text as a young seminarian (not easy, for it was kept in a secret alcove) he had been

astonished that there could be so many (he could only think of three), and was shocked when he read what some of them entailed. No, it was certainly not suitable for a young innocent!

"On religious subjects, of course," he added firmly. "I want to retell the stories of the Bible in the language of the old heroic lays. It is not a new idea. A monk at Streoneshalh called Caedmon began it. Listen, I will recite a part of one of his poems:

*He stripped himself then, young hero
that was God almighty.
strong and resolute;
He ascended on the high gallows,
brave in the sight of many,
when he wanted to ransom mankind.
I trembled when the warrior
embraced me;
even then I did not
dare to bow to earth,
but I had to stand fast.*

"Do you see? Christ is a hero, brave, a warrior. That way, we can get the good news, the *Godspel*, past any lingering heathenism, just like we do with the Christmas tree, which is reminiscent of the old groves sacred to Thunor."

"Yes, I see," she said, full of encouragement. "It is a wonderful project!"

Part of him basked in her praise, while another part said, "Then you should be getting on with it, not mooning over a pretty face."

That inner voice was a timely warning. He had agreed to one hour per day of tuition, but that hour often extended to two or even three hours as they indulged in pleasant digressions. They were the happiest hours of his day, but he was uncomfortably aware that they were a distraction from his ambition to be a great scholar and perhaps even be invited to the court of Charles the Bald, just as his predecessor at the Minster School, Alcuin, had been invited to serve Charlemagne.

"I must go," he said, conscience-stricken. "I have to give a lecture on Ezekiel this afternoon at the Minster School and I have not even started to prepare it."

As he left, Eowyn called after him, "Write me one of your poems – like the one you showed me – an acrostic," which had the result of making him spend another hour on Eowyn instead of Ezekiel. The lecture didn't suffer, however, for what it lacked in scholarly references was more than made up for by the happy smile on the face of the lecturer.

Next day it was verbs. "We decline an adjective and conjugate a verb," he began, "and the usual verb we begin with is '*amare*' – 'to love'. Now, repeat after me:

"amo – I love

amas – you love

amant – he, she, it loves..."

"How can 'it' love anything?" Eowyn interrupted with a disarming smile. "I mean, if it's an 'it', it has no feelings – like that table we declined last time, "If I said, 'O table, what do you

love?’ it couldn’t reply, and even if it could it would only say, ‘Nothing, because I have no heart!’”

If one of his pupils had come up with such an irrelevancy, he would have rapped his knuckles, but as it was Eowyn who asked it, he did his best to answer.

“You might say it as a figure of speech, like this: ‘Look at that table. It loves to be loaded with good things.’”

“They have some funny tables in Rome,” mused Eowyn. You can talk to them, they have feelings, and, I suppose, since they’ve got four legs, they can gallop like a horse.”

“Come now,” Cynewulf rebuked her, thinking he might rap her knuckles anyway (for Fulberht had adjured him to be strict with her), “be serious and learn the conjugation.” He slid the parchment towards her, and, as before, she memorised it in no time. Had they stuck rigidly to the syllabus she would have mastered the basics by now, but, as always, most of the lesson was spent in digression.

“*Amo, amas,*” she mused. “I love my uncle, my pooch, Grimbold, and... but I’d rather not say. What do you love?”

Cynewulf took up the question eagerly, “Oh, that’s easy. The minster, books, my father – even though he cut me off – and, oh! – I should have started with God.”

“That’s all right,” she said, “you are a deacon, so of course you love God. What else do you love?”

He took a deep breath, exhaled a soulful sigh, then echoed her words, “I’d rather not say.”

“Did you write that poem for me?” she asked, shyly, perhaps guessing – or hoping – what it might be in it.

“No,” he replied awkwardly. “I mean, yes, but it would be wrong to show it to you.”

“Why?”

“Because the words came straight out of my heart and I didn’t mean it to be like that.”

“Show me.”

With an odd mixture of reluctance and eagerness he reached inside his cassock – that mysterious black gown in which there seemed any number of deep pockets – and pulled out a *schedula*. He pushed it towards her and looked away in embarrassment. This is what she read:

† *Living all alone,*
 ♂ *Or with monks, cold as stone,*
 † *Visions I have, of you,*
 † *Eowyn, sweet and true.*
 ♂ *Read this and agree –*
 ♀ *Say that’s what we’ll be!*

“Oh, another runic acrostic,” she sighed, puzzling over it for a moment. Then her eyes lit up and she cried: “Lovers! Yes – that’s what we’ll be! Kiss me!”

“But your uncle!”

“He’s at Vespers.”

“Where I should be,” said Cynewulf, ruefully.

“But that’s all right,” she urged. “We’re in love, and that’s what Christianity is all about, isn’t it?”

The lover in Cynewulf told him that she was right, and ruthlessly suppressed the protest of the scholar in him, who was trying to remind him that the word in the Bible is “*caritas*”, which is charitable love for all mankind, not the “*amor*” of Ausonius, passionate and physical.

He kissed her, revelling in the passionate and physical, and quite forgetting charitable love and his ambition to serve Charles the Bald.

The Great Heathen Army

Halfdan and Ivar were playing *hnefatafl* when they heard the news of their father's death. It was brought by a messenger from England who told them how King Aella had defeated him in battle and thrown him into a snake pit.

Halfdan was holding a *hnefatafl* piece in his hand and he gripped it so hard that his fingernails bled. He looked at his hand and held it up to show Ivar.

"I vow by this blood that we will be revenged on that *ragr*!" he swore as he swept the game to the ground. "This blood is the first and Aella's will be last! I will bring him to battle and make him a Blood-Eagle!"

Ivar, known as Ivar the Boneless, agreed with a low growl. He was the eldest of the brothers and the biggest. He had the bulk of a bear and the brawn, too, and winter or summer he was always bare-chested. That's because he was a berserker – a warrior who fought "bare shirt" in battle, relying on brute strength and battle-madness. He had earned the cognomen, "boneless", because of the way he could bend and twist his body in unbelievable ways when the war-madness was upon him.

"Aella will rue the day when Ragnar's sons come seeking revenge!" he roared, and gnashed his teeth, as though he would gobble him up, and he clutched his *knifr* so hard that he left a hand-print on it. Then, in a fit of rage, he jumped to his feet and cried, "Kill the messenger!"

"No!" said Halfdan, his steely gaze asserting a will that was stronger even than Ivar's berserker madness. "It's not his fault. He's just the bearer of bad tidings."

In this restraint, arising from a sense of justice, Halfdan was showing the qualities that would one day make him a good king (and Ivar was showing the qualities that made him a good berserker).

They spread the word to the warriors of all Danmork to come and join them in a new adventure in England – not just to raid it, or ravage and rape it, but to win it and rule it. And the Viking spirit of those valiant Danes inspired them to throng in their hundreds and thousands to the sons of Ragnar, hoping to win fame and fortune. No larger host had ever been assembled in Danmork, so Halfdan called it the *Mikill Herr*.

Halfdan was fairer and handsomer than Ivar. His eyes were grey-blue, like the skies of his homeland, and his body, though manly, lacked Ivar's bulging muscles, but he made up in skill what he lacked in strength. Often, he wore one of the white shirts that Aslaug made for Ragnar as a kind of light armour, so silky and slippery that weapons slid off. That's why he was nicknamed "*Hvitserkr*", "Whiteshirt".

One of the jarl's who wanted to join them, noticing Halfdan's lordly bearing, went up to him and asked, "Who is the leader, here?"

"I am," said Ivar

"No, we three are brothers, said Halfdan quickly, "so we share the leadership."

"But I am the eldest!" said Ivar belligerently.

"But not the brightest," Halfdan said below his breath.

Ivar gave him one of his snarls, and Halfdan added, "To be fair, he has a sharp wit, when the war-madness is not making him see enemies in every shadow."

"I'm the fattest!" said Ubba, joking as always, "but also the fiercest!"

He said this to make them smile, and stop arguing. And he really was the fattest, having great rolls of wobbly flesh where Ivar had bulging muscle. He was also the friendliest and was never happier than when he was feasting in the mead-hall. But when on the battlefield, he became another man; a fearless fighter and a fearful killer.

"No! I'm the best warrior," said Ivar, boastfully, "because I'm a berserker!"

"That's because you go berserk!" Ubba said, repeating an old jest, "but it's not the best mind-mood to make big decisions."

"It's my right, I tell you, to lead the Great Army!"

"Why?" challenged Ubba

"Because I want *frægð* – fame! I want to live forever; warriors remember my name!"

"Just keep going berserk," laughed Ubba, "and they won't be able to forget you – even if they wanted to!"

"Let's not argue about leadership," said Halfdan, seeking harmony, as he always did. "The sons of Ragnar will rule together and share the riches when we conquer. There'll be kingships for all of us, including you, Ivar."

"I pity the people with a berserk king!" joked Ubba.

Halfdan waved the joke aside and spoke seriously.

"That's enough arguing for now – and enough piss-taking – we need to prepare for our venture, and the first thing to do

is to consult the *Volvr*. Those wise women will tell us what the Norns are weaving for us in the Loom of Years.”

“Agreed,” said Ivar. “There’ll be many a red thread woven in the battle for Engaland, and I want to know if one of them will be mine.”

“Then stay at home and take up weaving with the lasses!” said Ubba, making fun again.

“Shut it, *skitugr*!” swore Ivar, “or you’ll feel my knitting needle!” He fingered his *knifr*, then laughed it off.

The *Volvr* were wise-women who lived in a cave not far from where the brothers lived, in a *borg* called Hord. The cave was hidden in a shadowed grove, its entrance framed by tangled vines and ancient roots. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of herbs, damp earth, and burning incense. Flickering firelight cast a lurid glow on the stone walls, which were covered in runic spells and ancient symbols: the Triple Horn of Odin, the Valknut, The World Tree, Yggdrasil.

The *Volvr* were naked except for hair so long it must never have been cut, and loincloths of rabbit fur. Two were old crones, more gnarled and twisted than the roots of the trees that thrust into their cave, but one, an acolyte probably, was a youngster, who might have been beautiful if she had ever washed.

They welcomed the jarls with prophetic words, spoken in chorus:

“Hail Ivar! – the berserker who will become king of a land over two seas; and Halfdan, the White Shirt, who will be king of a shire!”

“What about me,” asked Ubba, not wanting to be left out.

“You will be a king too – the king of worms!” croaked their leader, the tallest and most emaciated.

“You mean Worms in Rhineland,” said Ubba, relieved.

But the *Volvr* just cackled, as though he’d cracked one of his best jokes.

Ubba didn’t understand it and just laughed it off: “Two seas, shires, worms... is that it? Ha! We’ve faced worse in Jelling on a bad market day.”

But Ivar was still staring at the three seers with a frown on his face. Then he turned on his heel and stormed from the cave without another word. His brothers followed, reluctantly, letting the flap of the hide door over the cave mouth fall shut behind them.

Outside, the wind was rising, wailing across the moor and whistling low between the standing stones. Ubba glanced back once.

“They always have to make it sound like a riddle,” he grumbled. “Why can’t they ever just say, ‘You’ll die next Wednesday after eating bad fish,’ or something simple like that?”

Neither of the others laughed.

Behind them, in the darkness, the *Volvr* whispered one final thing that only Halfdan heard:

“Three sons of Ragnar. Three ways to fall. All of them, one after another.”

Halfdan consoled himself by remembering the words of Odin in the *Havamal*:

*Cattle die, kinsmen die,
you yourself will die;
but the fame of a dead man's deeds
will never die.*

Yes, he would die, but before he did, he would do deeds that would live forever in the annals of the Northlands: he would avenge his father and win a kingship.

And to make doubly sure, and to guard against the malicious mutterings of the Norns, he spread the call wider – to Norvegr, Gotaland and faraway Frisia, promising untold booty – the wealth of the Northumbria – land, gold, women, glory – everything a Viking could want.

At last, a month later, hundreds of war-keels, set sail on the swan-road; an apt kenning, for with their billowing white sails, they looked like beautiful swans. As they sailed, they sang the *Hey-saa* war song:

*“Hey, saa, saa!
Losa ulfa stríðs,
ferðandi nær ok fjar.
Hey, saa, saa!”*

*“Hey, saa, saa!
Loose the wolves of war,
voyaging near and far.
Hey, saa, saa!”*

*"Hey, saa, saa!
Red in our thirst for death,
fighting to the last breath.
Hey, saa, saa!"*

*"Hey, saa, saa!
Odin laughs in his hall
and valkyries watch us all.
Hey, saa, saa!"*

The winds were favourable and the sea was calm, so the crossing took only two days – an omen that Odin favoured their venture. They landed on the coast of East Anglia, at a place called Gorlestun, rowed up the River Yare as far as they could, then moored the ships and raised the Raven Banner – the raven, the bird of carrion, the banner of blood. That banner had been sewn by the daughters of Ragnar, chanting spells as they spun the yarn. It was Halfdan himself who raised it, seeing it as a token of the revenge they came to wreak.

The folk of East Anglia had seen that banner before and knew what it meant – blood and death – and they scattered in all directions.

Love Is Blind

Cynewulf's duties as deacon were light. He was expected to attend the daily offices and to carry the processional cross on feast days. His duties in the Minster School were to deliver two lectures per week to the seminarians – the older students preparing for priesthood, and five lessons per week to the catechists: youngsters, some of whom would go on to be priests or monks, while others would return to secular life. In between times he was expected to study, both for his own ordination and for his lectures.

His interest at that time was in the prophet Ezekiel. He hoped to break new ground in comparing the parables of this prophet with the parables of Christ. His idea was to begin with Christ's *Parable of the Sower* (the argument) and compare it with Ezekiel's *Parable of the Lioness and Her Cubs* (the counter-argument), then use the comparison to demonstrate Christ's empathy with ordinary people, and the power of his parables (the synthesis or conclusion). After all, everybody had seen a sower, but who had seen a lioness? But it needed a lot of work to present it with correct dialectical reasoning, and, every time he opened the Bible, he found himself turning to *Song of Solomon*:

Quam pulchra es, amica mea, quam pulchra es! – Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead. Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every

one bear twins, and none is barren among them...
Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are
twins, which feed among the lilies.

As a poet, he couldn't help puzzling at the idiosyncratic imagery – “breasts like two young roes”! – and what had “feed among the lilies” got to do with it? Perhaps he would write his own *Song of Cynewulf* and do it better. No – nothing can be better than the inspired word of God! What he meant was to rewrite it in his own style.

As a teacher, he thought that the *Song* would make an interesting series of lectures in which he expounded the analogy between human love and God's love – that would be a real challenge of dialectical reasoning! – but he rejected the idea with horror when he thought of the disturbing effect it might have on young men who were preparing themselves for celibacy.

As a lover, he related to it at face value. It was a paean to human love and sexuality, and seemed to offer a Biblical justification for his sessions with Eowyn, for, when he revelled in the intensity of her love, he could imagine that that was how God loved his creation (he refused to admit to himself that, when he was with her, he never thought of God at all, just about how beautiful she was – eyes, lips, teeth, neck, breasts – just like in the *Song* when taken at face value).

He, also, had been preparing himself for a life of celibacy, and, having been in a starving condition for so long, was like a man brought to a feast. A studious man exceeds a debauchee in his enjoyment of a woman whom he loves – though he never thought of it like that. With the hair-splitting logic of the

schoolman, he reasoned that what they did together was not sinful, because he was not vowed to celibacy, and, since she was unmarried, he was not breaking the seventh commandment, the one about adultery. There was another word often used in the Good Book – “fornication” – but he preferred not to think about that.

On a typical day, while Fulberht was officiating at Sext, Cynewulf would be officiating at a different ceremony with a not dissimilar name.

The lesson would begin before Fulberht left, usually with admonitions from Cynewulf: “You must learn those verbs, or feel my rod!” as a way of dissembling the soft feelings he had for her.

As soon as Fulberht left the house, he would say, “Now you *will* feel my rod!” and he would take her into the bedchamber and make her do just that – for starters, of course. Other delights followed, and if you could be a fly on the wall, you would wonder where two such innocents – a bookish cleric, and a sheltered maiden – learned such outlandish lovemaking skills. The answer was simple. Cynewulf had studied Ausonius’ *De Amore*, and Eowyn had studied how Grimbold did doggy style with the bitch next door, and they put them both together and made – sweet music – sweeter even than in the melodies made in students’ quarter of Heslington.

And when you can make sweet music upon such a beautiful instrument as Eowyn’s body, why would you want to dry yourself up with quill and parchment? In short, Cynewulf’s lectures suffered, and, instead of offering original insights into Ezekiel, he ended up merely restating the content in his own words, fol-

lowed by a reading of one of the commentaries written by the Church Fathers.

Matters came to a head one day when Father Boniface, head of the Minster School, asked him to drop his lectures to the seminarians and take 10 lessons of catechism instead. However, he was so much in love with Eowyn, that the thought of his dreams going up in smoke hardly troubled him. Ten lessons of catechism were nothing, and required no preparation, therefore he could spend more time with her. His poetic dreams were also in tatters. Instead of working on his idea of a *Genesis* retold in the style of heroic poetry, he worked on his *Song of Cynewulf*, a version of *Song of Solomon* with modern imagery:

*Behold, you are fair,
and have lovely blonde hair,
(even down there!)
golden, like corn,
or the sun in the morn –
may it never be shorn!*

But, in his heart of hearts, Cynewulf knew that it was mere doggerel, and the imagery, far from improving on *Song of Solomon* was just a series of tired clichés. Eowyn liked it, though – so much so, that she rewarded him with his favourite position (Couplet 69 in *De Amore*), followed by hers (as exemplified by Grimbald) – and wasn't that better than an award of laureate's laurels from a collection of dry ascetics?

In short, our lovers, who believed themselves to be the happiest couple in the world, were so careless that their affair became the talk of Eoforwic. Everyone could see that their conversations were not always about declensions and conjugations, and that the only conjugation they cared about was of the conjugal type. Only honest Fulberht, under whose nose all this happened, was still in the dark; he was blind to what was obvious to everyone else, and even when people tried to inform him, he had such a high opinion of his niece and her tutor that he refused to believe them.

"Lovers, you say?" he snapped at Alfild, his kitchen maid, when she hinted at it.

"He writes poems for her. I've seen them."

"Did you read them?"

"I can't read."

Fulberht felt he was vindicated, and followed up with, "I know that young man's style. He is reworking passages from the Bible. Now get back to your pots and pans!"

Alfild went back to the kitchen wishing she had kept her mouth shut, as all her good intentions had achieved was to arouse her master's wrath.

"Perhaps it would be better if you sent Eowyn to the minster school," suggested Brother Boniface, tactfully, without giving his reason. "It is for men only, but I can put her in the broom cupboard which is near enough for her to hear the lessons."

"That will not be necessary," said Fulberht. "There is no need to worry. I have heard how Cynewulf chides her. Why, I have even seen him rap her knuckles!"

True, he had his doubts when he found one of Cynewulf's poems tucked into her Bible. Luckily, it was the one which began: "*Behold, you are fair, and have lovely blonde hair...*" which, though it seemed to be a love poem, was easily explained away as a Biblical paraphrase when her uncle challenged her.

Finding one of Cynewulf's cassocks in her bedchamber was a more serious matter – until Eowyn, in a moment of inspiration, said, "I was mending it for him!"

Fulberht wasn't convinced at first and reminded her: "We have Alfild to do that!"

However, she managed to pass it off by saying, "She's well enough for the stableboy's breeches, but no good at fine work."

However, as more and more evidence came to light, Fulberht could bury his head in the sand no longer, though, as a scholar, he wanted good evidence before taking action, not mere tittle-tattle. So he kept a close eye on them and eventually, by spying through a crack in the door when they thought he was at Sext, caught them red-handed – at sex. At first, it was hard to make out what he was seeing: it seemed to be a creature with a head at each end – and then he realised it was something he had read about, when, as a young cleric, he had peeped into the secret alcove (though he had never dared to try it with Eowyn's mother, who had been a rather conservative sort of woman). He did not disturb them in the act – he was too embarrassed for that – but he knew he had to do something about it, and, before the week was out, he had summoned up the courage to announce that they would be separated.

The Raven and the Rune

Where was the coast-warden? What happened to the watch-fires? Long years of peace and Christianity had led to these essential defences being neglected. But a ploughboy saw the dragon ships creeping up the river and flew with a warning to the nearest town, Northwich.

“Call out the *fyrð*!” he cried. “There’s a whole lot of dragon ships heading this way – that means Vikings!”

Ealdorman Frithwulf was reluctant to take the word of a mere boy – and a lowly ploughboy at that – but it was not long before a dozen others, high and low, made the same report.

“There is nothing I can do about it,” was his regretful reply. “The housecarls are away with the king and, anyway, are few in number. The *fyrð*men are unpractised and have no weapons. We have no choice but to sue for peace.”

His answer was met with groans and grief, but luckily for the folk of East Anglia, the sons of Ragnar were hell bent on revenge on Aella and had little interest in this swampy region; so they happily accepted the terms of the treaty, which the wily old Frithwulf managed to negotiate by exaggerating the poverty of his domains: peace for the Anglians in return for 300 horses.

The *Micel Hæðen Here*, as the Englisc called it, cut a swathe through the country like the scythe of a mower. They were heading for Northumbria, where Aella was king, but on their way, they raided for provisions: food to satisfy their hunger,

mead to satisfy their thirst, women to satisfy their lust – and, just for the fun of it, slaughter to assuage their blood-lust.

Halfdan rode near the front with Ivar, his shield resting against his thigh, his thoughts on Aella. He said little, but the men around him roared and laughed, comparing tales about yesterday's plunder.

Behind them, the fields of East Anglia smoked. They had left three villages in ruins that week. In one, they had nailed the reeve to his own barn door and set it alight around him. In another, they had dragged the women out of their homesteads, raped them, then thrown them into the river, taking bets on which one would drown first. Halfdan had watched and said nothing. He disliked senseless violence, but there was nothing he could do about it. He could quote passages from the *Laxdælasaga* that condemned such violence, but they would only laugh at him, and remind him that this is what they came for – it was the price of revenge.

The great war band followed Ubba like dogs behind a butcher. Ubba, with his wolf skin cloak and a ram's skull tied to his helmet, rattling out an endless stream of jests. He fought like he was born of the war-god, Thor, flinging himself into the fight as if it were a feast laid out for him – and then making jokes about it: "It's getting dark. Any more reeves around here? They burn well, better than a dozen pine torches!"

On the fourth night, they came upon Hæthleah. It was small – a clutch of houses by the fen-edge, pale smoke drifting from thatched roofs, chickens pecking in the yard. Halfdan saw a girl leading a goat by a piece of twine, and something clenched in his gut as he had a vision of that twine twisted round her neck by some ruthless Northman.

But Ivar just grinned and said, "Another tithe for the gods, eh?"

Halfdan said nothing. His knuckles tightened on the rein.

The moon bled red as they approached the village. A hush fell over the men, like predators scenting weakness. Then Ubba raised his axe, and crowed, "This is a dull brown *byr*. Let's paint it red!" and charged in swinging his axe.

Screams cut the air. Thatched roofs caught fire. Chickens scattered, burning. A man tried to run with a boy under his arm, but Ubba took the man's head clean off, and the boy slipped in his father's blood.

Halfdan saw a woman bolt from her house with a dagger in hand, her hair unbound. She slashed at Ivar's leg. He laughed, caught her by the wrist, and used his berserker strength to drive her headfirst into the wattle wall until the screams stopped.

Halfdan, though he couldn't see the point of raiding this poor settlement, was drawn into it when a villager tried to stab him with a pitchfork. He drove his axe into the man's ribs and felt the warmth gush out like spilled soup. He stood there for a moment, staring at the blade, as if it had done the deed without him.

Behind him, someone shrieked with laughter. "Hahaha!" That was Ubba again. "Here's your red thread, Ivar!" he cried, grabbing the twine halfway between the goat and the girl, but she dropped her end of it and fled into the dark, turning the great warrior Ubba into a mere goatherd. He saw the funny side of it, and laughed so heartily that he neglected to chase her.

At least she got away, thought Halfdan.

They made camp beneath the ash tree at the village edge. The branches twisted black against the sky. Halfdan sat near the fire but didn't warm his hands.

Three captives were dragged forward. One wore a bloodied priest's robe. Another was twisting in agony because of a severed foot. The last was just a boy.

Ubba stalked among them like a wolf scenting flesh. "Three for the gallows-god," he said. "Three for wisdom, and three for the fun of it!"

They hung the bodies by the ankles, slit open the backs, and began carving. Ribs cracked. Blood steamed in the cold. Halfdan turned his face away, but he heard it all – the breathy gurgles, the wet tearing.

The others cheered. They drank from a horn carved from a man's skull. They toasted Odin, Thor, Tyr. In the centre of the firepit, three cauldrons boiled. The boy went into the mead, the priest into the blood, the footless-one into the water.

Halfdan sat still. His hands trembled slightly in the firelight. He whispered a prayer, not to Odin, not to the gods of war and death, but to Freyr, the god of Peace. "This is not war, this slaughter of innocents. There is no honour in it. O, Freyr, god of Peace, hurry this hungry horde on to Northumbria so that we can do what we came for, and wreak an honourable revenge."

By morning, Hæthleah was ash. The sky was white. Ravens circled overhead, three of them. Always three. Halfdan watched as Ubba carved a valknut symbol into the door of the ruined

church and pissed against the altar, his bulky form wobbling with laughter at the desecration.

They broke camp at dawn, leaving the village blackened behind them. Smoke still curled from the longhouse, and the scorched valknut on the church door glistened with dew. The air stank of blood and woodsmoke, and no birds sang.

As they moved northward, the mist thickened across the fen. The ground squelched beneath hooves; pools of stagnant water gleamed like dull mirrors. Men began to mutter. Some tied charms to their spears. One threw a rune-stone into the marsh with a prayer. Even Ubba, normally loud and jeering, grew quiet.

That was when the raven came. It descended in silence, cutting through the fog, wings blacker than night. It landed on a splintered fence post just feet from Halfdan's horse, tilting its head once, twice – then fixing him with one pale, dead eye.

He reined in, staring back. The army rode on without him, swallowed into the mist. It was just Halfdan, the bird, and the bog.

“Have you come to welcome us as one of your own?” he said.

The raven opened its beak – but no caw came. Instead, it made a dry clicking sound, like bones tapped together. Then it hopped once and turned, revealing the fence post beneath it:

A rune had been gouged there. Deep and deliberate.



An old rune, *Algiz*, the elk-sedge, meaning “protection; defence from enemies”.

Surely the raven had not carved it! Thought Halfdan. That rune must have been there before. He dismounted slowly and ran his fingers along the carved wood. It was fresh. The cuts hadn't weathered. No moss had grown over them. No one had passed this way before.

Then he noticed something else. In the bracken below the post, barely visible, lay a human skull. Clean and bleached white – split down the middle.

He looked at the rune again and realised that it was inverted, and that inverted its meaning: like that it meant – “death”.

The raven fluttered once, then rose, circling three times overhead before vanishing into the fog.

Aella

The news of the army travelled faster than the new-won horses. Word flew on panicked messengers and frightened lips, from scorched fields to smoky halls: the *Micel Hæðen Here* was on the move, a tide of blades and blood, cutting through Mercia and heading north with the hunger of a wolf pack.

King Aella heard of it in the great hall of Bamburgh, where the banners still hung from his last victory, and the embers of a feast fire crackled low. He was listening to a report from his reeves when the scout arrived, breathless, bleeding from the brambles he had struggled through.

“*Hlaford*,” the rider gasped, “they come from the south. A sea of them. Danes, Norwegians, Ivar’s men, Halfdan and Ubba with him. The standard of the Raven flies above the host.”

Silence fell. Even the hounds near the hearth stopped chewing their bones.

Aella stood slowly. The recent battles with his brother, Osberht, had wearied him, though not as much as those whispered taunts: “tyrant” and “usurper”. He had won that last battle, but it seemed he had only won the privilege of fighting a relentless invader. His gaze passed from the rider to his war-chief, then to the sword at his side – notched, worn, but not yet broken.

His army was already in the field, raised not for foreign war but for the bitter feud with Osberht – a feud that would drag on, though he would return to it weakened by this new conflict. How unfortunate that the Vikings had chosen to invade when the kingdom was divided! He never admitted to himself

that he was the cause of both problems: he had usurped the throne of Northumbria, ousting his older brother, and had subjected a captive Viking – a famed warlord – to a dishonourable death.

Within the hour, his army was redirected southwards toward the border of Deira, where the rolling hills dipped down to the riverlands, the last good ground before the wild fens and open moors. There, they would make their stand.

They came to the place called Haethfelda, the Heath Fields, and there they dug in. A line of earthworks was raised along the ridge, and watch fires were lit in the hollows. The men set their shields in rows and sharpened their spears beneath the sky, while priests moved among them offering blessings with ash and incense.

Aella walked the length of the encampment at dusk, the weight of the stolen crown like lead on his brow. He passed lines of young thegns who stood straighter when they saw him, and older men with scarred faces who bowed their heads and muttered prayers not just to Christ, but to Woden – just in case.

In his command tent, Aella conferred with his witan late into the night. Maps lay sprawled across the table, weighted with daggers and drinking horns. The Danish host was moving faster than expected, and the numbers were uncertain. Some said a thousand, others said ten.

“They will not pass,” said Aella at last. “We will hold them at Haethfelda. If the Raven wants Northumbria, he must break his beak on our spears.”

Next morning, a rider came in from the southern slope, face pale as bone.

“*Hlaford*,” he said. “They are near. A day’s march, no more.”

And from the ridge, Aella stood with his war-chief and watched the horizon.

There, between the folds of the land, something moved. A shadow. A low sound, like the grinding of teeth. The wind brought with it the distant echo of a horn – and screams from a burning village far beyond the trees. The *Micel Hæðen Here* was coming.

“Save Me from Bloodthirsty Men”

In Eoforwic, Archbishop Wulfhere also heard the news and called an urgent chapter house meeting. The debate was almost as fierce as the recent debate about the heresy of Adoptionism. Adoptionism was the belief that Christ was a normal human being who was “adopted” by God. The pope had declared it a heresy many years ago, but the idea kept coming back. The archbishop, however, was wise enough to know that the dispute was not really about Adoptionism, but about personalities, with Canon Cynric (the Adoptionist) and Canon Fulberht (the Incarnationist) vying for promotion to dean. It was only when Cynewulf convinced the assembled ecclesiastics that the good people of Eoforwic cared nothing for theological hair-splitting that the matter was dropped.

When the question of what to do about the *Micel Hæðen Here* came up, the metaphorical swords were drawn again. Canon Cynric’s party took as their slogan: “*God wylle us gehealdan*”. They believed that God would protect Eoforwic and the Minster, especially as they had that most sacred relic, the *hallux* (big toe) of St Bosa, a former bishop of Eoforwic who had been sainted for his humility, learning, and zeal in building up the Northumbrian church.

The opposing party were of the opinion that God helps those who help themselves and that they should encourage the secular powers to do everything humanly possible to prepare a defence, in particular, repairing the crumbling walls and augmenting the depleted garrison.

Cynewulf, though his reputation was somewhat tarnished of late, was still respected for his powers of logic and rhetoric and was invited to speak. He supported the opposing party, because, as he put it: "God did not help our brothers at Lindisfarne. Why? Because they had sinned. We have sinned too – and I confess myself to be the worst of sinners – so we must look to our own defences."

Fulberht, though he longed to defeat Canon Cynric in debate, threw in his lot with the God Will Protect party, because he longed even more to defeat his erstwhile protege.

He walked into the centre of the chapter house and pointed an accusing finger at Cynewulf.

"So, he – the sinner – has the audacity to call me and my fellow clerics sinners – *even the archbishop!* We are good men here in Eoforwic, as the blessings that God has heaped upon us show: bountiful harvests, thanks to our farmers; peace and prosperity, thanks to King Aella and the *fyrð*; wisdom and knowledge, thanks to Brother Boniface at the Minster School; and faith and spiritual guidance, thanks to our good archbishop. These are *proofs* that God is on our side and will help our king to defeat the heathen."

Applause was not allowed in the chapter house, but the speech was received with the next best thing – numerous cries of "Amen!"

The archbishop, who was also of the God Will Protect party, closed the debate by affirming that an increased round of services, rather than an increased quota of swords, would be their defence.

“We must fulfil the words of the hymn that says ‘the voice of prayer is never silent,’” he said, “and repeat Psalm 59 on our rosary beads every day. Let us begin by saying it now.”

The ecclesiastics bowed their heads and chanted the psalm with greater earnestness than they ever did in the long years of peace:

*“Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;
protect me from those who rise up against me;
deliver me from those who work evil,
and save me from bloodthirsty men.”*

Though Cynewulf’s speech had not prevailed, it had done much to restore his reputation. Brother Boniface asked him to resume his lectures to the seminarians, and he started work on his intended masterpiece, *Genesis*. He didn’t forget Eowyn, though, and spent almost as much time writing letters to her as he did writing his lectures or composing his masterpiece.

He recruited Alfhild to the role of go-between. She was a handsome girl, with blonde hair braided into pigtails, well shaped and likely to please any man. He offered payment for her services, but was much surprised when she threw her arms around him and declared her love.

When your days are spent in stone buildings, kneeling in prayer with wizened old clerics, or trying to discipline boisterous boys who should be repeating their catechism, the sensuous softness of a willing woman is a tempting antidote, and Cynewulf had not the strength to resist. He was living in a cell in the Minster dormitory just then, and so arranged to meet her in the stables where they rolled rumbustiously in the straw,

Alfhild's sweet moans mingling with the neighing of the horses, reminding Cynewulf uncomfortably of the verses of Jeremiah:

I have seen thine adulteries, and thy neighings, the lewdness of thy whoredom, and thine abominations on the hills in the fields. Woe unto thee!

His dalliance with Alfhild meant that he didn't get far with *Genesis* – only to the point where God created Adam. He had been looking forward to writing about God creating Eve, so that he could describe her as Eowyn, but his lust for Alfhild got in the way. Lust is a very different thing from holy love. It might help him to write about Sodom and Gomorrah, but there were another thirteen chapters to go before he got that far.

His lectures to the seminarians, however, continued to flourish. Alfhild, though good in the straw, was no scholar, not that that really mattered. What mattered was that she had no conversation. He would tell her about his day, saying something like, "The news about the Vikings is making the boys restless. I had to cane six of them today!" but instead of replying with something like, "Why, what were they doing?" or "Why didn't you send them to Brother Boniface?" and thus continuing the conversation, she'd just say something like, "Oh." and that was that. She was content to sit beside him and stare absently into space, comfortable in his company, but with nothing to say, whereas he, a scholar, like to discuss everything in minute detail, which she said was "just going round and round". In short, she was boring (except when it came to neighing in the straw), so there was no danger of him falling in love with

her. She wasn't even interested in discussing the topic that obsessed everybody in Eoforwic – the *Micel Hæðen Here*.

“It's big,” said Cynewulf, frowning. “It must be if they call it, *micel* – and it's on it's way here!”

“Oh,” said Alfild.

A Bull's Hide

When Halfdan saw the vast line of Aella's housecarls stretched before him, and the preparedness of his defences, his heart sank like a stone in a fjord. He wanted to turn back and avoid a battle, for the favoured tactic of the Viking is: raid and run. After all, what good is a boatload of booty if your best friend is dead and your right arm is missing?

"There's too many," he said, after weighing the situation, "and far from avenging our father, we'll all end up in a snake pit!"

Ivar was contemptuous: "You are a coward! The warrior who stands the spear-storm is rewarded by victory or taken by the valkyries – and the greater the foe, the greater the glory!"

"My fate is to be King of Worms, and we're not there yet, so how can I get killed?" said Ubba.

"We'll get you to Worms one day," said Ivar. "Meanwhile, we'll try what a parlay can do. I've an idea that might outfox the foe without a fight."

So he furled the Raven and flew a white flag.

Aella had reasons of his own to welcome a parlay, and perhaps negotiate a peace, for his rival, Osberht, was taking advantage of the distraction caused by the invaders to build up his army again.

Ivar found that Aella was a scrunched up greybeard, with a big nose and talon-like fingers, who might have been mistaken for

a grasping old miser had it not been for his rich, red mantle and kingly crown.

He looked at him with disgust – this was the man who had dishonourably slain his father, Ragnar. A red mist swept over him and he had to bite his lips so hard to fend it off that they bled.

“We need not fight,” he said, “if you pay the *mannbot*, which you call *wergild*, in fair compensation for the death of our father.”

“How much?” said Aella, guardedly.

“30,000 *thrymsas*.”

“There is not that much gold in all of Northumbria!” cried the tight-fisted old king. “I’ll give you 5,000.”

“An insult!” growled Ivar, reaching for his sword hilt – but it was not there because he had surrendered his sword to the guard.

“10,000,” countered the wily negotiator.

But Ivar shook his head. He had a clever trick in mind which would give him a much-needed foothold in the country, which was better than any amount of *wergild*.

“Just give me land,” he said.

“I can’t give away my sovereign possessions!” cried Aella, though they both knew that he owned nothing by right, only by usurpation.

“Only as much as a bull’s hide can encircle,” said Ivar, seeming to compromise.

“That’s not much,” said Aella, thinking he had got the better of the Viking. “Agreed!”

“A bull’s hide!” shrieked Halfdan. “That’s barely enough for big fat Ubba to sit on!”

“If we cut it fine, it will encircle a few miles,” said Ivar.

“Then we must make sure it’s a precious few miles,” laughed Ubba. “Any gold mines hereabouts?”

“No, but I hear that there are plenty of coal mines,” said Halfdan.

“Coal! What good is that?” scoffed Ubba.

“It makes a good fire.”

Ubba began to roll with laughter. “I’d rather warm myself on a burning reeve any day!”

Ivar, determined to make his plan work, sought out a skilled fellmonger and purchased a bull of such tremendous bulk – one of the few remaining aurochs – that Ubba declared he was jealous.

As the fellmonger, whose name was Sibbald, began his work, Ivar explained his plan: “Cut it very fine and make it as long as you can, like a roll of twine.”

Sibbald was horrified. “That were a jest indeed! What? Go and spoil the leather? Sin and pity, why, ’twould shoe half your army! What a waste!”

“Do it I bid you!”

“I tell you it’s wrong! It’s like the vanity of your Roman gal-lants that cannot wear a suit but it is slashed to show the crim-son taffeta beneath.”

“I’m given so much ground as a bull’s hide will span – which as it is is nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“No – so cut it very fine and spread it far.”

“Is this the Viking cunning that I’ve heard of?”

“Yes,” put in Ubba, “so slice the bull’s pizzle as well!”

With the regretful sigh of an artist who is about to spoil his canvas, the fellmonger stretched the bull’s hide across his bench, sharpened his shears, and carefully cut out a thong that was as thin as twine. So fine was the thong, it was many miles long.

“Now to find that gold mine!” quipped Ubba.

“You mean, coal mine,” said Halfdan.

“Ubba is right,” grinned Ivar, “It’s a gold mine. I’m talking about Eoforwic. It’s the second richest city in Engaland, so they say, with a highway to the Humber, the River Ouse, and a world of trade beyond.”

“Eoforwic,” mused Halfdan. “Doesn’t that mean ‘City of the Boar’ in their language?”

“I think so,” said Ivar.

“Then that’s a good omen. Look! I have a boar crest on my helmet. Let’s see if this bull-twine will encircle the place.”

Ivar unravelled his bull-twine right round the city, while the citizens looked on, alarmed, from the old Roman walls, and when Ivar had encircled it (the bull-twine was just long enough), he shouted his victory cry: “I claim this city!”

Bloodthirsty Battle

It was November 1st, the feast of All Saints, and the minster was decked out in white and gold. The monks chanted the set hymn for the day to a haunting plainsong melody:

“Pro omnibus Sanctis, qui a laboribus suis quiescunt...

*“For all the saints who from their labours rest,
who thee by faith before the world confessed,
thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.
Alleluia! Alleluia!”*

Cynewulf, in a white surplice, led the procession, holding high the processional cross, but even before they reached the chancel, a horrified whisper rippled through the minster: “The *Micel Hæðen* Here is at the gates!”

A woman screamed, a man shouted, “To the walls!” and the procession faltered.

“Remember what we agreed!” hissed Archbishop Wulfhere – psalms, not swords will fell this foe! So keep going!”

The procession resumed its slow march, and the monks, taking the cue, sang with renewed vigour, so that the next verse of the hymn echoed from the high vault:

“O milites tui fideles, veri et audaces...

*“Oh, may thy soldiers, faithful, true, and bold,
fight as the saints who nobly fought of old
and win with them the victor’s crown of gold.*

Alleluia! Alleluia!"

But there was chaos in the congregation. The old, the women and the children fled to safety, and the men ran to fetch their arms and armour and man the walls.

But the Roman walls, once formidable, were crumbling into ruin after centuries of neglect. In the happy years when the star of scholarship shone brightly and the Christian cross had given Northumbria a golden age, the need for such fortifications had seemed distant. Now, as the people of Eoforwic stood behind the crumbling parapet, their past complacency weighed against them, the once-mighty barriers offering little assurance against the present threat.

And even the warriors of King Aella could offer no aid, because they were embroiled in another battle, far from the walls of Eoforwic. They were fighting the forces of Osberht, the former king, whom Aella had ousted in his rise to power. That civil strife had left Northumbria divided, its strength squandered as brother fought brother, and the city of Eoforwic was left vulnerable, its people forced to fend for themselves against the *Mycel Heathen Here*.

Halfdan turned to Ivar, a fierce glint in his eye. "You've got what you wanted," he said, half joking, "A bloodthirsty battle. You're a berserker, so go berserk! What does it mean anyway, 'berserker'? 'Bare' – no shirt – or, 'bear' – 'grrrrr'?"

“Both!” Ivar exulted. “I’m a bare bear, so they’d better beware!”

He foamed at the mouth as he said it, his berserker madness coming on. With a roar like a bear’s, he led the warriors toward the city’s walls, directing his men to the weakest points, where age and neglect had taken their toll.

The defenders of Eoforwic could only watch in growing dread as the enemy closed in, their strength seemingly unstoppable.

Ivar fixed his eyes fixed on a multangular tower that loomed above the battlefield. The years had not been kind to it; the crumbled mortar leaving crevices that formed a ladder of sorts. He scrambled up with the agility that came from his berserker madness, more like a great ape than a human, and bounded over what was left of the parapet. With his bloodied broad axe in his hand, he carved a path through the defenders. Each swing of his weapon sent out sprays of blood, staining the ancient stones red.

The defenders fought valiantly, their cries mingling with the clang of steel, but they were no match for the ferocity of the Vikings.

One young fyrdman, barely more than a boy, raised his spear in trembling hands, only to be met with the merciless thrust of a Viking sword. The weapon sliced through his side and the boy crumpled with a gasp, clutching at the gaping wound as blood poured freely onto the stones. Another defender, an older man with a grizzled beard, grappled desperately with a hulking Viking, looking like a giant preying mantis in his spectacle-plate helmet. They struggled for a long while, their faces contorted with exertion, until the Viking, who had

dropped his sword, drew his dagger and drove it deep into the man's vitals, twisting it cruelly. The defender's eyes widened in shock, his hands desperately trying to hold in the entrails spilling from the gaping wound.

Fyrdmen are citizens who fight when called up, not hardened housecarls, heavy with armour. When shields clash, they shout with fear, shitting their pants, and pissing in their hose. But Vikings are violent, encouraged by gods with a greed for blood. No wonder those peace-loving fyrdmen were hard pressed in the fray!

When the final blow was struck, Ivar stood victorious amidst the carnage.

"Ah! This is the life!" he enthused, his voice booming with berserker bloodlust. "There is no sound on earth like sword against sword! No colour like the crimson dripping from a wound!"

"What about the sound of mead swishing in the drinking-horn?" said Ubba, thinking more of the coming victory feast than the actual victory – but Ivar was too far gone in battle-madness to hear him.

Halfdan was just glad it was over and that the doom of the rune Algiz had not come to pass.

Meanwhile, the citizens of Eoforwic wailed in despair. Their homes and their lives were now forfeit to the merciless invaders. Mothers clutched their children, old men muttered long forgotten prayers, fathers, newly-fled from the walls, wondered how they could save their families. They knew there

would be no mercy; it was not the Viking way. They rounded up their households, saved what they could of their possessions and ran to the posterns – the small, secret gates that might offer a chance of escape before before the cruel Northmen could kill them, or take them for slaves. The streets that had once thrummed with life now lay eerily silent, save for the occasional cry of a victim or the swish of a Viking sword, cutting down a straggler.

As the last of the survivors disappeared into the darkened corners of the city, the Raven banner was raised high over Eoforwic – and Halfdan was reminded of that other raven – and the rune and the skull. He laughed aloud. If it had been some kind of macabre prediction, it was wrong. It was not his skull that had been split, but those of his enemies.

All over the walls of Eoforwic, the lifeless bodies of warriors were strewn, their forms now broken and mangled beyond recognition. Faces, that had been kind, friendly, loving, and, in the battle, full of resolve, were now grotesquely contorted, eyes wide and unblinking, staring into the void. Some had suffered deep cuts to their necks, their throats slashed open so violently that their heads were barely attached to their bodies. And where Ivar had been busy, the bodies lay with their skulls crushed, the bone shattered so completely that their faces were unrecognizable, twisted into a nightmare of blood and bone.

The Norns, looking down from Yggdrasil, the great World Tree, laughed softly as they worked at the Loom of Years. With deft fingers, they wove the red threads, the warp of blood interlacing with the weft of time.

And the *Volvr*, in their cave outside Hord, cackled as they watched Ivar, washing himself down as nonchalantly as a black-

smith who had done a hard day's work. They cackled even louder when they saw Ubba, knowing that his subjects, the worms, would be feasting well that day, but most amusing of all for these dark-minded dames, was the sight of Halfdan, standing proudly beneath the Raven banner, making a victory speech:

"Eoforwic is ours!" he cried at the top of his voice, "and a Viking city should have a Viking name. I call it: Jorvik!"

The warriors responded, though weary with battle, with stentorian shouts of: "Jorvik! Jorvik!" as the Raven banner flapped proudly above them, a dark silhouette against the blood-red sky.

But a distant voice contradicted them, the voice of a young woman: "Eoforwic! Eoforwic!" she screamed, and, for a moment, the warriors fell silent. Vikings are brave as lions – but very superstitious, and this cry was an unwelcome omen, perhaps the scream of a *wælcyrge*, the Englisc manifestation of their valkyries.

Loot!

“Time for loot!” cried one of the jarls, breaking the spell. The men needed no urging – this is what they came for, after all, and soon the whole army was racing after the jarl, yelling “*Herfang!*” at the tops of their voices, and the ghostly voice screaming “Eoforwic” was forgotten.

“Wait!” yelled Halfdan, who wanted to repeat the naming ceremony to wash away the memory of that haunting cry.

“Let them go,” said Ubba. “They’ve earned it. As for me, I’m going to find a cask of mead! Coming?”

The minster was the first target, as that magnificent building, finer than anything in Danmork, screamed wealth and attracted the Vikings like wasps to a honey pot.

Archbishop Wulfhere looked up from his missal with astonishment when the great west doors burst open to admit a rabble of Viking warriors. How could it be that their psalms and prayers had not protected them? He gave a nod to Canon Fulberht, who lifted up the golden reliquary which contained the *ballux* of St Bosa and waved it at the intruders, but to his surprise, they did not quail, nor did a glorified St Bosa appear in person, waving his crosier at them. Instead, a young Viking, attracted by the glint of gold, ran forward, thrust his sword into Fulberht’s guts and grabbed the reliquary. He shook it vigorously, and the precious relic fell to the floor. A nearby monk fell on his hands and knees and scrabbled to pick it up, but just as his hands closed around the bone, the young Viking gave

the monk a vicious kick to the head which caused him to drop the relic and slump to the floor. Cynewulf, without thinking of the consequences, stepped forward to help. The young Viking glared at him contemptuously, even piteously, through the visor of his spectacle-plate helmet, as he raised his sword for the fatal stroke. But he had underestimated his enemy.

Not so many years ago, Cynewulf had led the Hessay *fyrð*, and he was no stranger to the use of polearms – and that was exactly what he had in his hand – a large bronze cross set on a pole about seven feet long and an inch and a half thick. He hefted it with both hands, and it was no longer a processional cross but a war hammer. He swung it horizontally in front of him, using it to push the raider out of the reach of his sword. Doubt flashed in the raider's eyes, and he took a step back. But he recovered quickly, and with a sideways flick of his sword, tried to chop the cross off the end of the pole. But the wood was thick and his blow lacked force. Now that the raider was where he wanted him, Cynewulf raised the warhammer and brought it smartly down on his helmet. No purpose-made weapon could have been better designed for the job; the weight of the cross, the momentum of the swing, and the concentrated force of the crossbeam were enough to split the Viking's helmet and skull like an egg, except that the yellow yolk was his red blood, and the egg white was his brains.

Cynewulf felt sickened at the sight, despite the fact that the youth would have done the same to him. After all, what business had he – a man of peace, a man of God – with killing one of God's creations in such a brutal way and with such a holy object?

A cry from the archbishop brought him back to reality.

“The *hallux*! Get the *hallux*!”

Cynewulf scooped up the toe bone of the saint and, as an afterthought, grabbed the sword of the dead Viking, thinking he might need it to defend himself. Then he followed the others to the Baptistry, where they were escaping through a rear door.

The raiders let them go. They were too intent in stripping the minster of its treasures. A monk turned back, desperate to save a golden candlestick, but the archbishop stopped him with the words, “Leave that – it’s just a bauble – we have saved the only thing that matters – the *hallux* of St Bosa.”

The brothers didn’t trouble themselves with looting. A Viking leader was entitled to half of the loot, and as there were three of them, they would receive a sixth part each. Instead, they set about making themselves comfortable. There were many fine buildings in the *borg*, some of them of stone, but Ivar, thinking to impress the Eoforwic folk, chose the high hall of the last king of Deira, King Edwin, who had been driven into exile by Æthelfrith, king of Bernicia at some time in the seventh century. It was a mead-hall in the old style which had been built long ago in the ruins of the old Roman forum, and was now crumbling with neglect, being used mainly as a hay barn and stable.

Ivar ordered it to be cleaned up, and found, at the far end, under a some bales of hay, the old throne of the kings of Deira, battered, dirty and stripped of its gold decorations, but still impressive with its high back, carved with the symbol of Eoforwic, the boar, surrounded by gripping beasts. He had it refur-

bished and set up at the head of the hall, and rows of benches and trestles tables set around it. He planned to hold court here with his jarls, who would be given sleeping places under the eaves where they would spread their furs and hang their arms and armour, just as in the days of yore.

As it began to take shape, he rubbed his hands together with glee and pronounced, "Ha! it is like the Barnstokkr of the Volsungs. Sing of it, Gisli!"

In fact, it was nothing like it, but Ivar was seeing what it could be, not what it was.

Gisli was an elderly huskarl, too old for the shieldwall, who had changed his sword for a *skaldharpa* – which he played indifferently, since he was missing two fingers of his right hand. Neither was his voice up to much, having being worn to the consistency of gravel from years of screaming insults at his enemies. But he knew the old sagas inside out, and was not beyond turning an original verse or two. Now, at his lord's command, he sang of the Volsung hall, in the much-loved and often repeated, *Volsungasaga*:

*"Thus was the dwelling of Volsung,
the King of the Midworld's Mark,
As a rose in the winter season,
a candle in the dark;
And as in all other matters
'twas all earthly houses' crown,
And the least of its wall-hung shields
was a battle-world's renown..."*

Ubba's jaw dropped in disbelief. "Earthly houses' crown'! – it's a barn..." he wrinkled his nose and added, "...and it smells like one!"

"A good feast will see to that!" laughed Ivar, "and the rich smell of roast meat and spilled mead, will replace..."

"...the smell of horseshit. I hope so!"

Meanwhile, Halfdan had found something better for himself – a fine homestead, standing proud not far from the minster. It was a hall built of stone and timber, with a high gable facing onto the street in Goodramgate. He could already see it as his hearth-home, a place he could retire to when the revelry in the high hall became too much.

He pushed at the door, but it was barred, so he took a few steps back, then shouldered it open. He drew *Dainsleif* and went in cautiously, but seeing that the hall was empty, he sheathed it again.

The only light came from the embers of a dying fire, but it was enough for him to make an inspection of the place. At the other end of the hall, he found an old man sprawled on a straw mattress, his face pale from the blood loss of a sickening stomach wound. His breath was shallow, and his hand lay limp by his side, fingers curled in pain.

Before he could decide what to do about it, the silence was broken. From the shadows, a young maiden sprang toward him.

"Don't touch him!" she hissed, her voice venomous, like a snake preparing to strike. In her hand was a *seax* which she shook in his face.

“Who are you, *skjaldmær*?” he sneered, though he was impressed by her bravery, “screaming like a valkyrie?”

The fire of her anger made her fair skin redden, and the sudden movement shook her blonde mane free. Her lips were set in a thin, determined line, and her bosom rose and fell with her heavy breaths. It was the kind of fierce beauty that could move a warrior’s heart – strong, untamed and unwilling to bow before any man, not even one of her conquerors.

Her lips curled into a snarl. “I’m no shieldmaiden,” she spat. “I’m this man’s daughter. He’s old and he’s dying from a wound that one of your people gave him, so don’t you dare touch him!”

Halfdan laughed at her and tried to grab her, but she sprang aside like a she-wolf and sliced his arm with her blade. The sight of his red blood running down his white arm wiped the smile off his face, and he made a feint with his fist which fooled her. She stabbed at a fist that wasn’t there, and he caught her wrist before she could strike again. Then he twisted it, and her weapon fell to the floor, but the wonder of her beauty stabbed him instead, and, acting on impulse, he kissed her on the lips, but she bit his and drew blood. He smacked her face hard and she staggered backwards. He grabbed at her gown and she groaned and struggled, but he ripped it away, revealing her heaving breasts, tipped by two large, pink nipples, which seemed to taunt him, like two staring eyes.

She saw how he looked at her, guessed her fate and sighed resignedly, “You can do what you like with me, but spare my father.”

Enraged by the fight and aroused by the sight of those provocative breasts, he answered angrily, “I will have you any-

way. But to show I'm the master, I'll make an end of him," and, with those words, he drew *Dainsleif* and put the man to death. Then he rolled the body off the blood-covered bed, ripped off the girl's shift, pushed her on the bed and raped her viciously.

She struggled and screamed and scratched his back, but the more she struggled the more he enjoyed it. When he had finished she lay there weeping, though it was more for her father than herself.

"Don't take it too hard," said Halfdan, softening a little now that he had worked off his lust and assuaged his anger. "He would have died anyway with a wound like that. I have saved him days of agony."

"You didn't spare me," she sobbed.

"That's because I like you," he said, failing to see the contradiction – because, if a Viking liked a woman, he just took her – that is, if she didn't have any powerful relatives, in which case, he would have to negotiate with them first. The woman was rarely consulted.

"I wish you'd kill me as well," she keened.

"Perhaps I will," he said, stroking the blade of his bloodied sword.

She looked at him, horror struck.

"Don't worry," he laughed. "I'd rather stab you with my other sword. What's your name?"

"Eowyn," she spat.

"Well, Eowyn," he said after a moment's reflection. "I'm taking this hall and I might as well take you."

“No you won’t!” cried a voice from the doorway.

Halfdan spun round and saw the spare figure of a cleric, his white surplice spattered with red blood. He laughed his defiance, standing there, quite naked, like Beowulf ready to fight Grendel.

Cynewulf hitched up his surplice and drew the sword he had taken from the dead Viking. The sight of it seemed to add to the raider’s amusement: a minster-man with a sword – what could be funnier?

He picked up his own sword from the pile of clothes beside the bed and sprang forward, executing a diagonal cut. Cynewulf parried with the second guard, deflecting the blow, and followed up with a lunge aimed at the raider’s belly. It took Halfdan by surprise, but he jumped backwards just in time, only to be pushed forward by Eowyn, who had jumped up, naked, to help her lover. Cynewulf’s outstretched sword made a deep gash in Halfdan’s side, and, somewhat belatedly, he began to take his opponents seriously. He turned quickly, kicked Eowyn back onto the bed, then lunged again, aiming at Cynewulf’s sword arm. He caught his arm in a glancing blow, numbing it and causing Cynewulf to drop his sword. Halfdan strode in for the kill, but the naked shieldmaiden jumped on his back and bit his neck.

“Run!” she screamed, her lips dripping with Viking blood.

There was nothing that Cynewulf could do without his sword, so he ran.

Halfdan shook Eowyn from his back and thumped her in the face so hard that she passed out. Women were like horses, he reflected. You have to break them – beat them and keep on beating them until they lose the will to fight back.

The Victory Feast

The noise of looting had died down, and Ivar concluded that his men had grabbed all the gold they could find, and raped all the women they wanted. He made his way to the ruins of the Roman forum, where the men had fixed up a makeshift mead-hall of their own and gave them new orders:

“Tend to the wounded first, then take the dead and prepare them for the *brennuferd*, the funeral pyre. We will light it tomorrow, under the guidance of Guðbrand the *goðr*. But tonight,” he continued in a lighter tone, “Tonight we make merry!” He lifted a flagon of mead high in the air, the glint of firelight dancing in his eyes.

Later, in the high hall, Ivar sat on the old throne of the kings of Deira, and Ubba raised the toast: “To Ivar, King of Jorvic!”

Ivar leaned back and laughed. “King?” he said, “with Aella still in the field? Anyway, where’s my crown?”

He pointed to a tattered and faded tapestry which showed one of the former kings of Deira wearing an old fashioned crown – a thin gold band with points like the crenellations of a fortress.

“Find me that!” he laughed.

They had scoured the place earlier, but everything of value had been looted by the rapacious kings of Bernicia and taken to their fortress at Bamburgh from which they ruled the whole of the united kingdom, which they called Northumbria.

“Use this!” cried Ubba, throwing him a golden girdle, which had, no doubt, been ripped from some unfortunate Eo-forwic noblewoman.

Ivar arranged it round his unkempt locks and sat up straight, in what he hoped was a kingly posture.

Ubba, laughing, threw the woman’s shift over his head. “That’s better!” he cried. “You never were much to look at!”

Ivar, pulled it off, sniffing the sweet woman-scent.

“Where is she?” he said, thoughtfully

“Round the back, fighting Ketill.”

“Kick him off and bring her here,” said Ivar.

Moments later, a blonde-haired beauty wrapped in a cloak was led into the hall, followed by an angry Ketill in process of lacing up his hose.

Ivar liked what he saw and said, “I’m not yet a king, but you can be my queen-for-a-night.”

Ketill opened his mouth to say something, but a hard stare from his master made him shut it again. You don’t argue with a berserker.

Ubba, entering into the spirit of it – for a joke, as always – found a stool, set it beside the old oak throne, and sat the woman on it. Tears were pouring down her cheeks and she was trembling, but she managed to retain some of her dignity as the wife of an eorl (now lying face down, dead in the mud).

“What’s your name?” asked Ivar.

“Cyneburh,” she said, then added, with emphasis, “*Hlafdi-ge* Cyneburh.”

“So much the better. You will know how to offer the victory cup to my jarls – as Grimhildr did, when she served mead to Sigurd in the *Volsungasaga* – you know the old tradition.”

She did. It was an Englisc tradition too.

“But no spells!” quipped Ubba, “referring to the scene in which Grimhildr served an enchanted drink to Sigurd to gain power over him.

The fire crackled in the hearth as the hall filled with the murmur of voices and the clink of arm-rings. At the high table, Ivar the Boneless sat flanked by his jarls, their grey war-gear exchanged for woollen tunics of red and green. Then came Cyneburh, robed in deep blue, bearing the mead-cup in both hands. She moved with solemn grace, offering the first draught to Ivar, with the Englisc toast, “*Wæs hæl*,” and he replied, according to custom, with the Norse toast, “*Skal*,” drinking from the common cup. One by one, she served his foremost jarls: Halfdan, Ubba, Olaf, his war chief, and the rest. When they had drunk and toasted, Cyneburh stepped back, and the kitchen-thralls moved down the benches, pouring for the rest.

The air thickened with warmth as food was brought to the tables: a dozen boars on a spits, each carried by two thralls, followed by a procession of serving maids bearing platters of every kind of fish, flesh and fowl.

Ivar raised a toast: “To Victory! Hard won, but worth it! Jorvic – as we call it – is a rich city. We’ve taken enough loot to make us all rich. Even the common soldiers celebrating in the forum will have enough to buy a homestead back in Danmork. But, for us, Ragnar’s sons, it’s more than that. It is *mannbot* for Ragnar’s death!”

These words were received with wild acclaim, even though most of his jarls had come for loot rather than revenge. When the noise had died down, he called for Gisli and asked him to sing of the trick by which he had won it. Gisli had expected this and had something ready:

*Word-wolf spoke -
outfoxing Aella.
throne-thief thegn,
miserly with mannbót.*

*"Give me a borg
no bigger than a bull's hide."
The ring-giver agreed,
thinking he had won.*

*Fellmonger flayed
Silk-thin strand,
Wound the wall
of Eoforwic,
Borg of the Boar.*

*"Ours!" said Halfdan,
and I rename it
with "jortr" – "boar",
and "Vik" – "Viking"*

*Jorvik! –
"The Boar Borg
of the Vikings" –
Jorvik!*

It was Gisli trying to be what he wasn't – a skald – and getting cluttered up in his own kennings. But as his audience had lived through the incident, they could just about follow it, and the cry of "Jorvik!" shook the rotten rafters of the old hall. This time there was no-one to contradict them with a shout of "Eo-forwic!", for the woman who had shouted it was, at that moment, nursing a swollen cheek in hall in Goodramgate.

The long hours of feasting passed in a blur, filled with the clash of mead-horns, the scent of roasting meat, and the excited hum of laughter and song. Ubba stuffed his face like never before, and Ivar, going berserk on beer, danced on the mead benches. Yet, as the night wore on, many of the warriors slumped into the deep sleep of exhaustion, their bodies sprawled out across the floor, unable to stay awake even to enjoy themselves. What did they dream of? More fighting – or more fornicating? Perhaps Ubba dreamed he was already King of Worms and the wormsmen were welcoming him. Perhaps Ivar dreamed of taking on the whole of the army of Northumbria single-handed and beating them bare-shirt. Perhaps Halfdan dreamed of another fight with his *skjaldmær* sex slave. He could only dream, because he deemed it his duty to sleep in the high hall with his brothers and their jarls on that fated night.

Prayers and a Praise Song

As the first light of day began to filter through the cracks of the old hall, Ivar strode among the sleeping men, his boots heavy on the wooden floor.

“Get up!” he urged, shaking one of the warriors awake. “You’ve had a night’s rest, now we must pay our respects to the dead!”

The men groaned and grumbled, their bodies protesting at the sudden shift from dreams to duty, but there was no choice. The dead must be honoured – after all, it might be their turn soon enough.

They worked swiftly and solemnly, under the direction of Guðbrand, fashioning a funeral pyre and filling it with the accoutrements of war – swords and shields, helmets and hauberks, buckles and banners – objects to honour their fallen comrades and to equip them to be warriors of Odin.

With a heavy heart, Halfdan lit the fire, while Guðbrand prayed over them:

*“Far vel, hugr sterk. Mæt þu Valhallu með heiðri.
Sigrþor skenkir þer drykkinn og goðin taki þig í faðm.
Hvil í friði.”*

“Farewell, strong souls. May you enter the Hall of the Slain with honour. Victory-Thor pours you a drink, and the gods embrace you. Rest in peace.”

Everything on the pyre was plain to see: the gory mail, the gilded boar-crest, the many hearth-companions slain by the

sword. Heads were melted, gashes burst and blood gushed out as the flames took hold and black smoke rose to an overcast sky. It was a final offering to the gods, and it seemed that, in those billows of smoke, curled the valkyries, carrying the dead to Val-hall.

And with them rose songs of their deeds, sung by Gisli. Never was his grave and gravelly voice more suited to an occasion:

Skorgrim Wall-Wake
burst the bar at Bootham.
Hrafnkel Ouse-Drinker
sank with shield in river-blood.
Ormgeirr Wound-Caller
cracked skulls like eggs.
Tryggr Helm-Hewer
hacked through housecarls.
Bjarki Fire-Fist
flung the torch at the Minster door.
Stenulf Crow-Hall
fed the ravens on rook-road.
Bruni Sword-Tide
bled beneath the bell-tower...

It was not the *Elder Edda* – or even poetry at all – but it was just right for the occasion. Kings and jarls had their *drapur* – their praise poems – but here at least was a name, a kenning and a deed for each man of the rank and file.

After the funeral, Halfdan sent for Gisli.

“That was well sung,” he began.

Gisli made his bow.

“And so I want you to sing of my deeds. Begin at the beginning – my first raid.”

Gisli looked uncomfortable. He stamped his feet and looked this way and that, as if looking for a way to get out of it.

“What is it?” laughed Halfdan. “You skalds are all the same, like fussy fishwives. Why, if a poem was my enemy, I’d have bashed his skull in by now.”

“*Herra*, it’s simply this: I know all of your deeds since you came here, but nothing at all about your early life.”

“Then I shall tell you,” said Halfdan, “and you will do your thing with alliteration and kennings and perform it at the feast tonight.

“But, *herra*!”

Halfdan laughed indulgently. “Tomorrow night then.”

Gisli nodded and promised to do his best, then he settled down and listened attentively while Halfdan told his tale.

The Fight at Fiflestone

“I remember the wind that morning more than the blood. It was meant to be a simple raid – quick, quiet, clean.

“Hvarnes was a fat little fishing town tucked into a bay south of Vestfold in Norvegr. I’d been there once as a boy with my father, back when he still laughed and ruled and didn’t speak in riddles. The folk there smoked trout in long racks and wore pearls from the shallows. They’d grown soft under a puffed-up jarl named Alrik, who taxed traders and kept his spearmen fat on ale.

“Fridleif, my uncle, had it in mind to teach them humility. Just a few ships, enough to strike before dawn and be gone by the next tide.

“But they were waiting for us.

“Some fisher or thrall must have seen the sails and run ahead to warn them. As we rowed into the bay, I saw the torches already lit on the cliffs, and the movement of men behind the fish-drying racks and sheds. And then the horns sounded. They echoed down the fjord like the howling of wolves, and I felt the terror stir in my gut.

“Fridleif shouted orders; told us to pull back, regroup and strike from another angle. But I stayed ashore.

“I was sixteen, bursting with pride, desperate to carve my name into my enemies’ bodies.

“I ran toward the town square while others turned to the ships. The earth was black with sea-rot, and the first man I met was twice my age and drunk on his own courage. He had

a boar's-head brooch on his cloak and swung an axe like he meant it.

"We met in the shadow of a beached boat. I took his first blow on my shield, the force rattling my teeth, and struck low in return, slicing through the leather of his boot. He howled and staggered. I stepped in and drove my sword up under his ribs.

"He looked at me as he died – not with fear, but disbelief.

"I wanted to shout something clever, some line from the sagas, but I couldn't remember anything, and all I managed was a croak.

"Then more came. Alrik's men with spears and axes, all roaring my death. I should have run, but I didn't. I found higher ground – a broken net-drying scaffold – and held it.

"It wasn't bravery, not really – just stubbornness. I wouldn't turn my back; not in front of my kin.

"When the rest of our crew returned, blades wet and voices raised, they found me standing over three bodies, bleeding from the arm and grinning like a mad dog.

"Fridleif looked at me a long while, then said: 'He's his father's son.'

"That night, as we sailed back into the moonlit sea, I watched the flames of Hvarnes fade behind us. We hadn't taken much – some fish, some silver, a few frightened girls freed from a storehouse, but I'd taken something better – a name. That was the first time men called me Halfdan, not just 'lad' or 'boy'.

Halfdan finished, looking at Gisli for a sign of approval, but there was none. It was not that he didn't approve, but that he was already running alliterative lines through his head. He

left the hall like one in a trance to finish his lay for the next feast.

The following night, Halfdan said to Gisli in a low voice, "Is it ready?"

"Yes."

"Wait until I give the word, then begin."

Ubba had got hold of a performing bear and most of the entertainment centred around Bruin's tricks – clumsy dances to the beat of a tabor, balancing on barrels, and even mock-wrestling with a terrified thrall in a padded jerkin. The Danes roared with laughter, sloshing ale and slapping their thighs, while the bear growled and licked its chops, half-aware of the spectacle it had become. At one point, Ubba draped his own wolf-pelt cloak over the beast's shoulders and declared it a nobler jarl than any man in Bamburh.

But at last, things quieted down and Gisli was called upon to sing. He sang first, as Ivar had directed him, of the attack on Eoforwic:

*Ivar was foremost;
found his own way up
a multangular tower
where the crumbled mortar
left so many footholds
it was like a ladder.
He bellowed like a bear
and bounded to the top
with such ferocity,*

the fyrdmen fell back...

Ivar lolled back on the old throne, revelling in the words, and the honour they accorded him.

When the lay was finished, he threw Gisli a gold ring and said, "What about that time when I..."

"Wait!" interrupted Halfdan. "You're hogging the hall! Let's have something about me or Ubba – me first. Gisli is going to sing of my first raid."

"First raid? I was there. Don't forget to mention me, Gisli!"

"No you weren't," said Halfdan. "You were raiding Gotaland at the time."

"You can sing of that after," said Ivar, and nodded to Gisli to continue.

Gisli struck a chord with his two fumbling fingers, and began:

*"Dark was the dawn
on Hvarnes' shoreline,
Mist on the moor
and the smell of salt-fish.
Bold was the boy,
blade in his grip,
Halfdan the boy-warrior,
heart full of fire..."*

The warriors listened intently, every one of them remembering his own first raid – that rite of passage when they passed from boyhood into manhood – and the ending summed it up perfectly:

*So Halfdan the White Shirt
won his renown,
in blood and strife
on a stranger shore.
Not for gold, nor for glory –
But to win his manhood
among men – among Vikings.*

As the last chord on Gisli's gleewood died away, there was a moment of appreciative silence as the men looked first at Halfdan – the subject of the lay – and then at Gisli – the skald who made it. For most of them, it was the first time they had heard this tale of their master's youth. Uproarious applause followed, and Halfdan tossed Gisli a well-earned gold torc, while the steward passed him a brimming mead horn to lubricate his gravelly throat.

Halfdan was learning that it is not just deeds that build up a man's reputation, but the singing of those deeds, for what price the bravest deed in the Northlands if nobody hears about it?

Alfhild

Eowyn was sullen when Halfdan returned that night, flushed with the victory mead and expecting to lord it over her in his own hall.

“Bring me food!” he said, peremptorily, in no mood to tolerate more defiance from a mere bed-thrall. “Kill one of those chickens in the back yard.”

“I’m not your servant,” she retorted, coldly.

He backhanded her with a cruel laugh.

“No, you are my slave – in the bedroom and in the kitchen – and don’t you forget it!”

But she was not cowed. She stroked her sore cheek and spoke up for herself.

“I am a noblewoman. My father – my uncle, I mean – was a canon. I will not skivvy in the kitchen! We have Alfhild for that.”

Halfdan would have whipped her for answering back, but his curiosity was piqued. “Alfhild? Where is she?”

“Hiding from you.”

Halfdan laughed and called her name. There was no answer. He tried again: “Alfhild, wherever you are,” he called, “you’d better cook me that chicken, or it will be the worse for you!”

There was no reply, but there was an outburst of cackling that came to a sudden end, and, an hour later, a young woman appeared with a roasted chicken, a loaf of bread and a jug of ale.

“Alfhild?” questioned Halfdan, looking at her appreciatively. He had expected a portly matron in a dirty apron, but this

girl was better fitted to grace a nobleman's bed. Without sitting down, he grabbed a chicken leg and tore at it greedily, then said, "*Afkleð!*"

Alfhild looked questioningly, first at Halfdan, then at Eowyn.

"It's clear enough," he said, "Do I have to say it in Northumbrian? *Afkleð!* means 'off clothes!' – in other words, strip!"

"Oh," she said and stripped – and what a sight she was! More voluptuous than Eowyn with full breasts, full hips, and a face framed by golden pigtails, which were echoed in a golden triangle down below.

Halfdan took another greedy bite of his chicken, then he stripped too. Still standing, he picked up the ale jug and drank carelessly, allowing the golden ale to cascade down his body. "Lick it off!" he commanded.

After a moment's hesitation, she did.

"Lower!"

She licked lower.

"Lower still. You know what I want!"

She did, and she gave it, and he responded by fondling her ample bosom. His caress relaxed her and soon she was enjoying herself, for Halfdan was a handsome specimen; an ideal warrior: tall, craggy featured, well-muscled, and with a stomach so hard it could withstand even a punch from Ivar.

"Now," he said, with a grin of satisfaction. "Eowyn will watch while you show her how a good girl treats a good man!"

Eowyn had never felt so humiliated. Her cheeks burned, not with modesty, but with a fury she dared not show. She wanted to scream, to strike out, to vanish into the stone walls and be unseen. But she stood frozen, reduced to a bystander at

her handmaid's abuse. And worse still was the realization that this – this performance, this show of domination – was meant as a lesson for her.

She resolved there and then that she would never let it happen again – but how? By becoming what he had called her – *skjaldmær* – shieldmaiden. Though a Christian woman, she had heard of them in the old stories – Brynhild, Hervor, Lagertha – and local legend told of a shieldmaiden called Æthelgyth in Eoforwicshire. Well, if Æthelgyth could be a shieldmaiden, so could she.

Ubba's Turn

That evening in the hall, it was Ubba's turn to have his praises sung, but whether Gisli had had too much mead, or whether, in fear of Ubba, he was trying too hard to be poetic, was a moot point, but his *drapa* was difficult to follow:

*Sails swelled
on swan-white sea-steeds,
as Ubba's ships
sailed the Frisahaf.*

*Dorestad devoured
by flame's kiss.
Blood-wine flowed
Frisians fled.*

*Gold-hoard gathered,
gods' gifts stolen,
Dorestad drowned
in doom's dark tide –*

*That's how he earned
his bloody by-name,
Ubba Friski –
Bane of the Frisians.*

Someone threw a heel of bread at him and shouted. "Can't understand it! Tell it the way it was!"

"It's what Ubba wanted," countered Gisli in a hurt tone. He had laboured long over it, trying to make it like one of those poems that the skalds sing at King Horik's court in Jelling.

Ubba jumped to his feet to defend the skald. "It's a fair *drappa*, Gisli, but these boors don't appreciate it. Nevertheless, I do, and here's the proof."

He threw him a gold ring – a small, thin one, it is true, but a valued prize nonetheless. Gisli bowed his thanks and retired to the mead benches. Ubba also sat down.

"Well?" said Ivar.

"Well what?" said Ubba, who had settled down to his favourite pursuit of stuffing his face.

"We want to know about your raid."

"I've told you often enough," he mumbled through a full mouth.

"But the men haven't heard it. Tell them in your own words."

"I'm no storyteller," he protested.

"You love to rattle on when you tell your jokes. Tell it like that."

"Oh, very well then," said Ubba, taking one last gulp of his mead and getting to his feet again.

He looked around the hall, giving them that fatuous, fat-faced grin that always preceded one of his jokes, and even before he started, there was a laugh or two in anticipation of what was coming.

“Dorestad? Not just some muddy village. No, no. It was like a Frisian treasure chest spilled open – timber, tiles, traders, monks, and enough soft-handed coin-mongers to make a Viking’s teeth grind with greed. I’d been dreaming of this place for years. Yes, I wanted the silver – who wouldn’t? But what I really wanted was the silence after we left. That stunned, ‘Oh no, those mad Vikings again’, kind of silence.”

A ripple of laughter spread through the hall.

“By then, I had four ships under my command. Not because they loved me – oh no! – but because I brought home the loot and didn’t mind a bit of blood. Blood pays better than love anyway.

“We hit just after midday, right when the market was at its loudest. Our longships slid up the Rhine like wolves sneaking into a sheep-pen.

“I don’t remember the first man I killed – probably because I’d rather knock people out with a good joke than a sword. But I do remember the second: a poor monk clutching a silver cross like it was a magical shield – it wasn’t. His blood painted the stones like wine spilled at a feast – no, that’s not a good comparison. I hate to see good wine wasted. If he’d been full of wine – but what am I saying? – I’m beginning to sound like a *drau-gr*.”

More laughter. One thegn called, “Aye, and if you wake up craving blood, we’ll stake you through the ribs!”

Ubba laughed with them, then continued:

“My men spread out, grabbing what they could and setting fire to the rest. One of my boys – Freki, I think – dragged a merchant from his counting-house by his beard and asked if I wanted him spared.

‘Does he sing?’ I asked. ‘Because if not,’ I said, ‘he’s useless to me. I need a skald. That was before we got Gisli – in fact, come to think of it, he was hacking it out with the best of them back then. Isn’t that right Gisli?’

“That is so, *herra*, and, believe me, my swordplay was a lot better than my *skaldharpa* play!”

That too, raised a laugh, though the warriors appreciated Gisli’s “*skaldharpa* play” because, when he sang of battle, they knew he’d been he’d been there and got the *brynja*.

Ubba continued:

“Some Frisians tried to fight back, showing up in fancy armour like it was a parade they were going to. I met one overdressed huskarl on the hall steps. He had a helmet with a pink plume on it – no, to be fair, it was purple, faded by the sun; a red shield with a black eagle on it, a beard braided like a girl’s plaits, and red cross-garters over buff hose.

‘You devils!’ he snarled, in that weird nasal language of theirs – like Norse with a bad cold.”

More laughter.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Worse – Vikings!’”

Louder laughter.

“He fought harder than I gave him credit for. But rage only lasts until the blood runs out. I left him bleeding into his helmet, turning the pink crest red. I hope it wasn’t a family heirloom.”

Thegns were falling about with laughter and banging the tables with appreciation.

“By nightfall, Dorestad was nothing but ash and smoke trailing behind us like a ghost that has lost its way. Our ships were weighed down with coin, cloth, chalices, barrels of mead,

and a few scribes – just in case we needed receipts for the plunder.”

His audience were now rolling with laughter, some of them on the floor, though one bemused individual was looking lost and asking, “What’s a receipt?”

“I stood at the prow, wind messing up my hair, soot and blood streaked on my face, listening to my men sing their drunken songs. Me? I kept quiet, because this wasn’t the end. Not by a long shot. We’d be back. Or someone like us would.”

There was silence in the hall at those words. This was serious. This was what being a Viking all about.

Ubba continued, finishing off his story:

“And every time those Frisians whispered, ‘Dorestad’, I wanted them to think of me – preferably with a little fear... and maybe a bit of awe.”

There were murmurs of agreement and nods of the head as Ubba sat down.

Then he remembered something and jumped up again.

“And though you lot didn’t like Gisli’s fine praise song, his ending summed it up perfectly, for that’s how I got my by-name: ‘Ubba Fríski’ – ‘Bane of the Frisians.’”

That was the rounding off of his narrative that had been lacking before, and it met with stentorian applause, many of the warriors jumping to their feet. One of them shouted, “Never mind being a bane to the Frisians, you should be a skald. I love the way you tell it.”

Ubba laughed, “No chance! I can’t do kennings,” and sat down with a broad smile on his face.

Gisli was also smiling, because Ubba’s last words had left him feeling vindicated. The whole point of the story was how

Ubba got his by-name, and Ubba had almost forgotten to include it – and when he did, he had made honourable mention of his long-suffering skald.

Aella Strikes Back

Eoforwic, the jewel of the north, had fallen to the relentless onslaught of the heathen foe. The city been a beacon of civilisation, but its high walls, which had once repelled countless enemies, now lay breached and broken, its great minster, once the centre of Christianity in the North, had been transformed into a grim sanctuary for heathen gods. The air, once filled with the solemn chants of monks, now rang with the harsh cries of the invaders.

The shock of Eoforwic's fall resounded through the four kingdoms of Engaland, sending ripples of fear throughout Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, and Wessex. Much of the blame fell squarely upon Aella, whose usurpation of the throne of Northumbria had bled the kingdom white in civil war. But now, in the face of political pressure, he turned to Osberht, his former rival, hoping to forge an alliance that could drive out the heathen invaders.

They united their armies, determined to march on Eoforwic and reclaim it from the heathen hands that had defiled it. They sent out a call to the Northumbrian eorls to bring their housecarls and fyrdmen and so build an army big enough to counter the *Micel Hæden Here*.

Cynewulf heard the call, and went with the remnants of the Eoforwic *fyrd* to join what Aella was calling *Micla Cristene Here* – The Great Christian Army – and the title was not ill chosen, for it was a great army indeed, perhaps 10,000 men, and a match for the *Micel Hæden Here* in numbers if not in training and arms.

But the joint kings' efforts were bogged down by endless disputes. Every decision became an argument – strategy, leadership, resources, morale, discipline, even the design of the banners – should they be a gold on red counterchanged cross, or the white on blue cross of Saint Oswald? The warriors, weary of the constant bickering, began to lose heart. Some abandoned the cause altogether, slipping away to their homes. What should have been a swift campaign, a matter of days, dragged on for four long months.

And all the while, the heathen worked with relentless determination. While the Christian kings were bickering, they were building; they laboured day and night to reinforce the ancient Roman walls. They cleared the ditches around the perimeter and steepened the scarp and counterscarp. The Foss was diverted, its waters now flowing into a man-made moat that encircled the walls. The plan was to turn Jorvic into an impregnable fortress.

But the heathen were not immune to distraction. After a month of working on their defenses, the warriors started to complain.

Halfdan spoke up for them: "They say they are warriors, not workers and want a break."

"They have enough pressed men to help them," growled Ivar.

"They'd rather stick a sword in a Northumbrian than a spade in a ditch," said Ubba, putting it his way.

"The Northumbrians will be sticking *them* if they don't finish those walls!" retorted Ivar.

But, in the end, he relented and declared a night of feasting as a reward for work well done. But what was intended to

be a single night of revelry, stretched on for weeks. The finest wines, stored in the cellars of the dead Northumbrian merchants, flowed freely, and there was many a “*skál!*” and “*ves heill!*” exchanged as the drinking horns were clanked together.

But good cheer slowly degenerated into drunken madness. Ubba led the debauchery in hall, stuffing himself with as much food as his fat frame would hold, and drinking until it seemed that mead poured out of his ears. Ivar spent his time listening to Gisli sing more songs of his exploits, while drinking even more than Ubba.

Halfdan despaired as he watched the Great Heathen Army, which had fought so fiercely to win the city, turn into a Great Drunken Army, their discipline slipping away like spilled mead.

So, when Aella’s army finally marched south, the repair work was unfinished. The northern section of the ancient Roman wall, once a bastion of strength, was still a heap of rubble. Desperate, now, the Danes patched it with hastily gathered wood, erecting a crude palisade of sharpened stakes in a last-ditch effort to stave off the incoming attack. The moat, too, remained incomplete, its waters shallow, offering little protection. The men were exhausted, worn thin by battle after battle, then building and digging, and, latterly, a month of drunken revelry. Their ringmail was tattered, and their swords were blunted and notched by countless battles and lack of a blacksmith’s care. It was a broken army, weary and ill-prepared, facing a foe fighting for hearth and home.

Halfdan thought of that rune he had seen – that prophecy of death – but a Viking is not supposed to despair, so he attempted to counter it by remembering the *Völur* and their

prophecy of a kingship. It was woven in the tapestry of the Norns, so he could not die today. Indeed, he could not die until they had woven the last stitch; until the spindle snapped and the thread of his fate was severed with cold steel. He imagined the loom of Urðr clacking in the shadowy hall beneath the roots of Yggdrasil, the strands of his life stretched taut between past and future. Somewhere in that weave was a crown – not yet placed on his brow yet – just a dim gleam in the future.

But now the red thread of battle was tightening around him like a noose. The promise of the *Volkr* seemed a distant dream as Aella's house-troops scaled the broken walls of Jorvik. It seemed as if there were thousands of them, crashing in a tide of steel like a storm on a crumbling cliff. Ivar was banging heads together as usual, but for every head he smashed another one popped up – there were just too many of them. Ubba, for once in his life, couldn't find anything to joke about, though he attempted to say something about a jack-in-the-box.

For a while, the Vikings managed to hold the walls, but Aella's housecarls brought up fascines – bundles of dried wood – threw them against the temporary palisade, and set light to them. As the palisade crumbled to ashes, the housecarls surged through, the fyrdmen following them. The sudden in-rush pressed the Vikings back to the West corner of the old Roman walls. The once-proud invaders were now like sheep, shepherded by snapping sheepdogs. They found themselves cornered, their retreat blocked by the very walls that had once given them shelter.

Yet, though the enemy pressed hard, the Vikings would not yield – it was not in their creed. With nowhere to run, they turned to face their pursuers, their swords raised high in one fi-

nal stand. That corner had become their last refuge, and they would sell their lives dearly.

Ivar, roared at the top of his voice: "We must rally – or die!"

Halfdan shouted words of encouragement: "Remember Harald Wartooth at the Battle of Bravalla! He faced overwhelming odds rather than fleeing!"

"But don't be like Starkaðr who lost a finger in that fight!" added Ubba, doing his best to see the funny side of things (hard, because there wasn't one!).

The Vikings, battered but not broken, heard their leaders with grim resolve. In that moment, they knew it was now or never – either they would rally and fight or they would fall and rot.

So they rallied and fought with all the ferocity of cornered beasts. Ivar found a new reservoir of strength as he charged back into the fray bare-shirted and weaponless, his bloodshot eyes gleaming with madness as he banged heads together with the force of a giant's hammer, the sickening crunch of bone ringing in his ears. No armour could withstand him; he broke helmets as easily as if he were breaking eggs. In the heat of his rage, he even bit off men's ears, chewing the flesh with relish, as though he was gorging at a feast.

Ubba, fighting beside him, made a joke of it: "Ivar's having a good day today! I think we can all go home and leave it to him!" He was only jesting, and did almost as good service himself in the conventional way with sword and shield.

Halfdan was everywhere, his voice cutting through the chaos of battle, commanding his warriors with consummate

authority. "Swine array here!" he shouted, and, "Shieldwall there!"

Sometimes, he fought alongside his men at the front, and sometimes, he withdrew to a vantage point, watching the ebb and flow of battle, waiting for the right moment to strike. But always he thrilled to the throng of battle and the sight of the Raven standard opposing the Northumbrian banner of red and gold (Aella had got his way), and beneath it, the old Roman walls of Jorvik streaming with blood. His low mood of the morning was quite forgotten.

One of Aella's housecarls fought his way through to Halfdan. He was wearing a fine helmet of Northumbrian workmanship made of iron with brass edging and a nose to nape band ending in a dragon's head. His mail shirt was equally fine, made of thousands of tiny riveted links, and in his hand he held a sword with gold-inlaid pommel. But it was his face, that struck Halfdan, not that much could be seen of it behind the nasal and cheekguards of his fine helmet. He knew that face, he was sure – but who was it?

He struck with his signature diagonal cut, and his blade was met with a parry in the second guard. Then he knew who it was. What had she called him? Cynewulf, that was it! Well, this time he would finish him for good.

But it didn't work out like that. One of his jarls, eager to earn his lord's good opinion, butted in to help – but got Cynewulf's sword in his throat as a reward. His life-blood spilled out and reddened his ringmail as he slumped to the ground. Halfdan leapt back into the fray, but Cynewulf was gone, struggling with some other enemy somewhere else.

Refugees

The sun began to sink, casting an ominous blood-red hue over the battlefield, as if the sky itself bore witness to the horrors below. It was at that moment that the Northumbrians lost heart. They had hammered the Vikings like a thousand blacksmiths in a thousand forges, but, far from being hammered flat, each blow forged them into a more formidable force, like iron tempered in the fiercest of fires.

The resolve that had carried the Northumbrians forward now faltered, replaced by a sense of hopelessness, as it seemed that they struck and struck and achieved nothing. As a result, the tide of battle turned again, and it was the Vikings now who pushed forwards. There was terrible slaughter. The soil of Jorvic drank deep of blood, turning it into a slick, red mire. Blades hacked through mail and bone; spears punched through throats and bellies with sickening force. Men screamed as limbs were hewn away and faces torn open. Shields splintered, shattered under the weight of axe-blows that gave no respite. The Vikings trampled the fallen, grinding corpses into the churned ground, and ravens circled above, their cries sharp with hunger – always the ravens. Halfdan wondered if his raven was among them, bringing his rune of death.

By late afternoon, all that was left of the proud Northumbrian army was a shield-fort of bodyguards around the two kings. That's where Cynewulf should have been, fighting to the last beside his lord. But, seeing that all was lost, he chose, like many others, to flee. It was not an easy thing to do, as it went against all he had ever been taught about loyalty, but he had

scant respect for Aella, the usurper, whom he nominally served, and had other loyalties that were closer to his heart.

So he fled the field, not to save his life, but to try to save Eowyn. He fought like a man possessed through the bloody streets of Jorvic, his sword slick with gore and his shield splintered from axe-blows. The smoke of burning thatch stung his eyes, and the screams of the dying rang off the stone walls like iron on iron. He stumbled over bodies – some he knew, most he didn't – as he forced his way north through the chaos, past broken market stalls and shattered doorways, toward Goodramgate.

Eowyn, looking down from an upper window, saw only an armoured warrior, and thought it was one of the Vikings, but Cynewulf, seeing her, took off his helmet and cried, "It's me! Let me in!"

That fine Northumbrian helm, with nasal and cheek-guards, covered most of his face, but as soon as he took it off, she recognised him and admitted him. There was no time, even for a lover's greeting. Instead, he gasped out his news an urgent voice.

"We have to get out of here! Aella has lost the battle. Some will say I deserted him, but I hated to serve him!"

"Why? Is he not our king?" she said.

"He's a tyrant and a usurper – but never mind that now. Come on. We must go!"

Eowyn hesitated. Her pride reminded her that she was a shieldmaiden now, and shieldmaidens do not flee – but her common sense quickly intervened and reminded her that she

had not, as yet, had one hour of weapon training – no, not even one minute.

“Bring Alfild,” urged Cynewulf.

But Alfild shook her head, and after saying her usual, “Oh,” said “No,” and explained (briefly) that she felt safer where she was. There was another reason which she didn’t mention: she was secretly hoping that she might replace Eowyn in Halfdan’s affections.

Cynewulf, in a sharp voice, told her that she must come with him for her own good, and reached out to grab her arm. But she took a step back, her eyes glaring, then turned and ran to the kitchen.

“Let her go,” said Eowyn, hurrying him to the door. Then, just as they were outside, she said, “Wait! There’s something I must get,” and ran inside again.

A moment later she appeared with *Æsbrand*, his heirloom sword. “You dropped this,” she said.

He gave her his other sword, an inferior weapon, badly notched in the battle he had just fought, and sheathed *Æsbrand* in its place. Then they set about the business of getting his household together as quickly as possible – minus Alfild, who had disappeared.

Cynewulf’s household consisted of Osred, Fulberht’s stable boy, Bonny, a pony which carried their baggage, and Grimbold, who had not been invited, but decided to follow them. All their most treasured possessions were loaded onto Bonny’s

back, Eowyn's best robes, some gold and silver plate, and – both being scholars – books.

They joined the column of refugees fleeing the smoking ruins of Eoforwic. They were a ragged, silent procession – old men leaning on staffs, mothers clutching babes, and children too tired to cry. Smoke blackened their faces and fear hollowed their eyes, as they trudged south with all they could carry. Along the road, scattered bands of broken men from the Northumbrian *fýrd* stumbled through the hedgerows, wounded and leaderless. Cynewulf called to them, one by one, urging them to join him and help protect the refugees. Slowly, he gathered a ragged shield-wall around the caravan: farmers with reaping hooks, young lads with ash spears, greybeards with notched swords and eyes like flint. It was no army, but it was better than nothing. And in the bitter wind, with every step southward, Cynewulf looked less like a fugitive and more like a commander.

At the crossroads near Tameworth, Cynewulf stood beneath a leaning oak and urged the weary men to carry on to Wessex, where King Ælfred still held on and hope had not yet fled.

“There will be food, and purpose, and a war to win, and Ælfred needs every man he can get,” he said.

Some listened, but most turned toward the smoking hearths of Mercia's old stronghold, their strength spent and their hearts hollowed by loss. Tameworth offered walls and shelter, and that was enough for them. But a few, grim-eyed, silent, tightened their belts and shouldered their spears. They followed Cynewulf southward, through frostbitten fields and sleeping woods on the long and weary road to Wintanceastre.

Halfdan Deliberates

The sight of his victorious huskarls filled Ivar with a savage joy.

“Look at us!” he laughed, “We look as though serving-maids had been pouring wine over us all day!”

He spread his arms wide to show the blood of his enemies staining his ringmail.

“Now those renegade kings will taste our revenge!” he added with grim satisfaction.

Ivar stood out, even amidst an army of bloodied bodies, for he was a red all over, and grinning as broadly as if it was his birthday party. His grin widened further as his eyes fell on the two defeated kings chained back to back on the ground before him, trembling at the sight of this red demon out of Hell.

“If this is how kings end up, I think I’ll pass,” quipped Ubba, but nobody laughed, because this was the moment – the moment they had been fighting for so hard for so long – the moment when Ragnar’s sons would finally have their revenge.

Though Ivar claimed leadership on the grounds that he was the eldest brother, it was accepted that Halfdan had the wisest head, and so it was he who weighed the doom that would seal the prisoners’ lives.

“Did I ever tell you about that holmgang I fought – the one at Hedeby?” he began.

“This is no time for reminiscing,” said Ivar. “You’re supposed to be giving judgement.”

But Halfdan wasn't just story-telling. He had a point to make.

"I had no hall of my own then; no throne, no skald to sing of me – but I had a name that was beginning to travel, and I had a temper that travelled faster.

"It started over a game of *tafl*. Some petty lordling – a bastard named Eirik with a big mouth – called me a cheat when I turned the tables on him. He said I played like a Frisian..."

"There's no worse insult," said Ubba, Bane of the Frisians.

"I stood, but he just laughed – so I struck him with the hilt of my *knifr*. That took the smile of his face

"A circle formed fast. Traders made space like sea parting around a rock. Someone brought swords and laid them on the ground between us – a sign that there'd be a duel, not a brawl – a proper holmgang, within a marked-out square and no interference.

"He was bigger, broader in the chest, but slower – and angry – and anger makes a man reckless. We circled once, twice. He came in first, wild. I ducked low, caught his blow with a guard, then slashed across his thigh – though it was just a flesh wound: blood bloomed through his hose and he staggered, but didn't fall.

"He tried again – overhead this time – a chopping stroke, hard and clean. I sidestepped, turned inside his guard, and slammed my elbow into his jaw. He dropped to one knee. I pressed my blade to his throat.

'Yield,' I said.

"He didn't. So I twisted the blade until he squealed like a skinned pig. I didn't kill him. I could have – maybe should have – but something told me it was better to let him live, licking

the wound of shame. Afterwards, I sat alone by the water and cleaned the blood from my boots.

“An old thegn, battle-scarred and wise with years, approached me and spoke his thoughts:

‘You have shown mercy, like Baldr showing mercy to Hoðr, and like him you will prosper. You will win many allies and your enemies will fear you.’

“I wanted to ask him what he meant, but, after a hearty clap on the shoulder, he walked away and I never saw him again.”

Ivar was indignant. “Did you tell us this rambling tale to suggest that we should be merciful to these *hundur*?”

“No. Aella should be executed for what he did to our father – but cleanly – with one stroke of the axe. As for Osberht, he has done no wrong. He fought against us as any good man would fight against an invader. Thus, we should spare him. Give him back his kingship – for he is the rightful king of Northumbria, after all – on condition he accepts it as our client king.”

“And if he refuses?”

“Then a clean end.”

“You are too soft,” said Ivar, shaking his head, “and softness is not the Viking way. When our foes see the Raven they should expect red-blooded killers, not a rosebud gathering party.”

“Ivar is right,” said Ubba.

“Blood-Eagle for both, then,” growled Ivar, grinding his teeth in anticipation.

“No!” said Halfdan, with a mighty thump on the mead-board. “Think of the words that Odin said to Hjalm-Gunnarr before the battle at Fjoturlundr:

*“Strike –
but strike with knowing.
Show mercy to the brave,
waste no wrath on worms,
but do not flinch when the Raven calls.”*

“Well?” said Ubba, mystified.

“Show mercy to Osberht...” Halfdan insisted, then hesitated for a moment, weighing the words he had just spoken. “...but, perhaps Ivar is right, the Raven is calling and I am flinching at the thought of the Blood-Eagle.”

He took a deep breath, steeling himself, then gave his judgement:

Turning to Osberht, he said, “Against you, Osberht, we have no grievance. You fought with honour, though fate was not on your side.”

Then he turned to the executioner, a stout carl with a well-sharpened axe at the ready, and gave the word, “Make a clean end of it. Hack off his head!”

The executioner’s axe fell with a clang as the sharp blade sheered through flesh and bone and struck the stone beneath. A hush fell over the brothers as they gazed at the blood gushing from the severed neck. Aella let out a low wail.

“But as for you, Aella,” Halfdan continued, his voice grim with the verdict he was about to pronounce, “we have a score to settle, Ivar and I, and our brother, Ubba. You doomed my

father to a dishonorable death. He did not die in battle, as a Viking desires, but in the vilest Hel – a pit of vipers!”

Halfdan’s face hardened with determination as he stepped closer to Aella. “For that, you will suffer the direst death that we can devise. You will be made a Blood-Eagle!”

This ancient form execution was a fate feared even by the most hardened of warriors; it was not just a death, it was an unbearable torture.

Aella’s voice trembled with desperation as he pleaded with the brothers, looking particularly at Ubba, who’s fat face seemed friendliest.

“If you must kill me,” he said, his eyes wide with fear, “I beg you not to do it by one of your horrible heathen customs – I am a Christian, for God’s sake!”

“Very well, we’ll crucify you,” mocked Ubba.

It was no time for joking, so Halfdan waved to him to be silent, then said, “Did you listen, Aella, to my father’s death song?”

He didn’t need to spell it out: Aella had not considered his father’s religion when he condemned him to a dishonourable and lingering death, so neither would he honour Aella’s Christian religion – and from what he had heard, Aella’s life had been far from a Christian example.

At the word of command, the executioner stepped forward, and, with a single, well-judged stroke, drove his axe through Aella’s back, shattering the ribs beneath. The king gave the most blood-curdling scream that Halfdan had ever heard in all his years of battle, but it was sweet music to the sons of Ragnar. They had waited for this moment, bled for it, and Aella’s screams were their hard-earned reward.

The screams stopped as he lost consciousness, and Ubba, fearing to lose his enjoyment, said to the executioner, "Don't overdo it. Make sure he dies slowly and I'll give you a silver salver and a slave girl for your reward."

The executioner brought Aella round with a splash of water, then pulled out his lungs so that they lay like the wings of an eagle on his back. He writhed and wailed in utmost agony, while the sons of Ragnar raised their mead-horns to the war-god.

A celebratory feast followed, and, in a macabre touch, the trestle tables, laden with food and mead, were arranged around the victim, so that the jarls could watch him suffer as they feasted.

Gisli, his gravelly voice rising above the din of screams and laughter, sang of the mighty exploits of Ragnar, beginning with his humble origins and his battle to be king:

*"From a freeman's son,
to farmer and ferðmaðr,
Ragnar rose to royal status
claiming the kingship of Jelling,
his will unwavering
in the face of foes,
his name woven
into the Loom of the Norns..."*

The lay was punctuated with two-fingered chords on the *skaldharpa* and groans from Aella – a most fitting accompaniment – the sound of his suffering mingling with the melodies

of victory. The prisoner's suffering seemed only to heighten the mood of the feast. Twice, he passed out with the pain, and twice the executioner brought him round to suffer again.

By the time the lay was finished (and it was long, for there was a lifetime of deeds to celebrate), Aella seemed barely conscious, his once-proud form reduced to a shattered husk.

Halfdan, his thirst for revenge slaked to the utmost, and sickened by the Blood-Eagle, suddenly felt empty.

"Make an end of it!" he commanded, his voice quivering with revulsion, and the executioner delivered the mercy stroke. Again, there was the thud of metal on bone. Aella's body twitched one last time, then lay still. Halfdan exhaled a long sigh of relief, then said, "Remove the bodies and bury them with honour, according to their customs."

Ivar would have had them chucked into a ditch, but he was busy peeling an apple with his *knifr* and muttering something about worms getting fat either way – though he was dimly aware that Halfdan's mercy and moderation were the stuff that good kings were made of.

When Halfdan returned to Goodramgate, he had recovered somewhat from the harrowing experience of seeing a man die by the Blood-Eagle. After all, his father's death at Aella's hands had been almost as horrific, and he had managed to ameliorate matters somewhat by sparing Osberht the same fate, ordering the mercy-stroke for Aella, and an honourable burial for them both. What he needed now was to lose himself in the soft embrace of his woman.

“Eowyn!” he called, looking around for her

“She’s gone,” said Alfhild.

“Never mind,” said Halfdan, reflecting that she was too much trouble anyway. The last thing he needed was another fight, and when it came to losing himself, Alfhild had more to lose himself in – two bounteous breasts like two soft pillows, mirrored by two even larger pillows down below.

“You’ll do,” he said, “Now – *Afklæð!* I don’t have to translate this time, do I?”

“No, *herra*.”

“Or tell you what to do next?”

“No, *herra*.”

He laughed indulgently. This girl would help him to forget; she would treat him like a valkyrie treats one of the chosen, not fight him like a *skjaldmær*.

Snotingham

“We have won our revenge and can return to Danmork,” declared Ubba the following day, unable to contain his longing for familiar shores (proving that even a hard-hearted killer can get homesick).

Ivar, seated in the old oak throne, leaned back, and said, with a mischievous expression, “I was just beginning to enjoy myself!”

“I’d rather stay here,” said Halfdan, his gaze drifting towards the open doors, through which could be seen a glimpse of the city. The streets of Jorvik were beginning to stir with life as the merchants opened up their shopfronts and the bargemen loaded their barges.

“And why not? He continued. “The city is safe – or will be when we’ve finished repairing the walls. The farms are fertile, and the Ouse is bringing trade. We have a stronghold worth keeping.”

His eyes brightened with a vision of the future prosperity of Jorvik.

“And that’s not the only thing,” he added, leaning forward and rubbing his back. “I’m getting too old for the rigours of battle. I need to retire!”

“Retire? What’s that?” said Ubba, mystified.

“It’s when you stop working; stop fighting,” explained Halfdan.

“When you die, you mean?”

“No, I mean to have a few peaceful years at home, to look back and reflect on it all.”

Ivar was scornful. "What! And die in your bed like an old woman! A Viking should die in battle with a spear in his guts. That's the only death worthy of a warrior!"

"I'd rather drink myself to death..." said Ubba.

"That too," conceded Ivar.

"Or be *fokkað* to death by two seductive *skjaldmærar*."

"Only two!" scoffed Ivar, "it'd take a dozen to do me to death – good way to go, though."

Halfdan was willing to give up his place in the *Mikill Herr* for a peaceful retirement in Jorvic, but he was well aware that he would get no peace until his enemies had been defeated, or until he left Engaland altogether.

At last, he said with a sigh. "You'll get your chance to die in battle, Ivar. Soon the Engisc will rally and seek revenge – and the only way to win lasting peace is to beat them all: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Wessex – the whole lot of them!"

"Ah! Now you are talking," Ivar exclaimed, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. "For to me, there's no life, save when the swords clash! Let's go today and trounce the Mercians!"

Halfdan agreed, but with a heavy sigh, reluctant to risk the raven's rune again.

"I suppose so," he said. Then, remembering the politics of the leaderless north, added, "But first, we must find a puppet king to control Northumbria,"

"I saw that show!" joked Ubba. "*Hogg ok Juða* they called it. I liked it when Hogg hit Juða over the head with a truncheon. Is that what your puppet king will do?"

"Halfdan will hit *you* over the head with a truncheon if you don't shut up!" growled Ivar.

But Halfdan ignored them and continued to think out his political plan.

“Someone easily manipulated...”

“With a truncheon?” said Ubba.

Ivar thumped him.

“...who will ensure that tithes and taxes flow into our coffers. We’ll need ample funds if we are to wage war upon all four kingdoms!”

“*Hundr!*” swore Ubba, not at Halfdan’s plan, but at Ivar’s blow, though Halfdan couldn’t care less anyway, because he had thought of just the man.

Ecgeberht was chosen, a distant kinsman of Aella, whose bloodline lent him a semblance of legitimacy. Though his claim was tenuous, it was enough to placate the murmurs of dissent among the Northumbrian nobles. He pledged himself as their loyal servant, swearing fealty with a solemn oath before the gathered council.

With the matter of Northumbria’s governance thus resolved, the jarls wasted no time. Next dawn saw the Raven banner unfurling as they marched south, their sights set on the rich lands of Mercia.

They laid siege to Snotingham, a vital town far to the south of Jorvik, its reputed riches drawing them like vultures to a feast. The settlement’s defences, though formidable in appearance, were merely wooden walls, lacking the strength of Roman en-

gineering. The townsfolk, recognising the futility of resistance against the feared *Micel Hæðen Here*, capitulated swiftly.

Ivar was contemptuous: "Those Mercians are cowards! Man should meet man and never give way. This is the Code of Honour for warriors!"

"Those were not warriors. They were merchants and women," Halfdan reminded him. "Mercia has been too long at peace."

"To our advantage," added Ubba.

"Oh, I don't know," said Ivar, in a tone of complaint, "I was looking forward to bashing a few heads in!"

King Burghred of Mercia, seated in his capital at Tame-worth, received the grim tidings of Snotingham's fall with a heavy heart. Desperate to stem the tide of conquest, he sent an urgent appeal for aid to Æthelred of Wessex. Æthelred, who had been watching the progress of the *Micel Hæðen Here* closely, responded without delay. He marched north with a formidable army, the largest ever assembled in Wessex.

Then it started again, the grim game of battle. For three relentless days, the clash of swords and the cries of battle echoed across the fields, as Æthelred's housecarls pressed hard against Halfdan's huskarls. The tide of battle had turned, and the once-feared invaders found themselves teetering on the brink of defeat. Exhausted and bloodied, Halfdan turned to Ivar, his voice urgent.

"We must ask for a truce!" he urged, "or they will trounce us!"

Ivar's eyes burned with fury, his pride stinging more than any wound.

"Are we warriors – or women?" he spat, disdaining the very idea. The argument grew bitter, and had not Ubba, ever the peacemaker, intervened, their tempers would surely have caused them to come to blows. With a swift motion, he tipped the contents of his flask across over their heads, cooling their blood.

"Better red wine than the red blood of kindred!" he declared, a wry grin on his face as he wiped the wine from his hands. The two brothers, dripping wet, but still angry, paused, the tension broken.

"Let's sleep on it tonight," Halfdan suggested, his voice quieter now. "We'll talk again tomorrow, when we've had time to cool our heads."

As the first light of dawn crept over the land, it revealed a frosty expanse, the ground glittering with a sheen of ice. The battlefield, once thrumming with the clash of arms, now lay eerily still, with no sign of the enemy to be seen. Only the remnants of fires, their embers long dead, marked the spot where they had camped the night before. Ubba, his breath rising in the cold air, looked around, his eyes narrowing in disbelief.

"If I were a monk," he muttered, "I'd call it a miracle."

Ivar joshed him, "A fine monk you'd make! No, it's Odin's work!"

Halfdan, his expression lightened with a rare smile, said, "You are both right. This stroke of luck is god's work – whoever that god may be."

He gestured to the frost and explained what he thought had happened:

"The seasons have turned. The West-Saxons must return to their homes to tend the harvest, or their folk will go hungry."

His eyes twinkled as he surveyed the faint traces of battle smoothed over by the carpet of white.

"It is not just the Norns who decide our fate, the seasons also have their say."

"It's just *gæfu* – luck," said Ubba. "We got lucky today, but..." his voiced trailed off.

"But what?" prompted Halfdan.

"What if our luck runs out?"

Ivar's lip curled in disdain as he surveyed the quiet field, his thoughts still seething with the aftermath of battle.

"Luck's got nothing to do with it," he insisted. "Those West-Saxons are all meek and mild, like that god, the White Christ, that they worship. That's why they fled."

"Fled? They were winning!" Halfdan cried in vigorous disagreement. "They had us on the edge of defeat!"

But Ivar wasn't convinced.

"Another day's battle," he said, through gritted teeth, "and we would have ground them to pulp."

"I don't think so," said Halfdan, shaking his head. "That's why I wanted a parlay."

"I was shitting myself when I saw their shieldwall," joked Ubba, "but if they show their faces again, I'll shit on them!"

"Never mind shit, it's blood that counts," snarled Ivar.

“Haven’t you had enough blood?” said Halfdan, thinking of all the men who had died the day before.

“Æthelred, is a doughty warrior,” conceded Ivar, “despite the White Christ.”

“Too doughty!” said Halfdan with wry laugh. “We need an easier victim, so let’s forget about Mercia for a while – we can do that now Winter is here – and when winter’s over, we’ll raid East Anglia. That’s far enough away from Æthelred. What do you think?”

“They bought us off last time. Maybe they’ll do it again,” said Ivar.

“But we want more than horses. What else have they got?”

“Don’t worry,” said Halfdan. “It’s a kingdom, so there’ll be plenty of everything.”

“We’ll do it!” said Ivar, gleefully. “As soon as next year’s campaigning season starts. Pass the order to get ready to march. We’ll winter in Jorvik.”

Later in the day, as the sun dipped lower in the sky, the Danes were approached by a lone figure who walked tentatively towards them. He was a messenger, bearing tidings from the Mercian king. The man’s breath puffed in the cold air as he drew near, his eyes darting nervously from one Viking to another.

“King Æthelred has returned to Wessex,” he said, “so King Burghred will pay you to go away peacefully.”

For a moment, there was stunned silence, as the Viking leaders tried to take it in. They could scarcely believe it. The Mercian king, whose land they had raided, and whose ally,

Æthelred, had almost defeated them, now offered them Danelgeld to depart without bloodshed, not knowing that they had decided to go anyway!

“It really is our lucky day!” Ivar exclaimed, his face breaking into a grin, the sharpness of his earlier frustration melting away. “A king who fears us more than he values his gold!”

Halfdan smiled and repeated the well-known saying from the *Volsungasaga*: “‘Call no man lucky until his life is over.’ That was such a piece of luck that I fear we will pay for it, for is not luck balanced out in the Loom of Years?”

“You’re just a doom monger,” said Ubba, dismissing his brother’s reservations with a wave of his hand. “I live for the day – and today we will feast! And when we leave here, I’ll give to the locals a piece of advice: drop ‘s’ from their place name – ‘Snotingham’ sounds like something nasty dripping from a nose! ‘Nottingham’ sounds a lot better!”

The others laughed at Ubba’s clever joke, but whether the Snotingham men heard it is not known. Perhaps they did, or perhaps they thought of it themselves, but Nottingham is what their city came to be called in future years.

Christmas and Joltið

A housecarl with his own army, however small, however raggle-taggle, was sure to find acceptance in the house-troop of King Æthelred, to whom a trained and armed thegn was worth his weight in gold, even if he was landless and his fyrdmen were dispirited and poorly-armed.

He was made welcome by the king's younger brother, Ælfred, and they soon discovered that they shared an interest in learning.

"You should see our minster library!" enthused Ælfred. "Come, let me show you."

Cynewulf had noticed the minster as soon as he entered the city, and was impressed by the magnificence of its architecture. It reminded him of his beloved Eoforwic Minster, though it was not so large. The library was housed in the scriptorium, which was part of a complex of monastic buildings attached to the minster.

"There are over 100 books," Ælfred boasted, "and I would like to make it 200, no, 2,000!"

He gave a delighted laugh then reached for one of the illuminated manuscripts.

"But look at this. It's from your part of the world. An illuminated gospel from Lindisfarne. Look at these Celtic knots and spiralling motifs," he enthused, tracing them with his finger, "and those Insular majuscules flanked by fantastical creatures!"

Cynewulf turned the pages thoughtfully, those glowing images drawing him back to the world he had lost when he used a processional cross as a polearm.

“But I must confess a weakness for the old sagas,” continued Ælfred, reaching for a small volume, no bigger than a missal.

“This one, for example, which tells the story of the greatest warrior in the Northlands, Waldere. Listen to this...”

He flicked through the pages, found what he wanted, and read aloud:

*“And that’s how they came, one after another:
Camalo, Kimo, Werinhard, Ekrivid
Hadawart, Partravid, Gerwit, Randolph –
but Waldere slew them one by one
in single combat with his strong hand,
and, when the three remaining warriors
attacked with a trident, he took them down
just as surely as he had slain the others.”*

Cynewulf was moved to tell him about the project that was closest to his heart.

“I want to write like that, but about our Faith. I want to portray Christ as the warrior hero. In fact, you’ve just given me an idea. I could imitate that passage with Christ as the warrior and the Seven Deadly Sins as the antagonists.”

“An inspiration!” cried Ælfred. “You must do it!”

“I was working on *Genesis* before Halfdan came,” Cynewulf explained, “but I doubt that I’ll be able to do any more until we’ve expelled every last Viking.”

"I know what you mean," said Ælfred, shaking his head sadly. "I have a dream of making England the seat of learning, like Charlemagne's court used to be."

"And I hoped to be a great scholar and serve Charles the Bald," said Cynewulf, confessing his own dream. "But now I have to practice the arts of war until my muscles scream."

"War is not only about swordplay," Ælfred reassured him. "Read *Waldere*, and I'm sure you will learn something that will help you, even if you can't kill eleven warriors singlehandedly, as he did."

Cynewulf took a seat in the scriptorium beside the other monks and began to read, his heart lightened by the coming together of the two worlds that had torn him apart: learning and war, and by this unexpected meeting with a kindred spirit.

"Where have you been?" cried Eowyn, when he got back. "It's late and the streets are dark!"

Cynewulf laughed. "What, worried that some footpad would get the better of a veteran housecarl?"

"No, but..."

He took her in his arms and stroked her hair.

"You'll have to get used to me spending many days away – weeks, even, after St Agnes' day, for that is when we start training, and soon after that – well, you know..."

"The *Micel Hæðen Here*..."

"Yes. Æthelred's army nearly beat them last time – and next time we'll do it for sure!"

"Make sure you come home," she whispered, hugging him tighter.

"I want something to come home to?"

"What do you mean?" she said, pulling away and giving him a puzzled look.

"A wife. We can marry now that your uncle has passed away."

Tears sprang into her eyes and she leaned close, holding his head with both hands, and kissing him all over his face, then, breaking away again, and still tearful, she said, "I want that more than all the world – but, I must explain about my uncle..."

Cynewulf gave a gentle laugh and squeezed her hand.

"Let me guess – he's your father."

"How did you know?" she gasped, much surprised.

"Let's just say that such things are not unknown among the English clergy – and, believe me, it makes no difference to what I feel about you."

"There something else I'm unhappy about," she confessed.

"Well?"

"You are a deacon and you want to take holy orders, perhaps to become a canon like my father, or a monk, so, surely, marriage is not right for you."

"That is one of the things I love about you," he said, holding her tight. "You think of others, not just yourself?"

But even as he said these words, the pain of a lost dream was written on his face.

"As for taking holy orders," he continued, hanging his head in shame, "I am not worthy. I killed a man – and with the cross of Christ, no less! Then I went on to kill – God knows how many – in the battle for Eoforwic."

It was like a confession – a preparation for the confession he would make before Midnight Mass – and he almost told her about his affair with Alfhild. But what to call it? It wasn't adultery, because he wasn't married, and if it was fornication, he was also fornicating with her. Confused, he said nothing – and it was just as well. She was a good woman and would have forgiven him – after punishing him with a hurt silence – which was harder to bear than her anger.

"You fought in a good cause!" cried Eowyn, defending his dream, even, possibly, at her own expense. "You saved a monk's life when you killed that heathen with the cross, and when you killed those others, you were fighting for Eoforwic – for me!"

"Yes, I was fighting for you," he said, smiling again, "and I've won you, and I want to keep you until death do us part. And I can still live my dream, or part of it. I can be the poet that raises our language to the level of Latin. Just today, Æthelred's brother, Ælfred, gave me an idea for a poem."

Eowyn was happy. Her dream was about to come true – without having to sacrifice all the dreams of her lover.

Later, they celebrated Midnight Mass at Wintanceastre Minster. It was a magnificent spectacle. The nave was lit with hundreds of candles, the warm light of which brought to life the brightly coloured wall paintings which were a veritable procession of Biblical characters. There was Eve, wearing nothing but a fig leaf, there was Noah and his Ark, and there was Ezekiel, prophesying over the Valley of Dry Bones. But the most won-

derful figure of all was that of Christ Pantocrator giving a blessing from the giddy height of the vault.

The monks in the chancel sang the plainsong proper to the feast. The words were Latin, but Eowyn, thanks to her struggles with *amo, amas, amat*, could understand them:

*“Pax in terra et misericordia mitis.
Deus et peccatores reconciliantur” –*

“Peace on earth and mercy mild.
God and sinners reconciled.”

The words brought tears to Cynewulf’s eyes, and he said in a whisper, “Peace – mercy – that’s what we want in this life, not war and cruelty!” and it was never clearer to him than at that moment, that this was why Christianity was the true religion, with a God who was love – not like Odin and Thor – gods of war. As the memories of all that suffering humanity came back to him – warriors hacked to shreds, old men and children slaughtered without pity, women raped and enslaved – he felt the force of the words of the *Godspel*: “Peace on earth and good will towards men.”

That was all he wanted – all anybody wanted.

The brothers wintered in Jorvic, well-sheltered in the high hall of the old kings of Deira. When *Jolitið* came, they decked the hall with boughs of holly, donned their gay apparel and decorated the *Jolitið* tree. Many a barrel of mead was emptied, and many a spitted boar was devoured in the raucous feasting. The

hearth-fire roared and the hall resounded as they trolled the ancient *Jolttið* carol: "Fa la, fa la, la la la la." The skald struck his harp and joined the chorus, then went on to sing of the battles of Ragnar:

*"He led his fleet against Francia;
his legion of longships.
In his most famous fray,
he sailed up the Seine
and bearded Charles the Bald,
grandson of Charlemagne,
in the heart of his homeland.*

*"Their swords worked wonders
in the butchery of battle:
helmets were hammered,
heads were hacked off,
shields were shattered.
The delight of that day
was like hunting the hart –
wild and wonderful.*

*"They soon reached Paris,
which they plundered and pillaged,
ravaging their dwellings
and raping their women.
They paid him to leave –
7,000 livres –
a mountain of gold
to ballast their longships."*

After the feasting, it was time for fornicating, and Halfdan believed he had the best woman of them all – Alfhild. She was as voluptuous as that statue of Frigg in the minster, she bent to his will like a willow bending to the wind, and, unlike many women, did not weary him with endless wittering. Her, “Oh”, was enough when he had something to say. After all, how could a woman converse about the things that mattered: honour, courage, arms and armour, adventure, seafaring and ships? – and she more than made up for it in bed with her eloquent body language.

She welcomed him now with her arms wide open for a love-fest. That was the kind of conversation he liked. She initiated it in the usual way, and he responded in kind, then it was to and fro, to and fro, like discussion in a scholarly debate, but a deal more delicious. She rode him like a warrior in a war-keel bucking in a storm, then she wrestled him the wrong way round, then it was his turn to ride: he held her pigtails like reins and galloped to an exhilarating finish, after which, he lay there, spent, like a warrior waiting to be wafted to Valhall.

Joltið passed over the courtyards of Jorvik all too quickly and the sweet breath of Spring spurred the warriors to war. The smithies resounded as swords were smelted and sharpened on grindstones for the grim game to come.

Odin or Christ?

King Eadmund had warning that the *Micel Hæden Here* was on its way to subdue East Anglia, and summoned the Anglian *fyrð* to hold off the enemy at a place called Haegelisdun. He had 300 house-troops, heavily armoured, in nasal helmets and ring-mail byrnies, but his 800 *fyrðmen* had only kitchen knives and farm implements. They formed in a battle line, linking their shields, round linden-boards for the house-troops, old barrel tops for the *fyrðmen*. But there had been too many years of peace before the coming of the heathens, and none of them was prepared for the force of the storm that burst upon them.

They should have taken warning from that time, four years ago, when the *Micel Hæden Here* had marched through their kingdom. But Eadmund had bought them off, and they thought that, if it came to it, he would do it again.

They had trained half-heartedly in the green quiet of the meadows, their drills more ceremony than warcraft, their swords hung for show above hearthstones more often than wielded in practice. So when the Northmen came – howling through the morning mist with swords in their hands and murder in their eyes – their shieldwall crumpled like rotted wood. Smoke rolled across the fields, thick with the stench of burning thatch and blood, and the sky turned black with crows before noon. Even the bravest among them fought as in a dream, stunned by the fury, too late to rouse themselves before death came – not in the shape of the traditional symbol: a hooded skeleton wielding a scythe, but something far more terrifying:

a Viking in a spectacle-plate helmet, with its dark eye-holes, looking like a death's head.

Ivar, the berserker, was the most feared of all, though he fought bare-headed and bare-chested. He bounded among them, bellowing like a bear and bashing heads in. His berserker fury was too much for the Anglians, and some of them fled. Others followed, and the retreat turned into a rout, though King Eadmund's house-troops, sworn to die with their lord, held on to the bitter end. They formed in a shield-fort around their ruler and stood their ground, but they were too few and fell one after another, dying honourably in fulfilment of their vow. One of them, an old stalwart called Byrhtwold, shouted, as he shouldered his shield-board: "We will die with our lord as a liegeman should, and though our might lessens, our mood strengthens!"

Ubba heard him and admired him – then hacked him to pieces.

At last the sun sank in the west, spreading a ghastly glare of red over the bloodied battlefield and the piles of bodies of Anglian warriors. King Eadmund, surrounded by the bloodied remains of his loyal house-troop, was taken and tied to a tree. The rank and file Vikings taunted him, but dared not harm him, until Ivar pronounced on his punishment.

When he arrived, covered in the blood of his enemies, even round his mouth, and grinning with the sheer joy of it – a grin that showed reddened teeth – he said to the king, "If you value your life, you must become a vassal king, pay tribute, and, most

important of all, renounce your religion. The White Christ is a God for cowards. Return to Odin and you will live – as our vassal.”

King Eadmund gave Ivar such a withering look that even the bloodthirsty berserker quailed under it. His words were equally defiant: “My religion is dear to me – nor I do not fear death. Do your worse, but I will not renounce it!”

So Ivar did his worse. He headbutted him in the face with his bony brow, breaking his nose, and told his men to to beat him up. King Eadmund called upon Christ again, and Ivar, determined to assert his will, commanded the beating to stop. He thrust his bloody face close to the even bloodier face of the prisoner and spat, “You have one more chance! Shout for Odin instead – or Woden, as you Angles call him!”

But King Eadmund, despite his bruises and broken nose, spat back and called, “Christ!” again.

Ivar was secretly full of admiration for King Eadmund’s Viking-like courage, and wished with all his heart that he would renounce the White Christ, shout for Woden, and become his vassal. But he had no choice. The king had defied him and he had to act accordingly.

“Shoot him!” he ordered his archers.

So many arrows pierced Eadmund’s body, that the flesh was flayed, the bones laid bare and streams of blood flowed into a pool at his feet. His head slumped and his agonised body stopped twisting and turning as he gave up the ghost.

The Vikings untied his bonds and lowered his body to the ground. Ivar himself hacked off his head with total contempt for the human dignity that Christ embodies and Vikings don’t give a fart for. What was worse was that Ubba threw the king’s

head in a hedgerow and left his body unburied on the battlefield.

Ivar ordered the Viking army to return to their base at the border of Anglia, and they went on their way, raping wives and daughters, taking strong men as slaves, slaughtering the old and weak, and looting anything of value.

Meanwhile the mournful followers of Eadmund returned to the battlefield and sought their king. They found his torn and tortured body, but his head was lost, though they looked everywhere. While they looked, the beasts of battle crept to the slaughter-place to feast on the corpses: the raven, the rat, and the ravenous wolf.

But one of the wolves ignored the fallen ones and gave a bark that sounded like "*hic*". A monk from the nearby monastery laughed aloud at it.

"That wolf speaks Latin!" he said. "*Hic*' means 'here'."

"No, he's had his head in the beer barrel," joked a fyrdman. "*Hic*' is what we say when we're drunk!"

"It's just a bark, idiot," said the Ealdorman. He was addressing the fyrdman, of course, for monks are always treated with respect.

"Bark?" said the fyrdman. "It doesn't sound like a bark to me. My dog says 'wuff'."

"Your dog's a flea-infested mongrel. That wolf has class. He was barking in Latin!"

"Barking or Latinising," concluded the monk, "it's a sign, so let's follow him!"

They followed the wolf across the battlefield to the very hedgerow where the head had been thrown.

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed the fyrdman. "There it is!"

"A miracle!" the monk proclaimed.

"A lucky coincidence," concluded the Ealdorman.

"That may be," the monk continued, "but there's no doubt in my mind that this was a martyrdom!"

As he said this, he knelt and made the sign of the cross.

"King Eadmund died for the faith of Christ," he continued, "and should be canonised! I will see our Abbot and tell him the story; how King Eadmund stood and defied his conquerors, calling on Christ all the while, though it cost him his life."

In the Viking camp, Ivar was unsettled. "I think the White Christ cursed me today for killing a king who served him with courage. So I think it best that I leave this country."

"Where will you go?" said Halfdan, "to Danmork?"

"No," said Ivar, "I'm going to Dyflin. Through our father, Ragnar, our kin have a claim there – though it has been usurped by raiders from Norvegr. My plan is to get it back and be king."

He frowned as he said these words. He was not one to worry about his weird, being content to leave that to the Norns, but this clash with the White Christ had unnerved him.

"I am cursed in this land and I cannot stay," he said, trying to explain how he felt. "A powerful God protected Eadmund."

"Protected? He's dead!"

“Yes, and it was I who killed him! His God will avenge him unless I go away.”

He said this because he had no concept of a universal God, believing that each god was god of a specific place, even if it was the whole of the Northlands, which were ruled by Odin, with slightly different names in different lands: Woden, Wodan, Wotan – but the same god, nevertheless. Irland, he believed, was outside the dominion of Odin, and he hoped that, therefore, it would be outside the dominion of the White Christ.

There was also a mercenary reason: “I’m sure it’s the kingship I was promised,” he continued, “because it’s over two seas. It’s mine by right, as the eldest Ragnarsson, but a renegade Viking has proclaimed himself king. I shall do to him what I did to Eadmund!”

“Stay with us!” urged Halfdan.

“We need you!” said Ubba, adding his persuasion, “and your three-hundred huskarls, some of our bravest warriors – why, they’re nearly as berserk as you!”

“Give it a rest, *hundr*!” retorted Ivar. “I’ve got a better idea. Share my adventure. A new land is calling – the land of Irland!”

“We have spilt too much blood in Engalund,” said Halfdan, “to leave it, and anyway, I like it here, especially Jorvik, and those fertile fields from the city to the sea...”

“Ha! I think you’re thinking of something else that is fertile!” laughed Ubba.

Halfdan laughed too. “I’ll admit that my woman, Alfchild, is the best bed-thrall I’ve ever had; beautiful, blonde-haired, big-breasted, bountiful, perfect for child-bearing! I like her so much that when I get back I’m going to give her a baby!”

"The man who fears fighting," scoffed Ivar, "is only fit for womanish peace, far from where worth's won and the valkyries watch."

"I don't fear fighting, I just prefer *fupa*" growled Halfdan, firing up.

"*Fupa!* That means you want to do battle in a soft bed in safety, with your pr*** for a pike, and her c*** for a cut."

"How dare you insult me and my woman. I'll show my mettle and prove I'm a man!"

He punched with his bunched fist to Ivar's hard belly, but Ivar took it as lightly as a child's slap, laughed and lunged back at him. But if Ivar was strong, Halfdan was quick, and he bent to one side, evaded his punch, then bashed him again. Ubba stepped between them, and the bulk of his body was a better barrier than the bastions of Jorvik.

"Are you like Northumbrians, fighting each other; or like Attila, who butchered his brother?" he shouted. "Save your wrath for our enemies – we've got enough of them!"

"You're right," said Ivar, calming down, "but I've made my mind up and will have to bid you *far vel!*"

Halfdan was horrified. "Split our army! Then they'll finish us for sure and it will all be your fault! We found out at Snottingham that West-Saxons are no weaklings. We will need every man we can muster, and a berserker like you is a boon in battle."

Despite this praise for his strength, Ivar felt insulted, for now it appeared that he was more of a shirker than a berserker, so he said what he could to convince Halfdan that it made no difference whether he stayed or went.

"Never mind me. Bagsecg is coming with his Great Summer Army. He will reinforce you."

Halfdan heaved a sigh. "It's a relief to be reminded of that," he admitted. "With another great army we'll flatten those West-Saxons!"

"That's if it comes!" said Ubba with mocking laughter.

But Halfdan didn't find it funny. "If it doesn't we're dead!" he muttered.

The worry lay heavily, for, soon, he would be leader. With Ivar departing, he must decide everything on his own, unadvised, for Ubba, though valiant, took every problem as an excuse for a joke.

"Winter is coming," said Ivar, "so I won't be going just yet."

"Perhaps a winter of feasting and fornicating in our favourite *borg* will change your mind," said Halfdan, hopefully.

"It might," said Ivar, "If the ghost of Eadmund doesn't follow me."

Shieldmaiden

The Great Heathen Army's attack on East Anglia gave King Æthelwulf a much-needed respite to train his army. As a result, Cynewulf found himself based in the king's high hall, training by day and feasting by night.

Eowyn was now free to focus on her shieldmaiden plan. But how to begin? She went to her husband's armoury – a grand name, but just a storeroom at the back of the house – to look for a suitable weapon, and found his finest heirloom sword, *Æscbrand*, and an old notched thing, brown with rust, that didn't even have a scabbard. She unsheathed *Æscbrand* – reverently, partly because of all it meant to Cynewulf – his ancestors, his honour – and partly because she feared what it represented – blood and death. She curled her delicate fingers round the gold-wound hilt and essayed a few swings. Oh, but it was heavy! – heavier than she had expected – three pounds, perhaps more, and all that weight to be wielded by her delicate wrists! And who would teach her how to use it? She couldn't ask her husband. He would be horrified. He was a man of peace at heart and had traditional opinions of a woman's role. Indeed, she shared them – though in peacetime – this was war. Engaland was overwhelmed by ruthless invaders, and every man – every woman – had to look out for himself.

She sheathed *Æscbrand* and picked up the old notched thing. It was shorter and lighter and a little easier on the wrist. She conjured an image of Halfdan and proceeded to hack him to pieces with wide, untrained swings. Then, with the imaginary Halfdan lying dead and she out of breath, sweating, and

with an aching wrist, she laughed out loud. How foolish she had been to think that she could take on a man like Halfdan with twice her weight, twice her strength and a lifetime of swordplay! She looked at the old sword thoughtfully, and wondered how many men it had killed, and then wondered how it would feel to be on the receiving end of it. Eowyn was rich in empathy, and so keenly did she feel that blade in her guts that she cried out in imagined pain. This was another advantage that Vikings like Halfdan had: they had no empathy. They never imagined that, one day, the blade would be in their guts instead of their enemy's. Had she had a better understanding of the Æsir gods, she would have realised that Viking fearlessness arose from a belief that the Norns controlled their fate and they would only die when their allotted time had come.

Eowyn almost gave up the idea at that point. She was a woman; she had no business wielding a sword – and weren't shieldmaidens just an invention of the old storytellers to show that women had power too? Were there ever any real shieldmaidens?

Her shieldmaiden plan might have ended there had she not caught Osred larking about in the backyard when he should have been stacking wood. He was fencing with a piece of that wood with the old man who delivered it, and it seemed more than horseplay, as though the old man were giving him lessons.

"Stop that!" she cried, "and get on with the chopping and stacking."

"He's teaching me how to fence," objected Osred.

"You're a houseboy not a housecarl," she reminded him, and Osred returned to his task shamefaced. The old man turned to leave.

"Wait," she said.

The man, whose name was Ealdred, turned back and bowed to her.

"How can you teach the boy fencing?"

"I was in the *fyrð* when I was younger, *min blafðige*, and I learned something of it. Not much, not like a housecarl, but enough hold up in the shieldwall."

"Teach me," she said.

The old man looked at her as though she was mad.

"For self-defence," she explained. "These are dangerous times."

It was a credible reason, but the old man still hesitated.

"I'll pay you," she added.

Ealdred nodded. What matter if this high lady was out of her mind as long as he went home with a few coppers in his hand?

"Come with me," she said, leading him to the armoury, where she showed him the two swords.

Ealdred laughed and shook his head. "No, no, *min blafðige*, we don't begin with steel – too dangerous. Wait a moment..."

He went outside and returned with two wooden sticks.

"We'll start with these," he said. "They have no cross guards, but tomorrow I'll bring two wooden swords, if you give me a pair of chickens to trade for them."

Eowyn nodded agreement and took the stick he held out. It was much lighter than a metal blade and her confidence soared.

“Now,” said Ealdred, “think of the rune *Gyfu*.” He sketched its X-shape in the air.

Eowyn looked puzzled, wondering what a runic letter could have to do with it.

“Those are the first two cuts and the first two guards,” explained Ealdred.

“The First Cut,” he said, and slashed his stick diagonally down from left to right. “Now, I’ll do it again, and you must block it with the same diagonal, which we call the First Guard. Let’s try it a few times.”

After that, he taught her the Second Cut and the Second Guard and for a long time, they sparred with those. Sometimes Ealdred would make two First Cuts, or two Second Cuts, one after another, and though it caught her out at first, she soon learned to watch for it.

“It’s all in the eye,” he explained, as they paused for breath, “and rapid reactions. They’re much more important than brute strength.”

That thought delighted Eowyn. If she practised and practised she might one day be skilful enough to make her fantasy a reality, and fell that brute who raped her.

“But you need to build up the strength of your wrist and arm, and your stamina.”

“How?” she said.

“Practice your cuts against a pell. Any old post will do as long it’s as tall as a man. Oh, and do what Osred is doing – cut wood.”

“Thank you, Ealdred,” she said, “Come again tomorrow, and bring those wooden swords.”

“I might have to have them made, *min blafðige*,” he said, so it might not be until Wednesday or Thursday that I come again.”

“Very well,” she said, and showed him out.

As soon as he was gone, she went into the backyard and be-rated Osred.

“Too slow!” she cried.

Osred looked at the pile he had chopped, and wondered how much faster she expected him to work. Then she took his axe from him, and much to his surprise, started chopping the wood herself. He looked on for a while, feeling useless, then fetched another axe and joined in with the work. The logs were chopped in no time and Eowyn was exhausted, out of breath and sweating like a hog. She called her maidservant, Mildreth, to prepare a tub of hot water, and luxuriated in it, feeling that, for once, she had done something worthwhile with her day.

From that day on, she trained regularly, using the gatepost of the back gate for a pell, after sending Osred and Mildreth to the market, and sparring with Osred “for fun” (she didn’t want him to know that she was deadly serious about it). Above all, she trained with Ealdred, first with the wooden swords, and later with real ones – not *Æscbrand* of course, as she feared to notch it, but with the old sword against Ealdred’s old sword.

O Christmas Tree!

The campaign in East Anglia ended with the installation of a regent ruler, Æthelfrith of Gipeswic. Halfdan impressed upon him that he was not to call himself king because they had decided that Ubba should have that honour, but since Ubba wanted to stay with the army, Æthelfrith was to rule on his behalf.

They made their way north to Jorvik and wintered there, giving themselves to feasting in the old hall of the kings of Deira. By night, the fire in the hall was stoked until it was as hot as the summer sun, and there was feasting and drinking, and, later, fornicating with the Jorvikskyr lasses. After all, when you've spent most of the year battling in blood and guts, you need to let your beard down at *Joltið*, and a wrestle in the hay with a blonde beauty is a bit more fun than a wrestle in the mud with an enemy housecarl – that said, there were more than a few Vikings who declared that fighting was more fun, and that endless feasting and fornicating was as slow as a thaw in Niflheim.

By day, there was hunting and hawking in the Forest of Galtres, a huge forest of oak and ash, maple and magnolias, which stretched from the northern moors to the very walls of Jorvik, and teemed with deer and boar, hares and foxes, pheasants and partridges. Winter was a good time to hunt, especially when there was snow, as the tracks of their prey were easy to follow.

The hunt was as much a trial of courage as it was a pastime, and the boar, a symbol of strength, was a worthy adversary. Tracking it through the underbrush, the warriors' hearts

pounded with anticipation, each man knowing the danger that lay ahead. A cornered boar could be as deadly as any enemy on the battlefield, its sharp tusks capable of inflicting wounds that were worse than a swordthrust.

Halfdan, leading the hunt, knelt to inspect the freshly disturbed earth, a clear sign of the boar's recent passage. He gestured silently to his men, who spread out in a semicircle, each moving with the caution of seasoned hunters. The hounds, lean and fierce, strained against their leashes, their noses to the ground, catching the scent of their quarry.

Suddenly, a guttural grunt shattered the stillness, and the underbrush exploded in a flurry of movement. The boar, bristling with rage, charged out of the shadows. Halfdan made a signal to the hunters and they moved as one, their shouts mingling with the barking of the hounds. Spears flew, finding their mark, but the beast's strength was formidable. It charged at Halfdan, taking him by surprise. He felt sudden panic – but was he, who had crossed swords with two kings, to be taken down by a wild beast? Luckily, he had not thrown his spear with the others and he held it out in front of him, skewering the boar through its open mouth so neatly, it was almost as good as spit.

They celebrated in a mead-hall trimmed up for *Joltið* with holly and ivy, the holly berries as red as any blood. There was also mistletoe, with its white berries, to kiss under (and, yes, the Jorvikskyr lasses were there. Those manly warriors certainly weren't going to kiss each other!).

The centrepiece was the *Joltré*, the Yuletide Tree, decorated with offerings to Odin, Thor and Frigg: a bangle for the goddess, a hammer-pendant for the war god, an amulet for someone's lover, a finely spun scarf, a sprig of snowdrops; and, grouped round the bottom of the *Joltré*, offerings that were too large to hang up: a jug of mead, a pat of butter, a loaf of freshly baked bread; and the prize offering: boar tusks from the hunt.

They gathered round the tree, charged their mead horns and sang:

*"O Joltré, O Joltré
hversu trur eru blóð þín!
Þu grænkar ekki aðeins á sumartíma,
En einnig á vetrartíma, þegar það snjóar."*

*("O Yuletide tree, O Yuletide tree,
How faithful is your greenery!
You are green not only in Summer,
But when snow whitens the scenery.")*

It was Valhall on earth; no need to be bashed to death by a West Saxon broad axe to enjoy these delights; no need to be an iron-fisted, spectacle-plated huskarl either. Those delights were for everybody: the king, the jarl, the carl, the old man, the maid servant and the slave – and especially the Jorvikskyr lasses!

Later, Halfdan went to another kind of Valhall – bed with Alfhild. It was a world far apart from the welter of warfare,

though he wrestled with just as much vigour as with the West-Saxons.

“Give me a baby!” she crooned, wrapping her legs around him.

Halfdan gave a rich chuckle. “I want him to be a warrior, so I’ll have to work you hard!”

“Yes please!” she begged.

Halfdan marvelled at the mystery of woman. He could pound her harder than he ever pounded those West-Saxons – and she loved every minute of it!

To Cynewulf’s surprise, a huge fir tree had been erected in the North transept of Wintanceastre Minster.

“I don’t understand,” said Cynewulf to Ælfred. “Surely the Yuletide tree is a relic of the old religion of Woden!”

“Indeed it is,” said Ælfred, “but that is the genius of Christianity. It takes things that people know and love and reuses them for the Faith. For example, Our Lord wasn’t born on 25th December, but the church chose that date to celebrate Christ’s birth because it was the date when our forbears celebrated the Feast of Yule. The tree, which we call the Christmas Tree, is the same, only we deck it with candles, instead of offers to heathen gods, each one a silent prayer. Look! The monks are putting them up now!”

It was a wonderful sight, all those candles glimmering in that vast space, bringing the murals of the heavenly host to life: saints and prophets, cherubim and seraphim, angels and archangels, dancing in the flickering light. And, in the nave,

were even more candles, and in the chancel too, and, on the high altar, two of the biggest candles he had ever seen – hundreds of candles; hundreds of prayers.

There was feasting in Æthelred's hall. Cynewulf thought it was like those old stories of *Walheal*, where fallen warriors feast with Woden – then he kicked himself, and tried to replace it in his mind with a Christian image: The Last Supper. Æthelred certainly offered them wine and bread, and much more, and there was a sense of fatefulness about it, for, every man there knew that, come summer, he would have to face the heathen horde once again.

Æthelred spoke little, but his gaze moved over them all, as if committing each face to memory. Perhaps he already knew what the rest feared to say aloud: that this feast might be the last some would share.

In that moment, death was no shadow lurking in the corners – it was part of the company. It made the bread more wholesome, the wine sweeter. It made each breath a miracle – for what is life but a brief fire in the long dark?

And so they ate, and drank, and laughed, and remembered, and were quiet. Not because they feared death, but because they loved life, and knew how swiftly it slips through even the strongest hands. There was, in that hush, a yearning for something lasting, something to lift the soul above the dust and blood of the coming days. And so, as the embers of the fire glowed low, it was an opportunity for Ælfred to indulge one of his greatest pleasures – listening to the old heroic lays. He

asked the *scop* to perform part of *Beowulf*, that passage describing a joyous welcoming feast in Hrothgar's high-gabled hall, Heorot:

*Then was laughter of liegemen loud resounding
with winsome words. Came Wealththeow forth,
queen of Hrothgar, heedful of courtesy,
gold-decked, greeting the guests in hall;
and the high-born lady handed the cup
first to the East-Danes' heir and warden,
bade him be blithe at the beer-carouse,
the land's beloved one. Lustily took he
banquet and beaker, battle-famed king.
Through the hall then went the Helmings' Lady,
to younger and older everywhere
carried the cup, till come the moment
when the ring-graced queen, the royal-hearted,
to Beowulf bore the beaker of mead.
She greeted the Geats' lord, God she thanked,
in wisdom's words, that her will was granted,
that at last on a hero her hope could lean
for comfort in terrors.*

Cynewulf shivered with delight. That scene in Heorot, from hundreds of years ago, from the old, heathen times, was just like the scene before him. He was not the only one who enjoyed it, for there were calls for the *scop* to continue to the troll fight.

"Not tonight!" cried Ælfred, "you will have enough trolls to fight next year! Let's have a Christmas song instead."

In response, the *scop* strummed his gleewood with a merry chord and sang:

*"Masters in this hall, hear ye news today.
Brought from over the sea and ever I you pray.
Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell sing we clear!
Holpen are all folk on Earth, born is God's Son so
dear!"*

And the thegns sang along as happy as the shepherds who first saw the angels from the realms of glory. Drinking horns clinked as they exchanged the old Anglo-Saxon toasts: "*wæs hæl*" and "*drinc hæl*", and there was laughing and joking along the mead-benches.

"That's why we will beat them in the end," said Ælfred, confidentially to Cynewulf, "Christianity brings peace and joy, what does their religion bring? – an axe over the head!"

Æthelred had given Cynewulf a hall of his own, and he visited it when he could, as his duties as a housecarl often detained him in the hall of the king. The Christmas feast was one such occasion. He was expected to feast with his fellow housecarls and sleep in the king's hall – and it was a feast that lasted for 12 days.

On the thirteenth, he was home, and, after 12 days of feasting, rather more worse for wear than after fighting the *Micel Hæðen Here*, but he had a special gift for Eowyn: a golden brooch, decorated with intertwining gripping beasts with gar-

nets for eyes. King Æthelred had allowed him to choose it from his treasury as a reward for his service.

“Blíðe Cristesmasse!” he said, kissing her and pinning the brooch to her cloak.

“Oh, it’s wonderful!” she cried, holding it to the light to better appreciate the design, “but the best gift is having you home again!”

He hugged her tight, and wondered for a moment at the taughtness of her body. She had always been willowy, but there was a firmness to her muscles that he had not noticed before.

“By the way,” he said, standing back again. “What happened to the back gate? It’s hacked to bits?”

“Oh nothing,” she replied, as casually as she could. “Osred fancies himself as a housecarl and uses it as a pell.”

“I must speak to him.”

“Don’t” she pleaded. “He’s a good houseboy and I don’t want to upset him.”

“It’s not the gate I’m worried about. It’s just that I see his future as a cleric of some kind. Anyway, he can never be a housecarl because he is not a thegn.”

Eowyn was panicking now. If her husband spoke to Osred, her secret would be out. Once again, she affected a casual tone, as though it mattered little, one way or the other. “Leave it to me. I’ll speak to him.”

That night in bed, he was amazed at her energy. Their love-making felt more like a battle with a Viking huskarl, so fiercely did she wrestle him with her muscular body. It was fortunate that their only light was a smoking tallow candle, or he might have noticed that her body was different – slimmer, harder and more muscular, though in a subtle, feminine way.

Nevertheless, it was a wonderful way to end the Christmas feast.

The Taking of Dyflin

The ghost of King Eadmund haunted Ivar throughout *Joltrið* – or rather, haunted his dreams – though he believed it was real.

“What can a berserker do against a ghost?” he wailed.

Sometimes they found him tossing and turning on his bed of furs as though he was in a wrestling match. He woke up trembling and sweating, and with terrified eyes.

“I fought him off that time, but next he’ll get me – Eadmund! Eadmund!”

Later, in a calmer mood, he said, “I really must go. As soon as the winter storms subside I will sail. I’ll take six ships and my 300 huskarls. You won’t miss them when Bagsecg comes.”

Ivar’s ships left the western coast under a steel-grey dawn, slipping out between the headlands like shadows. The Irlandshaf was cold and sullen, its swells long and heavy beneath the hulls. Gulls wheeled above the masts, and the men huddled under furs, silent but watchful. Ivar stood at the tiller when the helmsman tired, his eyes fixed westward, as if he could already see the smoke of war rising beyond the horizon.

The ships swept in with the tide, their sails black against the leaden evening sky. Ivar stood in the prow of the lead ship, his cloak flaring in the sea-wind, his legs wrapped in seal-hide and braced wide for balance.

Before them, Dyflin rose out of the dusk: a wall of timber palisades and smoke-wreathed rooftops crouched beside the dark mouth of the Liffey. It was ruled by a Norse-Gael dynasty

founded from Norvegr by warriors the local Gaels called “The Fair Vikings”.

A Norse-Gael called Amlaib Conung was the current ruler, though, as Dyflin was then an undeveloped backwater, his title was merely that of “jarl”.

“I don’t know whom I hate the most,” snarled Ivar. “The Norvegans, or the Gaels.” He gave a contemptuous laugh, then added. “No. I know nothing of the Gaels, but I do know that Norvegr usurped the line that our father established.”

Beside him, his war chief, Olaf the White, gave a wolfish smile. “Simple. We’ll kill them all.”

The ships grounded in the muddy shallows as the last of the sun bled away. They came ashore, not in full array, but in silence – no shieldwall, no cries. Just the scrape of boots, the faint clink of mail, and the surge of the tide behind them.

Ivar moved among them like a shadow, his mind sharper than any spear. He had timed the attack to fall during the *þing*, the gathering of the ruling Norse-Gael clans, when the jarls would be drunk on mead and boasts.

His scouts soon proved that he had been right, hard though it was to believe: Dyflin’s gates were open. It was not trust that left them so, but arrogance. Amlaib had believed his name alone could hold the town.

He was wrong.

Within moments, the outer ramparts were taken. The guards were gutted in their sleep or dragged into the darkness before they could cry out. Fires were kindled only after the gates were barred behind them.

Ivar stalked through the streets of Dyflin like an avenging angel, or, in Norse terms, Vidar, the god of Vengeance, though

restraining his berserker madness for once – he was saving it for the right moment. His men spilled into the alleys and yards, kicking down doors, pulling warriors from their beds. Some they slew, others they bound, depending on their suitability as slaves. The Irisc mercenaries – those not drunk or already fled – were the first to die.

The hall stood in the centre of the town, a squat wooden beast with a steep roof and carved posts. From within came laughter, music, and the muffled clash of mead-horns. Ivar paused at the threshold.

“Burn it?” one of his captains asked, eager, torch in hand.

“Not yet,” Ivar murmured. “Let them see me first – the real king of this place!”

He pushed the doors open.

The music faltered. Faces turned – half-drunk men in gold, fur, and braids. Amlaib stood at the head of the feast, a horn in one hand, his other on the hilt of a dagger. His eyes widened, then narrowed.

“You’re early,” he said, trying for a jest. “The barley pudding has not been served yet.”

Ivar stepped forward into the firelight, his face stern. His voice, when it came, was low and menacing.

“I came to drink from your skull, Amlaib. But if you’d rather serve me first, I won’t object. After all, I *am* the king here.”

Then he let it out – his berserker fury. He foamed at the mouth and sprang forward, and the hall exploded into violence. It was a short fight. The jarls were drunk, the guards dead or absent. And when a fire was started at the far end of the hall, panic broke the rest.

Amlaib was dragged before Ivar. Blood matted his beard, but he spat his defiance.

"You're no king," he growled. "You're just a Viking raider."

Ivar grabbed his collar and pushed his face into Amlaib's. "I am king by right of my father, Ragnar Loðbrok."

There was spittle on his lips as he said this. He hauled Amlaib outside into the night, and unleashed the worst of his berserker fury. The screams didn't last long.

Later, Ivar sat in the high seat of Dyflin, blood still steaming on the floor, smoke from the recent blaze clinging to the rafters. He was quite calm now. It is amazing what a killing frenzy will do to take the beast out of the berserker.

Olaf passed him a horn. "Well, King of Dyflin. What now?"

Ivar raised his horn and laughed

"I'm going to breed a dynasty that will conquer all Irland – and maybe Englaland too."

"You will need more warriors then."

"Yes, but more important..."

"What?"

"I need a woman – I can't breed a dynasty on my own!"

A Setback

Spring came too soon, bringing with it the campaigning season and, soon after, the *Mikill Sumarið Herr* arrived as promised, led by a jarl called Bagsecg.

Ivar would have been *munnr-sla* – or “gobsmacked” as the Northumbrians would say – to hear that the Great Summer Army had actually come, though, just then, he was busy bashing skulls in Irland, and the news was that he was doing it so well that he had already won the kingship and was striking out at the neighbouring *Taoisigh*.

Halfdan was heartened to see those heroes – fine-fettled fellows, glittering in the summer sun with arms and armour fresh from the forge – so much so, that he advanced his plans to attack Æthelred.

Bagsecg was, as his name suggested, a fat fighter, a bulky *bjorn*, a well-rounded warrior. He was renowned for charging with his belly stuck out and barging through his enemies with his sheer bulk, while yelling, “Bagsecg!” at the top of his voice.

His second in command was a jarl named Guthrum. He was no young sea-thief chasing booty, but a war-chief hardened by years of slaughter from the Frisian coast to the East Anglian fenlands. Broad-shouldered, with a beard plaited like a longship’s rigging and eyes that gleamed cold as hoarfrost, he exerted a steadying influence on the sometimes foolhardy Bagsecg.

Bagsecg and Halfdan led their combined hosts towards a place known as Rhydding. This settlement, devoid of sturdy walls or any kind of defence, made it an easy prize, ripe for the taking. As their armies approached, the citizens, gripped

by terror, abandoned their homes without raising so much as a kitchen knife in resistance.

With the town now deserted, Halfdan seized the opportunity to secure it, ordering fortifications to be erected to transform it into a defensible base. He knew all too well that those frightened burghers, though scattered for now, would seek aid from the nearest fortified town and it was only a matter of time before they would return, bolstered by the grim resolve of professional housecarls.

It was Æthelwulf, the ealdorman of nearby Englefield, who came to their aid. Summoning his own house-troop and rallying the local men, he raised an army to recapture Rhydding.

When Halfdan saw the enemy approaching, he decided to meet them in the open, for this is where Northmen fight best, not cooped up behind walls. But in his overconfidence, he miscalculated, placing far too much faith in the overwhelming size of his combined army, and failing to take account of the resolve of men fighting for their homes.

Ealdorman Æthelwulf was a grey-bearded veteran, his battle experience written in the scars on his face, yet beneath the worn exterior of his *byrnie* and his old-fashioned concave shield, his heart beat with the hot blood of a young warrior. With a commanding presence, he spurred his men on, urging them to hold their ground and fight the good fight with all their might. At the front, he proved his mettle, sparring even with Bagsecg and managing to hold him off, despite his bargaining belly. His courage inspired his warriors, and they fought ever

more fiercely, emulating their ealdorman, who was as brave as any Viking.

There was blood, there was glory – if there's glory in gouging and grappling and striking and sticking, while your enemy does the same to you! Perhaps not glory, then, but certainly blood, and plenty of it!

By evening, the tide had turned and the Englefield men had the advantage. With the battle faltering and his warriors weary, Halfdan gave the order to retreat to the defences he had so wisely ordered. Bagsecg objected, as you might expect from a big-headed bully, but Halfdan, helped by Guthrum, persuaded him that retreat was necessary, and that they would regroup to fight another day.

The men knew that Halfdan was no coward, but, rather, a wise tactician, and Bagsecg, though reluctantly, fell in line. After all, he was new to the campaign, and thought it best to defer to Halfdan's experience; and anyway, an opportunity for revenge would not be long in coming.

It came soon sooner than he expected; only four days later, although, if anything, the force they had to face was even more formidable. Æthelwulf had sent for Æthelred, the king, and Ælfred his brother.

This time, Halfdan, determined to do better, sat down with Guthrum and planned every move like a game of *hnefatafl*. He sent Ubba on an outflanking movement, which took the Englefield men by surprise. Bagsecg, leading with a bull-like bellow straight from his fat belly, charged Æthelwulf's flank. That

brave Ealdorman urged on his fyrdmenn, but their shieldwall formation was facing the wrong way, and they were quickly overcome, and Æthelwulf's last sight on earth was the fat belly of Bagsecg bearing down on him. Following the loss of their leader, the survivors of Æthelwulf's army fled the field in disarray.

With Æthelwulf's forces scattered, Æthelred's left flank was now exposed, and his right flank was crumbling to Bagsecg's bully boys – Halfdan's *hnefatafl* moves were paying off.

What followed was butchery. Spears punched through mail, axes cracked bone, and the ground grew slick with blood and entrails. Men screamed for their mothers as their guts spilled in the mud. Limbs were hacked, skulls split like rotted fruit. The West-Saxons tried to rally, but fear had already unmade them. The Danes pressed in like wolves scenting weakness, howling through gritted teeth, blades red to the hilt. The dead lay twisted and sightless, and those who still crawled were silenced without mercy.

Recognising the futility of further resistance and weighing the peril of honour against the prudence of survival, Æthelred made the difficult decision to order a retreat. As the West-Saxons withdrew, Halfdan stood triumphant, the master of the slaughter-place.

Æscesdun

Four days later the two armies met again at Æscesdun, though, as the Northmen marched towards the fateful battleground, an unsettling omen cast a shadow over their spirits: a ghostly howling filled the air, an otherworldly wail that seemed to rise from the very earth beneath their feet. It was a sound unlike any they had heard before – an eerie, keening cry, like the wailing of a valkyrie, foretelling doom and death.

“The choosers of the dead are chanting already!” said Halfdan, trying to shake off his unease.

But Bagsecg, solid and self-assured behind his fat belly, answered breezily, “Don’t worry, we can’t die if it isn’t woven in the weft of the Norns!”

“And if it is?” challenged Halfdan.

“Then we’re dead, and there’s nothing we can do about – so what’s the use of worrying?”

“You’re right,” said Halfdan, cheered by a reminder of the Viking Code of Honour, “it never was worthwhile.”

“Anyway, what’s so bad about dying?” Bagsecg continued. “I’d love it if a valkyrie vanquished me in bed! Yes, it’s Valhall for me, and the valkyries that Baldr has promised to those who die in battle!”

“Never mind vanquishing valkyries,” said Halfdan, continuing the banter, “Just vanquish the West-Saxons and you’ll have their women. They’re as buxom and blonde as any valkyrie!”

“But what if they beat us?”

“Well, then they’ll have you, and stick it up your arse!” quipped Ubba.

“Ouch!” cried Bagsecg with a mock grimace. “I’d rather get speared in the guts.”

The strange sound wailed again and the two leaders fell silent, serious now, thinking it really must be the valkyries, and that it was an omen of a terrible battle, perhaps the most disastrous they had ever fought – for their preferred tactic was to strike with a superior force, get what they wanted and get out, a legacy of their raiding days. The last thing they wanted was to slog it out with an equal force and end up dead, despite their fine words about valkyries and Valhall.

They didn’t know that the eerie wailing had a natural explanation. It came from a stone called the Blowingstone, an ancient sarsen which sounded the alarm. And yet it was a harbinger of doom in its own way, for, when Ælfred blew into it, the sarsen made a blaring wail, warning all West-Saxons that they were under attack and should come to the Blowingstone and stand with their king.

Æthelwulf’s thegns assembled at the Blowingstone, bringing their fyrdmen with them. His own houstroop was there already, most with their own army of fyrdmen, varying in size according to their wealth. Cynewulf, had a mere half dozen, the remnants of those who had fled with him from Jorvik. Osred had begged and pleaded to be allowed to fight, demonstrating his skills with the wooden sword, but Cynewulf, with a vision of the young boy spitted on a Viking spear was adamant that he should stay behind. Ealdred, the elderly wood merchant, had attached himself to him saying that he was as good now as he

was 20 years ago when he fought the Vikings at Carhamptun, and had appointed himself the war-chief of the other six.

Ælfred greeted Cynewulf briefly, but, seeing he had only an old man and a few inexperienced youths for support, promised to send him a dozen more, including a shieldbearer, then hurried off to see to the new arrivals.

A horn sounded and the army began to march north. After about two miles, the Heathen Army was seen on the horizon. The horn sounded again, and the army took up the dispositions agreed by Æthelwulf and Ælfred.

It was at his point that 12 young fyrdmen attached themselves to Cynewulf, one of them bearing a shield so big, it was almost as big as himself. This must be the shieldbearer that Ælfred had promised him, he thought, and with his shieldbearer close on his left and the other fyrdmen ranged around him, he felt a great deal more confident.

The Vikings had been spooked by that strange sound, and it was well known that though they feared no man, they were as timorous as babes in the face of the supernatural. But Halfdan steeled himself by remembering the words of the *Havamal*: “Better to die with honour than live with shame”.

So putting all thoughts of life and death, valkyries and Valhall, out of this mind, he gave all his attention to strategy. The first thing was to gain the high ground before the West-Saxons, and, in that he succeeded, because Æthelred was also giving thought to his religion. In fact, he was praying. Ælfred was fuming when he saw the enemy gain the advantage.

Cynewulf, looking on, saw it differently, for he recalled that passage in Chronicles in which Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, prayed to the Lord to help him defeat the Moabites, Ammonites and Edomites, and found in the morning that his enemies had fled.

But Ælfred, in hot blood, put his faith in his right arm and charged headlong into the fray, tackling Halfdan's half of the Viking army head-on. Shieldwall met shieldwall with a deafening crash, the impact reverberating across the battlefield. The air was thick with the clamour of colliding wood and iron, and the shouts of the shieldmen mingling with the wailing of the wounded.

King Ælfred and the eorls of Wessex struck for their homes, their hearths and hoards, and that gave them the edge. They battered the Northmen so furiously that they broke their shieldwall.

At the same moment, Æthelstan charged, his confessions over, and confident in Christ, he battled with Bagsecg's half of the army. Bagsecg fought back with the strength of a bull, his big belly always to the fore like a human battering ram.

Bagsecg's liegemen, inspired by his example, battered their way through Æthelstan's shieldwall. Blood flowed in torrents, seeping into the earth, staining it crimson. Bane was rampant, death's grim shadow was cast over every corner of the battlefield as warriors fell, their agonised cries cutting through the cacophony of war. Swords clashed against shields with bone-jarring force, the relentless pounding echoing like thunder. Helmets were shattered beneath the blows of the broad axe. The wounded lay writhing, their groans a dire counterpoint to the

din of battle, while others stood firm, driven by the will to win – or perhaps only the will to survive.

Cynewulf, seeking to save the situation, gave an encouraging cry to his fyrdmen, charged and broke through the ranks of Bagsecg's shield-fort. He confronted him, man to man, his shieldbearer covering his flank, while his other fyrdmen, along with Ealdred, who was fighting more fiercely than any youth, held off Bagsecg's bodyguard.

Bagsecg bellowed, butted him with his belly, then swung his broad axe with all his might. His shieldbearer took the force of it, splitting the shield and knocking the shieldbearer to the ground

Bagsecg hefted his axe for another blow, but Cynewulf lunged at his belly. It was a big target and he couldn't miss, but the mail saved Bagsecg from being gutted. He was winded, however, and doubled forward, dropping his axe. Cynewulf seized the opportunity to hack his head, but the mail aventail of his helmet saved him. Frustrated, Cynewulf made a move that nobody had taught him – it was just instinctive – he kicked him in the balls. Bagsecg bent forward in agony and Cynewulf thrust his sword through the seam of his mail into his side. He went down, screaming, badly wounded.

Cynewulf stepped back, breathing hard, but he had relaxed too soon. Bagsecg's shieldbearer came up from the side and struck a resounding blow on the crest of his helmet. But the nose to nape band with the dragon's head, made of solid brass, deflected the blade, though the force was enough to knock Cynewulf cold.

With Bagsecg down, Guthrum took command of the Summer Army, and did his best to rally them. But the eerie sound

of the Blowingstone and the fall of their leader had unnerved them, and they lost heart, their courage draining away like mead from a broken drinking horn. They turned and fled, dragging their wounded leader from the battlefield, following those who had left with Halfdan.

Retreat soon turned into panic. They flung Bagsecg over a horse and led it at a run, the rest of the army running behind. No hare could outrun them, no horse was swifter; they flew like the wind. Those saga-sayings about never fleeing the field are good for a mead-hall boast, but when a determined enemy is after you with a broad axe, just forget them and keep on running!

Halfdan had no choice but to join them as his own army was depleted by Ivar's departure, and they had been unnerved by the omen they had heard before battle, which now seemed to be coming true.

As long as the daylight lasted, the West-Saxons harried the heathens. They left many bodies behind to rot, bloodied and lifeless – another harvest – this time for the scavengers.

The wounded West-Saxons were found and tended, among them, Cynewulf. He came round with his head ringing and sat up, trying to focus.

Beside him was his shieldbearer with Ealdred bending over him. He removed his helmet, pulled back the mail coif, and a shower of blond hair spilled out.

"Shieldmaiden!" whispered the onlookers in awed tones.

"Eowyn," gasped Ealdred.

Song and Saga

“And to think of all those hours I put in at the pell until my muscles screamed,” lamented Eowyn. “All that training, and I never used a sword once.”

“No, but you saved my life,” said Cynewulf, humbly gratefully.

“It’s a good job I built up my strength though, because that shield was heavy!”

“It was a shieldbearer’s shield.”

“But it split with one blow.”

“That blow would have split me if it hadn’t been for your shield!”

Just then, Osred burst in.

“Is it true that you fought at *Æscesdun*, *min blafðige?*” he cried.

“No,” snapped Cynewulf. “So get back to your work!”

But that interruption got him to thinking. It wouldn’t do for the gossips to say that his wife was a shieldmaiden. He would have to do something to scotch the idea – and perhaps his word skills were the way to do it. He laboured long over it and this was the result:

*On Æscesdun’s height the eagles hovered,
Dark with doom, the dawn grew red –
Ælfred stood with ash-wood lifted,
Young in years, yet wise in war.*

*The Danes came down with blade and banner,
Iron-shielded, storming the downs;*

*Halfdan led them, hoarse in shouting,
Bagsecg bold with bloodied men.*

*Fierce the fight by fir-tree thickets,
Spears like hail upon the hill,
Shields rang sharp with shattering sword-strokes,
War-cries rose like wind on moor.*

*Æthelred, at altar kneeling,
Heard the host in clashing cries –
Prayed for peace, then grasped his war-blade,
Blessed his hand and strode to death.*

*Ælfred, kingly though uncrowned,
Strode ahead through smoke and slain;
Banner-bearers broke before him,
Fell the fiercest, fled the rest.*

*Bagsecg fell where battle thickened,
Slain by a shieldmaiden, a blonde beauty
And brave as those in song and saga
Brynhild, Hervor, Heid and Visna.*

*Sword through helm, and howl of death;
Shield-maid bathed in Bagsecg's blood.
Earls lay low in blood and briar,
Ravens wheeled over pale corpses.*

*West Saxon war-smiths, wrathful-hearted,
Drove the Danes to ditches deep –
Foe-men fell upon the fallow,*

Æscesdun drank their flowing blood.

*Great glory for Engaland's guardians,
Praise for princes, priest, and thegn;
God looked down and gave them triumph –
Freedom held by Ælfred's housecarls.*

“That should do the trick,” he said to Eowyn. “Most of it is about the battle, but, in the middle I say that a shieldmaiden killed Bagsecg. Now, everybody knows that it was a Wessex housecarl – me, though I don’t want to boast about it – so the listeners will say straightaway, ‘Oh, that’s wrong.’

“I follow it with a reference to shieldmaidens in song and saga – imaginary shieldmaidens, made up shieldmaidens, suggesting that the shieldmaiden at Æscesdun was also imaginary, or made up, or a figment of the fog of battle. I go on to say that Bagsecg was killed by a sword through the helm, but he wasn’t killed outright, he was badly wounded – mortally, I hope – with a sword thrust in his side. Once again, listeners will say, ‘that’s wrong,’ and conclude that the whole shieldmaiden episode is a poet’s invention.”

“Ah! I have married a genius!” crooned Eowyn.

“But it will only work if you stick to the story! Keep denying it, and those few who think they saw you with their own eyes, will soon doubt their memories. Everybody else will think it a piece of poet’s nonsense the moment they hear the poem, and – hopefully – will laugh at anyone who believes it.

And that’s how Eowyn fought as a shieldmaiden with nobody knowing about it.

Bones Beneath Hreptun

The Great Heathen Army wintered in Hreptun that year. It was the royal and ecclesiastical centre of Mercia, strategically ideal for the planned conquest of Mercia in the following year. Halfdan chose Saint Wystan's church as their stronghold, as it was stone built and could quickly be converted into a defensible hall.

The snow had fallen in silence during the night of their arrival, smoothing the blood-dark earth around the church until it looked almost clean. Only the smell remained – of ash and unwashed men and wet animal hides, and beneath it all, the sick-sweet rot of disturbed graves, the result of digging up part of the burial ground to build a palisade.

Halfdan stood on the low rise by the church tower, wrapped in a wolfskin cloak, his feet ankle-deep in the crusted snow. The sky hung low, a pewter weight above the skeletal trees, and the river Trent flowed black and slow beyond the slope.

His thegns decided to make themselves comfortable in the church. They made a hole in the thatch, and lit a fire beneath it. Then settled down to swill their mead and listen to Gisli chanting a lay. But his voice was low, laced with drink and war-weariness, which did little to spread hall-joy. Halfdan made a mental note to tackle that skald. His job was to raise men's moods, not depress them.

The priest had considered himself too old to flee, and Halfdan had spared him, thinking he might be useful.

“Tell me, priest,” he said, “Is your saint so holy that he doesn’t mind our fires built over his bones?”

The priest drew his cloak tighter. “Wystan was a martyr. He died for peace. Not this.”

Halfdan grunted. “Peace dies easier than men.”

He turned slowly, facing the pale, stooped man who had once kept the keys to the church. The priest’s eyes were sunk deep in his skull, rimmed with red, but they did not waver.

“You heaped the dead like offal from a slaughterhouse. Heathen you might be, but you should respect the dead.”

A wind came down from the north, sharp with frost. Halfdan’s thoughts turned, not to the dead, but to the living who would not survive the winter. The wounded from the Mercian fighting, like the young warrior who had tried to slit his wrists rather than die in slow agony from his belly wound.

And then there was Bagsecg. He had been carried from the battle to Hreptun, sometimes in a cart, sometimes on a litter, then laid on a bed of furs in the nave of the church. Garm the Lækni did what he could for him, cleaning the great gash in his side and stuffing it with herbs, but it did no good. He moaned that he was freezing, but the fire did nothing for him. He whispering names in the old tongue, cursing both God and Odin with equal breath.

The nave had been stripped bare. No icons remained – only soot-blackened walls and flickering torchlight. A thrall woman sat beside him, silent and thin-lipped. One of Bagsecg’s fingers twitched, and Halfdan moved closer.

“You should have died on a battlefield,” he murmured. “Not in a priest’s place, sacred to the White Christ.”

Bagsecg replied in a slurred whisper, "This is Viking ground now. There's enough Viking blood in it!"

Halfdan looked down at him, Bagsecg, once so big and bold, who had made corpses of hundreds, But a Wessexman – some said a shieldmaiden – had repaid him in kind.

He knelt beside the bed. "If you die, I will avenge you."

Bagsecg's mouth twisted in what might have been a smile.

Was it a *skjaldmær*, like they say? It can't have been a valkyrie or I'd be in Valhall now."

"I don't know," said Halfdan, who only half believed in either, but when I defeat Æthelred, I'll bathe your sword in his blood."

Bagsecg seemed satisfied and closed his eyes.

Outside, the skald's voice rose again, stronger now, and clearer. A verse from the *Hervarasaga* that told how the shieldmaiden, Hervor, had to enter a burial barrow on the Isle of Samsey to retrieve the heirloom sword, *Tyrfing*, from the grave of her father, Angantyr. That barrow was haunted, and Hervor had to face the ghosts of the men who had died in the battle of Samsey at the hands of Hjalmar and Orvar-Oddr:

*"Wound-rent warriors
were wound in linen,
gore-streaked grave-cloths
gripped their bodies.
Byrnies folded,
brow-guards resting,
high on headstones
helmets waited.*

*"Shields stood silent
by stone-beds leaning,
sword-blades slumbered
along their lords,
with hilt held upward
o'er hushed sinews—
cold was the chamber,
cloaked in stillness.*

*"But one shroud sagged,
soul-ship empty;
steel and helm
were stolen thence.
Then Hervor, heedful,
her gaze sharpening
in shadow's corner,
she saw it standing:
a dusk-draped shape
with death-king's treasure."*

He could bear it no longer.

"Cut that and give us a battle song!" he barked.

Gisli played a discord on his harp, as though to cancel the previous lay, then, striking a martial note, began again. But once again, he picked the wrong theme:

*"Sigdrifa, the shield-daughter,
Bagsecg's breaker met in battle.
Svaðilfari's fang is blood-smeared,
Wolf's-head waits for maiden's mettle.
Óðin's spear sang through shield-board,*

*Skull's-bane struck with shield-maid's might.
Brising's fire burned warrior's war-mood,
But Bagsecg's rage burned ever bright."*

It was a mini-masterpiece, but talk of the shieldmaiden, Sigrdrífa, and Odin's horse, *Svaðilfari*, did nothing to raise the mood of the men, even though Bagsecg's defeat was not described.

The men had been spooked and were looking at the shadows dancing over the ribbed ceiling, lurching with every flicker of flame. They sat around the fire in silence, wrapped in cloaks stiff with mud and dried blood, their eyes drifting – again and again – upward.

One man, Ketill, crossed himself with the T of Thor, then looked down as if ashamed. "It's like a Angantyr's barrow in here," he muttered.

No one disagreed. Hours earlier, they had torn open the graveyard to bolster the palisade – pulling up thirty, maybe more, half-rotted corpses to drive sharpened stakes into the ground and make a palisade. Some had laughed while doing it. Some had gagged. But all had done it. Now, inside the cold stone shell of the church, the joke had turned to ash.

Above them, the carved grotesques on the capitals seemed to move in the shifting light – twisting, grinning, sneering: a writhing man with snakes for arms; a horned beast gnawing on its own tail; a woman with the face of a sow and breasts like shrivelled fruit. But worst was the devil-head in the chancel arch: a thing with curling ram's horns, staring glassy eyes, and a mouth so wide it seemed to grin down the entire nave. The key-

stone that held the sacred arch had become the sneering god of the dead.

Guthrum stood abruptly and threw a log on the fire. Sparks leapt. The light flared – and the devil-head seemed, for a moment, to wink.

“Enough!” he snapped, following their gaze. “It’s stone. Just carved stone.”

But his voice rang too loud; too desperate.

And then they heard it – a dragging sound. Not from outside. From beneath.

Ketill leapt to his feet, clutching his axe, eyes white.

“What was that?”

Nobody answered. They could hear it again – soft and slow, like something wet being pulled across stone. It came from beneath the floor, under the altar.

“The vaults,” someone whispered.

The men stared at the chancel steps.

Guthrum cursed and moved toward the altar with a torch, the flame shivering in his grip. The shadows fled as he approached. The devil-head above him seemed to smile wider.

The stone slab was cracked, and, through it, all he could see was darkness.

Then they heard it again – a breath. A sigh, but not one of the living.

Thorgils dropped his spear. Skarde screamed.

These were men who would face any foe: Northumbrian, Wessexman, or both combined, even if outnumbered, but, faced with the supernatural, they were like puppies in a thunderstorm.

Ketill, panicked, attacked the nearest grotesque with his axe, smashing it to pieces, but cracking the axe head.

"Enough!" cried Guthrum. "It's all in your minds!"

"But the breathing sound!" cried Ketill.

"Just the wind."

"*Herra*," pleaded Ketill, turning to Halfdan. "Those men are haunting us. We must give them a decent burial."

Halfdan knew it was no use arguing with him. Indeed, he felt uncomfortable himself – a sense of the numinous, which Gisli's description of the barrow at Samsey, and the strange carvings in the church had brought on.

"Very well. See it done."

And those men, exhausted from a ten mile march, a bloody skirmish along the way, and building a palisade at the end of it, got to their feet and reburied those bodies with as much energy as if they were morning fresh.

When it was done, Halfdan commanded the priest to pray over them. Most were heathens, but they imagined those Christian prayers pacifying the disturbed Christian souls and felt better for it. After that, the men went back to their tents or the church and ate and drank as cheerily as if it were a *Jolitið* feast.

Gisli, careful not to upset his master again, entertained them with bawdy songs, including the one about the milkmaid who went to milk the cows, but got milked by the dairyman instead:

*"Oh, the milkmaid rose at break o' day,
To milk the cow. The cow said, "Moo".
The dairyman crept up behind*

And, slyly milked the milkmaid too.

*"Fol-de-rol and fiddle-de-doo,
The cow said, "Moo", and she said, "Ooh!"*

Next morning, they found Bagsecg cold and still. He had died in the night.

"It's a pity that such a brave leader should die in his bed," said Guthrum. "Let's hope he died dreaming of big-uddered milkmaids rather than *brynja*-clad shieldmaidens."

"Not shieldmaidens, but valkyries," said Halfdan. "He died in battle, for it was a battle-wound that killed him. He will go to Valhall with all the others."

Then he shook off his gloom and clapped Guthrum on the back.

"Welcome to the cares of leadership," he said. "For it's your turn to lead the Summer Army."

Over the next few days, they transformed Saint Wystan's church into a proper Nordic meadhall, with tables and benches commandeered from the *borg* and a carved high settle for Halfdan. However, Halfdan, being respectful of Christianity, declared that the chancel should be reserved for Christ. The priest moved all the religious artifacts there, and held mass daily for those who wished to attend. He was surprised how many; that might have been because more and more Danes were convert-

ing to Christianity, or, more probably, because they hoped to appease the spirits of the dead whose peace they had disturbed.

The Harrowing of Mercia

It was early in the year, but Halfdan judged that it was a good time to begin their campaign against Mercia, as the Mercians would be unprepared, not expecting attack until the campaigning season began next month.

The ground froze hard outside Tameworth, and the hoarfrost clung to the helms of the Danes as they stood before the gates – silent, black-armoured shapes under a blood-red sky. Halfdan raised one hand, and the Great Heathen Army came to a halt like wolves who had scented their prey and were readying themselves to rip it to pieces.

The town sat hunched behind timber walls, its towers patched with moss, its ditch frozen over and half-filled with rubbish. The Mercian flag still flew – the gold saltire on a blue background – but it sagged like an old man's back – a good omen!

Halfdan turned to Guthrum. "Take your men round to the west. Find a weak spot."

Guthrum grinned, the top of his ear gone to a Mercian's sword, his beard crusted with blood from the morning's skirmish. "There's always a rotten place in a Saxon wall."

He melted into the snow with fifty men – berserkers, axemen, bow-limbed giants from Hedeby and Skiringssal. The rest of the army waited. There were no drums, no horns; only the quiet hiss of frost and the creak of leather and mail.

Then, from the town, came a cry: "Mercia for God!" and the blast of a horn. The gates were flung wide, and the King Burgred's men charged.

They came out like fools, bristling spears and waving swords, like *drengir* at their first training – the last warriors of Burgred, clad in boiled leather and broken mail, shouting as if prayer could fend off swords. Burgred's best men had been laid low last year. These were youths, recently trained – too recently.

Halfdan laughed as he drew his sword.

“Now!”

The two sides slammed together with the sound of iron on bone.

The first Mercian broke under Ketill's axe, his skull cleft from crown to collar. Blood fountained into the snow like spilled wine. Another tried to turn and run. Thorgils hamstringed him with a spearhead, then finished him with a gut-stab that left his intestines steaming in the frost. Spears shattered, shields split, men screamed and fell and screamed again.

Halfdan drove his blade through a Mercian boy not yet old enough to grow a beard. The lad's eyes went wide, as if shocked to be dying, but Halfdan pushed him aside like a slab of meat. His feet slipped in blood now; the white field was turning red.

At the same time, from the west, Guthrum's Summer Army struck. They had found a sally gate – cracked from rot, barely barred – and burst through like fire through dry thatch. Tame-worth's defenders, already stretched at the front, turned to find Danes in their streets. The bell tower rang twice, then fell silent. Smoke rose from the smithy, and the screaming got louder. The Mercian line buckled. Some tried to flee back into the town – only to find the gate already taken.

The Danes were inside.

Tameworth burned. Flames leapt from thatch to rafter. Women screamed in the alleys. A priest tried to hold up a crucifix and had his head split like a melon for his trouble. Coins spilled from the treasury, and men fought over them, slipping in gore.

In the royal chapel, Halfdan found the bones of some Saxon saint, Saint Werburgh, perhaps. He tipped the reliquary onto the floor and pissed on the skull.

“That’s for Thor,” he said.

Outside the palace, they found Burgred; not in armour, not on horseback – just a man – crown askew, sword in hand, blood on his cheek. He stood staring at them, eyes hollow.

“I am the king,” he said, perhaps hoping they would stop the violence and bow before him.

“Not anymore,” said Halfdan.

Burgred raised his sword for his last stand. He managed two steps before Guthrum buried an axe in his thigh. The king fell, shrieking. Another Dane – Skarde the Scarmaker – kicked the sword from his hand and dragged him into the courtyard by the hair.

“Kill him?” he asked.

Halfdan looked down at the broken king. “No. Let him crawl south like a worm. Let him tell the Pope that Mercia is no more.”

At dawn, the army assembled in the blackened ruin of the royal hall. Their chosen puppet, Ceolwulf knelt, lips pale, as the

Bishop of Licafield placed the Mercian circlet on his brow. The bishop's hand trembled. The holy book he held was scorched around the edges. There were no cheers and no feast. Just silence, and the smoke of the burning town.

"You wear it well," Halfdan said with a sneer, watching Ceolwulf rise.

"I wear it for you," Ceolwulf replied.

Halfdan smiled. "Yes. You do – and don't you forget it."

Outside, the crows were already gathering over the field of the dead.

The Battle of Meretun

After that victory, Halfdan was eager to press on to Wessex and finish King Æthelwulf once and for all. Guthrum was not so sure.

“He beat us at Æscesdun, and he can do it again.”

“We were cursed that day,” said Halfdan. “The English *walcyrge* were against us. You heard them howling.”

“They might be against us again.”

“No. We have paid the price. Bagsecg is dead.”

“I’ll spread that word,” said Guthrum. “It will give the men heart.”

Æthelwulf had news of the Heathen Army’s advance and marched north to meet them. It took a day and most of the next morning before they saw the Danes on the horizon of the Valley of Meretun.

The West-Saxons stood in clusters, their breath rising in small clouds in the bitter chill of a March morning. The warhorn had sounded early, rousing the soldiers from their uneasy slumber.

Among them was Cynewulf with his those of his fyrdmen who had survived Æscesdun: three of Æthelwulf’s and two of his own, including loyal old Ealdred. He had insisted that Osred stayed behind, and positively commanded that Eowyn stay behind also.

She took it badly, weeping and pulling at his clothes. "But, don't forget, I saved you, last time."

"My shieldbearer saved me, and I shall have another shieldbearer. Really, Eowyn, I saved your reputation with a poem. I won't be able to do that again. Then you will be some kind of freak, and men will want to fight you just to say that they did – and worse, to f... but never mind. I am your husband, your lord and master, and you must obey."

"But..."

"Saint Paul says so."

There could be no arguing with the Bible, so she desisted and watched him go, crying her eyes out. Her neighbours thought she was crying because she feared her husband might be killed in battle, they little thought it was because she wanted to go too and had been denied.

Cynewulf was sure to examine his fyrdmen closely this time, making them take off their helmets and lift their coifs. They were all men – well, boys, really. Young enough to feel both the fire and the fear of what lay before them, but keen as hounds on the scent to be hunting Vikings and helping to save Wessex.

Æthelred stood in the midst of his shield-fort with Ælfred by his side. Æthelred was still in his mid-twenties, but felt like an old man, worn down as he was by a series of battle which never seemed to end. His brother, Ælfred, was more optimistic. He remembered their success at Æscesdun, and believed that, if they could repeat it at Meretun, the Vikings would be swept like vermin from the green and pleasant land that was England.

Æthelred had divided his army into two wings, and in another shield-fort, not far away, stood their commander, Bishop Heahmund. The Battling Bishop, they called him, and his presence gave heart to those like Cynewulf who found it hard to reconcile what they were doing with the sixth commandment.

Heahmund had no trouble justifying his war-work, he simply repeated something he had been learned in the monastic school: “‘*Rasah*’ – the Hebrew word – means ‘murder’ not ‘kill’, and it says in *Genesis* 14 that a war is just if it is against an evil aggressor.”

His housecarls had no idea what he was talking about, but his sword, which he called *Michael*, after the avenging angel, spoke clearly enough. He wore a *byrnie*, like other housecarls, but over it he wore his cassock and chasuble, and he had a specially made purple mitre to fit over his helmet.

The Vikings – the “evil aggressor” in Biblical language – had come for them again, marching south from their recent victory at Tameworth, and confident, thanks to Halfdan’s message and the absence of that unnerving wailing, that they could win the day.

In the Viking ranks, Halfdan stood with his warriors, a grim smirk on his pale face. The great son of Ragnar Loðbrok had never known fear, and his eyes glittered with the thought of revenge on Wessex. Behind him, his men stood in tight formations, shields at the ready, their faces fired with war-mood. They had faced the West-Saxons before, but today, they would make sure their victory was complete. The Wessexmen, weak-

ened and tired from their previous engagements, would be crushed beneath the weight of Viking might.

The Wessex warhorns sounded once again, signalling that the time had come.

With a final exchange of words between Æthelred and Ælfred, the West-Saxons formed their shieldwall – a formidable line of shields, interlocked, their spears rising like a forest of ash and iron. Æthelred's voice was inspiring as he addressed his warriors:

“Remember, we fight for our homes, for our families, for Wessex! Stand firm. Stand strong!”

On the other wing, Bishop Heahmund gave a similar, but more expansive message.

“Remember, we fight for our homes, for our families, for Wessex, for England, for Christ! Soldiers of Christ arise!”

Both calls to action were met with a resounding cheer and the lines surged forward, a wave of men and steel.

The Vikings met them head-on, the sound of shields crashing against shields, the roar of warriors, and the screams of the dying filling the air.

In no time at all, Cynewulf was in the thick of it, his new shieldbearer to his left and old Ealdred to his right, the other five fyrdmen surrounding him like a shieldfort.

Then came a roar – deep, brutal – as a burly Dane burst through the shield-line to their right, axe high, mail splattered red with blood. He crashed into Ealdred with a blow that split

helm and skull in a single stroke, the old warrior crumpling with a groan that was lost in the din.

The fyrdmen reeled, but not for long. With a cry of vengeance, they turned on the killer like hounds on a boar, blades flashing, pushing him back. He snarled, swinging wildly, but they drove him off in a flurry of spears and shouting. But they made the typical mistake of untried men, and, in harrying the burly Dane, they left their master exposed.

Cynewulf found himself suddenly naked to the fight, the tight knot of shields unravelled, his right flank gaping like a torn cloak. He wheeled, too late, as a second Northman lunged through the breach – taller still, lean and fast, a spear like a death-sentence in his hand.

The blow glanced off Cynewulf's helm but knocked him sideways, dazed, causing him to stumble on one knee in the mud. Luckily, his shieldbearer, remembering his prime duty, had come back, and lunged across him, aiming for the man's armpit – but the Dane was quick to draw his sword and fight back. Metal rang on metal, men shouted, and for a heartbeat the battle narrowed to two breaths and two blades.

Cynewulf, recovering his senses, got to his feet and stabbed the man in the back, then, whirled round with his sword in the guard position. Unlike his fresh-faced fyrdmen, he knew that battle is not single combat and you have to have eyes everywhere.

His fyrdmen, just three of them now, joined him again, only to be swept away by a Viking onrush. The force of those big men in heavy armour was like an avalanche. Instinctively, Cynewulf fell to his knees and put his shield over his head. Another shield covered it – the one held by his shieldbearer, but

when the avalanche had passed, the shieldbearer was gone. He offered thanks to the Good Lord that that shield bearer was not Eowyn.

He had a brief respite to look around. The battle seemed to be going well for the West-Saxons, for, despite repeated Viking charges, they were gaining ground.

On his left, he caught a glimpse of purple – Bishop Heahmund, leading from the front as always. The Vikings must have seen it too, for, suddenly, he was surrounded by a great crowd of men brandishing swords and spears. Many fell, and for a moment it seemed as though the bishop would break through and resume his relentless attack, but the moment came when the purple mitre disappeared, followed by a great cry of “*Sieg Heill!*”

Æthelred diverted men from his own successful advance to support the left wing, and in so doing weakened the right. But he forged on, fighting fiercely, his sword sweeping in deadly arcs. Each blow he struck was a blow for Wessex, for England. But the Vikings were relentless. Their battle cries rang like thunder, their axes cutting through the air with deadly precision.

Beside him, Ælfred fought with the calm ferocity that marked him. Though he was younger than Æthelred, Ælfred moved like a seasoned warrior, his sword striking true as he fought his way through the Viking ranks.

Through the carnage, Æthelred caught a glimpse of a familiar figure – Halfdan. With a roar, Æthelred plunged into the fray, cutting his way toward him. His heart pounded in his chest. If he could kill Halfdan, perhaps the battle would end. Perhaps the Vikings would falter. He could see the Viking

leader now, his tall, imposing figure, his axe raised high. The two men locked eyes, and in that moment, the world seemed to shrink to the space between them.

But as Æthelred charged forward, a shout echoed in the chaos. His shield was struck with such force that it nearly flew from his hand, and he stumbled back, his vision blurred for a moment. Guthrum's men had attacked from the flank, and the West-Saxons were being driven back

He tried with all his might to fight through the fray and reach Halfdan, but, instead, he was confronted by a half-naked huskarl – a berserker. The berserker howled and leapt at him, bare handed, but it was the ordinary huskarls to either side of him that did the most damage. After the berserker had brought him down, they thrust their swords at him. He lay there, a king, writhing in the mud, beating them off with his bare fists, but it was not enough. One of them stood over him and drove his sword two-handed through his byrnie. That was probably the most expensive byrnie in Wessex, with tiny rings, hard, hand-locked with even tinier rivets, but the sword went through, and the king was now writhing in his own blood. But Ælfred had caught up with his brother's mad rush, and chopped his attacker's head off with one swing of his sword. Others of his household drove the Vikings back far enough for them to rescue their king and take him behind the lines.

The Vikings had achieved what Æthelred had striven for – felling their leader, and now, it was not the Danes who were leaderless, but the West-Saxons, and they began to give ground.

Ælfred did his best to rally them, raising the standard of the White Wyvern and sounding the warhorn to summon

them to his support. Cynewulf heard it, and headed for the banner – by himself – all his fyrdmen were dead.

The two wings, what was left of them, were combined now and presented a strong front that the Vikings found hard to break. But they pressed harder and harder, using the formation known as “swine array” – a wedge of men – to break the Wessex shieldwall.

Cynewulf found himself at the sharp end of the wedge, facing the Viking’s bravest warrior, for the strongest and bravest were always placed at the front, and almost always, were the first to die.

A huge man, a head higher than himself, bore down on him with the brute confidence of a killer who had seen many fall. The Dane’s beard was matted with blood, his axe notched but still lethal. Cynewulf raised his shield, feeling the impact rattle through his bones as the first blow landed – a hammering stroke that nearly drove him to his knees.

He countered quickly, slashing low to the belly, then stepping in with a thrust to the shoulder. The edge bit, drawing blood, but the giant only grunted and came on harder, driving Cynewulf back across the churned mud. He slipped in under the Dane’s guard once – twice – opening shallow cuts on thigh and ribs, but he was tiring fast.

Then came the end. The axe feinted high but swept low, and before Cynewulf could shift, the blade crashed into his leg, just below the knee. Pain like fire shot through him as he collapsed with a cry, the strength gone from him in a breath. His sword slipped from his fingers, clattering into the gore-slick ground. He tried to rise, to drag himself back into the safety of shieldwall – but his leg would not obey.

Around him, the battle roared on, but Cynewulf lay helpless, blood soaking into the earth beneath him, staring up at the grey sky as boots and blades thundered past.

The shieldwall surged again, men shouting, swords clashing on shields like struck anvils – but to Cynewulf, it was all distant, muffled by pain and blood loss. The world had shrunk to the torn ruin of his leg and the churned mud around him. He tried to move, to crawl, but every breath brought fresh agony, and the sky above seemed to spin.

He knew that was because of bloodloss and that he must do something about it or die, so, with a great struggle, he removed his belt and tied it as tightly as he could around his leg, above the knee. It didn't stop the bleeding, but it slowed it down.

As the day wore on, Ælfred, bloodied and exhausted, realised the inevitable – Meretun was lost. His men, weary from the years of fighting, fell back, regrouping and retreating to a more defensible position. The Vikings had won this day, but the war was far from over.

There were great cheers from the victorious Vikings, then a flurry of movement as they retrieved their dead and wounded. Any wounded West Saxon was quickly dispatched, so Cynewulf played dead – and it wasn't difficult, for he was so faint that he passed out – a saving grace in that horror of a slaughter place.

The sun set and night began to close in. The battlefield was deserted now apart from the birds and beasts of carrion. Cynewulf had come round, aware of a searing pain in his leg and a parching thirst in his throat. He was able to fend off the carrion birds, but the scavengers worried him. Scavengers – poor village folk coming to scrounge what they could – weapons, clothing, boots, even gold torcs and silver coins. For them, it was a cornucopia. Most were humble peasants, who would flee if he moved, others were more sinister; bands of feral youths who thought nothing of killing their victims before they looted them

Cynewulf was torn between a desire to cry out for water, and an instinct that told him to stay quiet, muddy, bloody, and almost invisible in the growing dark.

Among those scavengers was a woman wearing a thick cloak accompanied by a beardless youth.

“They said he was last seen around here,” said the youth.

“Keep looking,” said the woman. “Call his name.”

Calling was a bad idea, for it attracted the attention of the feral scavengers. A band of half a dozen of them approached, loaded with the booty they had already scavenged, swords, byrnies, belts and buckles.

“Ha! What have we here?” said their leader, a scrawny youth with a black eye and his front teeth missing. “A fair one! Just what I need!”

Eowyn spoke. "You lot should be ashamed of yourselves, West-Saxons that you are! You should be helping the wounded, not pillaging them."

"Shut up, *hore!*" retorted the youth. "and get those clothes off, before I rip them off!"

Calmly, she unlaced her cloak, gave it to Osred, and drew her sword, for it was Eowyn. She had kept her word to her husband, but, like many other wives, when he did not return, she had come to find his body, and had brought her sword for protection.

The feral youth laughed out loud and looked round at his friends for approval.

"We'll see about that!" he scoffed, and put his loot on the ground – everything except a sword he had stolen.

Eowyn could tell from the moment he raised his blade – the way his wrists tensed, the uncertainty in his stance – that he was no swordsman. He lunged, swinging in a crude imitation of the second cut, the arc wild and overshot, a strike born more of arrogance than skill.

She met it with ease, slipping into the second guard, her blade angled to absorb the blow. Steel clanged against steel, and his sword bounced away, leaving him open. Eowyn didn't hesitate. With the fluid precision of someone trained by masters, she stepped inside his reach and lunged low.

Her point drove deep into the soft meat beneath his ribs. There was no *byrnie* to stop the thrust. The steel punched through flesh and fat and something vital, and when she withdrew, it came free with a wet, sucking noise. Blood gushed, bright and sudden, spilling over the edge of his tunic. Some-

thing darker followed – coils, slack and glistening, falling to the earth like butchered entrails.

He dropped his sword with a shocked clatter, staring down at the ruin of his belly as if he couldn't quite believe it was his. Hands clutched at the wound, futile, fingers slick with gore. His eyes lifted to meet hers – wide, pleading, stunned – and Eowyn held his gaze without pity.

“You should not have drawn steel,” she said coldly. “Not if you didn't know how to use it.”

He staggered, tried to speak, but only a string of red bubbled from his lips. Then he fell to his knees, and a moment later, collapsed into the muck, the last breaths rattling from his lungs.

Eowyn turned from the body and cleaned her blade on the hem of his cloak. The fight had lasted less than ten seconds.

“Who's next?” she said.

Nobody stepped forward.

“Right. Throw that loot down. You are not fit to lick the boots of those that owned it – and get out of here!”

They did, dragging their mortally wounded friend with them.

Then she turned to Osred, who was so stunned by what he had seen, he could hardly move. It was his first sight of battle, and he was seeing it for what it was – a chaos of mud, blood and spilled guts. He was glad now that Cynewulf had forbidden him to be a fyrdmen.

“Keep looking,” urged Eowyn, “and keep calling.”

She felt the thrill of victory. Her training had paid off, and she learned what every warrior learns – that training is hard,

but is worth every strained muscle. An untrained swordsman stands no chance at all against a trained one.

“There’s no reply, *min hlafdige*,” whispered Osred after another half an hour of searching. “He must be dead.”

But no sooner had he said these words than a faint croak of “Over here!” made reply.

Eowyn hurried to the spot, cradled his head in her hands and gave him what he most desired on earth – water. She made a tourniquet for his leg to replace the crude one he had made from his belt and then, together, she and Osred helped him to hobble from the battlefield.

The Weighing of Cynewulf

Bald, the best leech in Wintanceastre, was busy trying to save the king from his grievous belly wound, but he sent his apprentice, Hærsige, to tend to Cynewulf. Hærsige shook his head when he saw the wound and promised he would do his best to save the leg. He set the bone and stitched the ragged flesh, and, at first, all seemed well, but, by next morning there was redness, around the wound, swelling and rising temperature. By the end of the day, Cynewulf was in a high fever.

“It is as I feared, *min blafdlige*,” said Hærsige. “Infection has set in.”

“Do something!” she pleaded.

Hærsige grimaced. “I would bleed him to let the fever out had he not lost so much blood already.”

“Do it!” she cried.

“No,” said Hærsige, his medical knowledge overcoming his deference to this strong willed woman. “I dare not. It will kill him. The good humours in his body will have to fight the bad. It will be another battle – and so soon after the last!”

“What can do?” said Eowyn, in tears now.

“Help him to fight the fever by keeping him cool. Bathe him with cold water – and pray.”

Eowyn sent Mildreth for cold water and towels, knelt by her husband’s bed and began a heartfelt prayer, pleading for his life, mixing the Lord’s Prayer with her own petitions:

*“Fæder ure, þu þe eart on heofonum,
i þin nama gehalgod...
spare this man!”*

*He is a good man,
a man of God,
a deacon before he was a housecarl.
He killed, that is true,
but to save a monk's life,
and to save Engaland...
Forgyf us ure gyltas,
swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum.
Amen.*

Perhaps those words found a way into Cynewulf's fevered dreams, for he saw himself standing before the seat of judgment. All around him was a terrible brightness, not blinding, but pure – so pure it scorched the shame from him. There was no floor beneath his feet, nor sky above, only a vast stillness shot through with light, and in the midst of that eternal brightness sat The Lamb, robed in majesty too great for human eyes to bear. On either side of the Throne stood terrible attendants; the cherubim: one shaped like a lion, its mane flowing like a crown of fire, and the other an ox, its heavy shoulders glistening with power. Both were covered in eyes, countless and unblinking, front and back, beneath their six wings that rose and beat in silence like the breath of eternity.

Before the throne, stood two advocates: one for the prosecution, one for the defence. On the left was Saint Peter, the keeper of the keys, looking stern with his penetrating eyes, long beard and white robe. When he spoke, the voice rang like iron against stone.

“You are not worthy to enter the Kingdom of Heaven,” he said. “You broke your vows as a deacon and committed fornication. You defiled what was consecrated. You took a life – and with the very cross of Christ, no less! Then you bathed your hands in blood again and again in battle, wearing the name of Christ like a token, yet acting like a brute beast.”

Cynewulf could not speak. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. The guilt in his chest felt like a stone too heavy to lift.

But then, from the right side of the throne, she came forward – Eowyn. She was naked as Eve, yet modest, as her long hair above and a fig leaf below veiled what should be veiled. Her eyes glistened – not with tears, but with truth, and her voice was clear as spring water running over stone.

“He fought in a good cause,” she said. “He killed, that is true. But he killed to save a monk’s life. Later, he took up arms to defend Eoforwic, and he held his sword between the enemy and me. At the Battles of Æscesdun and Meretun, he fought not for glory, but to save England.”

Saint Peter’s brow darkened. He unrolled the scroll further. “And what of this?” he thundered. “He made a mockery of the Holy Book, by rewriting the Song of Songs in praise of his lover. He turned scripture into seduction.”

But Eowyn stood firm. “He is a poet,” she said. “And poets shape their gifts not from obedience, but from vision. He sang of love – not to mock God, but to glorify what God created. Is not the *Song of Songs* itself full of desire and longing? He saw the divine through the mortal – he erred, yes – but his heart was reaching upward. And don’t forget the project that is nearest to his heart: to rewrite scripture in the language of the old

Anglo-Saxon heroic poems – a project which will help the conversion of a pagan people.”

A silence followed.

The cherubim stirred, the eyes on their wings blinking as one. The lion turned its gaze upon Cynewulf, and its mouth moved without sound. The ox lowered its head as if weighing the matter in its own unfathomable way.

Then the voice of The Lamb spoke – not in words, but in a Spirit of Truth that echoed through the soul.

“Justice sees your faults. Mercy sees your striving. Your wounds were many – some given, some received. But your heart did not turn from Me. So you my enter...”

The cherubim blinked their many eyes in approval. Saint Peter nodded gravely, but The Lamb had had not finished his judgment. “...but not yet. You still have work to do in the world, but not with a sword – you must renounce all violence. Let the archangel, Michael, wield the avenging sword, while you go back to your quill.”

Cynewulf awoke in the cold hour before dawn. For a moment he lay still beneath his rough blanket, the scent of damp earth and woodsmoke all around him. A wind murmured through the cracks of the hall, and somewhere outside, a rooster gave a ragged cry. But Cynewulf did not stir.

His eyes were open, but he did not see the rafters. He saw instead the eyes of the cherubim, infinite and unblinking, the terrible calm of the ox, the unquenchable blaze of the lion. He saw the figure of Saint Peter, stern and righteous. And he saw

Eowyn – naked, radiant, and unafraid – speaking for him with more eloquence than his old master, Canon Fulberht.

A tremor passed through him. It was not fear; gratitude, perhaps; gratitude to The Lamb; and Love, love for Eowyn, who had defended him in his dream as she had in his waking hours of self-doubt.

He touched his chest lightly, expecting a wound, or some remnant of that heavenly fire. But there was only the thudding of his mortal heart – worn, weathered, yet still beating. He had not crossed the boundary to the place from which no man returns, but he had been judged.

He sat up slowly and saw Eowyn – not the naked Eve of his dream, but a slumped, wearied figure in a soiled apron, and, more than ever, the beloved. He whispered her name, and immediately her eyes flicked open.

“O my love!” she cried. “To think that I was asleep when you might have needed me! Here, drink this.”

She gave him watered wine, and, immediately, he felt better.

Their talk woke Hærsige, who gently felt his forehead and pronounced that the fever had passed.

“How long...?” said Cynewulf.

“Five days,” said Eowyn. Then, hugging him – gently, of course – she cried, “Oh, I thought I had lost you.”

“How did I...?”

“She found you, *hlaford*,” said Mildreth, “on the battle-field.”

“And fought off scavengers like a sh...”

“Shhh!” hissed Eowyn, not wishing to upset her lord.

A dim memory of Eowyn offering him that much-needed draught of water came back to him.

"You saved me again," he sighed gratefully. "Was there ever a wife like you?"

Later, after he had swallowed some thin broth, he told her about his dream, and what it meant.

"I must lay down my arms. I am not worthy to enter the church again, but I can be a scribe – better – a poet. I will work for God with my pen, finish the project I began long ago, to present the *Godspel* message as a heroic saga."

Cynewulf's zeal for his new life was making him restless, and, seeing this Hærsige whispered to Eowyn that he should rest. He gave him a soothing draught, an infusion of poppy, to bring on sleep.

Gradually Cynewulf strengthened, and on the third day after the fever left him, he called for pen and parchment – but Hærsige shook his head.

"Not yet, *hlaford*. Rest," he said, giving him another draught of poppy.

But, though he couldn't write poetry, he could dream it, and when, finally, Hærsige allowed him, he sat up and dictated to a scribe the poem that would begin his new life as a poet, rather than a warrior.

Cynewulf's Dream Poem

*Then in sleep my soul could see
lifted in light, luminous, bright,
the Lamb, the Lord of Creation.
The wardens of the way, the cherubim,
stood beside him, bright as flame,
one, a lion in form; the other, an ox,
and Saint Peter, prosecutor,
and Eowyn, my advocate.
ℓ "Cynewulf," said Saint Peter.
ℓ "You have broken your vows.
† Now you must face judgment."
ℓ Eowyn spoke: "Pardon this poet.
℘ War overtook him,
ℓ Unworldly as he was,
† Led him to do evil things:
℘ Fight and kill."
Then on my life the Lamb gave judgment:
"I have seen your work, O word-smith,
and your intentions were good
You may enter the Kingdom – but not yet
because you still have work in the world,
let the avenging angel wield the sword
while you work for God with words."*

Later, Hærsige passed on the news from his master, Bald, that King Æthelwulf had lost his battle for life, despite his master's unmatched skill.

His friend, Ælfred, was now king.

King of Jorvik

After the victory at Meretun, Guthrum wanted to press on to Wintanceaster, only 30 miles away and finish the Kingdom of Wessex for good, after which, they would be the undisputed masters of the whole of Engaland.

But Halfdan, with his long experience of battle, was wiser.

“If we have any more victories like that, it is us who will be finished,” he pointed out, jabbing a finger in the air like a sword. “We lost so many men, you could almost call it a defeat.”

“But they fled the field.”

“To Wintanceaster, to walls, to a garrison, to reinforcements. No, it’s no good. We need to withdraw, and build up our strength. My men are exhausted. They’ve been in the field for six long years and they have had enough. They see the odds shortening with every battle – like playing lottery with Loki – and, at Meretun, many drew the short straw – too many! Those that survive want what we promised them when we first came here: land and livestock and women, and so far their bounty has been only blood.”

Guthrum gritted his teeth, but he was not like Ivar, prone to sudden anger, and he considered his words, like a wise man should.

“I’ve only just got here and I was beginning to enjoy it – but I understand – I think.”

“I’ll be honest with you, Guthrum – and I know you’ll not call me craven because you’ve seen me up to my ears in blood in the thick of battle – I am nearly 50, and have had my fill of fighting, and I too want to make a home.”

“Will you back to Danmork?”

“No. My home town, Hord, is a poor place, and – what have I been fighting for all these years? No. It’s Jorvik for me. My woman is waiting there with the kind of welcome that a warrior wants – and I’m minded marry her.”

Guthrum was disdainful. “What! Marry a kitchen maid?”

Halfdan laughed. “Why not? She can be wife number two. Frigg still allows us several wives, does she not?”

Now Guthrum was laughing.

“But you haven’t got a wife number one!”

“No, I’m saving that honour for some Engisc princess.”

“Got any in mind?”

“Æthelred’s daughter, Thyra,” said Halfdan, but he was only joking.

“No chance. I’ve heard her brother is arranging for her to marry Gorm the Old.”

“She should marry me instead – Halfdan the Young.”

“Gorm is a king.”

“I’m king of Jorvik – or I will be when I settle there.”

“That’s nothing compared to a whole country.”

“Well, somebody like that; a princess with power – and big tits would be nice.”

“What about a pretty face?”

“What for? Can you see in the dark?”

They laughed together for a while, then Guthrum, becoming serious again said, “I understand what you are saying. At 36, I’m in my prime, and, as I said, I’ve only just got here, but one day, I will want to do the same. After all, we take the chance of an axe in the skull to get something – land, wealth, women, power – so what’s the point if we never get to enjoy them?”

“Some men revel in the fighting, and so do I, sometimes – when I’m winning.”

“You can’t fight forever. Your body gets old, you slow down, and then you get the axe in the skull. No, Halfdan, I really do understand, and I wish you *skal og sejr* – good health and success.”

So a deal was decided which Halfdan summed up as follows:

“We will offer a truce to Ælfred. He’ll be glad enough to accept. Then I’ll go north and I’ll rule Northumbria from my capital at Jorvik. Ha! I may have a bit of cleaning up to do first. I hear some of the Jorvikskyr eorls have rebelled, and that puppet king of mine is feeble than a puppet in puppet show. But you don’t have to come with me. Stay here and rest your army, get new recruits from Danmork, and maybe Frisia, and then try again to defeat Ælfred – and next time I see you, you’ll be King of Wessex!”

They shook hands on it, and, once again, Guthrum wished him “*Skal og sejr*.”

The Rebels of Deira

Halfdan went back to Jorvik and hurried to the arms of Alfild, his would-be wife. Ah! How wonderful it is, after long journeyings, to come back to the place where the heart is – home! And for Halfdan it was a high-gabled hall in Goodram-gate.

But the hall was as silent as a funeral barrow and his maid-servant looked at him sadly. “Lord, you have a son,” she said with a sigh.

“But Alfild?”

Tears sprang to her eyes and she dabbed at them with her apron. “She’s dead. She died in childbirth.”

Halfdan wept – the mighty warrior who had seen his friends butchered in battle and had mourned them manfully without any tears, sobbed now like a little girl.

“Alfild never knew that how much I loved her!” he choked.

“My lord,” said the maid, humbly. “It is not for me to say, but from all she told me about you, it was clear that she loved you and knew that you loved her too, so don’t be sad – rejoice in your son.”

He found the baby boy wrapped in one of his old white shirts. “What’s his name?”

“She had no time to name him.”

“Then I’ll call him Hvitserkr, which is the by-name that men sometimes give me.”

The boy grasped his finger with a powerful grip, and Halfdan smiled at him with a proud father’s smile.

“He will be a fine warrior like his father and grandfather – and perhaps, like his father, a king.”

The word “king” made him reflect: a king, I call myself, but it’s only a word. A king makes a country – and so shall I! Sword and shield are my warrant, Jorvik my capital, and Jorvikskyr my country, from the Tees in the North to the Don in the south; the Pennines in the west and the North Sea to the east; and over that sea the old country: Jelling and Hord – but my new home is here. Or it will be when I’ve knocked a few heads together! I need to show them who’s boss!

His first challenge was to put down the rebellion led by Bragmund of Nidresdæl. He was an Englisc eorl who wanted to overturn the Viking conquest of Jorvik and Jorvikskyr, and had been joined by several other Englisc nobles, including, Eorl Ealdred of Hripum, and Wulfing, ealdorman of Ferigebrycg.

They had marched against Ecgberht, whom Halfdan had installed as puppet king of Northumbria, to reclaim the southern third of that realm, which was once known as Deira, and Halfdan had renamed The Kingdom of Jorvik, often called Jorvikskyr.

Ecgberht had not ever dared to oppose Bragmund. Indeed, some said he secretly sympathised with this Englishman fighting for his heritage. So even when Bragmund proclaimed himself King of Deira, he made no move.

His stronghold was Nidreholt, a fortress of timber and stone nestled on a high hill overlooking the valley, and said to be impregnable. His plan was to incite further rebellion and

gather enough warriors to drive out the Vikings in Jorvik, restore its English name, Eoforwic, and reign as King of Deira.

Halfdan knew that this rebellion could not be allowed to continue. He must smash the rebel before he had built up a force large enough to constitute a serious challenge.

He gathered a contingent of his hardiest warriors – men hardened by years of raiding, battle, and the harsh winters of the north. They rode swiftly through the frost-bitten plains and dense forests, their journey made more difficult by snow-filled valleys and bitter winds. The land was unfamiliar to many of them, but Halfdan had a sense of direction born of years spent raiding the rugged coasts of Northumbria.

They attacked anyone remotely connected with the rebellion, and, unfortunately, many who were not. Monks were slaughtered at the foot of their own altars. Women were taken, boys pressed into service or flung onto pyres. What gold could be found was torn from shrines or pillaged from the bodies of the dead.

At Tinanmuðe, they dragged out the abbot, who was said to have preached against heathenism, and set his limbs on the wheel, saying he would spin until he flew to pieces. At Hagustaldesham, an out-of-the-way place where the rebels had once met to hide their treasure, they tore up the altar stone to look for it, but found only old bones – the relics of Saint Wilfrid. At Bebbanburh, where a rebel war-band was said to be hiding in the nunnery, they found only nuns. They tore off their habits, to make sure, then got carried away and raped them. Afterwards, they set fire to their chapel.

The Northumbrians called it “*Seo Hergung*” – “The Harrying” – though they had no word strong enough for the horror

of it. They fled into the hills and dales, seeking shelter among druid trilithons or wolf-haunted caves. Some hid in rotting Brigantian hillforts, building hovels of mud and slate against the broken ramparts.

Halfdan did not smile, not even when burning burhs lit the skies like a northern aurora. He didn't like this work, but he knew it had to be done: these people had to know that he, Halfdan, was their master – their king – and not Bragmund, and that he had the huskarls he needed to enforce his will.

He rode among the fallen with his axe across his lap, staring at what he had wrought. Behind him, a slave carried the bones of Saint Wilfrid in a sack. They would be ground down for charms, mixed with boar fat and sold to the superstitious in Jorvic.

Amid the ruin, he saw something that unsettled him. A single stone cross, wind-worn, charred, standing unbroken in a field of corpses. None had dared to touch it. Ravens clung to its arms as if to mock its message. Halfdan rode up to the cross, half expecting to see that fated rune, Algiz. The ravens flapped away as he approached, but whether the rune was there or not was hard to make out on that weathered surface. At one moment, he thought saw it, but when he looked again, it disappeared. Nevertheless, there was no mistaking the message of death in the dead bodies that lay all around, mocking him, with their sightless expressions, and meaningless gestures of outflung arms.

Algiz or not, the next day, Halfdan rode for Nidreholt, where the rebel leader Bragmund had his hideout. They reached the foot of the hills as twilight began to fall, their breath misting in the frigid air. From the valley, the fortifica-

tions of Nidreholt loomed ahead, the watchtower rising above the trees, smoke curling from the hearths below. His men, who had faced down the West Saxon shieldwall, thought they were facing an easy prey and were eager for battle. Halfdan, however, knew that patience would serve him better than a direct assault.

He ordered the warriors to set up camp in a concealed position at the edge of the forest, out of sight of the stronghold's watchmen. As they sat by the fire, Halfdan turned his thoughts to the challenge that lay before them.

By morning, he had devised a strategy. The fortifications of Nidreholt were formidable, but the rebels had one weakness – complacency. Bragmund and his lords had grown comfortable in their isolation. The stronghold was strong, but it was nothing like Jorvik; there were no Roman walls protecting it, just timber palisades, rotting in the damp northern climate.

Nevertheless, Halfdan had decided not to attack directly. Instead, he would use deception to deprive the defenders of the advantage of their fortress.

Next morning, Halfdan ordered his men to retreat the way they had come. They made a show of pulling back, leaving behind signs of their departure – smoke rising from a deserted camp, abandoned supplies that made it look as though they had decided to leave the area. They withdrew to a nearby wood, hidden from the watchful eyes of the rebels.

The trap was set. Halfdan's men had left a trail of half-burnt torches and discarded armour to mislead their enemies.

By nightfall, the rebels of Nidreholt, emboldened by their perceived victory, began to move out in pursuit of the retreating Vikings. They followed the false trail into the dense woods and were met by a sudden, deafening clash of weapons. Halfdan's warriors had lain in wait, hiding in the trees and thick underbrush. The rebels, taken completely by surprise, were overwhelmed before they could react.

Halfdan himself led the charge, his axe flashing in the moonlight. The rebels, disorganized and in chaos, had no time to regroup. The battle was over within an hour, the ground stained red with blood. Their leader, Bragmund of Nidreholt, a man whose name had become synonymous with defiance, was taken alive, bound, and dragged to Halfdan.

"I am your king," said Halfdan. "What shall I do with you?"

"You are no king!" spat Bragmund. "You are a raider, bringing blood and suffering to a land that was blessed with peace and plenty. Go back to your own country!"

The words had no effect on Halfdan. Yes, he was a raider – a *vikingr* in his own language, but that was something to be proud of – and, as for countries, he had the dimmest concept of them. After all, in the Nordic world, boundaries changed all the time. To him, a country was where the strongest army held sway. Just then, he had the strongest army, so Jorvik and the lands around it were his.

Halfdan signalled to his men to make Bragmund kneel and bow his head. Then he raised his axe, and said, quite calmly, as though he was asking a man to decide between beer or mead, "Vow fealty to me, or die."

"I'll die, then!" spat Bragmund.

Halfdan hesitated for a moment, admiring the courage and integrity of this would-be king of Deira, but he knew full well, that in the Viking world, if you hesitate, you are lost, and, without further thought, he brought his axe down and watched the blood spurt and the head roll away.

He suffered a brief pang – not for the killing, as such, but for the loss of a man who might have served him well.

“Who’s next?” he said.

But the lesson had been taken to heart. Eorl Ealdred, older and wiser, knew that it was better to live to fight another day, so he, Wulfing and the other lords, vowed fealty and commanded their men to do the same.

Halfdan’s last act in Nidreholt was to order the destruction of the fort so that it could never again be used as a base for rebellion.

On his way back to Jorvik, Halfdan noticed many overgrown and neglected farms. The civil war he had found when he first arrived here was the cause of some, and some were the result of depredations by the rebels, but the most recent resulted from the *Seo Hergung* – The Harrying: the people had suffered, and the land had suffered – so much, that it was almost a wasteland.

He realised then, that it was not enough for a king to conquer his enemies, he had to bring peace and build up the country to produce the plenty that Bragmund had spoken of. It was a change of heart that had been a long time coming.

As a result, he commanded the conquered eorls and ealdormen, and his own jarls, to cultivate the farms – not themselves,

of course, those men were the great and the good of the land and such work was beneath them, but by organising the local folk. Those folk were well used to the serfdom imposed by an overlord. Their lords changed from time to time, in a flurry of butchery, but their work was just the same: sowing and ploughing, harvesting and reaping – it had to be, or everybody would starve – including those overlords.

As one of them said, “T’ old eorl used to say, ‘*Erie min feld!*’, an’ t’ new jarl says ‘*Ploga minn akr!*’ ’Tis a different langwidge, but it means t’ same – werk, werk, werk!”

Thus the races mingled, Danisc and Englisc, and more than a smattering of the ancient Brigantes, and Halfdan welcomed it. He was beginning to see that *verk*, *verk*, *verk* is better than *bloð*, *bloð*, *bloð*.

As he surveyed his new realm of Jorvikskyr from the belfry of the minster – now a temple to Odin and Thor – a saying from the *Havamal* came to mind.

“*Satt er betra en se osatt*” – “Peace is better than war”.

Halfdan left the hall in Goodramgate – which now held too many sad memories – and took up his seat instead in the old hall of the Kings of Deira, a place long neglected, for Ivar had done nothing with it – he was too busy fighting. The timbers were black with age, sagging with damp, and ivy had crept in through the broken shutters to coil about the hearth-stones. The thatch leaked in places and pigeons nested in the rafters where once war-banners had hung.

He recruited the best craftsmen in Jorvik, who tore out the rotten thatch and raised a new roof, pegged with oak and fastened with iron nails. The hearth he rebuilt with stone, carted in from the old Roman walls, and over it he hung a massive bronze cauldron, blackened from the flames, to feed a war-band fit for kings. The doors he replaced with thick oaken planks, carved with intertwining gripping beasts and ringed with iron studs. On the doorposts, runes were etched – calling on Odin, on Tyr, and on the spirits of the dead, especially those who had gone to Valhall to win him this earthly hall.

Along the walls he set shields – some his own, dented from battle; some taken from fallen foes; some sent as gifts from jarls and sea-kings across the whale-road. Spears stood in racks like saplings in a grove, and the floor was strewn with fresh-cut rushes. The new tables and benches were so strong that they would not shift when the warriors sang and beat time with their fists, or, as they sometimes did, jumped on the tables to dance or fight. The mouldering tapestries fell apart when they were taken down to be laundered, but there was one he didn't want to lose – the one that showed some ancient king of Deira, perhaps Edwin himself, standing victorious after a battle, his sword held high and the crown of Deira on his head – that old-fashioned crown he had noticed before – a thin gold band with spikes in the shape of castellation. And that gave him an idea. He would have a new crown made after the same model and be crowned with it as King of Jorvik.

Cynewulf Comes Home

Cynewulf heard of the mingling of Danisc and the Englisc and his mind turned to the fair city of Eoforwic, its soaring minster and the rolling hills and valleys of the landscape round about.

“It’s Jorvic, now!” Eowyn corrected him, when he spoke of it, “and the minster is a heathen temple.”

“I wonder what they’ve done with the books?” he pondered.

“Used them for Winter fuel, I shouldn’t wonder,” laughed Eowyn, teasing.

But Cynewulf’s pensive expression showed that he was serious.

“I must go there,” he said at last. “My leg is strong enough now – thanks to you.”

“Take me,” pleaded Eowyn.

Cynewulf considered it, but shook his head and said sadly, “I dare not take the risk, especially as your abductor, Halfdan, is king there. I hear that his wife died in childbirth, so who is to say that he won’t take a fancy to you again?”

“But you must take me!” she insisted.

“Why?”

She patted her stomach.

“You mean...?”

“Yes.”

“Unto us a child is given!” he cried – so loudly that Ælfred might have heard it in his high hall. Then he clapped his hand over his mouth, “Oh,” he said, much embarrassed. “I shouldn’t compare a human child to the Christ child!”

“What do you mean?”

“That was a quotation from Isaiah.”

“Why not?” she replied confidently. “Here’s one from Genesis: ‘And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.’”

“Ah, my love!” sighed Cynewulf. “I have taught you too well. You are a better scholar than I am!”

“So can I come with you?”

“No. Think of Psalm 26: ‘O shut not up my soul with the sinners, nor my life with the bloodthirsty.’”

He drew her towards him and hugged her gently, as though she was already great with child.

“I will be back before he is born.”

“He?”

“A soldier...”

“But...”

“...of Christ. He will be the next archbishop of Eoforwic!”

“I thought it was Jorvik now.”

Cynewulf laughed, dismissive of politics.

“Well, the next archbishop of whatever it is called when he comes to man’s estate.”

Eowyn’s mood turned serious.

“I’ll miss you,” she sighed.

“And I, you, but I promise I’ll be back in time, and I promise to bring you a very special gift.”

“What?”

“A poem.”

He was only joking, of course. She had enough of his poems to bind into a book.

“And something else.”

“What?”

“I won’t know until I see it.”

And with that, she had to be satisfied.

His next duty was to inform the king.

Ælfred was sorry to lose such a valuable subject, a housecarl, but also a scholar.

“You are the kind of man I need in my new kingdom – a sort of scholar-poet – a man who will help me defeat Guthrum, and then help me to defeat an even worse enemy – Ignorance!”

Cynewulf didn’t know what to say, and Ælfred, seeing him hesitate, pressed his argument: “And you have high honour here as the man who felled the leader of the *Mikla Sumar-ið Her*,”

“My shieldbearer did as much as me,” he said, with due modesty.

“I heard something of that,” said Ælfred with a wink. “Something to do with a shieldmaiden.”

“The fog of war,” said Cynewulf, evasively. “Men are under extreme stress. They see things...”

“Those who were there all died at Meretun,” mused Ælfred. “But we have your poem, and a fine one it is too, worthy to stand beside those old lays I love so well, the lays that sing of shieldmaidens; Brynhild, Hervor, Lagertha – Eowyn...”

Ælfred let that last name hang for a moment, then changed the subject. He knew, but he was sensitive enough not to say it openly. To avoid any embarrassment, he reverted to the previous subject.

“Will you stay?”

Cynewulf struggled to explain his feelings.

“Home means something – kin and country. That’s what we’re fighting for, isn’t it? Well, my home is in Eoforwic, my kin are Northumbrians and my country is Northumbria.”

“I hear it is now called Jorvikskyr,” said Ælfred, with a wry smile.

“But it is at peace now, and for every Dane there are a hundred Northumbrians, and I feel that I have a part to play there.”

Ælfred heaved a sad sigh, for Cynewulf was a valued friend as well as a valued member of his house-troop.

“Every man must follow his *wyrd*,” he said, solemnly. Then, with a light laugh, added, “But listen to me, I am beginning to sound like one of those heathen *scops*!”

Cynewulf found Jorvik to be a thriving capital city. The old walls had long been ruinous, so the damage caused by the recent sieges – a few more broken parapets, a few more gaps – made little difference. The wood and wattle buildings had been quickly replaced, and the riverside bustled with trade.

Cynewulf led his entourage to the hall in Goodramgate and found it empty. On enquiry, he learned that Halfdan, now king, had removed himself to the former royal palace of the defunct kings of Deira and refurbished it in the style of a Danish meadhall. He took lodgings nearby, settled his followers, and went to look at his beloved minster, leaving Osred to unpack the ponies.

He stood in the vast, echoing space, feeling a sense of belonging. He was relieved to see that the wall paintings were still there – the Creation, the Crucifixion, the Last Judgement, though they had been partly covered by tapestries showing the Æsir-Vanir War, the Binding of Fenrir, and Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods.

Then he looked towards the chancel and shuddered with horror. Instead of the high altar and the cross of Christ, were three monstrous statues – the largest was Odin and, on either side of him were Frigg and Thor.

“An abomination, is it not?” said a quiet voice behind him. It was Archbishop Wulfhere. He was dressed in a plain cassock, only his pallium and mitre showing his status.

“My lord!” said Cynewulf, recovering from his surprise and bowing humbly.

The archbishop gave him a blessing, then continued, “But I have saved something from this desecration. Come and see.”

He led Cynewulf towards the south transept, explaining as they walked that King Halfdan, in a gesture to his Northumbrian subjects, had allowed Christian services to resume in this part of the minster.

It was much as Cynewulf remembered it, the wall paintings of the Holy Family being untouched, but with a new, smaller, high altar against the East wall. He knelt before it, praying that the rest of the minster might one day be reclaimed and rededicated to St Peter.

As he got to his feet, he noticed a little side chapel in which twenty or so books had been stored. “Is that...”

“Yes,” said the archbishop, shaking his head sadly. “That is all that remains of our once extensive collection.”

“But there were over a hundred codices!” cried Cynewulf, appalled. “What happened?”

“Come and see,” said Wulfhere.

The scriptorium building was undamaged, but, inside was a chaos of broken tables and scattered parchments.

“They stripped the gold and jewels off the covers and used the parchment, and the wood from the tables for firewood. I suppose they thought it better than going out when the snow lay roundabout, gathering Winter fuel.”

Cynewulf picked up a torn parchment and traced the beautiful Carolingian capital with his fingers. “Sacrilege!” he sighed. Then he examined a codex without a cover. “This book is intact. It only needs rebinding – and look, only a few pages have been torn from this one. We can get the first few pages re-copied in the same style!”

He rooted around for a while longer, then gave his verdict. “Much has been lost, but there is much we can salvage.”

Wulfhere nodded sagely. “Perhaps I will entrust the task to you.”

“It would break my heart,” said Cynewulf, biting his lower lip, “to be the librarian of a mere twenty books and a few tattered remnants. It is a job for a monk.”

“Only three have returned,” said Wulfhere, sadly. Then, brightening up, he added, “but more will come when they hear that Eoforwic – Jorvik, I should say – is at peace.”

“What about the school?”

“Closed, and I don’t know when it will reopen.”

Cynewulf breathed a heavy sigh. "There is nothing for me here, then. I had hoped to take up my old positions as deacon and teacher, but there is no school and you will hardly need a deacon in such a small church."

"No, but there is something I need that is more important..."

Cynewulf looked the question, and the archbishop continued, "...someone who can persuade the king to give this back to Christ." He waved his hand in an all-encompassing gesture to indicate the library, the monastery, the school and the minster itself. Then he looked hard at Cynewulf. Cynewulf, though uncertain what he meant, accepted the commission.

When he got back, he found Osred in the courtyard playing with his sword. "Put that down!" he shouted. "It's a precious heirloom!"

"But I want to be a housecarl," protested Osred, who had got over the horror of the battlefield at Meretun, and was especially impressed by the huskarls of Jorvic, as they seemed to have more of a flourish about them than a typical Englisc housecarl, sporting braided beards, wearing furs over their shoulders, their arms and armour glittering with looted gold.

"That you can never be," said Cynewulf, sternly, taking the sword from him. "Only a thegn can be a housecarl, and you are just a houseboy. The best you can do is fight in the *fyrð* with a *seax* – if you can afford one."

"Will you teach me how to use one?"

"No."

“Why not?”

“Because it’s an instrument of death. Taking the weapon, he stroked his finger along the flat of the blade. “See how vicious it is and hungry for blood. Just imagine it stuck in your guts!”

“But I’ll stick it in the enemy’s guts first!”

Cynewulf grimaced, remembering the times when that had so nearly happened to him.

“That’s what they all think, but remember this: no matter how good you are, there’s always somebody better than you.”

With a sudden movement, he stabbed Osred in the stomach with his outstretched fingers and the boy jumped with surprise.

“Like that!” said Cynewulf. “No, it’s better to be a scholar, like me.”

“But you’re a housecarl!” said the boy, bursting with hero worship.

“Was. Didn’t you know? I’ve given it up.”

“Well, then, my mistress is a shieldmaiden.”

“What?”

Cynewulf thought that he had managed to keep it a secret – but how can you hide anything from your domestics?

“She was your shieldbearer at Æscesdun, and had a fencing match at Meretun – and won!”

“But she promised...”

“She kept her promise. She only went to the battlefield when the battle was over and you didn’t come back, and she took a sword for protection...”

Osred got carried away with the memory of it.

"You should have seen her, her sword flashing left and right, then, all of a sudden, stuck in the guts of that scavenger who tried to rape her."

"She didn't tell me this."

"She was afraid to upset you when your life hung in the balance."

Cynewulf thought about it and decided that his wife had done no wrong. She had not disobeyed him, but had risked her life to save his – for the second time.

"So can I...?"

Cynewulf put his arm round the lad and tried to his best to persuade him that it was a bad idea.

"Listen, and listen well. Those fyrdmen that the king gave me were young men, not much older than you. And where are they now? In a mass grave at Meretun. No. It is not the way to go. I have renounced violence, and so has my wife. I'll teach you something better."

"What?"

"Latin."

"What for?"

"So you can read the Bible."

Osred grimaced. He wasn't looking forward to it.

Court Poet

Cynewulf made his way to the royal palace with Osred beside him, the boy's eager step betraying his excitement at the prospect of seeing the renowned Viking, Halfdan Ragnarsson. He gave his name to the guards, and was surprised when he was admitted to the royal presence almost immediately.

"Hahaha!" laughed Halfdan, greeting him as though talking to an old friend, "the man I crossed swords with – more than once, if I remember. What is it you want?"

He was already speaking Anglo-Saxon, and in the Northumbrian dialect, too, an impressive achievement, even though the languages are not so very different.

"I have heard you are now a man of peace," said Cynewulf, "so I want to serve you."

"And none more welcome. I hear it was you who did for Bagsecg, and I know you are handy with a sword."

"I was fighting for England," said Cynewulf apologetically, but not without a touch of pride.

"No need to worry about that!" laughed Halfdan. "He was a bit of a braggart and better out of the way. As for England, what's that? East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex?"

"All," said Cynewulf simply.

"There's only Wessex left!"

"And in Wessex, there is Ælfred..."

Cynewulf left the statement hanging while wondering if the nobler course might have been to have stayed in Wessex and fought for England – but, no. The Lord had sent him a dream forbidding violence.

Halfdan just laughed.

"That's Guthrum's problem now, and I bear no grudges for the past. You are welcome to join my house-troop, provided you swear fealty."

"No," said Cynewulf firmly. "I have renounced violence. Here, take my sword. I vow that I will never use it again."

With these words, he knelt before the king and presented his sword.

Halfdan took it, examined it, and gave it back to him again. "A fine heirloom, with a pattern-welded blade, by the look of it. What's it called?"

"Æsbrand."

"Keep it, and if you don't plan to use it, hang it up over your high settle as an emblem of courage."

"I have no high settle," said Cynewulf, and that began a long conversation by the end of which Halfdan had agreed to restore Cynewulf's ancestral estate at Hessay, and Cynewulf had agreed to become one of his court poets. Halfdan also asked about Osred, and Cynewulf, much to Osred's disgust, said he intended him for a lay brother.

"But I want to be a housecarl!" he pleaded, disobeying his master's order to keep his mouth shut.

Halfdan laughed and invited him to come closer, then made to slap him around the head. Osred ducked, but it was only a feint, and Halfdan chucked him under the chin instead.

"Too slow!" he laughed. "If you were in my shieldwall, you'd be dead by now!"

Cynewulf scowled at the boy as if to say, "I told you so!"

Halfdan turned his attention back to their conversation.

“As I said, I need another *hirðskald*, what you call a court poet, or *scop*. Gisli is the best skald in Jorvikskyr, but he only speaks Norse. I need another *hirðskald* who can sing in Englisc – half my court are Northumbrians now.”

It was a strange irony, Halfdan reflected, that he, who had fought so hard to drive this Viking out, should now be asked to sing his praises. Nevertheless, it was the ideal role in which to fulfil the charge that Wulfere had laid upon him.

Best of all, Cynewulf was able to move into his ancestral hall, and Osred found himself in charge of of a dozen servants and slaves, with the duty of keeping them in order while his master was at court.

Cynewulf's first performance, following Gisli's recitation of Sigurd the Volsung slaying the dragon, was to recite the lay of the legendary Anglo-Saxon dragon, the dragon of Hronesness:

*The hoard-guard heard a human voice;
his rage was enkindled. No respite now
for pact of peace! The poison-breath
of that foul worm first came forth from the cave,
hot reek-of-fight: the rocks resounded.
Stout by the stone-way his shield he raised,
lord of the Geats, against the loathed-one;
while with courage keen that coiled foe
came seeking strife. The sturdy king
had drawn his sword, not dull of edge,
heirloom old; and each of the two
felt fear of his foe, though fierce their mood.*

That was well-received by Halfdan's English eorls and thegns, but also by the Danes, as almost all of them had been in the country long enough to understand English.

As feast followed feast, Cynewulf gradually introduced the poems that were nearest to his heart; poems which spoke of the Christian message in language that would appeal to a warrior.

After a series of nights when he recited the exciting single combats by that master of Nordic battle-skill, Waldere, he essayed a performance of what he thought of as his masterpiece, *The Waldere of Calvary*.

He had never felt so anxious before a performance, partly because he feared that, as soon as Halfdan heard the Christian references, he would stop the performance, or worse, send him away; but mainly because he was aware that, to have the desired impact, the verse must be something like the quality of the great heroic poems he had recited previously. He knew that he couldn't hold a candle to those ancient poets, but he hoped to catch an echo of them:

"Hwæt!

*We hæfdon gehyrt hu Waldere,
se weorðesta wæpenhēa on Norðerneodum,
feoll twelf feondas on anra gefeoht,
nu ge gehyran hu oþer hæleð,
(se wæs God almihtig)
oferswic þa Seofon Deadlican Synna..."*

("Listen!

*We have heard how Waldere
the worthiest warrior in the Northlands
felled twelve foes in single combat
Now you will hear how another hero,
(who was God almighty)
defeated the Seven Deadly Sins..."*

There was an awed silence as the courtiers – Danish jarls and Northumbrian eorls – realised what he was trying to do: present Christianity in a way that would appeal to a warrior, whether Danisc or Englisc.

Cynewulf went on to describe how Christ battled with each of the Deadly Sins:

Pride was presented with an adaptation of the scene from Matthew in which the Devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, but that Warrior of Wonder rejected the offer with the words: "Get behind me, Satan!"

Anger was presented as a hot-headed housecarl whom the Housecarl of Heaven fended off with a sword, cutting off his ear, as Peter did to Malthus in John's Gospel, but showing mercy in victory, healing the ear and giving the housecarl a blessing.

Lust was presented as a voluptuous naked woman, the description of which was greatly relished by the all-male audience. She was the easiest of the sins to defeat, for the Prince of Glory simply closed his eyes.

And so on to the Seventh Deadly Sin, Sloth, which he represented as Death's cousin, leading him to his conclusion:

*"Swa þonne, þæs synnes mearc is deað.
Gebidda þu to þam wuldorcynninge,*

And gehealda þin hige hal lifigende."

*("Thus, the wages of Sin is Death.
So pray to the Prince of Glory
and save your soul alive.")*

It was met with rapturous applause. This was something new – like that new stone cross in front of the minster, topped with the cross of Christ and with carvings depicting scenes from the Bible as well as Norse mythology.

Halfdan also expressed his appreciation, but when the applause had died down, he added, with a cynical laugh, "Good, very good – but don't think your fine words will persuade me to turn my back on Odin!"

Next day, Halfdan sent for him.

Cynewulf entered his hall with his head bowed, certain that he was about to be dismissed. But he was wrong. His master had a special project for him.

"You are a master wordsmith indeed," he began, but I don't want to hear any more about the White Christ. Save that for the minster. What I want is a verse saga – like that *Beowulf* of yours – about..."

He paused while a broad smile lit up his weathered features.

"...me."

Cynewulf was both happy (that he wasn't going to be sent away) and horrified (that he'd been asked to compose in Norse).

He gave a deep bow and replied, "*Herra*, forgive me, but perhaps you should ask your Danish skald, Gisli, to do that."

Halfdan swiped the air as though slapping Gisli away like an irritating fly.

"Gisli my *ærs*! He hasn't the tenth part of your skill – but, anyway, I want it in Anglo-Saxon because I want the common folk of Jorvik and Jorvikskyr to hear of the great deeds of their king."

The Lay of Halfdan

Cynewulf was mad with himself. Here he was, pandering to one of those “bloodthirsty men” condemned in the Bible; to a man who had sacked his beloved Eoforwic, then renamed it, flooded the streets with a foreign people and a strange language, and, worst of all, turned Saint Peter’s Minster into a heathen temple.

He had believed that he was supporting Halfdan’s project of peace and prosperity, and even hoped that he might persuade him to convert, but the more he heard of his bloodthirsty deeds from Gisli, the more he thought that it was no task for a Christian poet. He would have to go.

When he announced his intention, it was met with a fixed expression on that scarred visage that made Halfdan’s face look more like a carving than a face of flesh and blood. Cynewulf knew that it meant “no” in the most absolute sense possible.

“The lay is not finished,” said the Viking in that quiet tone that was more intimidating than his roar.

“But I promised my wife. She is with child, and...”

“Never mind women and children. Finish the lay and I will let you go. More than that. You will go with a reward that will make you a rich man.”

It wasn’t the promise of a reward that decided Cynewulf, but the stony expression.

“Very well, my lord. It will take me a week – no, two.”

“Good!” said Halfdan, his face becoming flesh and blood again.

“But you will not see me in that time,” Cynewulf warned him. “I must lock myself away somewhere so I will not be distracted by petty interruptions.”

Halfdan nodded, a thin smile showing his pleasure that his Englisc scop was going to take his praise song seriously.

How strange is Fate, mused Cynewulf – no, I should say, Providence, for perhaps that’s what it is – that I, an Engliscman and a former cleric, should be asked to write the defining work about a Norse... Hero? Tyrant? “Bloodthirsty man”? What shall I call him? Simple – a Viking. It’s all in that word. Perhaps the Almighty has sent me this task so that I can slip in some Christian references – like that monkish scribe did in *Beowulf*.

He secreted himself in the solar of his hall at Hessay and commanded that his meals be brought to him, but was not otherwise to be disturbed. Then, with quill and parchment, and much head-scratching, he began the great lay that tells of Halfdan’s invasion of Englalund. But where to begin? In Danmork? At the landing place in East Anglia? No, before that, so that the driving force behind the invasion was clear. Ragnar – it began with Ragnar – and that would be his first line:

*It begins with Ragnar
reciting his death song
in a snake pit in Anglia,
thrown there by Aella,
King of Northumbria,
who had beaten him in battle.
Ragnar was outnumbered,*

or it would have been different...

He penned the lines on a scrap of parchment, sat back, re-read them, and was satisfied. But wait! What about idea of including Christian references as the *Beowulf* poet had done? He tried again:

*It begins with Ragnar
reeling off his death-rune
in a snake-pit in Anglia,
cast down by Aella,
king of Northumbria,
who prayed to God in his need
to deliver him from evil
and defeat his enemy.*

Good – particularly that quotation from the Lord's Prayer! However, he thought, but mustn't overdo it. The next few stanzas must be description, vivid description, heightened by apt alliteration:

*Aella had him hurled
into a hollow of vipers.
All day they coiled and spat,
but kept away from his skin,
shielded by spells
sewn in Aslaug's shirt.
There Ragnar sat and sang –
his voice fierce with fire.*

Then Aella gave the order:

*Strip the sorcerer's shield.
He won't withstand the bite
without his woven ward.
Let the fangs find his flesh –
he'll cry out his name,
and we'll know at last
the wolf we have caught.”*

*And sure enough,
when the shirt was stripped,
the vipers wriggled
across Ragnar's breast;
struck with their venom.
The sting burned deep –
and Ragnar roared
“I am Ragnar Hairy-Breeks!”*

But I'm getting carried away! thought Cynewulf, much pleased with his efforts. I must sneak in another Christian reference.

*“God is my rock!” cried Aella,
“my fortress and salvation.
Giving me victory
over the Viking leader!”
Ragnar, waning,
and wracked with pain
rallied his strength
and sang his death song:*

Just right! he thought. It attributes victory to God, but if I'm not to overdo it, I must acknowledge Ragnar's heathen beliefs.

*"It emboldens my mood
to know that Baldr
is preparing the benches
for a warrior's banquet.
The champion who comes
by the Valkyries' choosing
into Odin's dwelling
does not lament death –"*

That's strong! But I don't want to encourage belief in the Æsir, so perhaps I'll give Aella a stern reply:

*"Not to Odin, but to Satan –
Not to Valhall, but to Hellhall!"*

Cynewulf shook his head. No. It wouldn't do. He liked the lines, but he would have to scratch them out. He had gone too far, and Halfdan might reject the whole thing. The Christian references had to be unobtrusive, as in *Beowulf*.

Once he got into the way of it, the words flowed, and by the end of the week, it was ready. Halfdan spread the word and, at the Friday night feast, the old hall of kings of Deira was packed to overflowing: Norse jarls in wolf-fur cloaks, Angle thegns in wool and bronze, traders with work-worn hands, and

high-born ladies with gold on their arms. Smoke curled from the hearth-fires, ox-roasts turned on spits, ale sloshed in carved bowls as laughter echoed from the rafters.

When the feasting had quieted and the boasting had burned out, Halfdan rose, raised his cup, and called forward his new *hirðskald* – Cynewulf, deacon, housecarl and court poet.

Cynewulf struck a single chord on his gleewood and the hall was quieted with a hush of expectation that was so great, you might hear a *seax* drop.

Then he began. First, he sang of Halfdan's early life, retelling Gisli's *drapur* in Anglo-Saxon. Then, after a pause for another round of Jorvikskyr ale, he began his great *Lay of Halfdan*. He sang of Ragnar in the pit, of snakes and spells, of blood and boldness. This held them spellbound – Halfdan too. He heard the Christian references, but let them pass, and Cynewulf knew that, despite his worries, he had not overdone them. They were like the leaven in bread – something small that would grow, and, please God, bring about the conversion of many, perhaps even the great man himself.

The ending was dramatic, using Halfdan's own words, but with a subtle Biblical reference in the idea of "swords into ploughshares."

*"So came Halfdan,
Ragnar's war-hardy son,
who sailed up the Ouse
with stern-mooded warriors.
He set his swords aside;
turned them into ploughshares
and proclaimed to his followers*

*‘Satt er betra en se osatt’ –
‘Peace is better than war’.*

For a moment, there was intense silence, as though the very beams of the roof were listening. Then the hall erupted – not in rowdy cheers, but in a long, low rumble of approval, like thunder beneath the earth. Some raised horns. Others simply nodded, solemn-eyed. And Halfdan? He gave a single nod that was almost imperceptible, but Cynewulf saw it. That was enough.

Peace had come to Jorvik. And perhaps – just perhaps – the Word had begun to take root.

Later, when the torches had burned low and the hall emptied into night, Cynewulf sat alone on the bench where he had sung. The last embers whispered in the hearth, casting red veins of light across the flagstones. Outside, the revels still echoed faintly in the old Roman forum. But here, in the stillness of the king’s hall, he could finally exhale.

His voice was raw, a fine tremble still lived in his fingers, but the deeper ache was in his soul – the ache of one who had risked everything in a single breath. The poem had lived within him for a week, like a child waiting to be born. Now it was out, and working in men’s hearts and minds.

He had watched Halfdan throughout; watched the eyes, the hands, the subtle movements of his great body in the shadows. He had feared rejection; he had feared worse – a laugh, a word, a blade. But Halfdan had let it stand. He had heard the *Godspel* threaded through a pagan saga and had not struck it down.

He thought of the line, "He set aside his swords; turned them into ploughshares", and how it had landed in the silence like a dropped hammer. A borrowed phrase from Isaiah, yes, and yet it belonged here too, in this place of sheathed swords and mixing of cultures.

"Peace is better than war". It was Halfdan's own tongue that had said it first. All Cynewulf had done was repeat a truth Halfdan himself had spoken.

The seed was sown. Perhaps that was enough. His work was done. Now he could keep his promise to Eowyn and return with honour.

Where's My Poem?

Cynewulf was as good as his word, and was back before the winter snows.

After a flurry of hugs and kisses, he asked Eowyn the question that was uppermost in his mind, "How's the next Archbishop?"

"He grows," she said, patting her stomach, which now had a noticeable bulge.

Then he gave her the gift he had promised. It was a brooch, engraved with an image of St Peter's Minster.

"To remind you of our real home," he said, kissing her, and fastening it onto her kirtle.

"Where I can never go," she said, with a touch of sadness.

"One day, perhaps. Remember the words of the hymn: '*Deus miris modis operatur ut miracula sua perficiat*' – 'God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.'"

"You needn't translate," she said, giving him a playful slap. "Remember, it was you who taught me."

"It seems a long time ago," he said with a happy smile as he thought back. As for home, we'll go there one day, I'm sure. Halfdan has promised peace and I have hopes that he – and many others of his heathen host – will see Light of the World. But..."

His words trailed off, but he didn't need to say them. She knew that it was to protect her that they stayed in Wintanceastre.

That settled, Eowyn asked about something else that was on her mind.

"Where's my poem?" she said, in a tone that was not devoid of possessiveness. She regarded the promised poem as an important token of his love. Perhaps she feared that one of those Danisc doxies might have replaced her as his muse

He took a sudden breath. He had forgotten it – but fortunately, he had something else that would do just as well, for his name and hers were embedded as a runic acrostic.

"I've finished *Genesis* and you're in it. Shall I read it to you?"

"Is it long?"

"Very."

"Then just read me the bit about me."

He could have recited from memory, but he showed her the manuscript so that she could see the acrostic of their names:

↳ *Creation – God made Heaven,*

↓ *Yggdrasil, Earth and man,*

† *Named him Ask or Adam,*

ℳ *Eternal in his plan.*

⋈ *We are his descendants,*

ℵ *Under the starry sky,*

↑ *Living the life he gave us,*

ψ *Flourishing till we die.*

+

ℳ *Embla, the first woman,*

⌘ *Or Eve or Eowyn:*

⋈ *Woman to be a help meet,*

↓ *Yielding to his every whim,*

† *Nor ever disobeying him.*

But she didn't like it.

"I'm not yielding, and I don't have to obey if I don't want to!" she snapped, the shieldmaiden coming out again.

"That's true!" he said, ruefully, then added, "but this is not a description of you, it's about the first woman, and I included the first woman in the Norse creation myth, and you – standing for the Eve in every man's life."

"Are you saying that all women should be yielding and obedient?" she challenged.

Cynewulf was forced to fall back on his rhetorical skills, using the question and answer technique, like a catechist.

"You're a Christian, are you not?"

She nodded.

"Well, it says in Genesis 3 that a woman should be a 'help meet' – and that means 'yielding' and 'obedient.'"

But he had trained her too well in the same art, and, quick as a heartbeat, the shieldmaiden became the scholar: "It's not the same. You can help somebody without yielding. And surely you believe what it says in Galatians 3, that man and woman are one in Jesus Christ?"

He nodded.

"Then rewrite it!"

She had beaten him fair and square in argument, and with appropriate reference to scriptural authority, so, like a good schoolman, he conceded, and after struggling with the alliteration, came up with:

† *Embla, the first woman*
 † *Or Eve or Eowyn:*
 † *Woman to be a help meet,*
 † *Yet equal as his lover,*
 † *Needing to help each other.*

“I like it now,” she said, smiling.

And he had to admit that it was better. As he had often found before, a challenge can push you to discover hidden resources in yourself, such as when you had to find a more musical rhyme or more apt alliteration – or when your wife complained about your patriarchal bias.

It was just the boost he needed for a project that was so splendid he hardly dared to think of it: the whole Bible – well, the exciting bits (not Deuteronomy) – rewritten in heroic verse.

That Christmas was different, quieter, because Ælfred had decided to spend it in the Royal Vill at Cippanham, taking his court with him. Cynewulf was invited by his old friend, but like many other thegns, he preferred to spend Christmas in his own hall.

The invitation had come with warm words and a seal pressed into green wax; Ælfred’s wyvern standard set within a wreath of oak. But Cynewulf, though grateful, had set it aside. The roads were deep in mire, and his bones felt the cold now more than they once had. He told the messenger that he would

keep Christ's Mass in the old way – modestly, with bread and wine, song, and holy reading, in the company of his family.

Eowyn moved slowly now, her hands often resting on the slight curve that had begun to show beneath her woollen gown. The child stirred sometimes in the quiet moments – flutters like the wingbeat of a wren, too faint for others to feel, but for her, it was everything. And Cynewulf would pause whatever he was doing, rest his hand lightly on hers, and marvel that so small a life could already change the rhythm of his own.

They kept the feast simply: a loaf shaped like a sun-wheel, a stew rich with barley and leeks, honeyed apples warmed by the hearth. On Christmas Eve, they lit a taper and sang together – Eowyn's voice low and warm, his still a little rough from reciting to drunken thegns. Afterward, they sat by the fire wrapped in the same cloak, her head on his shoulder, the snow hushing the world outside.

She asked him once, softly, if he ever regretted the road not taken – a cloistered life, a bishopric, perhaps, a name honoured in learned halls.

He frowned as he thought about it, and Eowyn feared it was because he did indeed regret the cloistered life. But when he answered, she realised that his frown had been about something else.

"I have often thought it strange that the church denies its clerics the fullness of life: marriage, children, family. It is a barren existence, and I am glad that Providence – I might even say

wyrd; our old Saxon belief in fate – has turned me aside from it.”

Eowyn laughed, and tousled his hair.

“It was I who turned you aside from it when I deciphered your acrostic all those years ago in Goodramgate!”

“You mean, when you uncovered those ‘breasts like two young roes’...”

“Roes?”

“... and when you showed me what you’d learned from Grimbald!”

“That’s nothing to what you taught me!”

“Latin?”

“No, ‘of love’. If I translate ‘*De Amor*’ correctly.

“Oh, that. That’s Ausonius – and anyway, love is a lot more than 69 positions.”

“Yes,” she sighed, touching her breast and then her belly.”

“What I am trying to say is, you didn’t deny me the cloister, you saved me from it, and now I am free to be what I want to be – a poet.”

A few days after Christmas, when the old year still had a few days left to run, they had an unexpected visitor. Osred, who had been left behind to keep an eye on the estate at Hessay, burst into the hall in a flurry of cold wind and snow.

“I bring news!” he cried, full of excitement, as though he was bursting to get it out.

“*Wel cumen, ond blipe Cristesmesse!*” said Cynewulf.
“What news?”

"Halfdan has converted! He was baptised by archbishop Wulfstan on *Cristesmæsse dæg*!"

Cynewulf heard the words as though a great bell had sounded inside his skull. He stood motionless for a moment, caught between disbelief and wonder.

"Halfdan?" he murmured, more to himself than to the messenger. "Halfdan the Bloodthirsty? He who made Aelle a Blood-Eagle?"

He paced a slow circle, eyes narrowed, then stopped short and repeated the news to himself as though he couldn't believe it until he had heard it several times over: "Baptised... by Wulfstan himself? On *Cristesmæsse dæg*!"

He crossed himself slowly, the old gesture feeling more significant than usual. That news meant that his six months of self-doubt when serving the Viking had been a worthwhile sacrifice. Whether it was his Christ-threaded poems, the archbishop's sermons, or – more likely – political expedience that had led to the conversion mattered not. He was won for Christ; for love instead of hate; for peace instead of war.

"Then may God take him in earnest," he said aloud. "And may He give us the wisdom to know if the wolf has truly put on the lamb's fleece."

Æbelingey

Twelve nights later, in the feast of Epiphany, a rider arrived at Cynewulf's hall, wild-eyed and half-frozen. Words spilled from him like blood from a wound: "Guthrum broke the truce and attacked Cippenham. Cippenham is taken and Ælfred fled to the marshes. The court is scattered. Wessex is broken."

The Vikings had attacked when least expected, months before the start of the campaigning seas. The *fyrð* was stood down and many of Ælfred's thegns were away in their own halls.

Eowyn called for wine, and the messenger calmed down enough to deliver the rest of the message.

"The king is on the Isle of Æbelingey, and he asks you to come to him."

Cynewulf sat still while the news was spoken. Eowyn reached for his hand and gripped it, gently, reassuringly.

While the rider waited in the ante-chamber, Cynewulf turned to her. She did not weep, only looked at him with the quiet strength he had always seen in her.

"You must go to him," she said.

"What can I do? I have given up the sword."

"It is not another sword he needs," she said with calm certainty, "but a voice that can stir dead embers to flame. A man whose words can inspire like only yours can."

He turned to her brusquely. "Words do not kill Danes."

"No," she said, "but they rouse men who can."

He paced, like a caged wolf, his cloak brushing the rushes.

"I am no courtier. I am no bishop. What could I be to a king who hides in reeds?"

"A reminder that not all have forsaken him. The land is bleeding, Cynewulf. The people whisper that God has turned His face. They need to believe in something again."

He clenched his jaw. "I am a poet. Not a saviour."

She stepped forward, placing a hand upon his chest.

"Then give him a poet's gift. Remind him who he is: not a vagabond in the marsh, but the chosen of Wessex. Tell him his story is not done, that there is still hope."

The silence stretched for a long time while Cynewulf thought it over. Then he said at last, "I will go, not as a warrior, but as a poet, and do what I can."

Before dawn, he wrapped his *Godspel* in wool and slung his satchel over his shoulder. He kissed her and pressed her belly. Then he left; into the bitter cold, into the north wind, into the broken kingdom.

The way to Æþelinges was long and hard. Cynewulf and the messenger passed through villages burned to ash, and woods where no birds sang, across fords crusted with ice and fields trampled by hoof and heel. Each night he laid his head on the ground and prayed – first for England, then for Ælfred, and lastly for strength enough to see his journey through.

At last they came to the edge of the fens. Hidden deep within that bleak and sodden land was Æþelinges, an island in the mist, encircled by reeds and slow, black water. There, among turf huts and thin smoke, the king had made his refuge.

The man who met him at the camp's edge was lean, soot-streaked, and clad in a patched woollen cloak, but the eyes were

unmistakably Ælfred's. They were tired, but still had the old fire.

"Cynewulf," he said, voice rasping with cold and strain. "God-a-mercy, it is good to see you!"

"And you, *hlaford*," said Cynewulf. "Though this is not the hall I left you in."

"No," Ælfred said with a wan smile. "Nor the feast I would offer. But come inside. There's warmth at least."

He led him to the low hut where he'd been staying; little more than wattle walls and a roof of bundled reed, its air thick with smoke and damp. Inside, a small fire crackled under a makeshift griddle where flat barley-cakes baked slowly in the heat. Ælfred gestured to a bench and crouched beside the hearth to turn them.

"They've set me to kitchen duties now," he said wryly. "Some queen of the marsh, an old cowherd's wife, left me in charge of these while she went to tend her goat. She said if I scorched them, she'd tan my hide."

Cynewulf chuckled. "The king of the West-Saxons, ordered about by a goat-keeper's wife!"

"There's justice in that," Ælfred said, eyes glinting. "She rules her hut better than I ruled a kingdom."

He sat back, and for a time they talked – not of tactics or war councils, but of what had brought them here; of why they still held on. The fire cast flickering shadows on the walls as they spoke of poetry, prophecy and providence.

Then Ælfred turned away and stared blankly into the fire. "Is all that lost?" he said in a solemn voice, "swept away in a tide of blood."

Cynewulf said, "*Hlaford*, I thought long and hard about what I could say that might help you, but nothing came. *I* can't help you – but perhaps one of the old lays that you love so well can: the *Lay of Hengest*, the founding father of our nation.

"Before Hengest came here, he was taken hostage by King Finn of the Frisians and was alone in Finnesburh without his hearth-troop, and without much hope of fighting back – just as you are now, here in Æbelingey. You know what happened, but I will sing it again."

Cynewulf picked up his gleewood, played a few notes in a martial mode, then began to chant:

*"Another year
came to the courtyards
of Finnesburh,
bringing with it
the brightest weather.
Winter was fled,
the fields were fair,
like an exile departed,
the guest from the court.
But Hengest thought
rather of revenge
than of the sea-path;
whether he could provoke
a bitter battle
with his bad-faithed foe.*

*So he did not refuse
the world-wide custom,*

*when the son of Hunlaf
placed the sword,
Hildeleoman,
onto his lap,
and looked the question.
Among the Frisians,
his mortal foe,
its edges were already
too well known.*

*Then Finn received
rightful revenge
in his own hall,
his hearth and home.
Guthlaf and Oslaf,
after their sea-journey,
declared their grief
about the disaster.
Then the hall was filled
with their foes' blood;
and Finn was killed;
the king amid his kinsmen."*

He waited to let the words sink in, then said, "You know what happened after that. Hengest went home to Hocsburh, and then sailed the sea-road in three ships to Britannia. There, he founded Englalund – and you must honour his memory by saving it."

And with those words, he performed the same action that the son of Hunlaf had done for Hengest. He took Ælfred's sword, *Cruc Deaðes*, *Cross-of-Death*, and laid it across his lap.

Ælfred took it by the hilt and held it up so that the finely wrought blade gleamed in the firelight. He took a deep breath and was about to say something when a sharp voice called from outside.

"If 'ee've burnt them cakes, Ælfred Ætheling, 'ee'll eat 'em all up!"

He looked at the cakes, and there they were, black and smoking.

Cynewulf tried not to laugh. Ælfred looked at him with mock severity.

"Don't let on," he said. "If bards start singing about this, I shall have you whipped."

They both laughed, long and hard. The kind of laugh that only comes when the world has fallen down around you – and something still remains.

"Tain't no laughin' matter, b'aint!" scolded the woman. "If yew can't mind a ceak, how'll yew mind a kingdom, then?"

"She's right," said Ælfred, accepting her rebuke.

"Good flour an' eggs gone ter waste, they 'ave!" she continued, still lamenting over the loss. "'Tis all right fer ye, king as ye calls yerself. Us poor folk 'ave ter make every copper do its bit, we do!"

"I'll make it up to you," said Ælfred apologetically, reaching into his purse, only to find it empty.

Cynewulf supplied the lack, handing the woman a silver penny. It was worth a week's wages for a goatherd, but she was not impressed, biting it suspiciously, to test its worth. Then,

finding it good, she said in a gentler tone, "'Tis not the money I care about, 'tis the waste."

"Never mind that," said Cynewulf. "Buy bread and ale and keep the rest. I would have preferred your cakes, but our king had other things on his mind."

"If 'tis them there Vikings, 'ee should get shut of 'em, then mebbe next time 'ee'll mind my ceaks proper!" she said over her shoulder as she left the hut.

When she had gone, Ælfred said solemnly, "I've learned two lessons today, one from Hengest – thanks to you, Cynewulf – and one from our good hostess.

Then he stood up, swung *Cruc Deaðes* with the old vigour and proclaimed in a voice that made Cynewulf jump, "And I mean to live up to them!"

His resolution was strengthened by news from Cynwit. Following Guthrum's success at Cippenham, Ubba led a raid on the Devon coast. He was met by Ealdorman Odda with a large force of housecarls and fyrdmen, but they were overwhelmed by the Viking's vicious onrush, led by Ubba, bounding towards them like an overweight bear, and yelling his battle cry, "Friski!"

They retreated to an old hillfort, which gave them time to reform, as Ubba hadn't the siege equipment to take it. Instead, he prowled beneath their walls, waiting for their surrender. But on a cold, grey morning, as mist clung to the cliffs and the sea sighed below, Odda ordered a surprise sortie. The fighting was brutal and brief. Ubba fell amid the press of spears and broken shields, and the raven banner was trampled in the dirt. When it was over, the Danes who lived fled to their ships.

Ubba was king at last, just as the Volvr had predicted – king of worms.

Eowyn Waits

The child stirred more often, stronger each day, and she had begun to speak to it aloud, as if her voice could bring it safely into the world before it was born. The mornings were cold and dim, but she would rise early and watch Mildreth lay the fire, heat water and bake bread. Sometimes, high-born lady though she was, she would help. It was good to have something to do.

Wintanceastre had grown quieter since the king's flight. Many had fled further south, away from the Viking threat. But Eowyn did not fear. The danger had already come and gone. What she feared now was silence: the waiting – waiting for news of her husband and waiting for the birth of her child.

At last, snatches of news came in – not by horn or crier, but in fragments, like gusts of wind before a storm.

A travelling monk, half-mad with frostbite, muttered of fires burning again in the woods. A passing shepherd said he'd seen a band of men gathering near Selwudu, all bearing the Dragon Banner of Wessex. And then the miller's boy came running down the lane, shouting to anyone who'd listen that the king had risen out of the marshes like a ghost from the grave and was rallying his housecarls and calling out the *fyrð*. The word was that all loyal West-Saxons were to assemble at the Egbert Stone, a standing stone of ancient origin, which had been a rallying point, since the time of King Egbert, Ælfred's grandfather.

That evening, she lit the lamp early and sat by the fire, a hand resting on her belly. The light flickered on the carved beam where Cynewulf had once hung his gospel-book, and she

remembered him reading aloud beside this same hearth, his voice rising like a chant, full of holy zeal.

She whispered his name now – not to the shadows, but to the child within her. As if to promise him that his father was coming home.

She had known, even as he vanished into the snow, that she would see him again. There was a kind of hope deeper than reason, and now, with the baby turning beneath her belly and the smell of fresh bread in the air, she allowed herself a smile.

Spring was coming and the land was waking, and when he returned – not if, when – she would tell him all the small things he had missed: the first snowdrop, the fox cubs in the hedgerow, the way the baby had grown inside her. How she had started talking to him in the evenings, just to keep the silence from setting too deep. How the cat had taken to curling up on his old tunic, as if it, too, was waiting, and how, through it all, she had held him close in her heart.

“Fight beside me,” Ælfred begged his old friend.

Cynewulf bowed his head humbly and told him about his dream and the vow that he had made afterwards never to resort to violence again.

“Then be my shieldbearer,” he said. “You will have to carry a great two-handed shield, twice as big as any other, so there will be no question of wielding a sword.”

Cynewulf looked up with a happy smile. Yes. He could fight with his king and still keep his vow. It was the perfect solution.

Eðandune

The morning came grey and without promise. A wind moved over the ridge, lifting the mist in shreds from the wet grass, but no birds sang. In the hollows beneath the slope, the *fyrð* stirred – half-armed men clutching spears, *seaxes*, and axes, some in mail, many in little more than wool and boiled leather. They spoke little, save in murmurs. A few knelt to pray. Others simply stared at the ground.

King Ælfred stood at the centre of the Wessex line, a lean figure in a mail shirt dulled by dirt and travel. Close beside him was Cynewulf, dressed again in his housecarl's byrnie and Northumbrian nasal helmet, but carrying only a shield. It was a great oval thing with three strap handles: two for the left arm to pass through, and one further down for the right hand to grip and guide. It was painted bright red with the White Wyvern of Wessex writhing across it. Around them was the king's shield-fort, a formation of 12 elite housecarls. Just then, they made a shieldwall in front of the king, but they could manouvre quickly to reform, to the left or the right, or form a circle around him as needed.

On either side of the shield-fort the men of Somerset, Wiltshire, and Hampshire gripped their spears and axes with tense fingers. They had answered his summons, not to win glory but to protect their homes, called from hearth and plough to defend the last hope of a Christian kingdom in the south.

The two armies faced each other across the wet grass of a low ridge near a place called Eðandun. The Danish host, drawn up beneath black raven war-banners, snarled like wolves behind

their iron wall. Their centre bristled with seasoned men of the Danelaw – scarred veterans of their battles in Mercia, East Anglia, and beyond the sea. Among them rode Guthrum the Unbaptised, a prince of cold eyes and iron discipline, his helm crested with raven wings and his axe dark with old blood. It was said he had sacrificed to Odin before dawn and daubed his men with goat's blood, promising victory or Valhall. His voice, when it rang out over the line, sounded deep and inhuman, more like a warhorn than a man.

When the Danes charged, it was like the fall of a storm from the hills, shields clashing, blades gleaming, the sound of their war cries rising like the howl of a pack scenting death. The Wessex wall met them with a roar of its own, but the first collision drove men back, shuddering. Cynewulf's arms quaked under the shock as he braced the shield against Ælfred's body. Blood sprayed like mist. Spears snapped. Somewhere to the right, a thegn screamed as he was dragged into the Danish ranks and butchered.

Ælfred moved like a flame, striking and shouting, his sword alive in his hand. Time folded into a rhythm of breath, steel, and prayer. Around him, his hearth-companions died to keep the shield-fort intact. Twice the Danes broke through. Twice they were driven back by the bite of West Saxon axes. The ground turned to mire, red and thick with the spilled blood of the fallen.

Cynewulf bore the brunt of it on his shieldbearer's shield, which cracked in two places, but somehow held together, and his *byrnie* was wet with blood not his own. He struck no blow and tried not to swear, though when a Viking bashed his shield

especially hard, he might shout: "*Deofol! Hund! Wyrn-cyn-ing!*"

All the time, he was tracking the king, warding him from danger. Once, a Dane flung a hand axe at Ælfred's chest, and Cynewulf caught it on the rim of his shield, falling to one knee with the force of it – but he staggered to his feet again.

Then Guthrum came.

He did not fight like a man driven by battle-rage, but like one possessed. He hacked his way through the ranks toward Ælfred, leaving a trail of slaughter. No Wessexman could stand before him. His axe moved in great, sweeping arcs, and with each step, the shield-wall bent. Æthelwold, Ælfred's cousin, tried to halt him and was swept aside, torn like a rag doll.

Ælfred turned just as Guthrum broke through.

Cynewulf saw it all in an instant: the Norse warlord towering, screaming the worst curse in his heathen tongue, "*Argr!*" the great axe descending toward the king's unguarded skull.

Cynewulf did not think. He dropped the shield, and, with a cry torn from the roots of his soul, seized the sword that Æthelwold had dropped and flung himself forward. The blade met flesh and parted it. Guthrum's shield-bearer, close at hand, was cut down in a stroke. Guthrum recoiled as the man's blood sprayed his face and snarled with beastlike rage, "*Bu ert argr!*"

Ælfred, recovering, and Cynewulf, sword in hand, surged at the Danish leader. Guthrum roared and met them head-on, his axe flashing in a deadly arc that bit into Cynewulf's mail, forcing him back a step. But Ælfred was already upon him, his blade ringing off Guthrum's shield and the links of his mail.

Cynewulf recovered and struck low, his sword scoring a deep gash across Guthrum's thigh, where the byrnie hung loose.

The Dane snarled in pain and reeled, turning his axe in defence, but Ælfred pressed in again, driving him back with a flurry of punishing strikes. The king's sword found the meat of Guthrum's shoulder, biting through iron rings and into flesh.

Blood poured freely now, staining the bloodied grass at their feet. Guthrum stumbled, fell to one knee, then rose again with a final, savage blow that drove Cynewulf aside. But he was flagging. His strength waning, and he could no longer match their fury.

He bellowed for his hearth-guard and staggered back through the melee, clutching his side, disappearing behind the shieldwall of his front line.

Seeing their leader in retreat caused the Danes to falter; the tide had turned. Ælfred's men surged forward, rallying with newfound ferocity. What had seemed certain ruin turned into slaughter as the West-Saxons pressed their advantage, driving the invaders down the slope. By dusk, the slaughter-place belonged to Wessex.

Guthrum, wounded and reeling, was captured not far from the battle's edge. Ælfred, with solemn grace, proposed a peace treaty, and Guthrum, realising that he had met his match, agreed.

They met later beneath the open sky at Wedmor.

It was not a hall or battlefield but a quiet field, where banners of the White Wyvern no longer flapped for war but hung still in the morning air. The Danes had fled or fallen, save

for Guthrum and a handful of his chosen men – proud still, though hollow-eyed, gaunt from hunger and defeat.

Cynewulf stood behind Ælfred as the two leaders approached one another. There were no raised voices, no gloating. Only the long silence of men who had faced each other across too many corpses and had at last found the end of it.

Guthrum bowed his head. “I will do as you ask. I will take your Christ, as I hear that Halfdan has done.”

Ælfred nodded once, gravely. “Then you will no longer be a foe, but a brother.”

The baptism was held in the old Roman church at Aller. A narrow stone chapel, its altar stark and simple. Cynewulf prepared the water himself, carried in from the river in a carved basin. When Guthrum stepped into the font, he did not tremble, but closed his eyes as though sailing a strange sea – not only in body, but in soul.

Ælfred, acting as godfather, laid a hand on the Dane’s bowed head while Archbishop Æthelred spoke the ancient words: “I baptize thee in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

Guthrum, blinked at that last word, perhaps wondering what ghosts had got to do with it, but then, the religion of the White Christ had many other mysteries – a virgin who bore a child, a crucified man who came back to life, winged beasts with hundreds of eyes called Cherubim and a tale about the end of the world more horrifying than Ragnarok.

Cynewulf watched the water pouring over Guthrum’s head, thinking of the words of the old hymn: ‘*Deus miris modis operatur ut miracula sua perficiat*’ – ‘God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.’”

“Mysterious” – why all that suffering? All those men, women and children butchered for nothing. “Wonders” – two heathen warlords won for the True Faith. He prayed God that his part in those wonders would absolve him for breaking his vow.

The Deaconess

He came home walking.

There had been no horses left to spare. But he did not care. He knew the path by heart: the track through the woods, the west postern of Wintanceaster, and his own back gate with the hacked post.

When he saw the hall he stopped. Eowyn was in the garden, kneeling among the herbs. Her back was turned, her hair tied in a rough knot beneath a linen wrap. She had always kept busy, even now.

He said nothing, but she looked up. And in that glance – before the cry, before the run, before the kiss that dissolved all silence – he saw it: that she had waited, and never once stopped hoping.

Her hands found his shoulders. His arms found her waist. Between them, the child pressed soft and strong against her belly, and he rested his forehead against it, breath catching.

“I thought of you every day,” he whispered.

“You’ve come back to us,” she said. “Whole.”

“Not whole,” he murmured, a vision of the mangled bodies at Eðandun blackening his mind for a moment, “but held together by the Grace of God.”

He took the baby, kissed him and held him high.

“It’s good to see you at last, archbishop,” he said.

“He’s a she,” said Eowyn, wryly.

Was that there flicker of disappointment in his eyes? If so, he recovered quickly, reminding himself of the words of Saint Paul, that men and women are equal in the sight of God.

"The new deaconess then."

"Why can't she be archbishop?" snapped Eowyn.

"Because only men can take holy orders," explained Cynewulf.

"Why?"

"Because it says in the Bible that women must be silent in churches, and..."

"But times are different," she argued. "That was 800 years ago when women had no education. I'm educated, and I know as much as a man. You should know; you taught me!"

"You can't change what it says in the Bible," said Cynewulf, gently.

"Why not?"

"Because it is God's word."

"Then I'll be apostate and go back to the old gods. She can be a priestess of Freya."

"Eowyn!" cried Cynewulf, shocked to the core.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. But it's not fair."

"She can be a deaconess, what's wrong with that? The deaconate was enough for me."

Eowyn smiled, happy again – until another argument started, when she suggested Freya as a name.

"We can't call her after a heathen goddess!" wailed Cynewulf.

"I was teasing," said Eowyn. "What about Alfgifu?"

"That's heathen too, it means 'Elf-gift'. What about Mary?"

"I don't like it, it's not Englisic. What about Hildegryth?"

"Almost as bad. Both elements mean 'battle'."

"You suggest something then."

"What about the most beautiful name in Engaland?"

She looked the question.

“Eowyn.”

She smiled, was flattered and considered it, only to reject it.

“It wouldn’t work. Suppose you came home and called, ‘Eowyn!’ We’d both come running.”

Then the new deaconess interrupted – “Wah!” – and Eowyn turned away and shyly unlaced her bodice.

Peace had settled on Wintanceastre like a golden blessing. It was “the peace that passeth all understanding” that Paul spoke of in his Epistle to the Philippians – and, after such a terrible struggle, it really did pass all understanding. It was like a miracle; a gift of God.

Cynewulf walked each morning past the minster, his gospel-book under one arm and a blank sheaf of parchment under the other. He sat on the old bench beneath the ash tree, where he could see the River Itchen bend away westward, as if leading back to everything that had passed.

At last, he felt inspired to pick up the thread of that great project – the Bible in heroic verse. He rolled the lines through his head as he walked and wrote them down by lamplight after supper, as Eowyn dozed with the new deaconess in her arms.

Next day, the news came: Halfdan had left Jorvik.

They could go home.

The Rune of Death

The Viking spirit is forged in the harsh lands of the north, where seafaring is the only way to prosper, whether it be raiding or trading, where adventure is way of life, and where death is a constant companion – and life is savoured all the more fiercely because of it. Halfdan was a Viking at heart. Peace had been a novelty – and he loved to see his people prospering – but the old restlessness troubled him sometimes, especially at nights, and no bed-thrall could replace his beloved Alfhild. So when he heard that his brother, Ivar, had died of disease, and his throne usurped, he decided to go to Irland, and win back the kingship for the Ragnarssons.

He'd heard a mysterious tale about his brother's will for his body's burial. He had asked to be buried on the beach near Dyflin, believing that his bones would deter all raiders. It was one of his wild ideas, and nobody believed it would work. However, his rival for the throne, a Norse-Gael jarl called Barith, had been superstitious enough to tear down the tumulus and trash his bones – just in case. And it seemed to work. Without Ivar, and without his memorial, the berserker spirit seemed to bleed away from his warriors and Barith was able to drive them out as easily as driving sheep over a cliff.

That's how Dyflin was lost to the Ragnarsson line, and why Halfdan wanted to assert his claim to be king. There were others like him whom peace didn't suit, so with six ships and three hundred jarls he set sail for Dyflin.

The seas were high, their wave-horses bucked and the salt spray lashed in Halfdan's face, but he laughed with joy to be journeying again. It made him recall that voyage to Engaland that he made long ago, when Ivar and Ubba were still alive, and Alfhild awaited his coming in that wondrous walled city which he had renamed Jorvik. He missed his brothers and he missed Alfhild even more, but the wisdom of the sagas says that it is no use pining for the past, so he said prayers of thanks to Odin and Frigg for their lives and looked over the prow to that smudge on the horizon that was the key to his future – and, as Odin said, in the *Havamal*:

*“The way is long, and one must go on,
ill it is to linger in sleep.”*

He had heard that the Fair Vikings – as local folk called them for their blonde hair – had usurped the province, led by Barith, and Ivar's followers, who were known in Dyflin as the Dark Vikings – not for their hair colour, but their cruelty (Ivar at work again!) had been exiled or enslaved. Well, he would soon see to that! He had defeated three kings, and relished the thought of making it four.

They beached their ships at a place called Loch Cuan, a natural harbour, and safe for the ships. Halfdan's boots struck the gravelly shore with a dull thud. Behind him, the longships creaked and shifted in the shallows, their ring-prowed silhouettes stark against the pewter sky. Around him, his warriors fanned out in silence, eyes scanning the tree line, breath rising in pale plumes.

He moved inland with deliberate steps, past reeds brittle with frost and trees stripped bare, their skeletal limbs reaching like warning fingers. And there, half-hidden among the dead bracken, he saw it: a stone, thrust up from the earth like a sentinel. Upon its face was carved a single rune:



Algiz, the elk-sedge, the old sign of protection – but inverted as it was, meaning the opposite – death!

He remembered when he had seen that rune in East Anglia. It had unsettled him then, but only a little, because he knew he could not die until the *Volvers'* prophecy had come to pass. But now, it had – he was King of Jorvic – and, therefore, the rune had power over him.

Halfdan examined it carefully. The lines of the rune were old but deep, worked with care. Had it been put there by a Fair Viking – for it must have been a Viking, a Gael would have used an Ogham symbol – as a warning against trespass, perhaps against men like him? Or had it been pecked out by the same Raven – Odin's raven – as a warning for him alone.

He shuddered, filled with a sense of the numinous, as though someone had just put a torch to his funeral pyre. Then he turned away with a dismissive gesture. Why should he take any notice of messages from old gods, gods whom he had been taught were nothing more than idols of wood and stone? He had come here to conquer, and he had better get on with it.

Fair Viking enemies had heard of their coming and lay in wait with the patience of wolves. Hidden in the brush and among the twisted trees, they watched Halfdan's host disembark in loose ranks, burdened by baggage, horses, and the blind arrogance of assumed victory. The landing site, wide and open, had seemed a gift from the gods – but it was a trap.

He came like a thunderclap – Barith of the Fair Vikings – tall as a bear and twice as fierce, his white-blond hair braided and bound in silver, his eyes pale and merciless. At his signal, a flurry of war-horns shrieked from the treeline, and then the ambushers burst forth, screaming, howling, shields held high, axes gleaming like ice under the bleak sky.

Barith himself led the charge, carving through the vulnerable flanks with a great dane-axe that bit through flesh and mail as if it thirsted. He did not shout; he grinned, a flash of teeth and fury, his cloak flapping behind him like a storm banner. Around him, his warriors moved in rhythm, disciplined despite their ferocity.

Halfdan responded with that command he had repeated so often in his Viking career: "Form shieldwall!" His men were warriors and were always ready. They sailed in their war-shirts with their shields on the freeboard, and when in a danger zone, even slept in their ringmail, so they rallied quickly from the surprise attack, and the day's work started – the work of warfare: slashing, shielding, battering, blocking, and Halfdan thrilled to the throng of battle as he had done so many times in the past, though he missed the inspiration of Ivar's war madness, and the solace of Ubba's jests.

And he was older; full sixty summers had passed since his father, Ragnar, had "wet the *barns* head" with a week of beer-

swilling – nor were they easy summers, lounging in the sun with a wine-cup in one hand and a woman in the other – but had been spent in battle, on board a longship, or in countless long marches, each summer taking its toll.

So when that upstart, Barith, came up against him, he was tired and weak and not up to the work. He wanted to shine in that single combat, and show his followers how well he could fight.

Halfdan Ragnarsson, once the terror of the North Sea, gritted his teeth and raised his blade again, though his breath rasped in his throat and his muscles quivered with the effort of the fight; he fought not only the man before him, but the creeping heaviness in his limbs – the slow betrayal of an ageing body that had once been feared from Frankland to Northumbria.

He gasped for breath, staggered under a hail of ringing steel as Barith's axe-blows clanged off his shield and *brynja*, jarring his bones and numbing his arms. His stance, once proud, now bowed. His boots dragged in the churned mud of the battlefield. He had fought all his life – this was just one more battle. But he could feel the weight of years, the toll of campaigns, the creeping dimness that dulled his once-sharp war-skill.

Across from him, Barith grinned wolfishly. He bore himself with the easy strength of a man in his fighting prime. Younger, leaner, less worn. And he had cause to fight: he meant to be king of Dyflin, and this single combat was all that stood between him and the seat of power, for, once Halfdan was defeated, there were no other claimants in the line of the Imair dynasty.

He circled Halfdan like a wolf around an old bull, nimble on the balls of his feet. His eyes never leaving his foe, watching for the telltale twitch of attack. He made little feints, false lunges – testing, tiring. He wanted Halfdan to spend himself.

Halfdan gritted his teeth, refusing to be baited. He held back, letting his blade drop slightly, watching, breathing, planning. He had one good strike left in him, perhaps two, and he would make them count. He would wait for the moment when the Fair Viking came too close, or dropped his guard – and then...

But the moment never came.

Barith struck first, fast as a snake, darting to Halfdan's right – the side unprotected by his shield. A gleam of steel flashed, and with a sudden, sickening jolt, Halfdan felt his sword fall from his hand.

His right arm was gone. Barith's stroke had slashed through muscle and sinew at the elbow, severing his arm, and blood was gushing from the ruin.

"*Ragr!*" he swore – a curse, a cry of rage, a scream of pain. His vision swam red.

He staggered back, refusing to fall. His knees wobbled, but he remained upright, panting like a beast. With his left hand he drew his *knifr*, a short-bladed knife, more tool than weapon – but all he had. He held it low, reversed, ready to gut his enemy if he came too close.

But his lifeblood was draining fast, and strength seeped from him like mead from a cracked horn.

Barith was not finished with him yet. He circled again, blade ready, not eager, but wary. Even a dying wolf has fangs, and Halfdan had earned his scars – but the end was coming.

Barith moved in again – fast, low – and this time he didn't swing. He kicked – a sharp, driving blow to Halfdan's shin. Bone jarred. Halfdan lost his footing and stumbled. Barith followed it up by sweeping his foot behind Halfdan's ankle, and the old warrior crashed to the ground with a helpless groan.

The mud received him with a squelch. He lay on his back, one arm severed, the other still clutching the *knifr*, though it trembled in his grip. The clouds above him were bruised with dusk.

Then Barith stood over him, raised his dane-axe and placed the point of the curved head just below Halfdan's chin. Cold steel pressed to soft flesh. His face was smeared with sweat, but his voice was calm, deadly.

"Dark Viking," he snarled. "Prepare to die."

Halfdan stared up at his foe. The steel against his throat was as cold as the North Sea, but it was not fear that filled him now. It was anger – slow, burning, bitter – the fury of a wolf brought down by age.

His chest rose and fell with the effort of breath. Blood soaked the earth beneath him. His lips curled into a half-smile, sardonic and smeared with blood.

"I've buried better men than you, Irisc," he rasped. "And worse men have thought me dead."

Barith's brow furrowed. He pressed the axe a little firmer – a bead of blood welled where it touched the skin beneath Halfdan's jaw.

"You are beaten! Yield and I'll make it quick."

Halfdan coughed a laugh – a wet, blood-laced sound. He dropped the *knifr* from his left hand, as if in surrender. But his eyes still gleamed.

“Quick?” he muttered. “No. I think not.”

With the last of his strength, Halfdan drove his knee up between Barith’s legs – a savage, desperate blow. Barith gasped, staggered back, the axe wavering in his hand.

In that breath of opportunity, Halfdan rolled, not to rise, but to seize his fallen *knifr*. He grasped it left-handed, awkwardly, by the hilt smeared with his own blood.

He was on his knees by the time Barith had recovered. The Fair Viking roared, stepping in for the killing stroke – but Halfdan surged upward with a guttural cry and drove the *knifr* straight into Barith’s inner thigh, which no armour protected.

The blade skewered muscle and artery. Blood gushed hot over Halfdan’s face and arm.

Barith stumbled back, screaming, clutching at the wound. He dropped his sword. His leg gave way and he fell – not dead, but dying.

Halfdan knelt again, swaying like a mast in a gale.

He coughed, spat blood, and looked at the writhing figure of his foe. “Kingship of Dyflin,” he murmured. “Not yours. Not yet.”

“Nor yours,” croaked Barith through gritted teeth.

Halfdan collapsed forward beside him, both of them bleeding into the soil – two warriors locked together in ruin, neither victorious, neither quite dead.

“I am ready to die,” said Halfdan, “and am happy to know that I die in battle with my sword in my hand...” He gave a grim laugh and added, “...though my hand and my sword are lying over there!” He grimaced with agony as he clutched his arm-stump, and began to recite his death song:

*"The angels are watching
and will wing me to Heaven,
like Viking valkyries,
winging to Valhall.
and there, with my brothers,
I shall feast with Ragnar.
As my father said:
'Læjandi skalk deyja!' –
'I die laughing!'"*

It was a synthesis of Odinism and Christianity that Cynewulf would have been proud to have written.

Afterword

This book began as a verse novella written in a modern version of *Háttlausa*, which is one of the verse forms used by the Old Norse poets. It was first published in November 2015. An enlarged and revised edition, entitled *The Lay of Halfdan* is in preparation.

I had long intended to rework it in novel form and began the project in late 2024 as the first book in *The Jorvik Trilogy*. The main change was to add a subplot, and I chose to built it around a character called Cynewulf who is modelled on the Anglo-Saxon poet, Cynewulf, though I doubt very much whether the historical Cynewulf had adventures which were anything like his fictional counterpart!

Cynewulf was one of the few Anglo-Saxon poets known by name, active in the 8th or 9th century. He is best remembered for his religious verse written in Old English. Four poems – *Elene*, *Juliana*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, and *Christ II* – are traditionally attributed to him, distinguished by the presence of his name encoded in runes within the texts. I built on this technique by including runes in the poems of my fictional Cynewulf.

My idea was to contrast the values of the Vikings: honour, loyalty, courage and reputation, with Christian values: mercy, pity, peace and love. Also to contrast the power of the pen and the sword, or perhaps I should say, “gleewood” or “skaldharpa” and sword.

Note that I have omitted diacritical marks in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse quotations (except in the back matter) as they were not used in the middle ages.

Like the old skalds, I have recycled a lot of material written by others, so I will acknowledge my debts here:

The Old Norse sagas are my most important sources, particularly: *Ragnarssona þáttr* (*The Story of Ragnar's Sons*) *Knútsdrápa* (*Praise of King Canute*) and *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar* (*The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok*). For the historical information, I am deeply indebted to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

The book begins with a rehashing of the *Krákumál* (*The Death Song of Ragnar Loðbrok*) which I have rehashed with narrative episodes from his life (according to the sagas). I have also used many phrases and expressions from the sagas to liven up my own descriptions of battle throughout my book.

The story of the bull's hide and the fellmonger is adapted from Middleton's humorous version in his play *Hengist, King of Kent*.

I am particularly indebted to Ezra Pound's *Sestina Altaforte* as this, though it has a later setting, vividly portrays the love of battle that was typical of the Vikings. My generation has been deeply affected by the legacy of two world wars, and the many inglorious conflicts that have happened since. It is therefore very hard for me – a lover a peace – to imagine delight in battle. Ezra Pound's sestina has helped me to do it, and you will find his key words (and some of his lines) at several places in the text.

I borrowed 'Eowyn', the name of my heroine, from the shieldmaiden in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. I intended it to be a temporary measure until I thought of something more original, but I got to like it, and kept it.

Ausonius is a well-known 4th century Latin poet. Most of his works are lost, which allowed me to attribute to him an imaginary poem entitled *De Amore*, which I imagined as a Latin *Kama Sutra*..

I have used some quotations from *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, by William Morris – a neglected masterpiece, which captures the heroic tone of the sagas better than anything else in modern English.

The description of the funeral pyre is influenced by the funerals in *Beowulf*. The extracts from the poem are in Professor Francis Gummere's version, which was first published in 1910. Gummere captures the style and tone of the original better than any other translation I have read.

Tennyson's *Brunanburh* supplied some of ideas and phrasing for my description of the Battle of Ashdown.

For All the Saints was written as a processional hymn by William Walsham How in 1864. *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* is a Christian hymn, written in 1773 by the 18th-century English poet William Cowper. In my novel, I have imagined them to have Latin originals.

Timeline

To help you distinguish history from saga and my flights of fancy, I give below an approximate timeline of The Great Heathen Army (GHA). It is important to note that there is some disagreement, and even confusion, among sources and scholars over the dates and sequence of key battles involving the Great Heathen Army, particularly in the years 865–878. This is due to a combination of fragmentary records, later legendary embellishment, and the limitations of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. I have focused on the main battles to keep the narrative rolling, and woven my fictional subplot around the them. The biggest change in my story is to place the Battle of Edington before Halfdan's expedition to Dublin, as I wanted the book to end with Halfdan.

c. 810: Halfdan Ragnarsson is born, possibly of Thora, Ragnar's second wife. It could not have been much before this, or he would have been older than 67 in his last battle.

865: The *Ragnarssona þáttr* (*The Story of Ragnar's Sons*) tells that King Aella of Northumbria killed Ragnar Loðbrok by throwing him into a pit of vipers. This prompted his sons to take revenge, and Ivar the Boneless, Halfdan and Ubba raised an invading army which the English called *Mycel Heathen Here* (Great Heathen Army). The story of Ragnar's death as a catalyst for the invasion may be legendary.

865 (Autumn): The Great Heathen Army (GHA) lands in East Anglia. The local East Anglians buy peace with horses and supplies.

866 (Autumn): GHA marches north into Northumbria, and captures Eoforwic (York) in November. The story of the bull hide trick (cutting a hide into a thong long enough to encircle a large piece of land) is found in *Ragnarssona þáttr*, chapter 3, is not historical, but a legendary motif also told of Hengest (“Thongcaster”).

867 (Spring): Northumbrian rivals Aella and Osberht unite to expel the Vikings. Battle of York: Both kings are killed, probably in March. Aella’s alleged “Blood-Eagle” execution is from *Knútsdrápa* and *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, but is not corroborated by historical sources. The Vikings install a puppet king, Ecgberht, in Northumbria. The GHA moves into Mercia later in the year.

868 (Autumn): The GHA winters at Nottingham. King Burgred of Mercia allies with Ethelred of Wessex and Ælfred. No battle occurs; peace is negotiated.

869 (November): The GHA returns to East Anglia and seizes Thetford. King Edmund resists but is captured and killed on 20 November 869 (according to tradition). The story of his martyrdom is probably true in its broad outline, but the story of his head,

which appears in the 10th century, *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* (*The Passion of St Edmund*) is probably one of the many legends that spring up around saints' lives.

870 (Winter–Spring): The Vikings consolidate control of East Anglia. Early 870: The army moves south into Wessex and major resistance from Ethelred and Ælfred begins.

871 Ælfred's Year of Battles:

4 Jan: Battle of Reading – Viking victory.

8 Jan: Battle of Ashdown – West Saxon victory; Ælfred plays key role.

22 Jan: Battle of Basing – Viking victory.

22 Mar: Battle of Meretun – indecisive; Ethelred possibly mortally wounded.

April: Ælfred becomes king of Wessex.

Vikings later capture London and winter in Mercia.

872 (Winter): The GHA winters in London. Rebellions flare in Northumbria and Mercia against Viking-installed rulers.

873 (Winter): The GHA moves to Repton in Mercia, and forces King Burgred into exile in Rome. Ceolwulf is installed as puppet king.

874 (Spring): The GHA splits: Halfdan heads north to Northumbria (where land is later divided among settlers). Guthrum leads the southern force into Wessex.

875 (Autumn): Guthrum winters at Cambridge. Halfdan settles his followers in Northumbria, starting Danelaw colonisation.

876: Halfdan shares out Northumbrian lands among his followers, who settle and begin farming. This can be regarded as the founding moment of Yorkshire, though the Yorkshire Ridings Society prefers the date 875 when Halfdan first came to York. This event has been celebrated annually since 1975 on Yorkshire Day (August 1st).

876: Guthrum captures Wareham in Wessex, then negotiates peace with Ælfred, but breaks his word and continues to fight.

877 (Early in year): Guthrum captures Exeter. Ælfred besieges the city and traps Guthrum's fleet. Vikings surrender and retreat to Gloucestershire. Reinforcements are lost in a storm.

877: Halfdan dies at the battle of Strangford Lough when fighting to regain control of Dublin.

878 (January): Guthrum launches surprise midwinter attack. Guthrum takes Chippenham; Ælfred flees to Athelney Marshes. The famous “burning the cakes” episode comes from a later legend.

878 (April?): An attack is made by Ubba on Devon and he is defeated and killed by the forces of Ealdorman Odda at a place called Cynuit, possibly Countisbury Hill near Lynmouth, on the north Devon coast.

878 (May): The Battle of Edington (Ethandun) in which Ælfred defeats Guthrum. Guthrum retreats and sues for peace.

878 (Summer): The Treaty of Wedmore: Guthrum agrees to Withdraw from Wessex and be baptised (Ælfred is his godfather) and settle in East Anglia. This establishes a rough division between Wessex and the Danelaw, formalised later in the Treaty of Ælfred and Guthrum.

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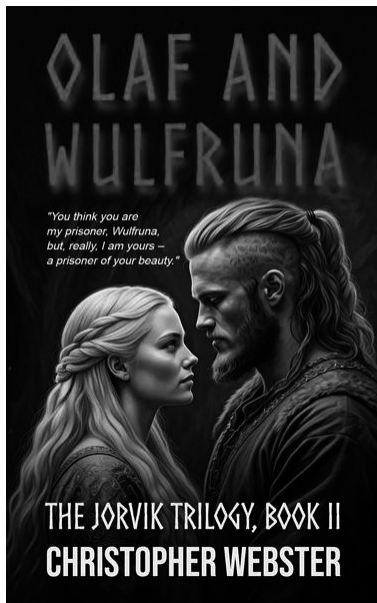
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Ragnarssona þáttr, *Knútsdrápa*, *Krákumál* and *Ragnars saga Loðbrokar*, can be found at <https://www.germanicmythology.com>¹.

1. <https://www.germanicmythology.com/>

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About the Author

Christopher Webster was brought up in Conisbrough, Yorkshire, which is well-known for its magnificent castle. The castle and its link with England's founding father, Hengest, inspired his interest in history. He studied English at Leeds University and was an English teacher for many years. His first publication was *Poetry Through Humour and Horror* (Cassell). This was followed by many more educational publications, including the best-selling *100 Literacy Hours* (Scholastic). He has also published a wide range of fiction, drama and poetry culminating in his "masterpiece" pentalogy, *English Dawn* and its sequel, *The Grail Delusion*. He is currently retired and living his dream, which is to be a full-time writer (though it is sometimes a nightmare when the words won't flow!). If you enjoyed this book, please consider writing a review.

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