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Warriors of the Storm

Written by Bernard Cornwell

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Bernard
Cornwell

WARRIORS

OF
THE STORM

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WARRIORS OF THE STORM

Bernard Cornwell was born in London, raised in Essex and worked for the BBC for eleven years before meeting Judy, his American wife. Denied an American work permit he wrote a novel instead and has been writing ever since. He and Judy divide their time between Cape Cod and Charleston, South Carolina.

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Warriors of the Storm

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1

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is for
Phil and Robert

CONTENTS

Place names

ix-x

Map

xi

Part One

Flames on the River

1

Part Two

The Ghost Fence

157

Part Three

War of the Brothers

259

HISTORICAL NOTE

347

PART ONE
Flames on the River



ONE

There was fire in the night. Fire that seared the sky and paled the stars. Fire that churned thick smoke across the land between the rivers.

Finan woke me. 'Trouble,' was all he said.

Eadith stirred and I pushed her away from me. 'Stay there,' I told her and rolled out from under the fleeces. I fumbled for a bearskin cloak and pulled it around my shoulders before following Finan into the street. There was no moon, just the flames reflecting from the great pall of smoke that drifted inland on the night wind. 'We need more men on the walls,' I said. 'Done it,' Finan said.

So all that was left for me to do was curse. I cursed.

'It's Brunanburh,' Finan said bleakly and I cursed again.

Folk were gathering in Ceaster's main street. Eadith had come from the house, wrapped in a great cloak and with her red hair shining in the light of the lanterns that burned at the church door. 'What is it?' she asked sleepily.

'Brunanburh,' Finan said grimly. Eadith made the sign of the cross. I had a glimpse of her naked body as her hand slipped from beneath the cloak to touch her forehead, then she clutched the heavy woollen cloth tight to her belly again.

‘Loki,’ I spoke the name aloud. He is the god of fire, whatever the Christians might tell you. And Loki is the most slippery of all the gods, a trickster who deceives, charms, betrays and hurts us. Fire is his two-edged weapon that can warm us, cook for us, scorch us, or kill us. I touched Thor’s hammer that hung from my neck. ‘Æthelstan’s there,’ I said.

‘If he lives,’ Finan said.

There was nothing to be done in the darkness. The journey to Brunanburh took at least two hours on horseback and would take longer in this dark night, when we would be stumbling through woods and possibly riding into an ambush set by the men who had fired the distant burh. All I could do was watch from Ceaster’s walls in case an attack burst from the dawn.

I did not fear such an attack. Ceaster had been built by the Romans and it was as tough a fortress as any in Britain. The Northmen would need to cross a flooded ditch and put ladders against the high stone walls, and Northmen have ever been reluctant to attack fortresses. But Brunanburh was aflame, so who knew what unlikely things the dawn might bring? Brunanburh was our newest burh, built by Æthelflaed who ruled over Mercia, and it guarded the River Mæse, which offered the Northmen’s boats an easy route into central Britain. In years past the Mæse had been busy, the oars dipping and pulling, and the dragon-headed boats surging against the river’s current to bring new warriors to the unending struggle between the Northmen and the Saxons, but Brunanburh had stopped that traffic. We kept a fleet of twelve ships there, their crews protected by Brunanburh’s thick timber walls, and the Northmen had learned to fear those ships. Now, if they landed on Britain’s west coast, they went to Wales or else to Cumbreland, which was the fierce wild country north of the Mæse.

Except tonight. Tonight there were flames by the Mæse.

‘Get dressed,’ I told Eadith. There would be no more sleep this night.

She touched the emerald encrusted cross at her neck. ‘Æthelstan,’ she said softly as if she prayed for him while fingering the cross. She had become fond of Æthelstan.

‘He either lives or is dead,’ I said curtly, ‘and we won’t know till the dawn.’

We rode just before the dawn, rode north in the wolf-light, following the paved road through the shadowed cemetery of Roman dead. I took sixty men, all mounted on fast light horses so that if we ran into an army of howling Northmen we could flee. I sent scouts ahead, but we were in a hurry so there was no time for our normal precaution, which was to wait for the scouts’ reports before we rode on. Our warning this time would be the death of the scouts. We left the Roman road to follow the track we had made through the woods. Clouds had come from the west and a drizzle was falling, but still the smoke rose ahead of us. Rain might extinguish Loki’s fire, but not drizzle, and the smoke mocked and beckoned us.

Then we came from the woods to where the fields turned into mudflats and the mudflats merged with the river, and there, far to our west on that wide stretch of silver-grey water, was a fleet. Twenty, thirty ships, maybe more, it was impossible to tell because they were moored so close together, but even from far away I could see that their prows were decorated with the Northmen’s beasts; with eagles, dragons, serpents, and wolves. ‘Sweet God,’ Finan said, appalled.

We hurried now, following a cattle track that meandered along higher ground on the river’s southern bank. The wind was in our faces, gusting suddenly to send ripples scurrying across the Mærse. We still could not see Brunanburh because the fort lay beyond a wooded rise, but a sudden movement at the wood’s edge betrayed the presence of men, and my

two scouts turned their horses and galloped back towards us. Whoever had alarmed them vanished into the thick spring leaves and a moment later a horn sounded, the noise mournful in the grey damp dawn.

'It's not the fort burning,' Finan said uncertainly.

Instead of answering I swerved inland off the track onto the lush pasture. The two scouts came close, their horses' hooves hurling up clods of damp turf. 'There are men in the trees, lord!' one shouted. 'At least a score, probably more!'

'And ready for a fight,' the other reported.

'Ready for a fight?' Finan asked.

'Shields, helmets, weapons,' the second man explained.

I led my sixty men southwards. The belt of young woodland stood like a barrier between us and Brunanburh, and if an enemy waited then they would surely be barring the track. If we followed the track we could ride straight into their shield wall hidden among the trees, but by cutting inland I would force them to move, to lose their order, and so I quickened the pace, kicking my horse into a canter. My son rode up on my left side. 'It's not the fort burning!' he shouted.

The smoke was thinning. It still rose beyond the trees, a smear of grey that melted into the low clouds. It seemed to be coming from the river, and I suspected Finan and my son were right, that it was not the fort burning, but rather the ships. Our ships. But how had an enemy reached those ships? If they had come by daylight they would have been seen and the fort's defenders would have manned the boats and challenged the enemy, while coming by night seemed impossible. The Mærse was shallow and barred with mudbanks, and no shipmaster could hope to bring a vessel this far inland in the dark of a moonless night.

'It's not the fort!' Uhtred called to me again. He made it sound like good news, but my fear was that the fort had

fallen and its stout timber walls now protected a horde of Northmen. Why should they burn what they could easily defend?

The ground was rising. I could see no enemy in the trees. That did not mean they were not there. How many enemy? Thirty ships? That could easily be a thousand men, and those men must have known that we would ride from Ceaster. If I had been the enemy's leader I would be waiting just beyond the trees, and that suggested I should slow our advance and send the scouts ahead again, but instead I kicked the horse. My shield was on my back and I left it there, just loosening Serpent-Breath in her scabbard. I was angry and I was careless, but instinct told me that no enemy waited just beyond the woodland. They might have been waiting on the track, but by swerving inland I had given them little time to reform a shield wall on the higher ground. The belt of trees still hid what lay beyond, and I turned the horse and rode west again. I plunged into the leaves, ducked under a branch, let the horse pick its own way through the wood, and then I was through the trees, and I hauled on the reins, slowing, watching, stopping.

No enemy.

My men crashed through the undergrowth and stopped behind me.

'Thank Christ,' Finan said.

The fort had not been taken. The white horse of Mercia still flew above the ramparts and with it was Æthelflaed's goose flag. A third banner hung from the walls, a new banner I had ordered made by the women of Ceaster. It showed the dragon of Wessex, and the dragon was holding a lightning bolt in one raised claw. It was Prince Æthelstan's symbol. The boy had asked to have a Christian cross on his flag, but I had ordered the lightning bolt embroidered there instead.

I called Æthelstan a boy, but he was a young man now.

He had grown tall, and his boyish mischief had been tempered by experience. There were men who wanted Æthelstan dead, and he knew it, and so his eyes had become watchful. He was handsome too, or so Eadith told me, those watchful grey eyes set in a strong-boned face beneath hair black as a raven's wing. I called him Prince Æthelstan, while those men who wanted him dead called him a bastard.

And many folk believed their lies. Æthelstan had been born to a pretty Centish girl who had died whelping him, but his father was Edward, son of King Alfred and now king of Wessex himself. Edward had since married a West Saxon girl and fathered another son, which made Æthelstan an inconvenience, especially as it was rumoured that in truth he was not a bastard at all because Edward had secretly married the girl from Cent. True or not, and I had good cause to know the story of the first marriage was entirely true, it did not matter because to many in his father's kingdom Æthelstan was the unwanted son. He had not been raised in Wintanceaster like Edward's other children, but sent to Mercia. Edward professed to like the boy, but ignored him, and in truth Æthelstan was an embarrassment. He was the king's eldest son, the ætheling, but he had a younger half-brother whose vengeful mother wanted Æthelstan dead because he stood between her son and the throne of Wessex. But I liked Æthelstan. I liked him enough to want him to reach the throne that was his birthright, but to be king he first needed to learn a man's responsibilities, and so I had given him command of the fort and of the fleet at Brunanburh.

And now the fleet was gone. It was burned. The hulls were smoking beside the charred remnants of the pier we had spent a year building. We had driven elm pilings deep into the foreshore and thrust the walkway out past the low water mark to make a wharf where a battle fleet could

be ever ready. Now the wharf was gone, along with the sleek high-prowed ships. Four of those ships had been stranded above the tide mark and were still smouldering, the rest were just blackened ribs in the shallow water, while, at the pier's end, three dragon-headed ships lay moored against the scorched pilings. Five more ships lay just beyond, using their oars to hold the hulls against the river's current and the ebbing tide. The rest of the enemy fleet was a half mile upriver.

And ashore, between us and the burned wharf, were men. Men in mail, men with shields and helmets, men with spears and swords. There were perhaps two hundred of them, and they had herded what few cattle they could find and were pushing the beasts towards the river bank where they were being slaughtered so the flesh could be carried away. I glanced at the fort. Æthelstan commanded a hundred and fifty men there, and I could see them thick on the ramparts, but he was making no attempt to impede the enemy's retreat. 'Let's kill some of the bastards,' I said.

'Lord?' Finan asked, wary of the enemy's greater number.

'They'll run,' I said. 'They want the safety of their ships, they don't want a fight on land.'

I drew Serpent-Breath. The Norsemen who had come ashore were all on foot, and they were scattered. Most were close to the burned wharf's landward end where they could quickly form a shield wall, but dozens of others were struggling with the cattle. I aimed for those men.

And I was angry. I commanded the garrison at Ceaster, and Brunanburh was a part of that garrison. It was an outlying fort and it had been surprised and its ships had been burned and I was angry. I wanted blood in the dawn. I kissed Serpent-Breath's hilt then struck back with my spurs, and we went down that shallow slope at the full gallop, our swords drawn and spears reaching. I wished I had brought

a spear, but it was too late for regrets. The cattle herders saw us and tried to run, but they were on the mudflats and the cattle were panicking and our hooves were loud on the dew-wet turf. The largest group of enemy was making a shield wall where the charred remains of the pier reached dry land, but I had no intention of fighting them. 'I want prisoners!' I bellowed at my men, 'I want prisoners!'

One of the Northmen's ships started for the beach, either to reinforce the men ashore or to offer them an escape. A thousand white birds rose from the grey water, calling and shrieking, circling above the pasture where the shield wall had formed. I saw a banner raised above the locked shields, but I had no time to look at that standard because my horse thundered across the track, down the bank and onto the foreshore. 'Prisoners!' I shouted again. I passed a slaughtered bullock, its blood thick and black on the mud. The men had started to butcher it, but had fled, and then I was among those fugitives and I used the flat of Serpent-Breath's blade to knock one man down. I turned. My horse slipped in the mud, reared, and as he came down I used his weight to drive Serpent-Breath into a second man's chest. The blade pierced his shoulder, drove deep, blood bubbled at his mouth and I kicked the stallion so he would drag the heavy blade free of the dying man. Finan went past me, then my son galloped by, holding his sword Raven-Beak low and bending from the saddle to plunge it into a running man's back. A wild-eyed Norseman swung an axe at me, which I avoided easily, then Berg Skallagrimmrson's spear blade went through the man's spine, through his guts, and showed bright and blood-streaked at his belly. Berg was riding bare-headed, his fair hair, long as a woman's, was hung with knuckle bones and ribbons. He grinned at me as he let go of the spear's ash pole and drew his sword. 'I ruined his mail, lord!'

'I want prisoners, Berg!'

‘I kill some bastards first, yes?’ He spurred away, still grinning. He was a Norse warrior, maybe eighteen or nineteen summers old, but he had already rowed a ship to Horn on the island of fire and ice that lay far off in the Atlantic, and he had fought in Ireland, in Scotland, and in Wales, and he had stories of rowing inland through forests of birch trees, which, he claimed, grew east of the Norsemen’s land. There were frost giants there, he told me, and wolves the size of stallions. ‘I should have died a thousand times, lord,’ he told me, but he was only alive now because I had saved his life. He had become my man, sworn to me, and in my service he took the head from a fugitive with one swing of his sword. ‘Yah!’ he bellowed back to me, ‘I sharpen the blade good!’

Finan was close to the water’s edge, close enough that a man on the approaching ship hurled a spear at him. The weapon stuck in the mud, and Finan contemptuously bent from the saddle to seize the shaft and spurred to where a man lay fallen and bleeding in the mud. He looked back to the ship, making sure he was being watched, then raised the spear ready to plunge the blade into the wounded man’s belly. Then he paused and, to my surprise, tossed the spear away. He dismounted and knelt by the wounded man, talked for a moment and then stood. ‘Prisoners,’ he shouted, ‘we need prisoners!’

A horn sounded from the fort and I turned to see men pouring out of Brunanburh’s gate. They came with shields, spears, and swords, ready to make a wall that would drive the enemy’s shield wall into the river, but those invaders were already leaving and needed no help from us. They were wading past the charred pilings, and edging around the smoking boats to clamber aboard the nearest ships. The approaching ship paused, churning the shallows with its oars, reluctant to face my men, who called insults to them

and waited at the river's edge with drawn swords and bloodied spears. More of the enemy waded out towards the dragon-headed boats. 'Let them be!' I shouted. I had wanted blood in the dawn, but there was no advantage in slaughtering a handful of men in the Mærse's shallows and losing maybe a dozen myself. The enemy's main fleet, which had to contain hundreds more men, was already rowing upriver. To weaken it I needed to kill those hundreds, not just a few.

The crews of the nearer ships were jeering at us. I watched as men were hauled aboard, and I wondered where this fleet had come from. It had been years since I had seen so many northern ships. I kicked my horse to the water's edge. A man hurled a spear, but it fell short, and I deliberately sheathed *Serpent-Breath* to show the enemy I accepted that the fight was over, and I saw a grey-bearded man strike the elbow of a youth who wanted to throw another spear. I nodded to the greybeard, who raised a hand in acknowledgement.

So who were they? The prisoners would tell us soon enough, and we had taken almost a score of men, who were now being stripped of their mail, helmets, and valuables. Finan was kneeling by the wounded man again, talking to him, and I kicked my horse towards him, then stopped, astonished, because Finan had stood and was now pissing on the man, who struck feebly at his tormentor with a gloved hand. 'Finan?' I called.

He ignored me. He spoke to his prisoner in his own Irish tongue and the man answered angrily in the same language. Finan laughed, then seemed to curse the man, chanting words brutally and distinctly, and holding his outspread fingers towards the piss-soaked face as though casting a spell. I reckoned that whatever happened was none of my business and I looked back to the ships at the end of the ruined wharf just in time to see the enemy's standard-bearer

climb aboard the last remaining high-prowed vessel. The man was in mail and had a hard time pulling himself over the ship's side until he handed up his banner and held up both arms so he could be hauled aboard by two other warriors. And I recognised the banner, and I hardly dared believe what I saw.

Haesten?

Haesten.

If this world ever contained one worthless, treacherous slime-coated piece of human dung then it was Haesten. I had known him for a lifetime, indeed I had saved his miserable life and he had sworn loyalty to me, clasping his hands about mine which, in turn, were clasped about Serpent-Breath's hilt, and he had wept tears of gratitude as he vowed to be my man, to defend me, to serve me, and in return to receive my gold, my loyalty, and within months he had broken the oath and was fighting against me. He had sworn peace with Alfred and had broken that oath too. He had led armies to ravage Wessex and Mercia, until finally, at Beamfleot, I had cornered his men and turned the creeks and marshes dark with their blood. We had filled ditches with his dead, the ravens had gorged themselves that day, but Haesten had escaped. He always escaped. He had lost his army, but not his cunning, and he had come again, this time in the service of Sigurd Thorrson and Cnut Ranulfson, and they had died in another slaughter, but once again Haesten had slipped away.

Now he was back, and his banner was a bleached skull mounted on a pole. It mocked me from the nearest ship, which was now rowing away. The men aboard called insults, and the standard-bearer waved the skull from side to side. Beyond that ship was a larger one, prowed with a great dragon that reared its fanged mouth high, and at the ship's

stern I could see a cloaked man wearing a silver helmet crowned with black ravens' wings. He took the helmet off and gave me a mocking bow, and I saw that it was Haesten. He was laughing. He had burned my boats and had stolen a few cattle, and for Haesten that was victory enough. It was not revenge for Beamfleot, he would need to kill me and all my men to balance that bloody scale, but he had made us look fools and he had opened the Mæerse to a great fleet of Northmen who now rowed upriver. A fleet of enemies who came to take our land, led by Haesten.

'How can a bastard like Haesten lead so many men?' I asked aloud.

'He doesn't.' My son had walked his horse into the shallows and reined in beside me.

'He doesn't?'

'Ragnall Ivarson leads them.'

I said nothing, but felt a chill pass through me. Ragnall Ivarson was a name I knew, a name we all knew, a name that had spread fear up and down the Irish Sea. He was a Norseman who called himself the Sea King, for his lands were scattered wherever the wild waves beat on rock or sand. He ruled where the seals swam and the puffins flew, where the winds howled and where ships were wrecked, where the cold bit like a knife and the souls of drowned men moaned in the darkness. His men had captured the wild islands off Scotland, had bitten land from the coast of Ireland, and enslaved folk in Wales and on the Isle of Mann. It was a kingdom without borders, for whenever an enemy became too strong, Ragnall's men took to their long ships and sailed to another wild coast. They had raided the shores of Wessex, taking away slaves and cattle, and had even rowed up the Sæfern to threaten Gleawecestre, though the walls of that fortress had daunted them. Ragnall Ivarson. I had never met him, but I knew him. I knew his

reputation. No man sailed a ship better, no man fought more fiercely, no man was held in more fear. He was a savage, a pirate, a wild king of nowhere, and my daughter Stiorra had married his brother.

‘And Haesten has sworn loyalty to Ragnall,’ my son went on. He watched the ships pull away. ‘Ragnall Ivarson,’ he still gazed at the fleet as he spoke, ‘has given up his Irish land. He’s told his men that fate has granted him Britain instead.’

Haesten was a nothing, I thought. He was a rat allied to a wolf, a ragged sparrow perched on an eagle’s shoulder. ‘Ragnall has abandoned his Irish land?’ I asked.

‘So the man said.’ My son gestured to where the prisoners stood.

I grunted. I knew little of what happened in Ireland, but over the last few years there had come news of Northmen being harried out of that land. Ships had crossed the sea with survivors of grim fights, and men who had thought to take land in Ireland now sought it in Cumbreland or on the Welsh coast, and some went even further, to Neustria or Frankia. ‘Ragnall’s powerful,’ I said, ‘why would he just abandon Ireland?’

‘Because the Irish persuaded him to leave.’

‘Persuaded?’

My son shrugged. ‘They have sorcerers, Christian sorcerers, who see the future. They said Ragnall will be king of all Britain if he leaves Ireland, and they gave him warriors to help.’ He nodded at the fleet. ‘There are one hundred Irish warriors on those ships.’

‘King of all Britain?’

‘That’s what the prisoner said.’

I spat. Ragnall was not the first man to dream of ruling the whole island. ‘How many men does he have?’

‘Twelve hundred.’

'You're sure of that?'

My son smiled. 'You taught me well, Father.'

'What did I teach you?'

'That a spear-point in a prisoner's liver is a very persuasive thing.'

I watched the last boats row eastwards. They would be lost to sight soon. 'Beadwulf!' I shouted. He was a small wiry man whose face was decorated with inked lines in Danish fashion, though Beadwulf himself was a Saxon. He was one of my best scouts, a man who could cross open grassland like a ghost. I nodded at the disappearing ships. 'Take a dozen men,' I told Beadwulf, 'and follow the bastards. I want to know where they land.'

'Lord,' he said, and started to turn away.

'And Beadwulf!' I called, and he looked back. 'Try to see what banners are on the ships,' I told him, 'and look for a red axe! If you see a red axe I want to know, fast!'

'The red axe, lord,' he repeated and sped away.

The red axe was the symbol of Sigtryggr Ivarson, my daughter's husband. Men now called him Sigtryggr One-Eye because I had taken his right eye with the tip of Serpent-Breath. He had attacked Ceaster and been beaten away, but in his defeat he had taken Stiorra with him. She had not gone as a captive, but as a lover, and once in a while I would hear news of her. She and Sigtryggr possessed land in Ireland, and she wrote letters to me because I had made her learn writing and reading. 'We ride horses on the sand,' she had written, 'and across the hills. It is beautiful here. They hate us.' She had a daughter, my first grandchild, and she had called the daughter Gisela after her own mother. 'Gisela is beautiful,' she wrote, 'and the Irish priests curse us. At night they scream their curses and sound like wild birds dying. I love this place. My husband sends you greetings.'

Men had always reckoned that Sigtryggr was the more

dangerous of the two brothers. He was said to be cleverer than Ragnall and his skill with a sword was legendary, but the loss of his eye or perhaps his marriage to Stiorra had calmed him. Rumour said that Sigtryggr was content to farm his fields, fish his seas, and defend his lands, but would he stay content if his older brother was capturing Britain? That was why I had told Beadwulf to look for the red axe. I wanted to know if my daughter's husband had become my enemy.

Prince Æthelstan found me as the last of the enemy ships vanished from sight. He came with a half-dozen companions, all of them mounted on big stallions. 'Lord,' he called, 'I'm sorry!'

I waved him to silence, my attention with Finan again. He was chanting in fury at the man who lay wounded at his feet, and the wounded man was shouting back, and I did not need to speak any of the strange Irish tongue to know that they exchanged curses. I had rarely seen Finan so angry. He was spitting, ranting, chanting, his rhythmic words heavy as hammer blows. Those words beat down his opponent who, already wounded, seemed to weaken under the assault of insults. Men stared at the two, awed by their anger, then Finan turned and snatched up the spear he had thrown aside. He stalked back to his victim, spoke more words, and touched the crucifix about his neck. Then, as if he were a priest raising the host, he lifted the spear in both hands, the blade pointing downwards, and held it high. He paused, then spoke in English.

'May God forgive me,' he said.

Then he rammed the spear down hard, screaming with the effort to thrust the blade through mail and bone to the heart within, and the man leaped under the spear's blow and blood welled from his mouth, and his arms and legs flailed for a few dying heartbeats, and then there were no

more heartbeats and he was dead, open-mouthed, pinned to the shore's edge with a spear that had gone clean through his heart into the soil beneath.

Finan was weeping.

I urged my horse near him and stooped to touch his shoulder. He was my friend, my oldest friend, my companion of a hundred shield walls. 'Finan?' I asked, but he did not look at me. 'Finan!' I said again.

And this time he did look up at me and there were tears on his cheeks and misery in his eyes. 'I think he was my son,' he said.

'He was what?' I asked, aghast.

'Son or nephew, I don't know. Christ help me, I don't know. But I killed him.'

He walked away.

'I'm sorry,' Æthelstan said again, sounding as miserable as Finan. He stared at the smoke drifting slow above the river. 'They came in the night,' he said, 'and we didn't know until we saw the flames. I'm sorry. I failed you.'

'Don't be a fool,' I snarled. 'You couldn't stop that fleet!' I waved towards the bend in the river where the last of the Sea King's ships had disappeared behind a stand of trees. One of our burning ships gave a lurch, and there was a hiss as steam thickened the smoke.

'I wanted to fight them,' Æthelstan said.

'Then you're a damned fool,' I retorted.

He frowned, then gestured towards the burning ships and at the butchered carcass of a bullock. 'I wanted to stop this!' he said.

'You choose your battles,' I said harshly. 'You were safe behind your walls, so why lose men? You couldn't stop the fleet. Besides, they wanted you to come out and fight them, and it isn't sensible to do what the enemy wants.'

‘That’s what I told him, lord,’ Rædwald put in. Rædwald was an older Mercian, a cautious man who I had posted in Brunanburh to advise Æthelstan. The prince commanded the garrison, but he was young and so I had given him a half-dozen older and wiser men to keep him from making youth’s mistakes.

‘They wanted us to come out?’ Æthelstan asked, puzzled.

‘Where would they rather fight you?’ I asked. ‘With you behind walls? Or out in the open, shield wall to shield wall?’

‘I told him that, lord!’ Rædwald said. I ignored him.

‘Choose your battles,’ I snarled at Æthelstan. ‘That space between your ears was given so that you can think! If you just charge whenever you see an enemy you’ll earn yourself an early grave.’

‘That’s . . .’ Rædwald began.

‘That’s what you told him, I know! Now be quiet!’ I gazed upstream at the empty river. Ragnall had brought an army to Britain, but what would he do with that army? He needed land to feed his men, he needed fortresses to protect them. He had passed Brunanburh, but was he planning to double back and attack Ceaster? The Roman walls made that city a fine base, but also a formidable obstacle. So where was he going?

‘But that’s what you did!’ Æthelstan interrupted my thoughts.

‘Did what?’

‘You charged the enemy!’ He looked indignant. ‘Just now! You charged down the hill even though they outnumbered you.’

‘I needed prisoners, you miserable excuse for a man.’

I wanted to know how Ragnall had come upriver in the darkness. It had either been an incredible stroke of fortune that his great fleet had negotiated the Mærse’s mudbanks

without any ship going aground, or else he was an even greater ship-handler than his reputation suggested. It had been an impressive feat of seamanship, but it had also been unnecessary. His fleet was huge, and we had only a dozen boats. He could have brushed us aside without missing an oar stroke, yet he had decided to attack in the night. Why risk that?

‘He didn’t want us to block the channel,’ my son suggested, and that was probably the truth. If we had been given just a few hours’ warning we could have sunk our ships in the river’s main channel. Ragnall would still have got past eventually, but he would have been forced to wait for a high tide, and his heavier ships would have had a difficult passage, and meanwhile we would have sent messengers upriver to make sure more barricades blocked the Mærse and more men waited to greet his ships. Instead he had slipped past us, he had wounded us, and he was already rowing inland.

‘It was the Frisians,’ Æthelstan said unhappily.

‘Frisians?’

‘Three merchant ships arrived last night, lord. They moored in the river. They were carrying pelts from Dyflin.’

‘You inspected them?’

He shook his head. ‘They said they carried the plague, lord.’

‘So you didn’t board them?’

‘Not with the plague, lord, no.’ The garrison at Brunanburh had the duty of inspecting every ship that entered the river, mainly to levy a tax on whatever cargo the ship carried, but no one would board a ship that had sickness aboard. ‘They said they were carrying pelts, lord,’ Æthelstan explained, ‘and they paid us their fees.’

‘And you left them alone?’

He nodded miserably. The prisoners told me the rest. The three merchant ships had anchored where the Mærse’s

channel was narrowest, the place where a fleet faced the greatest danger of running aground, and they had burned lanterns that had guided Ragnall's ships past the peril. The tide had done the rest. Let a vessel drift and it will usually follow the swiftest current in the deepest channel and, once past the three merchant ships, Ragnall had simply let the flood carry him to our wharf. There he had burned both wharf and ships, so that his own vessels could now use the river safely. Reinforcements could now come from his sea kingdom. He had ripped apart our defence of the Mærse and he was loose in Britain with an army.

I let Æthelstan decide what to do with the prisoners. There were fourteen of them, and Æthelstan chose to have them executed. 'Wait for low tide,' he ordered Rædwald, 'then tie them to the stakes.' He nodded at the charred pilings that jutted at awkward angles from the swirling river. 'Let them drown in the rising tide.'

I had already sent Beadwulf eastwards, but would not expect to hear his news for at least a day. I ordered Sihtric to send men south. 'They're to ride fast,' I said, 'and tell the Lady Æthelflaed what's happening. Tell her I want men, a lot of men, all her men!'

'At Ceaster?' Sihtric asked.

I shook my head, thinking. 'Tell her to send them to Liccelfeld. And tell her I'm going there.' I turned and pointed to Æthelstan, 'and you're coming with me, lord Prince. And bringing most of Brunanburh's garrison with you. And you,' I looked at Rædwald, 'will stay here. Defend what's left. You can have fifty men.'

'Fifty! That's not enough . . .'

'Forty,' I snarled, 'and if you lose the fort I'll cut your kidneys out and eat them.'

We were at war.

* * *

Finan was at the water's edge, sitting on a great driftwood log. I sat beside him. 'So tell me about that,' I said, nodding at the corpse that was still fixed by the spear.

'What do you want to know?'

'Whatever you choose to tell me.'

We sat in silence. Geese flew above us, their wings beating the morning. A flurry of rain spat past. One of the corpses farted. 'We're going to Liccelfeld,' I said.

Finan nodded. 'Why Liccelfeld?' he asked after a moment. The question was dutiful. He was not thinking about Ragnall or the Norsemen or anything except the spear-pierced corpse at the river's brink.

'Because I don't know where Ragnall's going,' I said, 'but from Liccelfeld we can go north or south easily.'

'North or south,' he repeated dully.

'The bastard needs land,' I said, 'and he'll either try to take it in northern Mercia or from southern Northumbria. We have to stop him fast.'

'He'll go north,' Finan said, though he still spoke carelessly. He shrugged, 'Why would he pick a fight with Mercia?'

I suspected he was right. Mercia had become powerful, its frontiers protected by burhs, fortified towns, while to the north were the troubled lands of Northumbria. That was Danish land, but the Danish lords were squabbling and fighting amongst themselves. A strong man like Ragnall could unite them. I had repeatedly told Æthelflaed that we should march north and take land from the fractious Danes, but she would not invade Northumbria until her brother Edward brought his West Saxon army to help. 'Whether Ragnall goes north or comes south,' I said, 'now's the time to fight him. He's just arrived here. He doesn't know the land. Haesten does, of course, but how far does Ragnall trust that piece of weasel-shit? And from what the prisoners said, Ragnall's army has never fought together,

so we hit him hard now, before he has a chance to find a refuge and before he feels safe. We do to him what the Irish did, we make him feel unwanted.'

Silence again. I watched the geese, looking for an omen in their numbers, but there were too many birds to count. Yet the goose was Æthelflaed's symbol, so their presence was surely a good sign? I touched the hammer that hung at my neck. Finan saw the gesture and frowned. Then he grasped the crucifix that hung at his neck, and, with a sudden grimace, tugged it hard enough to break the leather cord. He looked at the silver bauble for a moment, then flung it into the water. 'I'm going to hell,' he said.

For a moment I did not know what to say. 'At least we'll still be together,' I finally spoke.

'Aye,' he said, unsmiling. 'A man who kills his own blood is doomed.'

'The Christian priests tell you that?'

'No.'

'Then how do you know?'

'I just know. That was why my brother didn't kill me so long ago. He sold me to that bastard slaver instead.'

That was how Finan and I had first met, chained as slaves to a bench and pulling on long oars. We still carried the slaver's brand on our skin, though the slaver himself was long dead, slaughtered by Finan in an orgy of revenge.

'Why would your brother want to kill you?' I asked, knowing I trod on dangerous ground. In all the long years of our friendship I had never discovered why Finan was an exile from his native Ireland.

He grimaced. 'A woman.'

'Surprise me,' I said wryly.

'I was married,' he went on as though I had not spoken. 'A good woman, she was, a royal daughter of the Uí Néill,

and I was a prince of my people. My brother was too. Prince Conall.'

'Conall,' I said after a few heartbeats of silence.

'They're small kingdoms in Ireland,' he said bleakly, staring across the water. 'Small kingdoms and great kings, and we fight. Christ, how we love to fight! The Uí Néill, of course, are the great ones, at least in the north. We were their clients. We gave them tribute. We fought for them when they demanded it, we drank with them and we married their good women.'

'And you married a Uí Néill woman?' I prompted him.

'Conall is younger than me,' he said, ignoring my question. 'I should have been the next king, but Conall met a maid from the Ó Domhnaill. God, lord, but she was beautiful! She was nothing by birth! She was no chieftain's daughter, but a dairy girl. And she was lovely,' he spoke wistfully, his eyes gleaming wet. 'She had hair dark as night and eyes like stars and a body as graceful as an angel in flight.'

'And she was called?' I asked.

He shook his head abruptly, rejecting the question. 'And God help us we fell in love. We ran away. We took horses and we rode south. Just Conall's wife and me. We thought we'd ride, we'd hide, and we'd never be found.'

'And Conall pursued you?' I guessed.

'The Uí Néill pursued us. God knows it was a hunt. Every Christian in Ireland knew of us, knew of the gold they would make if they found us, and yes, Conall rode with the men of the Uí Néill.'

I said nothing. I waited.

'Nothing is hidden in Ireland,' Finan went on. 'You can't hide. The little people see you. Folk see you. Find an island in a lake and they know you're there. Go to a mountain top and they'll find you, hide in a cave and they'll hunt you

down. We should have taken ship, but we were young. We didn't know.'

'They found you.'

'They found us, and Conall promised he would make my life worse than death.'

'By selling you to Sverri?' Sverri was the slaver who had branded us.

He nodded. 'I was stripped of my gold, whipped, made to crawl through Uí Néill shit, and then sold to Sverri. I am the king that never was.'

'And the girl?'

'And Conall took my Uí Néill wife as his own. The priests allowed it, they encouraged it, and he raised my sons as his own. They cursed me, lord. My own sons cursed me. That one,' he nodded at the corpse, 'cursed me just now. I am the betrayer, the cursed.'

'And he's your son?' I asked gently.

'He wouldn't say. He could be. Or Conall's boy. He's my blood, anyway.'

I walked to the dead man, put my right foot on his belly, and tugged the spear free. It was a struggle and the corpse made an obscene sucking noise as I wrenched the wide blade out. A bloody cross lay on the dead man's chest. 'The priests will bury him,' I said, 'they'll say prayers over him.' I hurled the spear into the shallows and turned back to Finan. 'What happened to the girl?'

He stared empty-eyed across the river that was smeared dark with the ash of our ships. 'For one day,' he said, 'they let the warriors of the Uí Néill do as they wished with her. They made me watch. And then they were merciful, lord. They killed her.'

'And your brother,' I said, 'has sent men to help Ragnall?'

'The Uí Néill sent men to help Ragnall. And yes, my brother leads them.'

‘And why would they do that?’ I asked.

‘Because the Uí Néill would be kings of all the north. Of Ireland and of Scotland too, of all the north. Ragnall can have the Saxon lands. That’s the agreement. He helps them, they help him.’

‘And he begins with Northumbria?’

‘Or Mercia,’ Finan suggested with a shrug. ‘But they won’t rest there,’ he went on, ‘because they want everything.’

It was the ancient dream, the dream that had haunted my whole life, the dream of the Northmen to conquer all Britain. They had tried so often and they had come so close to success, yet still we Saxons lived and still we fought back so that now half the island was ours again. Yet we should have lost! The Northmen were savage, they came with fury and anger, and their armies darkened the land, but they had one fatal weakness. They were like dogs that fought each other, and only when one dog was strongest and could snarl and bite and force the others to his bidding were the invasions dangerous. But one defeat shattered their armies. They followed a man so long as he was successful, but if that man showed weakness they deserted in droves to find other, easier prey.

And Ragnall had led an army here. An army of Norsemen and Danes and Irish, and that meant Ragnall had united our enemies. That made him dangerous.

Except he had not whipped all the dogs to his bidding.

I learned one other thing from our prisoners. Sigtryggr, my daughter’s husband, had refused to sail with his brother. He was still in Ireland. Beadwulf would think otherwise because he would see the flag of the red axe and he would think it belonged to Sigtryggr, but two of the prisoners told me that the brothers shared the symbol. It was their dead father’s flag, the bloody red axe of Ivar, but Sigtryggr’s axe, at least for the moment, was resting. Ragnall’s axe had chopped a bloody

hole in our defences, but my son-in-law was still in Ireland.
I touched my hammer and prayed he stayed there.

‘We must go,’ I told Finan.

Because we had to whip Ragnall into defeat.

And I thought we would ride east.