

The future King of England, Edmund Ironside, fights to not only defend his people but also save his father from his troubled past and those who seek to manipulate him for their own ends.

England's Martyr

By Alfred Read

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England's Martyr



BOOK ONE
of the *Ironside Trilogy*

ALFRED READ

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Prologue

The dream was always the same. He was a young man again, too young yet to have been compelled to take on the burdens of kingship. He stood alone in a small, draughty stone chapel, a place unadorned by finery or warmth, the night black and featureless outside. Before him lay the body of his older half-brother, Edward. Edward was dead. He was always dead, his pallid form lying motionless upon the altar, his sunken eyes closed and hands clasped up to his chest as if in prayer.

He tried to reach out to him, hoping to take his hand in his, imploring him to wake up. He never stirred. Part of him always wished him to somehow spring to life, to be the boy he was and spare him the burdens of what lay ahead. Edward never moved. He lay still, saintly in his repose, the faint, flickering candlelight playing across his ever-youthful features. He then noticed the wound, that jagged, ugly gash in Edward's side, a mark left by the hand of one who would kill a king. He felt alarm now. Somebody had done this. Somebody had killed him. Then the guilt. The heavy, suffocating guilt and anxiety. He was being watched. He turned around.

They were all there again. Staring at him, accusation in their eyes. Bishop Dunstan was one of them, long dead now, but here again tonight, placing blame with the others. That slippery bastard, Ælfric, was there alongside his son, Ælfgar, both of them looking straight at him, along with a younger man he didn't recognize. The valiant Byrhtnoth stood off to the side, not so brave tonight but ready to accuse with the rest of them. Bishop Ælfstan too. Ulfcytel. Ælfhelm. Thored. Sigferth. Wulfgeat. They were all here and more, they were always here, crowding the chapel, staring at him, silent in their accusations. They all believed he'd killed his own brother. They all thought he'd killed the king. He hadn't. He was just a boy. It wasn't fair. But they wouldn't look away. If only they would look away.

Panic rose in his chest. From the shadows, always on time, emerged his mother, Ælfthryth. She moved towards him, ignoring the others, dressed in heavy, dark robes. She was always saying something, just quiet enough to be inaudible, but what was it? Why would she not speak up? And why would the others not turn to look at her? Her eyes, this night and every other, were fixed on Edward rather than him, a look of remorse etched upon her face, her lips moving swiftly as she repeated the same phrase, over and over, always too quiet. Too quiet. TOO QUIET.

King Æthelred opened his eyes, his nightclothes clinging to his skin and the bedsheets drenched in sweat. Another night with the dream. Always the same dream, going exactly as it had dozens of times before. Sometimes months would go by without them, and in their absence his sleep would be undisturbed, the memories of his troubled past seeming to finally fade into wishful irrelevance. Then they would return, and with them, strife across the realm. Dissent, treachery, and war seemed to be his lot as king, his troubles never-ending, a new threat from outside and within always looming on the horizon.

He sat up, prising the sheets from his body and shifting his weight around so his legs exited the side of his bed in one fluid movement. He rose to his feet and took a few halting steps over to his desk, working the strength back into his limbs as he did so. A splash of water from a hand basin drove the fatigue from his eyes, the cool sensation easing his mind back into focus. He stared at his hazy, shifting reflection in the water. Aged. Thinning, silvered hair reaching just past his shoulders. A short scrub of a beard. Dark, tired, mournful eyes. A troubled man. From the days of his youth onward.

He turned away, the sight doing absolutely nothing to lift his spirits. A sharp chill had worked its way into his bedchamber, his skin prickling against the clinging, soaked linen of his nightshirt. He tore the garment from his body, hurling it with disgust and frustration against the wall, the cloth impacting on the bare masonry with a damp slap.

Æthelred retrieved a woollen nightgown from the chest at the foot of his bed, taking a moment to savour the new-found warmth after easing his feet into a pair of fur-lined leather slippers. He knew it was useless attempting to sleep again. Once he was up he was up, and the fear of falling back into the presence of those accusing eyes always served to keep him fully awake. Something was off about the last dream too. He couldn't put his finger on it, but there'd been something different about it, although precisely what had changed eluded him. That had not happened before. He would have to think.

The hall outside his bedchamber seemed more foreboding than usual, the flickering shadows cast by a line of stuttering torches moving as if they had a life of their own. Æthelred strode past the two figures standing guard at his door, both men instinctively falling into step behind him, the heavy treads of their armoured bodies echoing across the hallway and carrying into the passageways beyond.

After twenty or so paces he turned left, his hand reaching out to grasp the ageing iron door handle to his study. He pushed with some effort, the heavy oak door easing back on its hinges, the welcome sight of what he sometimes felt was his one true refuge opening up before him. He paused in the doorway, a moment later turning to address one of the two guards immediately behind him.

“Bring Eadric,” he said simply, the armoured figure nodding its head once before striding away down the hall, its expression hidden beneath a sheer mail coif that hung from the silver-plated metal of its visor. Æthelred ducked through the now open doorway, the single remaining guard stepping through after him.

The air inside was noticeably warmer, no doubt due to the wood fire crackling softly from an impressively wide stone hearth on the far side of the room. Stout shelves lined a good portion of the walls here, offering a wide assortment of tomes and curiosities that it still pleased Æthelred to keep around. A well-tailored crimson rug lay a short distance from the hearth, upon which rested a pair of finely carved chairs placed to accommodate any reader looking to take full advantage of both heat and light for after-hours study.

This was not the time for reading, and the king instead made his way over to his usual spot at the window. The guard behind him gently eased the door to a close before taking up a protective vigil beside it, his mail-clad form motionless yet potent in the dim firelight. Æthelred pushed the window's wooden shutters ajar and then open, breathing in deeply as the rich air of the Temes washed over him. The night sky hung stark and silent above, the stars sharp and lustrous in their heavenly splendour, the cobbled streets and stone buildings below veiled in darkness.

For a moment he felt the vast expanse of the world stretching out before him, a thousand times a thousand places to go, far away from the pontificating, backstabbing futilities of his court. A breeze tugged at his robes, almost as if he were being encouraged to make that audacious step and just ride out into the city and beyond, free to make his own fate. But he wasn't free. He was the rightful King of England. He had responsibilities to the realm, and the throne was his until God said otherwise.

Yet if any other ruler had ever had as many enemies, he'd not heard it. Foes near and far wished to unseat him, and perhaps the most threatening of these was the Danish king, Sweyn Forkbeard. This foreign savage had plagued his kingdom for years now, his hordes striking with little warning

to loot and burn whatever they pleased and then escape from grasp before Æthelred could muster the forces to face them.

In desperation, he'd resorted to paying Sweyn to leave his lands unharmed; a humiliation that weighed heavily on his reputation. This had also created a significant tax burden upon his subjects, leading to grumbling and dissent from ingrates unwilling to pay their due. Æthelred would have none of it, and the fact that Sweyn had at last withdrawn back to Denmark was evidence enough his policy had been the correct one. Let his people complain all they liked, at least they were alive.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of England's troubles, and as Sweyn returned to Denmark another threat had emerged. Thorkell "the Tall" was his name, and after gathering an army from across Scandinavia he was bleeding England just as Sweyn had done, demanding hefty tribute to spare its people and then taking what remained through violence whenever it pleased him.

Thorkell was an unknown quantity to Æthelred. The word was he was the leader of some kind of association of warriors for hire, and that he'd won prestige and authority through martial prowess rather than statecraft or heritage. This may explain how he'd been able to recruit men from all corners of the north, promising renown and easy pickings preying upon an England already weakened by the campaigns of Sweyn Forkbeard.

Æthelred didn't want to admit Thorkell was right in his assumptions. England had been weakened, in more ways than one. In better times it may have been a simple matter to raise a force to drive the invaders back. Yet rather than rallying to their king, plenty of so-called nobles could see no further than their own petty interests, second-guessing their rightful monarch and ensuring no cohesive defence was ever possible. In the past this had repeatedly frustrated Æthelred's efforts to bring Sweyn to battle, and the same was happening now.

Indeed, one of the direst of such incidents had occurred last year when he'd assembled an armada to do battle with Thorkell's invasion fleet off the coast of Cantwara. If they had won there Thorkell's army would have been smashed before it could even land, thus sparing the kingdom the prolonged bloodletting it was presently enduring. Alas, it was not to be. Just as they were preparing to confront the enemy, Lord Beorhtric, a brother to Æthelred's own trusted Eadric, had accused the supposedly noble Lord Wulfnoth of treachery against the crown. Wulfnoth and his supporters had acted fast, stealing over twenty vessels from Æthelred's fleet and using them to make their escape. They'd then turned their ire on the innocent,

burning and looting several settlements along the south coast and putting their people to the sword. Æthelred still couldn't believe Wulfnoth was capable of such vindictiveness. He'd always come across as so civilised.

Beorhtric had given chase, promising to deliver the traitor to Æthelred alive if possible. Yet as if part of some dark spell, an accursed storm had seen his force dashed on the shore, their ships lost and their men without aid. Wulfnoth had then attacked them, seeking to take revenge on Beorhtric for exposing his treason. Beorhtric had fought him off with great bravery, but the same storm that had assailed him had then caught Æthelred's fleet in its jaws, wreaking havoc and necessitating his speedy retreat to his capital, Lundenburg. Æthelred still wondered what had gotten into Wulfnoth. The man had always seemed loyal. Where he had escaped to remained a mystery.

In any case, the chaos had allowed Thorkell to land at Sandwice, debarking his thousands of warriors from his hundreds of ships entirely unopposed. The fiend had then spent the autumn of 1009 ransacking much of the south, reducing many a hamlet and village to smoking ruin. Even the great and holy city of Canterburie had been threatened, forcing the locals to hand over a sizeable amount of coin right into Thorkell's own coffers. That wasn't acceptable, and so Æthelred had bravely rushed southward to face the enemy, expecting to be joined in his campaign by his local thegns. He was to be disappointed yet again. Eadric had discovered at the last moment that the half-wit Ealdorman of Hamptonscir, Ælfric, had failed to raise the forces he'd promised, putting the king's army at a numerical disadvantage. He'd again returned to Lundenburg, reminding himself to deal with Ælfric at a later date. This had not been the first time the man had failed him.

Æthelred took some satisfaction from recalling what had happened next. Overconfident and drunk on his victories, Thorkell had been foolish enough to attack the capital itself. His savage horde had thrown itself against the city's ancient walls, losing many of their number to both spear and arrow shot from above. Thorkell had eventually been driven off, much to the elation of Lundenburg's people, but he'd then moved westward, sacking the great city of Oxeneford before heading back east into Cantwara. There he'd lurked all winter, licking his wounds or receiving reinforcements, Æthelred knew not, only to suddenly take to ship and head north to Eastengle with the first rays of spring.

Word then came that a large English force was gathering to oppose him, under the leadership of Eastengle's famous ealdorman, Ulfcytel. Æthelred had tried to be pleased. Six years previously Ulfcytel had led a rag-tag force

against another of Sweyn Forkbeard's invading hosts and bloodied the bastards as deserved. Although it hadn't been a complete victory given the enemy had retained the field, Ulfcytel had won some renown as a leader of men, and the news that he was now moving to oppose Thorkell had uplifted many.

Yet in his darker moments Æthelred was not so enamoured. A popular leader at the head of an army was not something a man in his position could afford to be complacent about. He and Ulfcytel had admittedly once been friends, and Æthelred had even allowed him to marry his daughter, Wulfhild. But that was before he'd won fame against the Forkbeard, and his influence had only grown since then to terrifying proportions. Would he move against him? It was not impossible, considering the level of treachery already on display from his supposed subjects, and should Ulfcytel even defeat Thorkell...

Æthelred was startled from his troubled thoughts by a knock at the door, the sudden, sharp sound cutting through the peaceful, contemplative ambience of his study. He turned from his view at the window, nodding once to the solitary guard to receive his guest. He knew who it was. Eadric was always prompt when summoned.

The king's guard moved from his post and slid the door back a few inches, peering through the gap he'd made in an attempt to spy any potential threats outside. Clearly satisfied, he heaved the door open entirely with a single movement, allowing two figures to enter. Æthelred recognized one of the newcomers as the guard he'd sent to fetch Eadric, his posture suggesting he wasn't entirely at ease, almost as if he didn't trust the man he'd been sent to escort. It mattered not. He had important business to discuss, matters which were best aired away from prying ears.

"Both of you can wait in the hall," Æthelred said curtly, his two faithful protectors responding immediately and exiting the study without a word. They were loyal men, and he trusted them with his life. Sadly, the mind of a simple soldier was ill-equipped to hear of the complexities of politics, and Æthelred wasn't inclined to share his thoughts with just anyone, even those charged with his protection. They could best fulfil their duties out of earshot, at least for the next hour or so.

If Eadric had been asleep he showed little sign, his face remaining free of any hint of lethargy and seemingly fully alert. His grey eyes retained their usual sharpness, his blond hair tied back as if he'd been at weapons practice. His short, no-nonsense beard also appeared immaculate, showing no trace of the kind of disarray that usually came from prolonged slumber.

His chosen attire of a hardened leather tunic and breeches was also unusual for the hour, reinforcing the impression he'd been engaged in some kind of martial pursuit. He bowed before his king, a perfectly executed manoeuvre.

"Did I disturb you?" Æthelred inquired, gesturing lazily towards one of the chairs by the fire.

"You did not, my king," Eadric replied neutrally, correctly interpreting Æthelred's gesture as an invitation to take a seat. He did so, a look of slight consternation on his face upon noticing the still-open window. The chill of the outside world had already made serious inroads into the previously comfortable warmth of the study.

Æthelred ignored him, crossing the room to claim his own place by the fire, the window left open. The two men sat in silence for awhile, the light cast from the hearth dancing erratically in the gloom. The king had become naturally suspicious in his time, his once youthful enthusiasm giving way to a certain bitterness as calamity after calamity afflicted his realm. It was not easy for him to speak his true intentions, let alone converse with another on his very dreams. Eadric did him a service by breaking the silence.

"As I understood it, my king had wished to hear my report on the present crisis after breakfast? Has something changed?"

"I had the dream again," Æthelred said quietly.

"About your brother?"

"Indeed, although something was different," Æthelred breathed, his mind straining to remember precisely how his all-too-regular nightmare had changed.

"Does my king take this as an omen?" Eadric inquired, his voice now hardly louder than a murmur, his grey eyes sharp and almost sparkling in the firelight. He was on to something, Æthelred thought. He wasn't a superstitious man, but he believed things generally happened for a reason.

"Perhaps," said Æthelred, his gaze lingering on a single ember that had escaped its brethren and was now glowing, ruby red, on the hearthstones. "The dream always comes when trouble lies ahead...this situation with Ulfcytel..."

His voice trailed off. Eadric seemed to read his thoughts. "You don't trust him," he said. "That's understandable. He has an army. He's popular. If he defeats Thorkell he'll win even more renown. People may even start to see him as the man to defend the kingdom when Sweyn Forkbeard returns."

Æthelred's jaw tightened at his choice of words. He'd hoped his policy of paying tribute to his Danish counterpart would be seen as a hard-won diplomatic victory, despite how many times Sweyn had returned in the past

to again wage war on England. To hear of his reappearance spoken of with such certainty was a sting Æthelred could do without.

And yet he couldn't disagree. Sweyn would almost certainly return, again demanding payment and again likely to try and destroy everything in his path if he didn't get it. Such were the Danes. This would be an ideal time to prepare a defence of some kind, provided they could find a way to deal with Thorkell. But how?

"Are you suggesting that Ulfcytel could defeat Thorkell without me?" Æthelred asked, his pride wounded.

"Ulfcytel already has a capable force and is himself a capable fighter," Eadric replied, apparently unperturbed by his king's tone. "And yet he's outnumbered. He'll expect you to move north with the garrison here to attack Thorkell with him. You should remain here."

"Why?" Æthelred asked, irritated at the idea of again being seen as an indecisive, even cowardly, ruler.

"Because there is every chance that Thorkell could simply double back if he detects you and Ulfcytel attempting to trap him. He'd be a fool not to. And Lundenburg without your protection will fall."

That would be it, Æthelred knew. If he lost Lundenburg it would take a miracle to keep the loyalty of any of his thegns and ealdormen; a task that was hard enough already. Thorkell could simply loot the city and return to his ships or, even worse, occupy it and attempt to stay, perhaps even declare himself king.

Æthelred's mind began to work feverishly, imagining a scenario where he was forced to lay siege to his own capital, the walls of his fair city manned by Norsemen intent on carving out the heart of his own country. And Ulfcytel...the English would then look to him or some other bastard to lead them. It would be the end for King Æthelred. All his efforts up until now would have been in vain.

"That must not happen," Æthelred said firmly. "That cannot happen."

"It need not," Eadric assured. "You and your forces should remain in Lundenburg. But I will ask...you recall using Norse mercenaries in the past, yes? How you won Olaf Tryggvason over?"

Æthelred nodded, wondering where this was going. The mercenaries in question had initially been a welcome addition to his forces, although they were both expensive and unreliable, and many of them had gone on to betray him when opportunity arose. He'd made sure they'd paid for that in blood, and what was already known as the "Saint Brice's Day Massacre" had sent a clear message he would not tolerate the treachery of foreigners.

His English troops had also resented them massively, for the hatred between the two peoples remained intense after decades of conflict and would not be eased through the mere exchange of coin. It was to be expected.

“How about we simply pay Thorkell to fight with us?” Eadric asked. That was a novel proposal. It was one thing to hire Danes on an irregular basis and in relatively small numbers, but to purchase the services of an entire army, their infamous leader alongside them, was quite unusual. And likely massively expensive.

“That would drain my coffers further,” said Æthelred, a touch of exasperation in his voice. “The realm is already over-taxed as it is. I could have a revolt on my hands.”

“Possibly, but think on this,” Eadric continued, leaning forward slightly as he spoke. “People will fear you all the more with Thorkell by your side, not just the English, but also Sweyn. An English king able to command a Norse war host? That would turn heads. Sweyn would take note. He'd take us seriously then. He'd be a fool not to, just as he'd be a fool to try and attack us with Thorkell in our employ.”

Æthelred paused to properly digest his words. What was being proposed was quite novel, yet the amount of coin needed would indeed require more taxes. This would anger his subjects immensely, although he wondered how successful any revolt could be if he had an army of Norsemen ready to unleash. It would also most certainly make an impression on Sweyn, perhaps even convince the cur to stay away altogether. Yet there were dangers. Betrayal could come at any moment, and Æthelred had learned that money was only enough to secure loyalty for so long. But given England's currently perilous state, did he have much choice? Perhaps Eadric's proposal would give them time to consider other options.

“Any attempt to approach Thorkell with such an offer should be done with the utmost care,” Æthelred said thoughtfully. “I cannot be seen to be negotiating with him so closely after all he has done.”

Eadric nodded slowly, becoming lost in his thoughts for a few moments. “I will be blunt, my king,” he finally said. “If Ulfcytel attacks Thorkell we can forget this plan, and Sweyn will likely return anyway. If Ulfcytel somehow defeats Thorkell his reputation will only grow, and considering so many are already moving to join him...”

“Who?” interrupted Æthelred, anger now rising in his throat. “Who else joins Ulfcytel?”

“Several notables have already promised troops or are attempting to join him themselves,” Eadric replied quickly, a flash of concern entering his voice. “Your kin, Æthelstan, is with him, as is Oswy, kin by law to Byrhtnoth, hero of Malduna...”

That last name really set Æthelred on edge. He'd known his brother-in-law, Æthelstan, was in Eastengle, probably as a means to prove himself considering his father, Thored, a former Ealdorman of Euerwic, had passed on some years ago. He was something of an unknown factor, admittedly, and the king's real ties with Æthelstan's family had been severed following the death of his dear wife, Ælfgifu. She'd been a wise match at the time, the marriage securing the loyalty of Norþanhymbre under Thored and providing Æthelred with sons and daughters.

It was also very possible that Æthelstan resented the rule of the brave and loyal Uhtred as the current Ealdorman of Norþanhymbre, perhaps thinking it was time his own family regained their former prestige. Æthelred was unsure if Æthelstan was even aware of the dark events he and Eadric had set in motion to secure Uhtred's position, but given his affiliations with Ulfcytel it seemed very possible he was up to something.

Yet it was the mention of Oswy that was cause for real alarm. The man was a living reminder of the illustrious Byrhtnoth, and when people thought of him they thought of one thing: Malduna. It was almost twenty years past, but Æthelred could still remember first hearing of it; how the battle had lasted all day, how the English had refused to give in even in the face of Sweyn Forkbeard's vast horde, how Byrhtnoth had been slain fighting to the last...the Battle of Malduna had become legend, and rightly so.

But legends could be dangerous, especially in the hands of those able to lay claim to them. Oswy was able to do precisely that due to his relationship with the martyred Byrhtnoth. The news that he was now preparing for war alongside the famous Ulfcytel made Æthelred more than a little uneasy. Was this simple coincidence, or were the two men conspiring against him?

“Why would you say Oswy has gone to join Ulfcytel?” Æthelred asked pointedly, now more than ever wishing Eadric would say something that allayed his suspicions. Unfortunately he was to be disappointed, the very next words he heard sounding as if they'd been plucked from his own troubled mind.

“If Ulfcytel wishes to raise a formidable force, Oswy would be important to him in more ways than one. When people see him they remember Malduna. They remember Byrhtnoth. They remember resistance.

They remember their pride. Oswy could be useful for any man wishing to..."

"Wishing to what?" Æthelred snapped, his patience wearing thin.

"...use his prestige for political reasons. Political power. To become a leader of men. Impose his will on others," Eadric finished.

"Impose his will on me," Æthelred muttered. It was not a question and he did not need clarification. He understood the situation. He could see the danger he now faced, and it wasn't solely from the foreign warlord, Thorkell. His own kind were not just unreliable, unpredictable, or incompetent. There was treachery here.

"There is more you should know, my king," Eadric said, a note of caution returning to his voice. Æthelred saw the man seemed almost fearful of his reaction at times, an observation that pleased him. Given all the disobedience across his kingdom, at least one man knew his place.

"Of those notables travelling to join Ulfcytel," continued Eadric, "there is one who I fear will all but confirm our suspicions as to what he may be planning."

"Who is it?" Æthelred asked, wondering how anyone at this point could make the situation worse.

Eadric inhaled deeply before continuing. "Ælfric. The Ealdorman Ælfric has raised what's left of the Hamptonscir fyrd and is marching for Eastengle."

Æthelred slowly got to his feet. He took a few measured steps forward towards the fire, holding his hand out over the stuttering flames. He noted how cold his study had become. He'd not really felt it before, perhaps finding the frigid air a strange comfort whilst he pondered his many troubles.

"Close my window," he said bluntly, observing with some satisfaction how quickly the young Eadric carried out his command. An authoritative response was what was needed, in small matters and large. Dealing with Ælfric would be no different. He should have done this years ago. It was all so clear now.

Ælfric's recent failure to raise troops to join Æthelred in his bid to confront Thorkell had been suspicious enough. The fact he had now managed to raise his fyrd but to join Ulfcytel marked him as a traitor. He should have been made an example of the first time he'd tried to betray Æthelred some eighteen years past. The king had been patient then. Not now. Action was needed.

“I have made up my mind,” Æthelred said aloud, his back turned as he continued to stand over the hearth, gazing into the flames. “The presence of Ulfcytel, Oswy, and Ælfric in one place might have been innocent enough, but at the head of an army it's too much. I am no fool. I can read the political situation. I am a king still, despite how much that may pain some.”

Æthelred wished it had not come to this, but the realm was again in peril, and if he could not trust those who owed him obedience he would have to look for support elsewhere. He continued to stare into the flames whilst he spoke, finding it easier to convey such grave instructions as if he were merely thinking aloud.

“You are to have your agents open up a means of communication with Thorkell. You are to impress upon him the good sense of gaining wealth through loyal service to me, King Æthelred, rather than throwing away the lives of his men in struggle and strife.”

Eadric nodded slightly, his face unreadable whilst he listened.

“I also have an additional task for you, one likely as difficult as it is dangerous,” said Æthelred. “I want you to go to Ulfcytel. You are to make the strategic situation clear to him and that it's impossible for me to leave Lundenburg undefended. He has no hope of victory without me, so his army is to move south. Tell him I intend for us to join forces or something akin to that. I can then deal with him as I see fit. If he will not cooperate, I want you to use the situation to eliminate Oswy, Ulfcytel, Ælfric, and anyone else who may be a threat to me. However you do it, we can blame it on the Danes. Is that understood?”

Eadric smiled grimly, apparently untroubled by what he'd just heard. “I am pleased that my king has come to see the situation for what it is,” he said, almost appreciatively. “I will set out for Eastengle without delay and convey your desires to Ulfcytel. I already have somebody in his camp, close to him. Almost kin, you could say. So if he will not obey his king, the chaos of any clash between himself and Thorkell will open up opportunities for us to punish such disloyalty.”

Æthelred liked the way he talked. He'd understood what was being asked of him, and he knew the dire nature of the task did not necessitate further elaboration. A victorious army headed by Ulfcytel, Oswy, and Ælfric would be a greater threat to Æthelred's crown than Thorkell himself. Northmen could be paid off. He'd done it before, as he hoped to do again. Unpredictable, charismatic English nobles with popular support, not to mention armies, were another matter. Men like that could make or break kings. They had to go.

Æthelred resumed his seat, his eyes drifting to the window. The night outside had changed, turning from an almost impenetrable blackness to a deep, enveloping blue. Dawn approached. He gestured towards the door, an indication that he would be alone, his gaze returning once again to the fire. Eadric moved to cross the room, the sound of footsteps light and easy-going on the stone slabs. Light footsteps on stone. Like his mother. In the chapel. From his dream.

An image filled his mind. Ælfric and his son, Ælfgar, staring at him with the others. But this night...a younger man with them. One he did not recognize. Dark hair. A full beard. Large, brown eyes. Broad, strong shoulders. His gaze was different. Not so accusatory. Just sadness. That was what he'd seen tonight. That was what was new. Who was he? What did this mean?

Nothing good. The dream always meant trouble. The fact that it had suddenly changed did not put Æthelred at ease. He turned his head just as Eadric reached the door, his hand reaching out to take the handle. Æthelred called out:

"How many sons does Ælfric have?!"

Eadric stepped back and turned, a hint of confusion on his face.

"I apologise, my king, can you repeat the question?"

"How many sons does Ælfric have?" Æthelred repeated, a tad calmer this time.

"As I recall, he has the one heir, Ælfgar, the one you had..." his voice faded. Æthelred knew what he meant, and he appreciated him not speaking of it now.

"Find out how many sons he has," Æthelred said evenly. "If a son younger than Ælfgar, perhaps with darker hair and broader shoulders, should make himself known, find out more about him. If he seems like a threat...treat him as his father deserves."

He understood. There was no need to spell things out with Eadric, Æthelred saw that. His obedience, intellect, and humble background were the reasons the king had ensured his star continued to rise at court. Æthelred knew he would do as he was commanded.

Eadric bowed again before he turned to leave. Æthelred went back to his window, becoming lost in thought as he stared out across the still-slumbering city, the first hints of morning birdsong drifting on the wind.

Eadric strode lightly down the hallway from the king's study, his mood uplifted, plans and possibilities unfurling in his mind. Those two guards outside didn't like him. He could read that well enough, the one who'd fetched him from his chambers having the manner of a man who expected to have to defend himself. Interesting that they could see it. Strange that some could not.

Everyone had their gifts, no? And Eadric, Ealdorman of Mierce and most trusted advisor to King Æthelred, certainly had his. He was pleased the king had responded well to his counsel, apparently believing his ultimate decision was entirely of his own mind. Suggestion was a powerful talent, Eadric knew. Now the die was cast.

“The king is well advised,” Eadric muttered contentedly.

I

Days of hurried marching through rain. Mud encrusting boots so thickly it wasn't worth the effort to take them off. Precious moments of sleep snatched on cold, damp earth, the snoring of men and the shuffling footsteps of sentries an ever-present irritant. Stale bread, weak ale, and the threat of enemy attack, which, if their luck in this war proved consistent, would come when they were most vulnerable. All these things were part of a warrior's life for as long as he could remember. A nightmare for some. A duty for all.

Today he couldn't get enough of it.

After over a week's worth of arduous travel, Alaric, son of the Ealdorman Ælfric of Hamptonscir, was within sight of his destination. The journey had not been easy, the incessant downpour at times turning the roads into a muddy ruin better suited to pigs than men. Now that was almost over. With just over two hundred of his best men, Alaric was traversing a last stretch of road just a half mile north of the town of Theodford, and with that, was within reach of a chance to rally against the heathen threat and strike a blow for the salvation of England. Any amount of hardship had been worth it. He'd come all this way again, five times and yet more, for half of such an opportunity.

He would not be alone. Marching forward at the head of his warriors, Alaric could see many others had already answered the call. Several thousand men were camped on a sodden expanse of heathland just a short distance northward, the lines of soaked and at times mud splattered tents offering welcome shelter to their likely march-weary occupants. Additional columns of soldiers could be seen moving into the camp from both the north and west, the men gradually dispersing into smaller, ad hoc groups intent on unpacking supplies and erecting shelter as quickly as humanly possible.

This was the mustering point for the new English army, one that, God willing, would put an end to the latest predations of the now infamous heathen warlord, Thorkell the Tall. The location was well chosen, for the area was partially enclosed by a man-made ring of heaped, solid earth intended to not only signify a rally point but provide a defensible position against attack. The village of Wretham to the north provided a convenient supply base, whilst a lake, now swollen by the downpour, was visible to the east. "Hringmere", the locals were said to call it. As good a name as any.

Alaric caught sight of a man on horseback heading in their direction from the camp. He called his men to a halt, the familiar scraping, shuffling ambience of two hundred pairs of marching feet easing off as the sound of heavy, ironshod hooves drew closer. His friend, Osmund, moved up alongside him, the man's cumbersome, crunching footsteps betraying his presence some seconds before his burly outline appeared in Alaric's peripheral vision.

"Ready to use those fancy manners of yours now, eh?" Osmund said cheerfully, flecks of rainwater showering off his saturated, rust-coloured beard as he spoke. He was a larger man than most, Alaric being no exception, and he struck a truly imposing image now, clad in a long coat of shimmering mail and a full helm that enclosed much of his face, save for those glittering blue eyes and red explosion of a beard.

"Hopefully there won't be much need for them after today," Alaric replied, a second later realising he'd inadvertently accepted Osmund's compliment that he was indeed a good speaker. The banter between the two men was often fierce, and at times a casual listener could be forgiven for thinking they despised one another. The more world-weary would suspect otherwise, however. Men as close as brothers would often express fellowship in less than flattering ways, complimenting each other with what could sound like the harshest of insults. Osmund stating that Alaric had "fancy manners" was possibly the nicest thing he'd said to him in months. This was something to ridicule him for later, perhaps, at least once they were out of this accursed weather and had found a source of half-decent mead.

The rider eased his horse to a clattering halt about a dozen paces ahead of them. The face of the man sitting atop the rather fine black steed was largely obscured amidst a thick, beige woollen cloak, although a flash of metal from under his hood indicated he was likely fully armoured. He scrutinised Alaric for a moment, possibly trying to ascertain whether he was indeed the leader of these men on the basis of the quality of his attire. The column of warriors at Alaric's back had now come to a complete stop, their number trailing down the road in a line of grey metal and towering spear tips. They were a fearsome sight, all mail hauberks, iron helmets, and stout linden shields, each man also carrying an axe upon his back or belt for use at close quarters.

Alaric stood at the head of them, his status as a man of noble birth reflected in the fact he carried a sword as well as a spear, his helm standing out also via the decorative silver plate that hugged the contours of his visor.

Although Alaric instinctively assumed he'd look as bedraggled as he felt, to the rider he still cut a fine figure, his helm shimmering slightly in the deluge, the deep green of his cloak parting to reveal expertly-wrought scale mail and the tell-tale sheathed sword of a man of good standing.

Satisfied he was more than likely addressing the right person, the rider finally spoke, his voice raised slightly to compensate for the sound of rainfall:

"Allow me to extend the greetings of my lord, the Ealdorman Ulfcytel of Eastengle."

"And allow me to extend greetings from my father, the Ealdorman Ælfric of Hamptonscir, and on my own behalf as his son, Alaric," came the response. Was that a fancy enough salutation? He didn't much care at this point. Osmund could get a laugh out of it later.

The rider inclined his head in respect, gazing back down the line of soldiers as if expecting Alaric's father to make himself known. "My father sent me and my men on ahead," said Alaric, aware that a question relating to the man's whereabouts was likely coming. "We were most eager to respond to your lord's request so we have moved with extreme haste to meet you here."

"That's most appreciated," the rider said, his face still inscrutable from the confines of his hood. "And the Ealdorman Ælfric himself? He is well?"

"He is in fine health, my friend," Alaric replied, deciding now might be the time to tell him what he really wanted to know. "He marches this way with a larger force of around two thousand men of the Hamptonscir fyrd. They should arrive within the week."

The rider nodded his head several times with some enthusiasm, clearly pleased by what he'd heard. Alaric could just about spy a smile of a sort cracking across the man's face, an image that lightened his heart. The chaos of the past year had been hard on the people of Hamptonscir, limiting the forces they could spare to venture beyond their own borders. If the Ealdorman Ulfcytel was likely to be happy with what they could bring to his campaign, Alaric was glad.

In truth, Ælfric's decision to send his son on ahead was not entirely his own. Alaric had implored him, begged even, to be permitted to do a forced march, stressing the importance of joining Ulfcytel's army with all haste. A larger force with an ample supply train could not move with the kind of speed the situation required, so Alaric had hatched the idea of simply rushing northwards with some of their best men, thinking correctly that the veterans had the grit to endure such a harrowing journey.

His father had eventually agreed, despite some initial reservations. And it had worked. No matter what happened now, the Ealdorman Ulfcytel had a couple of hundred of Hamptonscir's finest at his disposal. The men could make a difference, and there was always a chance Thorkell could delay any move further north, allowing Ælfric to arrive with reinforcements. Alaric had made the right decision here. He knew it.

The rider had now dismounted and taken several steps towards him. Alaric sensed Osmund tense, the paw-like grip around his spear indicating he suspected the rider may pose some kind of threat. Alaric paid it no mind. Better to be too ready than not ready enough, and Osmund was hardly likely to attack this man for the pure sake of it. He wasn't a Dane.

At five paces distant the rider halted and eased back the hood of his cloak, revealing a face that clearly did not belong to a man intent on violence. In fact this one looked like he'd be more at home in a monastery library than a mustering field, his earnest expression and thin, light blond beard speaking of a still youthful naivety. Possibly the dourest part of his almost gentle countenance was the iron, open-faced helmet he wore, the severity of which failed to detract from a smile that was as genuine as it was infectious.

"I should add my name is Osbert," he said happily, again bowing his head as he addressed Alaric. "I am a steward of the Ealdorman Ulfcytel, tasked with helping to organise the mustering of this army."

"Then you'll know where the food is," Osmund interjected, matter-of-factly, although Alaric knew he took a certain pleasure in disrupting these formalities. Osbert didn't seem fazed, no doubt from being accustomed to men of Osmund's type.

"That I do," he replied jovially, "and you'll be glad to hear there's plenty of it. If you'll now follow me?"

With a single neat movement Osbert pulled the hood of his cloak back into position, the familiar "tink tink" sound of raindrops impacting on his helmet being cut short. He strode back over to his horse, gently taking it by the reins and easing the faithful beast around in the direction of the way he'd come. He set off at a brisk pace, tenderly leading his steed alongside him, a graceful gesture of his right arm signalling it would be correct to follow.

Alaric and Osmund fell into step behind him, the rest of the men doing likewise with a certain eagerness that spoke to the likelihood that the news of food was quickly spreading down the line. They followed Osbert for about a quarter mile up the road, the westernmost portion of earthworks

now close at hand to their immediate right. Several groups of men were working on the “ring” encircling the muster field beyond, putting their backs into digging a long, shallow ditch that looked like it was intended to stretch across the entire southern facade.

Unbeknownst to Alaric, this ditch was actually designed to extend virtually around the entire perimeter, allowing excess rainwater to stream down the earthen ramparts of the “ring” and drain away safely. The ditch would also serve as an additional impediment to any attacker, as a man was liable to fall in if he didn't take due care in his efforts to get to grips with any defenders beyond it. Once in the ditch or struggling to climb out he could be easily finished off with an arrow or spear thrust from atop of the fortifications proper.

Both Osmund, Alaric, and the hundreds behind them were too fixated on the prospect of food and warmth to ponder such matters, and the line of soldiers filed past their labouring brethren without comment. Osbert continued to lead them north for several more minutes until he paused and turned right when the road they were on joined a wider, more heavily trafficked intersection. The column of troops followed suit, arcing around and heading east, the previously heavy, scraping thunder of their footfalls soon replaced with a wetter, less pleasing cacophony as they became reacquainted with their old friend, mud.

They passed a score of forlorn-looking warriors tasked with watching the road, Alaric and Osmund both nodding in respect at the men standing vigil in the grey downpour. Lengths of raw timber had been heaved into position here to demarcate the boundaries of the camp, their presence intended to force an attacker into attempting to rush the relatively narrow passage Alaric's troops were now marching through. Any foe attempting to climb over the barricades would run the risk of being shot full of arrows or stabbed before he planted his boots on the ground, whilst a mass of men trying to storm the roadway itself would be forced into a narrow bottleneck and punished accordingly.

Alaric noticed they were now getting into the encampment proper, an increasingly dense thicket of admittedly modest tents hoving into view along the left-hand side of the road. After several more minutes he again signalled for the column to halt, noting that Osbert had paused at another intersection. The road branched northward from here, heading towards Wretham, but not so far ahead and to their right lay an entrance to the ringed muster field. Osbert headed towards it, again gesturing for them to follow, leaving Alaric wondering why he'd stopped to begin with.

After another minute or so of marching there was no doubt they were very much at the heart of the camp. There were tents everywhere, like a vast expanse of greying white, and armed and armoured men were bustling this way and that, turning the ground beneath them into a sea of mud. Rainwater swiftly filled the deep, messy imprints left by their footfalls, yet miraculously nobody slipped up, making Alaric suspect these men were already well accustomed to living here.

A small smithy also lay a short distance ahead, its workspace protected from the elements by a sheet of canvas hoisted overhead via wooden poles. A rather serious-looking man was sat within, his hands expertly working the head of a spear against a grindstone to turn blunted metal back into something usable. A few others were busy with something at a makeshift forge, each of them looking like they were the only men present who were currently warm.

Several onlookers began to cheer when they clapped eyes on Alaric's men. The sound increased in volume, spreading like a wave as others joined in until it was as if the entire camp was celebrating. The men of Hamptonscir returned the honour in their own way, the crash of hundreds of spear shafts drumming on shields thundering outward to be carried for miles upon the evening breeze.

"I can't remember the last time anyone was so pleased to see us!" Alaric shouted to Osmund, the racket only just starting to subside.

"Somebody was once pleased to see you?" came the predictable response, the barb rendered harmless by the size of the grin on Osmund's face. Alaric mouthed an obscenity back at him and turned to face Osbert, who was looking positively elated by the shield-hammering spectacle he'd just witnessed. Osbert also seemed to have manifested himself a friend in the form of a grey-headed gent wrapped tight in a dark woollen cloak, the frown etched across his aged features suggesting he was quite uncomfortable in the rain.

"The mood is good here, is it not?" Osbert said, his hands placed on his hips.

"I'd say we're ready for a fight," Alaric responded, at the same time wondering if Osbert had ever been in one. "But not before we've eaten, I would hope?"

"Fear not," Osbert said, gesturing towards the stranger next to him. "This is Bertram, and he will get your men fed and set up for the night somewhere dry, although I expect the Ealdorman Ulfcytel will be wanting to speak with you. Will you follow me again?"

Alaric nodded at Bertram, who bowed his head in greeting. He then set off alongside Osbert, taking care with his footsteps whilst he attempted to traverse the abnormally muddy ground. He made it ten paces before he nearly lost his footing, managing to right himself at the last second and hoping beyond hope that Osmund hadn't seen him. He peered back over his shoulder, spying Osmund conferring with Bertram on the logistics of sheltering and feeding the new arrivals. He'd seen nothing.

"Don't let him near the ale!" Alaric called, pointing a finger at Osmund. His friend turned with a look of mock outrage, his hand rising to his chest in feigned shock. What was actually funny was the way Bertram gazed back and forth between them, unsure as to whether he really had just received orders to keep the man away from strong drink. Osmund would set him straight, no doubt.

Osbert led Alaric ahead and to the right, the pair passing through the opening in the ring wall they'd spied earlier. The space within seemed to have been turned into a storage area plus fort, with wide, sheltered berths housing barrels of supplies. A large number of severe-looking warriors were milling about, most of them trying to keep out of the rain whilst others stood vigil at the ramparts, staring out across the heathland in stoic readiness.

Osbert headed straight for a grey pavilion, this structure looking like it was a place of importance and one that apparently warranted its own path of narrow wooden planks leading up to its entrance. Alaric was grateful for something more solid to walk on, traversing the creaking yet stable pathway in pursuit.

They soon found themselves facing two particularly imposing guards standing watch outside the pavilion's entrance. The men here were likely from the personal retinue of the Ealdorman Ulfcytel, their equipment and demeanour suggesting they were more than capable of handling themselves in battle. Their shields were slung upwards and behind on their backs, their hands resting on the long handles of their war axes, their mailed hauberks heavy and long to the point they reached their knees. Like Alaric they wore helms that covered the entire face, although theirs were lacking any decorative silver. These men were to defend their lord by smashing the enemy to pieces. Looking pretty didn't enter into it. Alaric approved.

Osbert nodded to the two giants when he came within a sword's reach. They stood aside from their path, allowing Osbert to pass within. Alaric followed, eagerly stepping out of the chill downpour and into some much welcome shelter. He stood for a moment, taking in the change of

environment, enjoying the slightly warmer air and the fact he could no longer hear the sound of raindrops bouncing off metal. It seemed like he'd been in the rain for so long he'd forgotten what it was like to not feel it. He placed his hands on either side of his helmet, pulling it free with a single effort and letting his arms rest in front of him. Out of the rain and bare headed. Heavenly. Next thing he'd be able to take off his boots.

He breathed out, a long, deep exhalation, two parts relief and one part fatigue. Despite how Alaric felt, he still appeared somewhat presentable now his helm was absent, his dark brown eyes, thick wedge-like beard, and chestnut mane of hair serving to convey a certain presence.

He then realised people were staring at him. Three in fact. Osbert, and two powerful-looking individuals stood at a solid oak table strewn with candles, tankards, and one very large map. Osbert looked to the more senior of the two men, gesturing towards Alaric as he spoke:

"This is the Lord Alaric of Hamptonscir, son of the Ealdorman Ælfric, who has marched with great speed to aid us with two hundred well-equipped fighting men."

That was a good way of putting it. He had done just that.

"Was that your lot making that bloody massive racket just now?" came the gruff, demanding response from the man Osbert had addressed, his eyes fixed on Alaric and Alaric alone.

"I would say so. High spirits, you could call it," Alaric said lightly, returning the gaze steadily.

Their eyes remained locked for a few more moments, the man's expression inscrutable behind his vast silver beard and almost comically bushy eyebrows. His abundance of facial hair was at odds with his largely bald head, the scalp of which seemed to shine faintly in the flickering light cast from the candles. He was dressed in a similarly expertly-wrought coat of scale mail as Alaric's, an impressively thick cloak of rich, deep blue cascading back over a pair of broad, well-formed shoulders.

The man's paunch suggested he was partial to a tankard with a pie or two, yet the girth of his arms signified he was quite capable of putting a man down if required. His associate provided something of a contrast, possessing a thinner, more athletic figure, his shorter, neater beard and head of bountiful, light brown hair suggesting he were still in his youth, were it not for the smile lines across his face. His eyes flitted curiously between his rotund friend and Alaric, clearly wondering where this exchange might lead.

“Good, that was an impressive amount of hammering,” silver beard finally said, his face cracking into a broad grin. “Do that again in a few days and the Danes will soil themselves in fright when they hear it. I know I nearly did!”

“Thank heavens you didn’t,” the other man interjected, “we’d have had to abandon the camp in some haste.” All four of them laughed, silver beard’s mirth sounding like a cross between a pair of straining bellows and an enraged bear. It was good to hear.

“You’ll know me as Ulfcytel,” silver beard announced to Alaric, his voice straining slightly with the forming of words. “Rumour has it I’m the Ealdorman of Eastengle, and I’m also told I’m in charge of gathering this army and holding off that Thorkell bastard until the king comes to finish him.”

“Æthelred will be here,” the other man stated, a certain familiarity to his tone.

“Let’s hope so,” Ulfcytel replied, a hint of dismay in his dark eyes. “Your brother-in-law hasn’t exactly excelled himself when it comes to military matters, and I’m not confident of our numbers.”

Brother-in-law? This man must be Æthelstan, and a man related to a king, even if only by law, deserved a certain respect...even if that king was as useless as Æthelred, Alaric thought bitterly.

“Æthelred will be looking to settle accounts with Thorkell ever since he forced him back from Lundenburg,” Æthelstan said, although something about his tone gave the impression he didn’t quite mean it. “A ruler doesn’t like to be attacked in his home, and the army we are raising here presents him with a good opportunity to take the field and trap Thorkell between us and him.”

Ulfcytel nodded to himself, seemingly willing to go along with the notion that Æthelred may have suddenly developed a backbone. Alaric was not so sure. Last year he and his father had raised the Hamptonscir fyrd to join the king at first word of him marching south. They were ready to depart with several thousand men when they’d heard the news that Æthelred had instead headed back to Lundenburg, apparently under the impression his southern thegns would not raise troops to support him.

This made absolutely no sense. They’d mobilised as many men as they had, yet the king had suddenly abandoned his campaign, leaving the south to fend for itself. Without the king’s reinforcements they’d had no chance of confronting the enemy directly. Retreat and humiliation had been their lot, and when Thorkell had grown tired of them and headed north the surviving

people of Hamptonscir had returned to their burned villages and ruined farmsteads, each wondering why the king had not come to defend his people. It was a bitter memory, and Alaric would speak of it.

“If I may ask, my lords...why would we assume the king would be willing to confront Thorkell here after he'd abandoned us in the south?”

It was a fair question, he felt. Ulfcytel did not respond immediately, instead leaning forward and resting his hands upon the table, a slight frown on his face as his eyes began to again pore over his map. Æthelstan spoke up, apparently irked by a question he felt he'd already answered.

“As I said, the king was attacked in Lundenburg. That's more than enough to force him to take the situation seriously. Up until then Thorkell had contented himself with attacking settlements...”

“That were not as important as the capital?” Alaric interjected.

“I apologise if I sound insensitive, Alaric,” Æthelstan replied. “I imagine you've had a hard time of it. But the fact is if your father had raised an army as the king commanded last year when he'd mar...”

“We did raise an army!” Alaric spluttered, his temper rising in the face of such falsehood. “He turned back before we could join him and left us at the mercy of the heathens!”

Æthelstan blinked a few times at the sudden escalation. Ulfcytel's frown deepened, not so much out of annoyance but concern. Osbert shifted from one foot to the other, uneasy at the prospect of witnessing a heated exchange. Let him watch, Alaric thought. It might do him good to see a clash of words before a clash of arms.

“Is that true?” Ulfcytel asked quietly, his eyes still on the map in front of him, his hands placed firmly on the table edge.

“It is true, my Lord Ulfcytel,” Alaric said quickly. “The king commanded my father to raise his fyrd and he did so. The king then suddenly left us to fend for ourselves whilst he retreated to Lundenburg.”

Æthelstan responded with words more troubling than Alaric had heard in years. He didn't like consorting with so-called nobles precisely because of conversations like this, where cryptic remarks and snide retorts seemed to be the norm. All the same, what was said next caught him off guard.

“I'm afraid your father has a reputation for unreliability, Alaric. He's feigned illness twice now to avoid battle. Why would last year be any different? Can we really blame the king for being cautious?”

Alaric didn't know what he was talking about. He breathed in deeply, flexing his shoulders and drawing himself up to his full height. He had no

idea what he was referring to, but to all but call his father a coward was a step too far.

"I'd ask my Lord Æthelstan to be mindful of how he speaks about my family, especially when it comes to spreading false rumours." Alaric mouthed each word a touch slower than necessary, hoping to make it clear he would not brook any dissension on this.

Silence fell, save for the ever-present sound of raindrops impacting on the pavilion. Æthelstan returned Alaric's gaze, an eyebrow raised slightly as if he didn't quite take him seriously enough to respond. Ulfcytel finally spoke:

"Where is your father, Alaric?"

"He marches to join us here with about two thousand men."

"Why are you with us and he is not?" asked Ulfcytel.

"He sent me on ahead. He understands time is of the essence and the journey long and difficult. And I wanted to be here."

Both Ulfcytel and Æthelstan exchanged looks. Alaric wasn't certain what that meant but he was starting to feel more than a little uncomfortable. What did they know? What foul rumours had been spreading at a time when the kingdom was in peril? Who would waste time with gossip when all effort should be put into fighting the enemy? Why should he stand here and be insulted after he and his men had just run themselves ragged to come and help these people?

"I'm sorry if we've offended you, Alaric," Ulfcytel said, apparently sincere. "Æthelstan simply speaks from what he has heard and I'm afraid I share his concerns. But if you say your father is coming and you yourself will fight with us, then I know I speak for both of us in saying you are most welcome here."

"But what concerns..." Alaric was cut off by a sudden wave of Ulfcytel's hand.

"It doesn't matter now, my friend," Ulfcytel said sharply yet without malice. "What matters is that we have decent, God-fearing men joining us every day. With the king's help our victory is assured."

"And if he doesn't help?" Alaric asked.

"Then we will pray all the more and fight all the harder," Ulfcytel said, the conviction in his voice soothing Alaric's temper. This man had a good heart, of that he was sure. He felt confident knowing he was in charge, and his reputation as the man who'd almost defeated Sweyn Forkbeard was impressive in itself. There was a Christian in him too, Alaric could see. A man of courage and faith.

Æthelstan was another matter. His words relating to his father had cut deep, and the fact he'd failed to explain himself when confronted didn't help matters. Ulfcytel seemed to appreciate his presence though, and his status as brother-by-law to the king was no doubt useful when it came to giving their gathering army some legitimacy. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps the king really would march to aid them. Family ties mattered. Even a man such as Æthelred must see that, surely?

Ulfcytel continued staring at Alaric for a few seconds, his expression as difficult to read as ever due to the flickering candlelight and the vastness of his beard.

"You must be tired, Alaric," he murmured, a touch of sympathy in his voice.

"We have been on the move for some time, it's true."

"And it's getting dark," Ulfcytel said. "You should join your men and rest. I'm sure Osbert will see to their needs, right, Osbert?"

All eyes fell upon the dutiful Osbert, the man who Alaric had almost forgotten was there in the heat of his exchange with Æthelstan. A bite to eat and the company of Osmund seemed preferable to continuing any argument. Æthelstan could wait, for the moment. Alaric would discover what exactly he had against his father soon enough. He would have the truth from him. Honour demanded it.

"Bertram will have likely found your men a place to set up camp by now," Osbert said, turning to face Alaric. "I will take you to him, assuming my lords have finished all they would say?"

Both Ulfcytel and Æthelstan nodded, yet the latter's eyes lingered on Alaric with a coldness that he didn't much care for. Alaric donned his helmet and inclined his head respectfully towards Ulfcytel before turning and exiting the pavilion, Osbert joining him a second later. They walked in silence back down the plank gangway and towards the exit in the ring wall, Alaric again struggling a little to keep up with Osbert's brisk pace amidst the continuing downpour.

The daylight was indeed fading when they marched past the makeshift smithy, the men inside still busy with their work and very much blessed to have both shelter and heat to aid them. Osbert led Alaric along a footpath that seemed to wind its way north east from the ring wall. A forest of tents greeted them on either side, many of them already occupied if the glimpses of interior candlelight were any indication. Shelter and candlelight. Such meagre comforts would be a veritable luxury to Alaric and his company.

They moved swiftly yet carefully for another five minutes or so, neither man saying a word whilst they focused on navigating their way ahead without slipping up in the encroaching twilight. Alaric got the impression Osbert was a little embarrassed. Chances were he'd expected nothing but jubilation and comradeship when he'd presented Alaric to his commanders. Alaric resolved to remain silent out of consideration for the man's situation. Osbert would have little idea as to Æthelstan's apparent animosity towards his father. To question him over it would just add to his discomfort.

Eventually, the tents started to thin out into a stretch of open field hosting a significant number of men busy in the task of constructing themselves shelter. Alaric spied the considerable form of Osmund just up ahead, working with Bertram and a score of others to erect a canvas shelter that would ideally serve as a temporary eating area. Alaric joined them without a word, taking a wooden stake from a supply cart and holding it firmly in place for Osmund's hammer to hew it into the sodden earth. Osmund obliged, the sharpened wooden point disappearing into the turf under the weight of his blows.

Osbert also made himself useful, lending his arm to their endeavours with little hesitation. He comported himself admirably, even when he slipped and landed arse first in the mud whilst helping attach the canvas to the now-completed wooden scaffold. Osmund heaved the smaller man to his feet with ease, a friendly chuckle upon his lips. Unfazed by his tumble, Osbert continued to assist them in setting up camp, working with the rest of them without complaint for the best part of an hour as the rain and darkness intensified.

By the time they were finished Alaric was again soaked, his armour too having grown even heavier, such was his fatigue. The three men sat inside the large shelter they had just constructed, their huddled forms gathered around a cauldron of stew that was just starting to bubble and froth atop a much-revered log fire. Alaric relished the warmth, and he soon relieved himself of both his mail shirt and tunic in the hope of drying both next to the flickering flames.

About two dozen men shared the shelter with them, each looking to sate his appetite before retiring for the night. Alaric could see the exhaustion on their faces. He'd pushed them hard these last few days, he knew. They'd had to reach this place quickly, but now they were here it was imperative they get some rest. He'd make sure of it before he himself succumbed to sleep.

Osbert left without eating, saying something about how he would dine with Ulfcytel. He parted company with minimal fuss, wishing them well

and disappearing into the night with a weary Bertram. Alaric and Osmund ate in silence, the men around them doing likewise. The warmth of the food was almost heavenly, providing a stirring reminder that a man, if modest and reasoned, needed relatively little to be happy in this life. Osmund apparently felt the same, wolfing his share down as if he was just hours from starving to death. Given the size of him perhaps that wasn't far from the truth.

"You like it here then?" Alaric asked Osmund, still slightly amused at the speed at which he'd gotten through his meal.

"What's not to like?" Osmund replied, a few bits of stew still stuck in his beard. "It's got everything we need. I'd spend the rest of my days here, were it not for that huge horde of bastards heading this way."

Alaric wasn't sure if he was supposed to laugh, given his friend really hadn't said anything that wasn't exactly true. Neither man thought much of material comforts, and there was indeed a massive army of foreigners on the rampage who urgently needed killing.

"What do you think of the army so far?" Alaric asked quietly, hoping to get an honest answer on what he thought of their chances. Osmund stared into his empty bowl, almost as if he was wondering what had happened to his stew, before responding.

"It's good. It's well-equipped. Some hard nuts here, no doubt, and we're led by the man who almost defeated the Forkbeard. I'd say Thorkell is going to know he was in a fight, whatever happens."

Alaric nodded slightly. What Osmund had said was again true, but the reality was that not all of their army had arrived yet. The enemy host was considerable, and from what he'd seen of the camp thus far the English were very much outnumbered. Victory would likely depend on reinforcements arriving in time. His father, essentially. And the king.

"How long do you think it will be before the rest of the fyrd joins us?" Alaric asked. Osmund gathered his thoughts, pawing casually at his beard and knocking loose a few pieces of barley that he'd somehow failed to get into his mouth previously.

"No offence, Alaric, but I don't see your father being able to move like we just did. I'd say we give him a few days, but I don't think the enemy will allow us to just sit here and gather strength without them having a say in it. We may have to fight with what we have."

Alaric felt a little uneasy at his reply. It was indeed true that his father was getting on in years and certainly not able to charge across country as they had done. That wasn't his fault, and after Alaric's little exchange with

Æthelstan he wanted to avoid any further talk of his father's apparent inadequacies. There was something in Osmund's tone also that he hoped he was just imagining. He held his tongue, reminding himself that his friend likely meant well.

He finished up and headed outside. It was dark and the rain was incessant, but his men had done a sterling job of pitching every tent they'd been assigned. They took to them now, venturing inside to much-needed shelter, each and every one of them looking forward to a night's slumber without the weight of armour across their backs.

Alaric retreated to his own tent, a humble-looking thing no larger than any other. He managed to get inside without demolishing it, which was no small feat given it was getting increasingly difficult to see now they'd lost the daylight. Sleep, however, did not come easy, and it wasn't due to a lack of comfort or the trouble it took to finally remove his boots.

What did seem to be holding rest at bay was his earlier conversation with Ulfcytel and Æthelstan. What did they even mean about his father being unreliable? Why would the king have just abandoned the south, even if he didn't trust his father? Why was he still an ealdorman if he didn't have the confidence of the monarch? Why hadn't Alaric stayed in the pavilion longer and gotten real answers out of Æthelstan?

He knew the answer to that. He was here to fight the enemy, not brawl with a man he'd only just met. Ulfcytel at least seemed sympathetic towards him, and he was hopefully able to tell that he was genuine. Osbert had also impressed him, seeming like an honourable fellow eager to do what he thought was right. Alaric sincerely hoped the young man would survive the inevitable clash with the enemy. He made the sign of the Cross over himself as he lay amidst his sheepskins and offered up a brief prayer for his safety. The downpour continued to thunder outside whilst he finally drifted into sleep, words of piety repeating on his mind:

Lord Jesus Christ

Son of God

Have Mercy upon Me

A Sinner.

II

“We should attack and attack now! Damn the king! If he was even a man worthy of this land, let alone the bloodline of the great King Alfred, we wouldn't be in this mess!”

Oswy's furious words hung in the air, his audience taken aback by their sheer audacity. It was one thing to doubt the king. Many did, but to openly condemn him was another matter altogether.

Despite the tension, Alaric had to stifle a yawn. He was tired, and his mind was still foggy from being so suddenly roused from his unusually peaceable repose. He had no idea how long Osbert had been rustling outside his tent, half-whispering his name, until Osmund had simply bellowed for him to awake. The sound had shaken him from whatever dreams he'd been enduring, sure enough. It was then that Osbert had told him of their visitor. An envoy from Lundenburg had come. An envoy from the king.

The three of them had hurried southward through the camp, the first glimmers of dawn providing meagre light to guide their footsteps. When they'd passed through the ring wall and entered Ulfcytel's pavilion, Alaric had found himself in the middle of an argument, the king's “envoy” facing down a storm of harsh voices and demands for clarification. He had not brought good news. King Æthelred and his army were not coming.

Ulfcytel nodded towards Alaric when he entered. Æthelstan ignored him. Several others unknown to him glanced in his direction, whilst another remained fixated on the “envoy”, a look of barely restrained fury on his face.

Osbert hurriedly whispered the man's name into Alaric's ear. Lord Oswy. The Lord Oswy. The legend. Or the inheritor of one. Oswy was son-in-law to the now martyred Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, the man who had so heroically died fighting Sweyn Forkbeard at Malduna almost twenty years ago. Oswy had continued that legacy of defiance, frequently clashing with the king on how to handle the myriad threats from Scandinavia. With his bristling silver beard and towering, mail-clad figure Oswy looked every inch a worthy inheritor to his father-in-law's legacy. Alaric was impressed.

The same could not be said of the man who had just provoked his near-treasonous outburst. Æthelred's envoy was none other than Eadric, the Ealdorman of Mierce, a little-known figure, to Alaric anyway, who had only been elevated to such a lofty rank a few years ago.

Despite never having been in the same room until now, Alaric knew he had a reputation for cunning, yet whether that was in the service of the realm or for his own advancement remained to be seen. He was certainly doing well for himself, as he'd married one of the king's daughters shortly after becoming an ealdorman, effectively cementing his position as one of the most powerful men in England. Alaric did not know if the union was a happy one. Odds were the king was simply bestowing favours upon him, and Alaric somehow doubted either man really cared much for the concept of love. Power and politics came first, in their world.

In contrast to the towering Oswy, Eadric was just above average height and hardly outfitted for battle, being dressed in a dark green kirtle and deep crimson cloak. His lower half sported a similarly coloured set of breeches, these in turn complemented by some well-wrought, albeit mud-splattered, fur-lined boots. Typically for one of his standing, Eadric wore his thick blond coloured hair long enough so that the tips just passed his shoulders, although the slight curls gave him a touch of the feminine, something Alaric found hard to respect in a man.

Eadric's narrow shoulders also suggested he'd not spent much time holding fast in a shield wall, and the soft contours of his face and pink, rose-tinted cheeks were only saved from boyishness by a neatly trimmed beard. Naturally, no English nobleman would be complete without a sword, and Eadric's dangled from a fine silver-studded leather belt, its red-jewelled pommel visible above the sheath.

Despite the evident quality of his weapon Eadric still didn't look like much of a warrior. There was something in those grey eyes, also, a hint of arrogance, or even worse, cruelty, that made Alaric feel a little uneasy. Overall he felt it best to hold this man at arm's length, at least until he'd proven himself half-decent. Eadric, for his part, was still glowering towards Oswy, appearing shocked and angered both over what he'd said.

"Did you just damn your king, Oswy?" asked Eadric with more than a little ice in his voice, the menace unmistakable for an audience already uncomfortable with what had been said thus far.

"What would you have me say to that, Eadric?" Oswy seethed in reply, his face growing redder by the moment. "You march in here in the dead of night, amongst men who have turned out to defend this land, and tell us that our own king won't leave Lundenburg to face the enemy? What kind of king is that?"

Alaric found it hard to disagree. Ulfcytel even grunted in agreement. Æthelstan's expression was unreadable, but he'd made no effort to defend

the king, perhaps feeling embarrassed at how his previous optimism had been proved wrong-headed. Eadric at first seemed unmoved by Oswy's emotional response, although what he said next had more of a more conciliatory tone.

"Think about the larger picture. A physical confrontation here isn't the wisest course of action. The king sees this, which is why he remains committed to safeguarding Lundenburg."

"And nowhere else?" Ulfcytel spoke now, moving alongside Oswy to address Eadric. Side by side these two old heroes looked truly formidable. With men like these to lead his armies, Alaric was left wondering just why King Æthelred was so cautious.

"The king would have you lead this army south to unite with his own forces," Eadric replied, ignoring Ulfcytel's question. "Once this is done Thorkell will no doubt be cowed by our numbers and be more willing to negotiate."

"Negotiate!" Ulfcytel thundered, this being his turn to lose his temper alongside the still bullish-looking Oswy. "We can't just abandon Eastengle! The enemy will burn and loot as they see fit and then likely lay waste to the north as an afterthought! What will we say in negotiations then? Please, Lord Thorkell the Murderous, do us the honour of leaving us the ashes of our own kingdom?!"

"The king believes Thorkell can be made to listen to reasoned argument," came Eadric's truly ludicrous response, something that he himself didn't appear to take all that seriously, given his sudden lack of eye contact with Ulfcytel. Alaric sensed a moment to interject. He took a step forward towards Eadric and spoke.

"Listen to what argument exactly, since the king let him burn the south already?"

Alaric heard Osmund mutter something in approval. Both Ulfcytel and Oswy rumbled to themselves in apparent support, with even Æthelstan appearing to acknowledge Alaric's words with a solemn nod. Eadric turned around slowly, looking Alaric up and down with those grey eyes of his before speaking.

"The situation last year was different. The king did not have the forces to defeat Thorkell's host after it landed. The Ealdorman Ælfric had failed to..."

"The Ealdorman Ælfric is my father," Alaric interrupted, "and we raised our fyrd to meet the king, just as it now marches to meet us here."

Eadric didn't appear disturbed in the face of Alaric's claim. Whereas yesterday both Æthelstan and Ulfcytel had been almost surprised when he'd countered the false rumours about his father, Eadric reacted like he'd said precisely nothing. He instead just stood there, seeming to scrutinise Alaric's appearance, as if trying to place him within a memory.

Ulfcytel spoke up again, his voice now conveying an air of calm authority rather than frustration. "As Ealdorman of Eastengle the bulk of this army is mine," he said, matter-of-factly. "I will not move my forces to Lundenburg and leave my people to be butchered. If Thorkell moves further into my lands I will confront him. I will fight him. And I will kill him."

Good words, Alaric thought. Precisely what he needed to hear, and likely sentiments shared by most others present. He found himself wishing he'd been there with Ulfcytel when he'd confronted Sweyn Forkbeard six years past. Perhaps if the king had then supported the Eastenglians with a proper army the fearsome Ulfcytel would have given Sweyn a forked skull to go with his beard. A pleasing image, at least to Alaric.

Unfortunately, King Æthelred had again failed in his duty, leaving the Forkbeard's army to escape to their ships, albeit severely diminished in number, thanks to Ulfcytel. History now looked to be repeating itself, for the king was yet again refusing to face down his enemies and was instead leaving his subjects to do the job for him. This would not stand, and Alaric would have his mind known.

"I will fight alongside the Ealdorman Ulfcytel," he said aloud, his words directed at everyone present rather than merely the king's envoy. "If my father makes it here with reinforcements, God be praised, but if not, me and my men will fight with whatever resources we have at our disposal. We will not stand by and see what happened in the south happen here."

Ulfcytel and Oswy looked on in approval, Alaric feeling like he'd suddenly grown several feet in stature, such was the sensation from knowing such men respected him. Eadric took a step back from Alaric, turning to lean against Ulfcytel's generously sized map table. He gazed straight ahead at nobody in particular, his next words uttered with a quietness that contrasted with the boldness of what had been said thus far.

"Each and every one of you is set on doing battle with Thorkell, against the wishes of your king." It wasn't a question, they all knew that. Ulfcytel then spoke, his voice again heavy with authority.

"It is not that we have turned against our king, and let no man here claim that it was so. But I will not allow this land to be ravaged further. I

will not give up an inch of English soil to this pagan, this heathen, this killer of men, women, and children alike.”

The reminder that their enemy was indeed a Godless monster was a welcome one. Nobody in their right mind took the Northmen's apparent conversion to Christianity seriously. They'd made a show of it in the past, claiming they were as Christian as anyone else, but they'd never ceased their violent ways nor shown any real understanding of what the faith was about. They were also still in the habit of looting and burning English churches just as their pagan forebears had done; a fact that led Alaric to believe, quite rightly, that the modern Dane was about as Christian as any other murderous heathen savage.

And yet from what he understood various Scandinavian kings were still arrogant enough to claim otherwise. King Harald “Bluetooth”, the father of Sweyn Forkbeard, had been the first. Why he'd decided to adopt – or at least pretend to adopt – Christianity was a mystery, but as expected he'd spread his new “faith” via the sword rather than the Bible, effectively forcing the people of Denmark to convert or suffer the consequences.

Unsurprisingly, King Harald's rather unorthodox approach to evangelisation made him more than a few enemies, a point amply demonstrated by the fact his own son ultimately rose up and deposed him. Sweyn had not, however, undone his father's work, and to this day the Danes persisted in calling themselves Christians, albeit whilst still often worshipping their old Gods and sometimes seeming to regard Christ as just another deity in their pantheon. It was idiotic, and impossible to take remotely seriously.

Neither had such antics failed to find an echo outside of Denmark. Olaf Tryggvason was another Norse king who, like the Bluetooth, had gotten strange ideas in his head, ideas that had led him to believe his fellow Norwegians should give up their old ways and adopt whatever it was he thought Christianity to be.

Alaric found it strange that he'd decided he was the man to institute such change, for he'd been no saint and never had been. Olaf had always lived a life of violence, attacking England and other lands as he saw fit, but he'd been brought to the negotiating table in 994 when King Ethelred had offered a sizeable sum of money to placate him. That wasn't surprising in itself, but what was unusual was that Olaf had agreed to be baptised, at the hands of the Archbishop of Canterbury, no less, with the king himself as his sponsor. Alaric didn't know why the man had agreed to that, but for whatever reason he had, and he'd soon left England in the company of

English missionaries, apparently set on converting his own people in Norway.

“Convert” was an odd word to use for what he did next. Olaf hadn't taken no for an answer, and he'd used extreme force to break the old religion and anything else he deemed to be in his way. He hadn't been shy about getting his hands dirty either, at one point even ramming a live snake down the throat of one of his rebellious jarls, killing him in the process.

How likely it was that Olaf had been able to pick up a venomous serpent and go on to insert it inside a likely armed Norwegian noble was a mystery, but the rumour, exaggerated or not, spoke to the brutal way in which the man had spread his new “faith”. Alaric was not impressed, and he deeply resented the name of Christ being invoked to justify such blatant savagery.

Olaf's alleged conversion hadn't done him much good either. For reasons that Alaric was ignorant of, this supposedly Christian king had gone on to face some form of uprising, something that Denmark's Sweyn Forkbeard had taken advantage of. In the ensuing conflict, Olaf was said to have been defeated in a naval clash with Forkbeard's fleet, apparently throwing himself into the sea rather than be captured.

This was one story. Others had heard it said Olaf had become a pilgrim and made his way to the Holy City of Jerusalem where he endured to this day. Alaric was inclined to reject that rumour, finding it difficult to believe Olaf's conversion was ever genuine and that he'd more than likely met his end at the hands of Sweyn. Greed, not faith, was the main motivator when it came to Norse behaviour. It was foolish to think otherwise.

Alaric was roused from his thoughts on recent history by the realisation that the pavilion had fallen silent. All eyes were again on Eadric, but if he was uncomfortable under such scrutiny he showed no sign. What had he said?

“You mean to tell us that you yourself have spoken with the enemy before coming here?”

That was Æthelstan. He didn't look happy. No one did. Eadric however remained unruffled, not appearing to notice how close Æthelstan's hand now was to the hilt of his sword.

“You are correct, my Lord Æthelstan, as per the king's command I sought Thorkell out before coming here.”

“And what did the bastard have to say for himself?” growled Oswy. “And how did you even get near him? How does one walk up to a Dane and ask to talk?”

“Perhaps if you'd ever tried to talk to one rather than kill them you might be surprised,” Eadric said, a touch of humour in his tone. No one laughed. Æthelstan's hand was now resting on the pommel of his blade, Ulfcytel, Oswy, and the two men Alaric didn't know looking similarly guarded.

“Thorkell is open to discussions on the basis there's something in it for him,” Eadric continued, this time without any attempt to provoke mirth. “He's a savage, yes, as you'd expect, but he's not entirely without intelligence. He knows that fighting a war for wealth is itself expensive. Why bother then if you can gain wealth by easier means?”

“And how long will the king do this?!” shouted a balding, irate-looking man Alaric had not met previously. “How does it make us look to simply pay off whoever comes here with ill intent? All it does is encourage every heathen bastard with greed in his heart to come calling! Can you not see that, Eadric? And where is Mierce in all this? Why have you not brought your own fyrd to aid us? We sent requests across the realm.”

“I can see it, Wulfric, with greater clarity than yourself,” spat Eadric with some irritation. “And I received no such messenger with any request. I've only recently learned you were gathering here. But if you men are indeed committed to fighting Thorkell, it makes sense that I tell you where he is camped.”

Silence again fell on the assorted company. Alaric hadn't expected this. He'd taken Eadric to be a mere plaything of the king; a man who would never act on initiative and remain an obedient thrall to the ever-ineffectual Æthelred. If he gave them the exact location of Thorkell...

“You'd have us attack Thorkell and kill him before he can rally his army to face us?” Ulfcytel had finished Alaric's train of thought for him. It did indeed seem that Eadric was suggesting just that.

“Why not?” shrugged Eadric. “I cannot dissuade you in your thirst for confrontation. But if you do face Thorkell's army many of you will die. You may lose. If you attack his camp, whilst he's at rest...”

“Like a common brigand?! That's just not Christian!” came the immediate rebuttal from the man Eadric had called Wulfric. Fair sentiments, Alaric mused, since attacking in the dark whilst your enemy is flat on his back won't exactly put you on the path to sainthood. But did they have much of a choice?

“It's not, but if we don't win here, who knows how many more innocents will die,” Oswy muttered, his shoulders slumped in resignation. “I will ask

you though, Eadric, how we are supposed to even get into his camp without simply having to fight a pitched battle once they see us coming?"

"That's a fair question, and it's here that a certain overconfidence may well be Thorkell's downfall," said Eadric, his hand reaching for one of the tankards scattered across the map table. Alaric wasn't even sure if the drink was his or if he was simply helping himself to Ulfcytel's. If he objected to having his ale pilfered he showed no sign, appearing eager to hear what might be said next.

"Thorkell's army isn't operating out of a single camp," Eadric explained after taking a swig, his hand then moving to wipe away a few flecks of ale from his irritatingly neat beard. "He seems to be under the impression that we can't raise an army to do anything other than defend Lundenburg. Simply put, most of his men are still engaged in plundering after his sack of Gipeswic a few days ago. They are not expecting an organised force to sweep in and oppose them. They are scattered, dispersed...vulnerable."

"I find it very hard to believe that Thorkell doesn't know about us being here," Ulfcytel said sceptically. "We've been gathering men and supplies for some time now. Why would he be so careless?"

"Because he's used to victory?" Eadric hypothesized, looking nonplussed. "Let's be honest, the chaos and confusion sown last year when the Lord Wulfnoth betrayed the king would have left a real impression that England cannot organise a proper defence. Thorkell just doesn't take us seriously, I'd say. A mistake on his part."

Alaric found himself wondering what had happened with Wulfnoth. From what he understood there was no indication he'd sympathised with the enemy or despised the king. The sudden accusation from Eadric's brother, Beorhtric, that he was guilty of treason was unexpected and hard to believe, although Wulfnoth's subsequent decision to go on the rampage with his own forces was downright bizarre. That storm also had seemed almost intended to cover his flight, and Alaric thought it really quite ominous how it had gone on to scatter the English fleet so that Thorkell might land. Was the heathen in league with dark, forbidden powers? Alaric didn't want to think of it.

"I find this a strange proposition, Eadric," said Oswy. "Even if we somehow get a force inside his camp, how do we know he won't just call in all his warriors? We'd be massively outnumbered, and there's no way to know his army is as scattered as you claim. Why don't we just march now and smash him to pieces with our full force?"

“Another fair question, my lord,” Eadric answered. “I would say if you march with all the men here Thorkell is liable to notice and fall back, gathering all of his men as he does so and gaining numerical superiority over us. Without the king moving up to support us we'll be finished.”

“Then return to the king and tell him to get himself out of Lundenburg!” That was Wulfric again. He wasn't wrong. Eadric didn't seem unsympathetic either.

“King Æthelred will not leave the capital lest it fall into enemy hands,” he said sadly. “I did try to tell him we had an opportunity to crush Thorkell here. He prefers to negotiate, once more.”

“So what happens to you if the king discovers somebody snuck into Thorkell's supposedly depopulated camp and murdered him?” Alaric asked this time. “Won't he be displeased that there'll be one less foreigner in the world to hand large sums of money to?”

“I'll take that chance, and I won't be implicated in what you do here,” said Eadric, a slight smile creeping across his face as he again beheld Alaric. “Why would I be? I can simply tell the king that I informed you of his commands, as I have done...and shortly after somebody attacked Thorkell's camp and killed him. He need not know much else, except that England will have become a safer place to live.”

Alaric was now warming to Eadric. There was a certain something about him that hinted he may simply be a good man caught in a difficult situation. After all, he was just an ealdorman like any other and relatively new to the position as well. If the king would not listen to him he could hardly disobey or shout him down. He had done as he'd been ordered, no doubt. But he'd also acted on his conscience in ensuring a threat to the realm might be eradicated. That was to be admired.

One of the men Alaric hadn't been introduced to suddenly spoke up. He'd remained silent thus far, his small, dark eyes flitting between the meeting's participants like he was attempting to imprint everything onto his memory. He looked capable for his middle years, being dressed in a short mail shirt and leather breeches, a hefty iron cudgel hanging from his belt.

“A night attack on an unsuspecting enemy is feasible, my Lord Ulfcytel,” he said, his voice gruff and unassuming. Alaric had taken him for a no-nonsense warrior when he'd first walked in, and he didn't seem wrong in that initial impression. Ulfcytel turned to him, a not-unfriendly look on his face.

“For those of you wondering,” Ulfcytel began, “this here is Thurcytel, and he's captain of my Eastenglian forces here. He's as wise as he is...ah...bald.”

A ripple of laughter spread through the pavilion, in part due to the irony of Ulfcytel's impertinence, given he himself had lost his own flowing locks some time ago. Fortunately, Thurcytel wasn't bothered by the reference to the barrenness of his scalp, instead speaking once more in his previously gruff fashion.

“Wars can be won with such sudden, bold moves, and something not dissimilar was attempted in our own nation's past,” he continued, his eyes still moving from person to person as if trying to convince each of them in sequence. “Over a hundred years ago the heathen warlord, Guthrum, surprised our King Alfred at his estate in Chipeham...had Guthrum succeeded in killing him, there would have been no Battle of Ethandun. There would have been no England. We could well have an opportunity right here to end this war before it spirals out of control.”

Eadric nodded towards Thurcytel, a sincere smile cracking across his boyish features. He seemed relieved to have something of a surprise ally here, and Alaric couldn't fault what had been said. Perhaps this really was their chance to do something that would echo throughout history. If that were so he just hoped he was up to playing his part.

“I'm glad to see somebody appreciates the opportunity for what it is,” Eadric said, still visibly pleased. “Like he says, a night attack is very workable. If successful you'd have decapitated Thorkell's army. I don't need to explain what that will mean for the lives of all your men.”

“Alright then, Eadric, but something else bothers me,” said Ulfcytel, ambling slowly over to his map table as he spoke. “How do we know that if we really do try and sneak up on Thorkell the Tall-Bastard or whatever he calls himself, he won't just have mustered his full strength by the time we get there? We could end up sending people to their deaths for no reason at all.”

“Because I left him with the distinct impression that you'd obey the king's instructions and move south to Lundenburg,” Eadric stated. “Obviously he doesn't know you've refused. He has no reason to think you'd disobey. He thinks we are weak, cowed, and compliant to the king. He will not be expecting you.”

“So it's weakness to be obedient to the king now, is it?” Oswy murmured, a deep frown again creasing his aged but energetic face. “I seem

to recall you taking exception to me voicing my opinion of Æthelred just earlier, Eadric.”

Eadric exhaled slowly, holding his hands up to his temples in exasperation. Oswy was spoiling for a fight with Eadric and Alaric couldn’t fathom why. If what he said was true they’d soon be smashing in Thorkell’s skull rather than facing a potentially unwinnable battle with no help from the king. Eadric had done them a favour, to say the least.

“What would you have me do, Oswy?” Eadric asked, more despairing now than angry. “I have told you what the king desires of this army. You will not obey. So if I am not to see you all killed in battle I must do what I can to salvage something from this chaos. You have an opportunity here to perhaps end this war now. Why not take it?”

“Why not indeed?” Alaric asked, rhetorically. “I for one say we act on this. If what you say is true, Eadric, my men and I can get into Thorkell’s camp and finish him before the rest of his troops are able to muster. We’ve done such grim work before. It’s doable, I know.”

“As have I,” Ulfcytel said. “This is how I know these things are usually best handled with two groups. You attack a camp when you’re outnumbered and even if you catch them sleeping most will just wake up and rush you. You need another lot to come in at the right moment, when the enemy is all in a panic at being attacked from one direction. Hit ‘em hard from another side, is what I mean. Use your scant numbers for maximum impact. It works.”

Alaric knew what he meant. Both he and Osmund had done something similar last autumn, back when Thorkell was shadowing Canterburie. They’d never had a chance against his main force, but they’d raided a few camps being used to supply his rearguard, even freeing some captives in the process. They had learned the value of surprise in those skirmishes, that and the fact the enemy were capable of being killed just like any other men, regardless of their fearsome reputation.

“Alright then, so is it agreed?” Alaric asked, eager for the talking to finish and for the fighting to begin. “I will take a few score of my best and accompany Eadric to wherever it is Thorkell is camped. We’ll attack at night, and the sound of our fighting will serve as a signal for a second group to storm the camp from the other side? Is that your thinking, my Lord Ulfcytel?”

“That does sound like a plan,” he replied, running his fingers through his silver mane of a beard. “I can lead a batch of my own personal retinue and...”

“Wait, my lord, if I may,” interrupted Æthelstan, who had also moved closer as Alaric was speaking, the three men now encircling Eadric to the point he looked quite uneasy at their proximity. “As you yourself have said, this army is yours to command. Most of the men are from Eastengle and will look to you first and foremost. I would suggest you stay with them. If all agree, I could assemble a force from my Norþanhymbrians to provide Alaric with the support he requires.”

Alaric felt a little indignant at the assumption he'd need help from a cold fish like Æthelstan, yet his offer was fair. He had no notion of the quality of the Norþanhymbrian troops he'd mentioned, but Alaric was feeling confident. Enough planning. More fighting.

“I would stress that the ealdorman himself should lead this assault,” Eadric said, for some reason now placing an undue emphasis on the word “ealdorman”. “With a task of such importance, we need a man who...”

“I don't think so, no,” said Æthelstan, the sharpness of his voice cutting Eadric off in mid-sentence. “As I said, an Eastenglian army needs its Eastenglian leader. They know and respect him...and even if we kill Thorkell we'll still need Ulfcytel and men like him to safeguard the realm against Sweyn Forkbeard and his ilk. Alaric and I can handle the camp attack well enough.”

Eadric paused, his thoughtful eyes suggesting he was thinking on a way to counter what had been said. Ulfcytel didn't speak up, looking like he'd been convinced by Æthelstan's words. Alaric didn't disagree either. Ulfcytel was needed here. He was too important, now and for the future.

“All right then,” Eadric murmured, apparently resigned to Æthelstan's plan. “I will accompany you both with my own escort. I suggest we stick to the woodland to mask our movements. Small force or not, I imagine there'll still be over a hundred of us, and that will draw attention.”

“How long do you think this will take?” Ulfcytel asked, sounding almost exasperated now it seemed he wasn't going with them.

“Two days there, perhaps,” Eadric replied. “If we're successful you'll see us soon enough as we'll have Northmen looking for us. Without Thorkell though they'll be in disarray. They'll be finished as an effective force, God willing. They may even start fighting among themselves.”

“Looks like it's settled then,” Ulfcytel said cheerfully. “Let's drink on it, and with any luck we'll soon be drinking again in victory!”

Ulfcytel strode past Eadric, the smaller man nimbly ducking aside, and filled several tankards at his table from a barrel of ale he'd somehow managed to keep hidden somewhere in the pavilion. Osbert moved to assist

him, distributing drinks to all present, the lad appearing sincerely grateful when Ulfcytel insisted he take one for himself.

Ulfcytel raised his tankard in a toast, his company doing likewise and drinking in unison, the foamy, almost bitter fluid lifting their already high spirits. Dawn was finally breaking outside, its rays gradually penetrating the pavilion, and the oppressive rain was finally easing off to a slight drizzle. Anyone who walked in right now would no doubt think the men leading this army were unfit for service, given the hour at which they were indulging. They would be wrong.

The meeting had started with the promise of disaster. They'd been let down by their king, again, and the odds had looked to have turned decisively against them. Now in the morning light there were new possibilities. Even without Æthelred's army, it felt like they had a chance of attaining something precious. Victory.

III

The sun had set several hours ago, the forest canopy blanketing them with a darkness undisturbed by either moon or starlight. An owl hooted some distance away, unworried by human activity and ignorant of the many concerns of men. A chill breeze drifted lazily through the thicket, its caress setting many thousands of leaves in gentle motion, the otherwise soothing sound doing little to relax already frayed nerves. Something else was out there. Something was coming. Something large.

Osmund emerged from some foliage about twenty yards away, a look of bemusement on his face. He shrugged and shook his head. Alaric understood what he meant. This really must be the only entrance to Thorkell's camp, at least on the southern side. Æthelstan had departed with his men a while ago, heading for what Eadric had claimed was a second entrance on the eastern edge of the camp. This had been part of the agreed strategy, of course, but Alaric had still felt uneasy at splitting up, despite both men assuring him they would be ready to attack as long as Alaric commenced his own assault here in one hour. They'd even left a candle clock behind so he could be precise.

Osmund joined him beneath the creaking, resplendent limbs of a vast and well-aged oak, the two of them crouching low to observe the enemy position about a hundred yards ahead. It was a Dane camp, no doubt about it, although whether it was the right one was uncertain, despite Eadric's assurances. The enemy had erected a ramshackle palisade that extended north and then east for some distance, yet the only entrance they'd been able to locate was situated just ahead in the form of a narrow gap manned by two bored-looking warriors.

These men had no idea how useful they were given their torches were lighting up their position nicely, the pair of them clearly unaware they were being watched. Alaric's force had been doing precisely that for some time whilst they searched in vain for a way into the camp that bypassed the palisade. As it stood, the only way inside was simply to smash through the southern entrance, killing the guards currently idling there and taking whatever lay beyond by storm. Brave, but potentially disastrous. And it didn't help that the only man who really knew this terrain, that being Eadric, had now departed.

Alaric glanced behind him, spying the odd glint of dark iron amidst the trees and ferns that hugged the narrow trail they'd followed thus far. Alaric

once again couldn't help but admire his men. He knew they were good at what they did, and they'd proved that to him over and over, but their efforts to conceal themselves were really quite impressive given the bulk of their arms and armour. There was nothing to be seen unless you knew already what to look for, and those flashes of metal and mail that were visible could easily be overlooked by any casual observers. These were men of subtlety as well as might. That's why he'd brought them.

Their numbers, of course, were thin. He'd taken about fifty of his original retinue with him, fearing more would only increase the odds of detection. He needn't have been so cautious. They'd not encountered any wandering foes at all, let alone an organised patrol. Was Thorkell really as overconfident as Eadric had made out? Did he really think the English were beaten? If what Eadric had said was indeed true, Thorkell's overconfidence might indeed get him killed. Alaric would make sure of it in fact.

When they'd left Hringmere they'd been in high spirits. Every man had been made aware of what was expected of him, just as they were aware of how dangerous their mission really was. They'd initially made good time, doing the common sense thing and sticking to the woodland, Æthelstan's Norþanhymbrians moving almost as swiftly and competently as Alaric's southerners.

Their first night camped out was uneventful. Æthelstan seemed at ease in their company and unwilling to revisit previous tensions in regard to Alaric's father. Alaric had considered bringing the issue up with him, yet ultimately he'd decided against it, thinking it wise to keep Æthelstan sweet for the battle to come. They also couldn't risk an argument out in the wilds like this. Everything they did here depended on remaining quiet and unseen.

The next day had been different. As the afternoon came they could see smoke on the southern horizon. Gipeswic was still burning. The enemy's decision to set the town alight was typical behaviour, and Eadric had claimed he'd seen the settlement aflame when he'd passed this way three nights previously in his efforts to reach Ulfcytel. What had become of its inhabitants he did not know, and from the tone of his voice he didn't much care either.

Alaric didn't understand how he could be so unmoved. The slow, steady destruction of his homeland under the ever-unready rule of King Æthelred was a source of constant heartache for him. Perhaps Eadric was just better at hiding his feelings, since he was a man accustomed to the role of diplomat rather than warrior. That would make sense, although his stoicism

provided no comfort as they marched closer, the bitter smell of burning, charred wood soon reaching them on the wind.

Alaric knew each and every one of his men would be looking to settle scores. The stench of yet another torched settlement was bringing back memories, none of them good, and he was absolutely certain he wasn't the only one with his blood up. They couldn't reverse the damage done to the south last year, nor could they save Gipeswic now, but if all went as planned they had a solid chance of getting up close to those responsible. Their swords and axes would then do the rest.

If they succeeded Alaric hoped they'd still be able to get away and rejoin Ulfcytel, but even if they all died escaping he'd be glad of what they'd achieved. These were dire times, yet history would remember them fondly as the men who'd dispensed some justice for the sake of a much-aggrieved land. That was a legacy he could be happy with. The man who had killed Thorkell the Tall.

"The candle thing has almost burned down," Osmund whispered hoarsely. "There is no other way in for us. We'll just have to rush them."

Osmund spoke the truth. There could be no subtlety to this, which almost seemed a shame given the stealth they had successfully employed up until now. The most viable course of action was to simply charge the camp entrance, kill the guards, and then rush inside. If Æthelstan was in position he'd no doubt hear the ensuing cacophony and make a move of his own. Thorkell would come rushing out of his doubtlessly large and opulent tent to find his people under attack from two directions. Alaric would then remove his head from his shoulders. Job done.

Things seemed as good as they were going to get. With any luck, most of those inside the camp would now be asleep or drinking themselves silly. Alaric stared at the candle clock Æthelstan had placed for him at the base of the oak tree. It was almost time. Almost. Now.

Alaric stood up. Osmund looked at him, slightly perplexed, wondering what he had planned. It was unlikely the enemy would be able to see him from this distance, the light cast by the torches of the guards at the camp entrance barely penetrating the surrounding undergrowth. Alaric motioned for Osmund to stand. He did so.

"I've an idea," Alaric said softly, "if we remove our helmets and do thus..."

Alaric took off his helm and tied his cloak tightly around his chest, concealing much of his armour. Osmund did likewise, looking nonplussed. He'd see soon enough why this was important, yet that still left the question

as to where to put their helmets if not on their heads. He tucked his under his cloak, cradling it with his left arm. Osmund did something similar in imitation.

“Now hold on to me, like you're hammered,” Alaric said.

Osmund didn't need to be told twice. He'd done this many a time in the past, although in those instances he had actually been drunk. He allowed Alaric to grip him around the waist, in turn putting his own arm around his shoulder and stumbling forward as his friend started to move.

“Mutter to yourself, act like you've had a proper skinful or twelve,” Alaric commanded.

As ordered, Osmund started to do precisely that, giggling idiotically and commencing a rambling monologue on “friends that stick around” and how “women don't get it”. Alaric waved for the men behind them to stand down, mouthing something in their direction to make sure they understood. He'd call on them when needed.

They continued on like this for a few dozen paces before they were spotted by the two Danes on watch. Alaric kept up the charade, shuffling towards them with a burbling Osmund in his grip, shaking his head like he was embarrassed for his friend. Both sentries tensed visibly when they clapped eyes on them, only to then relax somewhat as they took in what at least looked like two of their own returning to camp, albeit worse for wear.

Alaric felt like he'd been wise to have taken precautions with his appearance. If he'd left his helmet on the silver-worked masterpiece would have advertised his status as an Englishman of some repute. Instead they looked like two regular drunkards who were certainly not the advance guard of a force come to kill a certain foreign warlord. This ruse might actually work.

He chuckled to himself whilst Osmund droned on, his sober recitation of the kind of nonsense he talked when drunk proving too near the mark. One of the Danes started to laugh with him as they drew closer, finding Osmund's predicament to be fairly amusing. The second guard, being possibly more intelligent or perhaps just sober, remained silent, his hand instead resting on the grip of a particularly unpleasant-looking axe hanging from his belt. Alaric would have to kill him first.

They were now just a few feet from the Danes. The cheerful one grinned towards Osmund and nodded, mumbling something likely humorous. His more circumspect companion did what Alaric had half-expected him to, pointing to the bulge created by his attempt to hide his helmet under his cloak and barking what could only be a demand for an explanation. He'd

also pulled his axe free of his belt, his arm tensed like he intended to use it. Alaric wasn't going to wait around for that.

He released Osmund, who suddenly recovered from his drunken state and lunged at the still jovial Dane in front of him. He clamped a paw-like hand over his mouth, silencing him lest he try and cry out, and smashed a fist into his jugular. The Dane's knees buckled and gave way almost immediately, and he fell face-first like a toppled statue, his hands reaching up protectively towards his throat. Osmund resolved matters with a quick stamp of his right foot, leaving the unfortunate fellow twisted in the dirt, his neck snapped and bent at an unnatural angle.

His associate was not exactly thrilled with this turn of events, taking his eyes off Alaric and stepping forward to swing for Osmund. If he'd assumed it was preferable to kill the larger intruder first he was mistaken, as he'd left his guard open in the face of an arguably more skilled opponent. Alaric simply drew his sword and then swung left across his enemy's neck, opening his throat with it. He collapsed to the ground, thrashing and gurgling in his own blood. Alaric impaled him through the chest, putting him out of his misery.

The victorious pair stood silently for a moment, listening out for any indication they'd been heard. The wind in the trees. The heaving of their own breath. A faint sound of harsh, mocking laughter and boisterous conversation from somewhere up ahead. Little else. They had not been detected. They could still do this.

Alaric crept forward, clearing the remaining few feet between himself and the palisade. He pressed himself up against the wooden edifice and peered around and to his left, looking through the entrance and into the camp proper. Nothing unusual. About ten feet of clear ground between himself and a mess of tents, worse than Hringmere, with several cookfires surrounded by clutches of drunken warriors.

They seemed to be enjoying their carousing and nonsensical conversations well enough, the racket they were making serving to obscure the sound of the recent scuffle. Alaric guessed that from the tents in view plus the number of men already visible there were about a hundred fighters to deal with, although admittedly he could only see so far. Outnumbered two to one, at least, and that was just from what he could see here. Alaric wasn't worried. They had surprise with them. And scores to settle.

He and Osmund both retrieved their helms from the ground, having dropped them in the tussle. They then unfastened their shields from the

harnesses on their backs, Alaric feeling reassured by the familiar weight in his hand.

He turned to where he knew his own men were still watching from the trees. He sheathed his sword and reached down, picking up the still-burning torch of his fallen foe and holding it aloft. They understood the gesture. A dozen, two dozen, then all of his men came into view, their mail-clad forms of glinting helmets and menacing spear points emerging out of the darkness with a grim eagerness. Alaric smiled and let the torch drop. He then unsheathed his sword and slipped through the gap in the palisade, moving at a crouch. Osmund followed, likewise staying low, the larger man doing his best to imitate Alaric's attempt at stealth.

They'd made it about fifteen yards inside when more blood was drawn. A rather stout-looking Dane had emerged from his tent immediately in front of Alaric, yet he was so slowed by sleep he'd barely raised his weapon before he was cut down. Another, this one fully equipped, tried to tackle Osmund from the side, but the ginger giant threw him off with a twist of his shoulder and then reduced his head to a splintered ruin with one swing of his axe.

They'd been seen. Somebody cried out, a mix of anger and alarm, which was followed by another voice, similarly angry, and then more after that. That was it then. Alaric bellowed for his men, and the entire English force came screaming through the camp entrance, their furious battle cries reaching up into the heavens. They spread out, hacking and stabbing at the Norsemen just beginning to awake and stumble from their tents, showing no restraint whatsoever in the shedding of heathen blood.

The warriors Alaric had previously spied drinking and gibbering at their campfires had now spotted them, but a few were so drunk they were having trouble standing up. Those who were more alert looked confused and apprehensive, clearly wondering where their new visitors might have come from. It mattered little what they thought. They were dead men.

Alaric rushed forward, pounding the pommel of his sword off his shield, the warriors behind him screaming obscenities and challenges as they followed. About a score of them crashed headlong into the first group of drunken Norsemen surrounding a roaring log fire, the English overrunning their position in a frenzy of pent-up rage and brutality.

Alaric used the momentum of his charge to smash his first opponent to the ground with his shield. He then hacked downwards in a wide swing, his sword's edge splitting the topmost part of the Dane's skull as he struggled to sit up. Another warrior leapt in Alaric's direction, thrusting a jagged spear

towards his undefended right shoulder. He shouldn't have bothered. Rather than impaling Alaric he himself was pierced through the flank, the Saxon responsible continuing to run forward with such force that the Dane was actually carried on the end of his spear and deposited into his own campfire.

The man roared as the flames scorched his skin, the stench of burning flesh and singed hair mingling with the smell of wood smoke, sweat, and freshly shed blood. At some point he managed to roll free of the fire and lie still, his left side a charred, raw ruin and his right drenched with blood. He would not last long.

Alaric lost sight of him when another Dane made an attempt on his life, this one actually leaping from the other side of the fire and through the flames in a bid to tackle him to the ground. Osmund caught him in mid-leap with a swing of his axe, the edge burying itself in his stomach with a sickening thud. The wounded warrior turned his head to scream something at Osmund, the sound harsh and high-pitched as he came to terms with the fact death was likely seconds away. He would be right. Osmund's second blow felled him like a tree, his now lifeless form toppling backwards into the fire.

A real brute then came bellowing out of the darkness to Alaric's left, fully armed and armoured in a crude mail coat, well-worn helm, and hefty war axe. He threw himself forward with a beast-like wildness, his base malevolence outshining any sense of self-preservation. He swung for Alaric, his axe heavy with purpose, but his aim was well off, his frenzied state ensuring his first blow fell short by several inches.

The second swing was no improvement, and Alaric only had to step back to avoid it, his sword unraised in a bid to provoke his opponent into overconfidence. The beast tried a third time, but again his efforts were predictable, and Alaric simply deflected the blow away with a well-practised twist of his shield. This wasn't an equal contest. This man may actually be a skilled warrior but whatever force, supernatural or mundane, that had him addled this night wasn't doing him any favours, at least against a practised fighter of Alaric's calibre. No amount of screaming and gibbering would change that.

Such pride was immediately punished when his assailant did the unexpected. Dissatisfied with his inability to lodge his axe in Alaric's skull, the Dane decided to simply throw his body weight forward, shoulder-first, crashing into Alaric's shield arm with a force that almost knocked him from his feet.

It wasn't all bad. Alaric's defensive instincts had kicked in from the sudden physical shock of having two hundred pounds of lunatic barrelling into him, a point well demonstrated by the fact the man was now slumped on his knees and clutching desperately at his throat. Alaric's right arm had automatically swung his sword upwards in a defensive arc as soon as he'd been hit, the tip of his blade carving a bloody line up and through the soft vulnerability of his opponent's jugular. The Dane's hands, chest, and stomach were now red with blood, his instinctual efforts to stem the flow doing little more than give the erroneous impression he was attempting to throttle himself.

Alaric would waste no more time. He took a step to the man's left and then forward so he came up alongside him. He then slammed his sword down, point first, inside and past the contours of his collar bone, sheathing the blade deep in his chest cavity. A cleaner death than the Dane would have given him, he had no doubt.

He soon discovered why Osmund had not assisted him. Several yards away a broken Dane lay sprawled at his friend's feet, the dead man's visage a grim, red ruin following a blow from Osmund's axe. Osmund himself had not been able to savour victory, however, and he was now struggling with two other Danes, one of which had made a grab for his right hand in an attempt to disarm him whilst the other hammered at his increasingly splintered shield.

Alaric stepped in and cut the first man down from behind, his sword parting flesh and leaving a deep, diagonal gash down his back. A now freed Osmund made a swing for the cur hacking his shield apart, causing him to stagger backwards and onto the spear thrust of an onrushing Saxon. He fell to the earth without comment, his ribcage splintered open by several feet of iron-tipped ash. Osmund grunted his approval.

They turned to evaluate the situation. The English force had managed to clear the entrance and carve a bloody salient straight into the enemy camp. Corpses and collapsed tents littered the ground, and by the looks of it many a foe had been slain within seconds of being awoken by the ear-splitting roar from a half-hundred warriors eager for vengeance. The enemy should have really put more thought into their own defence. Instead they'd been caught out, either asleep or in their cups.

And they were still paying dearly for such laxity. Everywhere Alaric looked they were being cut down, his men a picture of grim determination whilst they went about their furious business. He saw a near-naked Dane being dragged from his tent not ten yards away, his cries pitiful as he was

hauled through the mud by his remarkably long hair. If he placed value on his appearance he need no longer worry, for his head was soon parted from his shoulders, his Saxon assailant slamming him face-first into the dirt before decapitating him with one swing of his axe.

Another had decided to face his attackers, making a cacophonous show of roars and curses as he squared off against two Saxons. One of them feinted to the left, distracting the Dane and causing him to swing wildly at his shield. That was the only opening his compatriot needed. A second later and the Dane was on his knees, a torrent of blood pouring from a jagged wound across the side of his neck. He slumped forward and was still, his previous defiance unremarked, his lifeblood soaking the soil of the land he'd sought to harm.

From the looks of it the English had the beginnings of a total victory. But Alaric had miscalculated. When he'd first surveyed the enemy position he knew his field of view was limited, as the camp was clearly of considerable dimensions if one took into account the length of the palisade they'd scouted not twenty minutes ago. This was more evident now they were inside, for they could see the mass of tents here extending for some distance eastward, precisely where Æthelstan was supposed to be commencing his attack.

But there was no sign of him yet, and there was no way he could not know what was going on, given the sheer amount of noise they were making. Perhaps he'd encountered heavy resistance of his own. Whatever the case, it looked like Alaric would have to face considerably more than the initial one hundred or so opponents he'd previously estimated. That was not good.

As if to confirm his suspicions about two dozen enemy warriors came howling out of the night. They were advancing at a rapid, enthusiastic speed towards Alaric's easily visible position near the fire, making a horrific, shrieking racket as they went.

At least some of the advancing Danes were properly equipped with mail, helmets, and a variety of shields and arms. Why these men had not been manning the entrance was a mystery to Alaric, as their presence in and around the palisade would have made it largely impossible for the Saxons to have wrought the level of surprise devastation they'd just inflicted. Perhaps there was another entrance somewhere around here they had been watching, or some other location of importance that had not yet been revealed.

Whatever the reason the English could not allow the enemy to seize the initiative. Alaric rushed forward to meet their charge, bellowing at the top of his lungs for his men to join him. They did so, a collective enthusiasm sweeping over them as they broke into another headlong rush, their cacophony of war cries echoing out into the night.

They'd covered a short distance before Alaric received a new opponent, this time a fully armoured warrior with the confidence to rush ahead of his brethren to intercept his advance. The Dane loped forward with a speed that alluded to the fact he was well-practised in moving and fighting, a skill he demonstrated beyond doubt when he used his momentum to actually leap slightly into the air and launch a downward swing of his axe toward Alaric's head.

Whilst gutsy, the attack was also predictable, his movements so deliberate that Alaric knew as soon as the man's legs tensed to leave the ground that a strike towards his face was coming. Alaric continued his charge without slowing, raising his shield up and forward to allow it to take the full force of the incoming axe. The weapon's head buried itself in the shield, the strength of the blow enhanced by the momentum of Alaric's charge moving up to meet it.

He crashed into the Dane at speed, staggering him backwards under the weight of the contest. At some point the Dane dropped his own shield to better grip his axe with both hands in a bid to pull it free. Ill-advised. Alaric thrust his sword towards his now exposed stomach, the blade's sharpened tip easily piercing the wrought iron scales and hardened leather of his armour.

Muscle and organs gave way to an onslaught of tempered metal, a torrent of blood soaking Alaric's lower half as the Dane was impaled. Alaric pushed with his shield arm as his legs continued to propel him forward, the now-expiring Dane giving up his desperate hold on the embedded axe and falling to his knees.

Alaric stormed past him, his eyes again fixed on the onrushing mob of heathens just a half dozen paces ahead. The now mortally wounded Norseman used the few moments of life he had left to clutch at his stomach, his fingers tentatively probing the contours of his catastrophic gut wound. Whatever final thoughts he was having were cut short by the onrushing wall of Saxon shields, the Dane's kneeling form crumpling and disappearing under the weight of charging bodies.

The two forces finally met. The clash of shields was immense, the sound of dozens of men colliding at speed in a welter of hate and fury making

Alaric's head ring. He was pushed forward by the man behind him, the two of them making the Dane immediately to their front stagger backwards. Whilst this was positive, it also meant Alaric's sword arm had been pushed forward against his own shield, making him unable to strike his foe, at least for as long as he was being carried along through sheer momentum.

His opponent didn't seem to have any such restrictions. His axe impacted off the edge of Alaric's shield twice, a third swing nicking the side of his helmet with a dull clang. If he'd not been wearing it he'd by all chances have lost his left ear and a good portion of his face into the bargain. Alaric growled with effort and made another bid to free his arm, managing this time to pull it backwards as the man behind him shifted his weight. He found out why a moment later when the Dane in front of him suddenly toppled over, his face rent open by a spear thrusting over Alaric's shoulder.

He pushed forward into the breach, knowing well enough that the Danes' ad hoc shield wall would likely collapse if they got in behind them. The wounded man at his feet had other ideas, grabbing at Alaric's legs and tripping him up. They struggled in the dirt, Alaric losing his grip on both his sword and shield in the process. Despite his injury, the warrior had some life left in him, and he snarled like an enraged wolf, his scuffed, bloodied fists raining down on Alaric's thankfully well-protected head.

There was only so much of that nonsense Alaric was willing to put up with. He knocked his hands aside and grabbed him around the throat, a second later butting him in the forehead with the front of his helmet. He then rolled the Dane over, using the reversal of positions to rain down punches of his own into his enemy's already bloodied face. He broke his nose with a wet crunch, knocking several rotten teeth free with a subsequent blow, the Dane's efforts to defend himself proving inadequate in his weakened state.

Large hands suddenly grabbed Alaric by the front of his shoulders and hauled him to his feet. His initial hunch that Osmund had appeared to assist him turned out to be ill-founded, as the man that now faced him was a mess of scar tissue and sharpened teeth, his breath also smelling like something had died in his mouth.

He didn't waste time introducing himself either, instead smashing the front of his helm into Alaric's with an ear-splitting clang. He then punched him in the solar plexus, the blow heavy and purposeful, and Alaric felt the breath leave his lungs with the doing of it. His knees threatened to give way, yet he somehow remained on his feet, bringing his guard up and deflecting several more punches in the process.

Alaric's helmet had been partially knocked out of position, revealing part of the right side of his face. The Dane noted this well and grabbed him with both hands around the throat, endeavouring to squeeze the life from him whilst sinking his teeth into his now exposed cheek. He bit deep, snarling as he did so, tearing through flesh with his bizarrely sharp canines.

This was intolerable. It was one thing to fight a man, but to behave as a total savage was another thing altogether. Unhappy with the prospect of losing his face, Alaric grabbed at the Dane's eye socket with his left hand, forcing his thumb down at a point onto the eyeball and pushing deeper. His opponent ignored him at first, but he soon realised the danger, releasing Alaric from his clenching jaws and grabbing at his wrist.

That was the opening Alaric needed. He swung his fist in a right hook to catch the fiend on the side of the head, knocking him off balance. Not enough. He stepped in with a classic uppercut, hammering the Dane on his chin with a dull thud and staggering him backwards. Better. Alaric used the moment to retrieve his sword from the ground, swinging it with both hands up and then down in a hammering arc connecting with the centre of the Dane's head. It didn't matter that he was wearing a helmet. Iron and then bone parted in a welter of blood. He dropped like a stone.

He wasn't the only one. The enemy shield wall had by now broken apart, and the better-equipped and well-motivated Saxons had pushed on through, stabbing and hacking at their now desperate and defeated enemy. More Danes fell, and the English rushed forward, stampeding over tents and broken bodies and putting down any stragglers brave enough to still face them. A few survivors could be seen fleeing into the night, likely heading to Thorkell himself to warn him of what was taking place. Let them do just that. Let Thorkell come charging out to face them, only to be attacked in the rear by Æthelstan. Alaric would then take his head.

But Æthelstan still wasn't here. The camp stretched out before them to the east, foreboding in the darkness and most certainly empty of any glorious charge from their Norpanhymbrian allies. Alaric retrieved his shield, taking the opportunity to also catch his breath and assess. They'd lost people in the last brawl. Alaric crossed himself when he saw them, broken and bloodied upon the ground, and offered up a quick prayer for their souls. They would mourn properly later.

"We're taking too long here," Osmund hissed, keeping his voice low to avoid spreading needless worry. He hesitated upon seeing the state of Alaric's face, the torn, bloody mess that had been his right cheek drawing the eye. He chose not to comment.

"This was supposed to be a quick raid, get in, kill Thorkell and leave," Osmund continued. "We're basically fighting everyone here. Don't get me wrong, I've been waiting for this, but the numbers are not on our side. We can't keep this up. As soon as the enemy actually wake up properly and realise..."

His voice trailed off. He was right. Time was of the essence. They had to push on, now, and finish what they'd started. There was also the chance that Æthelstan might need help. Time to move. And quickly.

"We can't turn back now, Osmund," Alaric said hoarsely, hoping his friend didn't think he was implying he was afraid. In all honesty he was finding it a little hard to talk. The injury to his cheek was worse than he'd initially feared, and his mouth kept filling with his own blood. He spat some out before trying again, the crimson splatter going unnoticed on the otherwise gore-strewn battleground.

"What I mean is...we can still finish what we came to do," he said, struggling still to form words. "Æthelstan could also need our help. Something has gone wrong somewhere, and we can't just leave without him."

Osmund nodded a few times, accepting what he'd said without argument. The men again fell into some kind of order, and their now somewhat depleted number set off at a jog, Alaric and Osmund in the lead.

As they progressed it became clearer still that Eadric had completely misled them on the size of this camp. It was large enough to shelter a small army, and it was more than suspicious that so far they'd encountered relatively few enemies. Where were the rest of them?

A minute passed before they found themselves approaching a large wood and canvas shelter, somewhat similar to the type they'd constructed a couple of days ago at Hringmere. A sizeable log fire was smouldering away in a shallow pit dug just off to the left, their path actually having taken them slightly uphill to the point, had it been daytime, they'd have been able to see over the palisade about fifty yards to their right.

The structure looked important, and it was decorated with a foreboding ram's skull that had been placed directly over its single entrance. Alaric didn't know what that signified and he didn't care either, as he had no interest whatsoever in the dark and callous beliefs of foreigners. Judging from the murmuring behind him though some of the men were unsettled at the sight of it. He didn't blame them. He didn't like the look of it either, especially the way it seemed to glare over them in the shifting firelight.

Just as he was considering doing something about it the skull suddenly split in half, a moment later falling to the ground and shattering into so many jagged fragments. One of his men had thrown a spear at it, destroying the cursed thing with remarkably precise aim. The spear itself had continued on its trajectory, tearing through the outer canvas of the structure and vanishing into the interior beyond. Somebody would have to retrieve it.

Alaric crept forward and up to the entrance, peering inside. There was nothing to fear. The place was deserted, yet curiously it looked to have been used as some kind of war room. Several long tables were arranged along the interior walls, displaying a plethora of crudely drawn maps detailing various regions of both England and what looked like Scotland. Alaric wrinkled his nose. He didn't think of the enemy as strategists, but from the looks of things here they at least gave some attention to such matters. There must be a method in their madness he'd not seen before.

The centre of the chamber was dominated by a large wooden dais, its rough, slipshod construction indicating it had been built in a hurry from whatever timber was available. Alaric couldn't guess its purpose. Perhaps Thorkell was actually ridiculously short and needed an extra boost to give speeches to his men, the sobriquet "the Tall" actually serving as a means to mock him. That was a pleasing thought. Either way, the thrown spear was lodged in the dais. Alaric moved to retrieve it. He tore it free with one try, splinters scattering at his feet. Then the shouting started.

Several of his men hurried in, Osmund at the head of them. "A lot of blond bastards heading this way, it looks like they followed us from somewhere," he said breathlessly, alarm lighting up his normally placid eyes. Alaric hurried outside to get a look for himself. Osmund wasn't exaggerating. About two hundred yards back down the path they'd just traversed were several hundred Danes advancing toward them, their armour and weapons glittering amidst the light cast from their own torches.

They were approaching slowly, casually even, apparently confident of their numbers and unmoved by the fact the English had snuck into their camp and butchered scores of their brethren. That in itself was suspicious. None of this made sense. The lack of patrols around the camp. The presence of just two guards at the entrance. The disorganised resistance...and now the sudden appearance of serious reinforcements, albeit from the way they'd just come. Something was wrong, and Alaric's instincts told him it might yet get them all killed.

"Get inside, all of you!" Alaric commanded. His men didn't need to be told again, every one of them hurrying into the structure and out of sight,

although Alaric made a point of returning the spear to the man it belonged to as he passed by. Once he was sure there were no stragglers he himself slipped back inside, the Danes beyond content to continue advancing with no real hurry.

Now what? There was only one entrance and they'd just passed through it. For a moment he considered making some kind of stand here, for the enemy would have to come through a relatively narrow space in order to get at them. He dismissed the notion, realising that their foes could also just set the place on fire from the outside to roast all of them within. Given the latter was more likely, Alaric opted to draw his sword and hack themselves an escape route.

"We'll give them the slip and push on!" he shouted, making his first brutal incision in the canvas at the eastern end of the room. Within mere seconds he'd slashed themselves a suitable exit, and Alaric went through first, feeling he should be the one to lead his men into parts unknown. Outside he could see something in the gloom up ahead, the faint hiss of wind in leaves greeting him on the night breeze. Trees. There were trees maybe just a few hundred paces away. This must be the eastern edge of the camp. They could escape.

The others exited the structure rapidly, one by one, and began moving swiftly to get some distance between themselves and those following them. They'd failed in what they'd originally set out to do, they all knew that now, but there was no sense in dying a pointless death. They were fortunate to have gotten as far as they had. The Northmen would not be forgetting this night in a hurry, that was certain. They'd received a bloody nose and no mistake.

They covered a good distance in record time, the men naturally motivated by the prospect of escaping into the forest. They soon reached what seemed like the edge of the camp, the long palisade to their right suddenly turning and giving way to a large, open maw of a gate before resuming its winding course to the north. And then they saw it. The ambush.

Æthelstan's men had made a good show of it, at least. They'd admittedly not made it far, looking like they'd only cleared the camp entrance before being attacked on both sides, if the pattern of bodies was anything to go by. There were roughly forty dead Norþanhymbrians, the entirety of his force, lying chaotically amidst the tangled forms of a comparable number of Danes. That was a good effort, considering the situation. The Norþanhymbrians were obviously not a people to take lightly.

They found Æthelstan himself curled up off to the side of the pathway, his eyes still open and beginning to dry out in the crisp night air. Somebody had hacked off one of his arms at the elbow. His banded mail coat was also split across his stomach, probably from taking something large and weighty, likely an axe, to his guts. His sword hung limply in his remaining hand. A dead Dane lay close by, part of his head looking like it had been bashed in by something sharp and heavy.

Alaric knelt down, removing what was likely a wedding ring from Æthelstan's hand. He had a feeling somebody would want this returned. He then reached out and closed his eyes with his fingertips, making the sign of the cross a moment later. "Lord have mercy," Alaric muttered, hearing his words echoed back at him by Osmund and those within earshot. A brief moment of piety and calm. Alaric savoured it. It didn't last.

One of his men suddenly cried out in alarm. Alaric looked up, everyone now staring in the direction of the gate. A sizeable force of Danes was emerging from the woods beyond and moving into position to bar their escape. What they'd been doing out there he had no idea. What he was certain of was that the man leading them seemed unusual. Tall. Too tall.

He looked like a giant out of some kind of pagan myth. Heavily armoured in a coat of masterfully worked metal scales that reached his knees, he sported a long, rugged cloak of animal hide that billowed out behind his wide shoulders. Much of his face was obscured by a weighty, dark iron helmet, although there was no hiding the huge metallic grey beard that cascaded down from his anvil of a chin. He carried a large war axe, clasped in two gnarled, oversized hands, its edge encrusted with a dull, deep red crust. He stood for a moment, staring at the Saxon force like he knew each of them. Like he'd been waiting.

It had to be him. Thorkell the Tall. He lived up to his name, after all. And he was to die, now, even though they were outnumbered. Even though the enemy had reinforcements in pursuit. Alaric was killing Thorkell tonight. He would then face his Maker, he knew, but not before he removed the head of the serpent that was this foreign army. Not before he killed Thorkell.

That might not be so easy. There was another warrior approaching who caught Alaric's eye, a brute of a man attired in furs and heavy, flint-coloured mail. He also sported a most striking helmet. It covered his entire face, like Thorkell's, and was similarly sturdy, but half of it had been painted red, although to signify what Alaric had no notion. He seemed loath to leave Thorkell's side, as if he were some kind of protector, and he was

similarly equipped with a sizeable war axe alongside what looked like a brutally fashioned spear slung across his back. It mattered not. Thorkell would fall tonight. There was nothing this fool could do about that, red helmet or no.

"We know what we have to do," Alaric bellowed, standing up and away from Æthelstan's corpse to address his warriors. He intentionally deepened his voice so it carried further, again putting additional effort into his pronunciation to compensate for his face wound. The last thing he wanted to do here was slur his words.

"We came here tonight to make these bastards pay," he intoned, pointing his sword in the direction of the advancing enemy. "We can still do that. If we don't break them here, we die. I don't fancy dying, not whilst there's an England still out there to protect. Not whilst there's still a life to be had. Not whilst our noble brother, Æthelstan, lies here, unavenged and unburied."

A ripple of agreement spread through the men, and they hurriedly assembled into a line facing the enemy, shields and spears at the ready. Alaric wasn't a skilled orator, and he didn't have time to waffle on about "destiny" or "fate" or other such apparently inspiring things to get his lads fired up. They could see the situation for what it was. They were outnumbered at least three to one, probably more, and they knew there was another enemy force closing behind them. If they didn't prevail here all was lost.

Others may have given into despair, resigning themselves to their fate and giving in, awaiting death and hoping it would be quick. These were no such men. Roaring in unison, the forty-five or so Englishmen left alive charged as one to crash into the enemy, their hearts overflowing with hate and defiance both. Then the bloodletting began again, shield clashing on shield, spears stabbing and axes hacking wildly. There was to be no holding back. Either they broke through or they all died.

The melee was confusing, chaotic, and frenzied. The man next to Alaric dropped suddenly, a slashing blade from a particularly cruel-looking Dane tearing through his throat with ease. The brute responsible was no doubt skilled with such a weapon, but he'd left his arm extended and unguarded after delivering his strike. Alaric lashed out with a shout, slicing the Dane's hand off at the wrist. He collapsed to his knees, howling desperately with pain. Alaric heard him burble something in his lilting language, too quiet to be heard over the carnage, although from the streaks of fresh tears marring his face it was likely an appeal for mercy. Alaric kicked him in the jaw, the blow knocking him onto his back, apparently senseless.

A body smashed into him from his left. Alaric turned and saw it was the enemy, but this one was not long for this world, as he'd been impaled through the stomach. The Saxon responsible let go of his spear, thinking it irretrievably stuck in the Dane's gut, and drew his axe instead. He took a blow from somewhere on his shield, the impact making an audible crack and fraying part of the wooden surface. He lashed out with his weapon at whoever had struck him, being answered by a scream of pain from amidst the mass of brawling bodies.

Remarkably, the Dane with the spear in his stomach was actually still on his feet and staring like he didn't quite understand the severity of his injury. Alaric lost sight of him amongst the chaos, although the Saxon who had wounded him reappeared a moment later and began staggering towards him, a thrown axe embedded in the side of his neck. He reached out for Alaric, his hands gentle and sincere, almost as if in his death throes he'd gotten the notion that his commander could help him.

For a split second there was nothing Alaric would have liked more than to know his name, to talk and pray with him, perhaps in a better time to have broken bread together and been as brothers. Each and every one of his men was fighting for their family as well as the kingdom. They'd trusted Alaric to lead them, and he'd led them to their deaths. The only way any of this would make sense would be if, by a miracle, they achieved what they'd set out to do.

The wounded man stumbled another step towards him, hands still outstretched. He then went down suddenly, struck from behind by the one who had presumably thrown the axe. Alaric charged forward, leaping over the man's body and barreling into his assailant. The fiend staggered backwards under the impact, losing the grip on his shield and struggling to maintain his footing. He was a wiry, weasel-like man, all flowing ring mail and blond hair, the cruel sneer on his face suggesting he found the situation vaguely amusing. He'd also pulled another one of those throwing axes from somewhere, this likely being some kind of speciality of his.

Perhaps he was special. Perhaps he was known in his home town for his skill with thrown weapons, and his friends liked to place bets on his accuracy. It didn't matter now. Alaric leapt at him, slamming the point of his sword into the bastard's midriff, sheathing fully half of the blade into his body cavity. The weasel cried out, or at least tried to, his sneer now an agonised grimace as his insides were reduced to a weeping, bloody ruin. Alaric kicked him in the stomach and off his sword, hacking at him again as he fell. He strode past the corpse, catching another Dane in the middle of

some kind of war cry and cutting out his throat with a wild swing, silencing him permanently.

The enemy force was starting to crack under the fury of the Saxon assault. Alaric couldn't tell how that was even possible, but he didn't dare stop to evaluate, nor would he question the desperate heroism of his men. They didn't have much time. There was still an enemy force pursuing from behind, and unless they'd all suddenly become deaf they were likely aware of the situation and hurrying to close the trap.

Another Saxon warrior fell close by, reduced to a grimacing, expiring heap of pain from a particularly savage blow to the groin. Osmund was roaring off to the right, seemingly in a frenzy, having picked up a second axe from somewhere and was using it to good effect. At least three Danes lay dead at his feet, and a wedge of several other Saxons had begun to form around him in a bid to press the advantage of having a huge, red-bearded lunatic with two axes on their side.

Osmund was in his element, fighting bravely as he always did, a true hero of the old Kingdom of Westseaxe. A man among men. Then he was dying, a thrown spear protruding from his chest, the point shattering the iron links of his armour and burying itself in his great heart. For a fraction of a second his shining blue eyes fell upon Alaric, his mouth agape, as if he wished to say something to his friend for one last time. Then his knees gave out. He fell backwards, coming to rest on the grass, his dead eyes fixed blankly on the stars above, the stampede of men and death continuing to whirl around him.

Alaric didn't have time to be shocked. Overwhelmed with hatred, he existed now to bring furious judgement down upon the foe, these accursed, miserable pagans, these harbingers of misery and desolation. The figure with the half-red helm had thrown that spear. He stood some distance away, just outside of the melee beyond the gate itself, guarding Thorkell whilst he watched the battle. Whether this was cowardice or prudence Alaric knew not, but the events of this night all seemed to indicate Thorkell had been aware he was a target for assassination.

In any case, he was apparently content to just stand back from the fight and observe now that his man had dealt with the furious Osmund. Alaric saw his chance. He'd hack his way through this mob and finish this tonight, fighting through as many men as needed. He started with the Dane immediately in front of him, opening up his stomach with a savage side slash and head-butting him to the ground for good measure. He then spun to meet a threat to his left, bashing his shield into the face of another foe

who was busy grappling with one of his men. The previously beleaguered Saxon regained his composure, taking advantage of his now dazed opponent to bring his axe down upon his head, cracking helm and skull alike. Alaric staggered onward over the corpse, pushing forward in his assault.

Somebody made a frenzied swing for his head, screaming furiously as they did so. Alaric swept his own blade out in an upwards arc, intercepting the Dane's blow in mid-air and severing much of his forearm. The fool's sword flew off into the grass about a meter from Thorkell's feet. Alaric ignored the Dane he'd just wounded, leaving him to crumple over onto his side and get busy with bleeding to death.

Alaric strode on, hacking and killing, his great fury ensuring he'd almost fought his way clear of the battle. Thorkell was just ahead, about a dozen paces away, and the beast looked to be alone, his guard elsewhere. Their eyes met amidst the chaos, the Northman calm and without emotion, the Englishman drenched in blood and sweat, overcome with grief and rage in equal measure. Alaric pointed his sword directly at him and screamed a wordless challenge. Thorkell just looked at him, content to stand there, his hands placed on the haft of his axe, the head of the weapon resting in the grass. He knew he had the advantage. He thought Alaric couldn't reach him.

As if in confirmation a cascade of blood-curdling roars suddenly shook the night, the sound of yet more stampeding feet following a second later. Alaric turned and saw the force that had been pursuing them was joining the battle. It was over. They were all dead. They'd put up a heroic struggle, but this was the end.

The enemy reinforcements crashed into what was left of the Saxon force from the rear, cutting them down as they went. Astonishingly his men continued fighting, but they were seconds from death. Their fate was sealed. Alaric turned again to face Thorkell, tears of rage cascading down his cheeks, his teeth grinding with hatred. He took a deep breath and charged.

He made it at least three paces before the blow landed. He should have known, some might say, that the leaders of armies generally do not meet in battle, despite the stories claiming otherwise. The great King Alfred of Westseaxe never directly fought Guthrum at Ethandun, just as his grandson, the renowned King Æthelstan, never physically locked swords with the fiendish Olaf Guthfrithson at Brunanburh.

Alaric's last bid to complete his task and kill Thorkell was thus perhaps foolhardy to any casual observer, but the more charitable among them

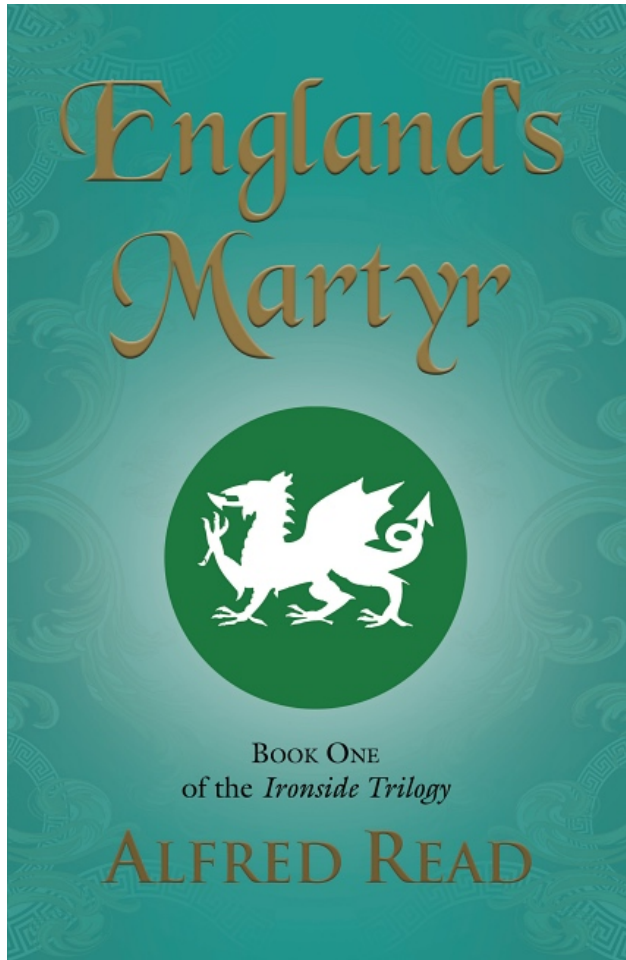
would understand it for the act of desperation it truly was. Alaric knew he was dead either way, and so he'd come to the conclusion that he'd rather do some good with the scant moments he had left than simply stand there and wait to die.

Regardless, the red-helmeted Dane charging in from his left was not about to let him succeed. Alaric hadn't seen where he'd gone or where he'd reappeared from, but he was on him now, striking suddenly and swiftly in defence of his lord. Alaric's prized helmet buckled inwards from the sheer force of the blow, the head of the two-handed axe biting deep into the silver and iron workmanship and ruining what had been a labour of love for the smith who'd made it.

Alaric couldn't remember who that was. In fact, he couldn't remember much of anything as he tumbled away under the impact, losing his footing and plunging headlong into what felt like a prolonged, uncontrolled descent. His vision whirled and whirled, his view alternating repetitiously between the wet, cool grass and the glorious star-filled sky above.

Some part of his mind told him he couldn't see out of one eye. The other part was just grateful when he came to a halt, although he had no idea where since all seemed like darkness. An ear-splitting cry of triumphant, unrestrained savagery then reverberated through the night, a hundred plus a hundred throats roaring in jubilation at the completion of some grim deed.

Alaric didn't know what that was about, but something told him it was the worst thing in the world. His head hurt and his hair was wet with something. He felt frightened that whoever was making that noise still seemed close. He just wanted it all to stop. He closed his one eye that could still be closed. And stopped.



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