

*Enjoy a sneak preview of one of the opening scenes from Bernard Cornwell's new novel, WAR LORD.*

*He is the Lord of Bebbanburg. He is a King's warrior who had helped the King achieve the throne. He is a man of proud independence, now content to be at home in his own lands. But fate decrees otherwise . . .*

There was hardly a breath of wind, the sea was lazy, its small waves collapsing exhausted on Bebbanburg's long beach. The ship approaching from the south, its prow crested with a cross, left a widening ripple that was touched with glittering gold by the early morning sun. She was being rowed, her oars rising and falling in a slow, weary rhythm.

'Poor bastards must have been rowing all night,' Berg said. He commanded the morning's guards posted on Bebbanburg's ramparts.

'Forty oars,' I said, more to make conversation than to tell Berg what he could plainly see for himself.

'And coming here.'

'From where, though?'

Berg shrugged. 'What's happening today?' he asked.

It was my turn to shrug. What would happen was what always happened. Cauldrons would be lit to boil clothes clean, salt would evaporate in the pans north of the fortress, men would practice with shields, swords and spears, horses exercised, fish would be smoked, water drawn from the deep wells, and ale brewed in the fortress kitchens. 'I plan to do nothing,' I said, 'but you can take two men and remind Olaf Einerson that he owes me rent. A lot of rent.'

'His wife's ill, lord.'

'He said that last winter.'

'And he lost half his flock to Scotsmen.'

'Or he sold them,' I said sourly. 'No one else complained of Scottish raiders this spring.' Olaf Einerson had inherited his tenancy from his father who had never failed to deliver fleeces or silver as rent. Olaf, the son, was a big and capable man whose ambitions, it seemed to me, went beyond raising hardy sheep on the high hills. 'On second thoughts,' I said, 'take fifteen men. I don't trust him.'

The ship was close enough now that I could see three men sitting just forward of the stern platform. One was a priest, or at least he was wearing a long black robe and it was he who stood and waved up at our ramparts. I did not wave back. 'Whoever they are,' I told Berg, 'bring them to the hall. They can watch me drink ale. And wait before you smack some sense into Olaf.'

'Wait, lord?'

'Let's see what news they're bringing first,' I said, nodding at the ship that was now turning towards the narrow entrance of Bebbanburg's harbour. The ship carried no cargo that I could see, and her oarsmen looked bone weary, suggesting that she brought urgent news.

‘Æthelstan,’ I guessed.

‘Æthelstan?’ Berg asked.

‘She’s not a Northumbrian ship, is she?’ I asked. No Northumbrian ship carried a cross on the prow. ‘And who uses priests to carry messages?’

‘King Æthelstan.’

I watched the ship turn into the entrance channel, then led Berg off the ramparts. ‘Look after his oarsmen. Send them food and ale, and bring the damn priest to the hall.’

I climbed to the hall where two servants were attacking cobwebs with long willow switches tied with bundles of feathers. Benedetta was watching to make sure every last spider was driven from the fortress. ‘We have visitors,’ I said, ‘so your war against spiders must wait.’

‘I am not at war,’ she insisted, ‘I like spiders. But not in my home. Who are the visitors?’

‘I’m guessing they’re messengers from Æthelstan.’

‘Then we must greet them properly!’ She clapped her hands and ordered benches to be brought. ‘And bring the throne from the platform,’ she commanded.

‘It’s not a throne,’ I said, ‘just a fancy bench.’

‘Ouff!’ she said. It was a noise Benedetta made whenever I exasperated her. It made me smile, which only irritated her more. ‘It is a throne,’ she insisted, ‘and you are king of Bebbanburg.’

‘Lord,’ I corrected her.

‘You are as much a king as that fool Guthfrith,’ she replied, making the sign to ward off evil, ‘or Owain, or anyone else.’ It was an old argument and I let it drop.

‘And have the girls bring ale,’ I said, ‘and some food. Preferably not stale.’

‘And you should wear the dark robe. I fetch it.’

Benedetta was from Italy, snatched as a child from her home by slavers, then traded across Christendom until she had reached Wessex. I had freed her and now she was the Lady of Bebbanburg, though not my wife. ‘My grandmother,’ she had told me more than once, and always making the sign of the cross as she spoke, ‘told me I should never marry. I would be cursed! I have been cursed enough in life. Now I am happy! Why should I risk a grandmother’s curse? My grandmother was never wrong!’

I grumpily allowed her to drape the expensive black robe over my shoulders, refused to wear the bronze-gilt circlet that had belonged to my father, and then, with Benedetta beside me, I waited for the priest.

And it was an old friend who came from the sunlight into the dusty shadows of Bebbanburg’s great hall. It was Father Oda, now bishop of Rammesburi, who walked tall and elegant, his long black robe hemmed with dark red cloth. He was escorted by a pair of West Saxon warriors who politely gave my steward their swords before following Oda towards me.

‘Anyone would think,’ the bishop said as he came closer, ‘that you were a king!’

‘He is,’ Benedetta insisted.

‘And anyone would think,’ I said, ‘that you were a bishop.’

He smiled. ‘By the grace of God, Lord Uhtred, I am.’

‘By the grace of Æthelstan,’ I said, then stood and greeted him with an embrace. ‘Do I congratulate you?’

‘If you like. I think I am the first Dane to be a bishop in England.’

‘Is that what you call it now?’

‘It’s easier than saying I am the first Danish bishop in Wessex, Mercia and East Anglia.’ He bowed to Benedetta. ‘It is good to see you again, my lady.’

‘And to see you, my lord bishop.’

‘Ah! So rumour is wrong! Courtesy does live in Bebbanburg!’ He grinned at me, pleased with his jest and I smiled back. Oda, Bishop of Rammesburi! The only surprising thing about that appointment was that Oda was a Dane, son of pagan immigrants who had invaded East Anglia in the service of Ubba, whom I had killed. Now a Danish son of pagan parents was a bishop in Saxon England. Not that he did not deserve it. Oda was a subtle, clever man who, as far as I knew, was as honest as the day is long.

There was a pause because Finan had seen Oda arrive and now came to greet him. Oda had been with us when we defended Lundene’s Crepelgate, a fight that had put Æthelstan on the throne. I might be no Christian and no lover of Christianity, but it is hard to dislike a man who has shared a desperate battle at your side. ‘Ah, wine!’ Oda greeted a servant, then turned to Benedetta, ‘no doubt blessed by the Italian sun?’

‘More likely pissed in by Frankish peasants,’ I said.

‘His charms don’t grow less, do they, my lady?’ Oda said, sitting. Then he looked at me and touched the heavy gold cross hanging at his breast. ‘I bring news, Lord Uhtred.’ His tone was suddenly wary.

‘I supposed as much.’

‘Which you won’t like.’ Oda kept his eyes on me.

‘Which I won’t like,’ I echoed, and waited.

‘King Æthelstan,’ he said calmly, still looking at me, ‘is in Northumbria. He entered Eoferwic three days ago.’ He paused, as if expecting me to protest, but I said nothing. ‘And King Guthfrith,’ Oda went on, ‘misunderstood our coming and has fled.’

‘Misunderstood,’ I said.

‘Indeed.’

‘And he fled from you and Æthelstan? Just the two of you?’

‘Of course not,’ Oda said, still calm. ‘We were escorted by over two thousand men.’

I am old, I was tired, I had fought enough, I wanted to stay at Bebbanburg, I wanted to hear the long sea break on the beach and the wind sigh around the hall’s gable. I knew I had few years left, but the gods had been kind. My son was a man and would inherit wide lands, I could still ride and hunt, and I had Benedetta. True she had a temper like a weasel on heat, but she was loving and loyal, had a brightness that lit Bebbanburg’s grey skies and I loved her.

‘Two thousand men,’ I said flatly, ‘yet still he needs me?’

‘He requests your help, lord, yes.’

‘He can’t manage the invasion on his own?’ I was getting angrier.

‘It’s not an invasion, lord,’ Oda said calmly, ‘just a royal visitation. A courtesy between kings.’

He could call it what he liked, but it was still an invasion.

And I was angry.

I was furious because Æthelstan had once sworn that he would never invade Northumbria while I lived. Yet now he was in Eoferwic with an army, and I had eighty-three men waiting behind the crest of a hill not far south of Bebbanburg to do his bidding. I had wanted to refuse Oda, I had wanted to tell him to take his damned ship back to Eoferwic and spit in Æthelstan’s face. I felt betrayed. I gave Æthelstan his throne, yet since that day when I had fought at the Crepelgate he

had ignored me. That did not upset me. I am a Northumbrian and live far from Æthelstan's land, and all I wanted was to be left in peace. Yet he had broken the oath he made to me, he was in my country with an army, and now he wanted my help. Again. And so I had led eighty-three warriors from Bebbanburg to ambush King Guthfrith of Northumbria who had fled from Æthelstan's invasion. The sun burned high and bright, the day was still.

Oswi, on a sweat-whitened horse, brought news of the enemy's approach. 'Soon, lord,' he said.

'How many?'

'A hundred and fourteen. Some prisoners too.'

'Prisoners?' Bishop Oda, who had insisted on accompanying us, asked sharply, 'we were only expecting one captive.'

'They've got some women, lord,' Oswi still spoke to me. 'They're driving them like sheep.'

'The women are on foot?' I asked.

'Some of the men too, lord. And a lot of the horses are limping. They've ridden fast!' He took a leather flask from Roric, swilled out his mouth with ale, spat into the grass and took another swig. 'They look as if they've been travelling all night.'

'And so they might have,' I said, 'to have got this far so quickly.'

'They're worn out now,' Oswi said happily.

Bishop Oda had brought me his news from Eoferwic and his ship had made the journey in two days despite the fitful winds, but the men approaching on the long straight road had fled the city on horseback. I reckoned to take a week to ride from Bebbanburg to Eoferwic, though admittedly that was slow and allowed me long nights in friendly halls. I had once ridden it in four days, but never in heat like this early summer. The fugitives from Eoferwic had fled fast and they had ridden fast, but Bishop Oda's oarsmen had easily overtaken them and now the weary horses were bringing them into our ambush.

'It is not an ambush,' Bishop Oda insisted when I used the word. 'We are merely here to persuade King Guthfrith to return to Eoferwic. And King Æthelstan requests your presence in Eoferwic too.'

'Mine,' I said curtly.

'Indeed. And he also requires you to gain the release of Guthfrith's captive.'

'Captives,' I corrected him.

'Indeed,' Oda said dismissively. 'But Guthfrith must be returned to Eoferwic. He simply needs reassurance that King Æthelstan comes in friendship.'

'With over two thousand men? All in mail, all armed?'

'King Æthelstan likes to travel in style,' Oda responded.

Æthelstan might describe his visit to Eoferwic as a friendly visitation, but there had still been fighting in the city because in truth it had been a conquest, a lightning fast invasion and, reluctant as I was to give Æthelstan any credit, I had to admire what he had achieved. Oda had told me how Æthelstan had brought an army of over two thousand men across the Mercian border, then led them at a relentless pace northwards, abandoning any man or horse that faltered or weakened. They pounded the road, reaching Eoferwic while their presence in Northumbria was still an unconfirmed rumour. The city's southern gate was opened by West Saxon warriors who had infiltrated Eoferwic pretending to be merchants, and Æthelstan's army had flooded into the streets. 'There was some fighting on the bridge,' Oda had told me, 'but by the grace of God the pagans were defeated and the survivors fled.'

Those survivors were led by Guthfrith and Æthelstan had sent Bishop Oda with a demand that I bar the northern roads and so keep Guthfrith from escaping into Scotland. Which is why I waited on the hillside under the burning sun. Finan and I were prone on the crest, staring southwards, while Bishop Oda was crouched behind us. 'And why,' I asked him sourly, 'shouldn't Guthfrith escape to Scotland?'

Oda sighed at my stupidity. 'Because it gives Constantine a reason to invade Northumbria. He'll simply claim he's restoring the rightful king to his throne.'

'Constantine is Christian,' I said, 'why would he fight for a pagan king?'

Oda sighed again, his eyes on the far distance where the road vanished in the heat. 'King Constantine,' he said, 'would sacrifice his own daughters to Baal if it increased the size of his realm.'

'Who's Baal?' Finan asked.

'A heathen god,' Oda said dismissively, 'and how long do you think Constantine would tolerate Guthfrith? He'll marry him to one of his daughters, then have him quietly strangled and the Scots will own Northumbria. So no, Guthfrith must not reach Scotland.'

'There,' Finan said, and far off a group of horsemen appeared on the road. I could just see them, a blur of horses and men in the summer haze. 'They're tired right enough,' Finan said.

'We want Guthfrith alive,' Oda warned me, 'and back in Eoferwic.'

'You told me,' I grumbled, 'and I still don't know why.'

'Because King Æthelstan demands it, that's why.'

'Guthfrith is a piece of raddled shit,' I said. 'It would be better to kill him.'

'King Æthelstan demands that you keep him alive. Pray do so.'

'And I'm supposed to obey his orders? He's not my king.'

Oda gave me a stern look. 'He is *Monarchus Totius Britanniae*.' I just stared at him until he offered a translation. 'He is the monarch of all Britain.'

I snorted at that. Æthelstan had been calling himself the king of the Saxons and Angles ever since he had been crowned and he did have some claim to that title, but ruler of all Britain? 'I imagine Constantine and Hywel might disagree?' I suggested sourly.

'I'm sure they will,' Oda said calmly, 'but nevertheless King Æthelstan wishes you to prevent Guthfrith from reaching Scotland, and to release his captive unharmed.'

'Captives.'

'Captive.'

'You don't care about the women?' I asked.

'I pray for them, of course. But I pray for peace even more.'

'Peace?' I asked angrily. 'Invading Northumbria brings peace?'

Oda looked pained. 'Britain is unsettled, lord. The Norsemen threaten, the Scots are restless, and King Æthelstan fears a war is coming. And he fears it will be a war more terrible than any we have known. He yearns to avert that slaughter and to that end, lord, he begs you to rescue the captive and send Guthfrith safely home.'

I did not understand why sending Guthfrith home would make peace, but I remembered the dragon flying above Bebbanburg's ramparts and its grim message of war. I looked at Finan, who shrugged as if to say he no more understood than I did, but we had best try to do Æthelstan's bidding. Down in the valley I could see the approaching men more clearly, and see the women captives walking at the rear of the long column of horses.

'So what do we do?' Finan asked.

'We ride down there,' I said, easing my way back from the crest, 'we smile politely and

tell the stupid bastard that he's our prisoner.'

'Guest,' Bishop Oda said.

Roric helped me into the saddle and Aldwyn gave me the silver-crested helmet. The leather-liner was uncomfortably hot. I buckled it under my chin, but left the cheek-pieces unlaced, then took my wolf-head shield from Aldwyn.

'No spear yet,' I told him, 'and if there's any fighting you stay out of trouble.'

'He used to say that to me,' Roric said, grinning.

'Which is why you're alive,' I growled. Roric had been my servant before Aldwyn, but was now old enough to stand in the shield wall.

'There'll be no fighting,' Bishop Oda said sternly.

'It's Guthfrith,' I said, 'he's a fool, and he fights before he thinks, but I'll do my best to keep the beef-witted idiot alive. Let's go!'

I led my men westwards, always staying out of Guthfrith's sight. When I had last seen him he had been perhaps a half mile from the bend in the road and travelling painfully slowly, and we went fast, our horses rested, turned down the hill and threaded through the pine trees, splashed through the hurrying stream and so reached the road where we formed a line of two ranks so that when the approaching fugitives appeared they would see two rows of mailed horsemen with bright shields and sun-glinting spearheads. We waited.

I did not like Guthfrith and he did not like me. He had spent three years trying to make me swear an oath of loyalty and for three years I had refused. Twice he had sent warriors to Bebbanburg and twice I had kept the Skull Gate barred, daring Guthfrith's spearmen to assault the fortress, and twice they had ridden away.

Now, in the hot sun, his spearmen were on my land again, only this time they were led by Guthfrith himself and Guthfrith had to be bitter. He believed his kingdom was being stolen, and in a moment he would see my men, see my wolf's head badge on their shields and he would realise he outnumbered me. Bishop Oda might piously hope there would be no fighting, but a cornered Guthfrith would be like a polecat in a sack; maddened and vicious.

And he had hostages.

Not just the women, though they had to be rescued, but Guthfrith, cunning as he was, had snatched Archbishop Hrothweard from his cathedral in Eoferwic. 'During the Mass!' Oda had told me in horrified tones, 'during the Mass! Armed men in the cathedral!'

I wondered whether Guthfrith would dare harm the Archbishop. Doing so would make him the enemy of every Christian ruler in Britain, though perhaps Constantine would swallow his anger long enough to put Guthfrith back on Northumbria's throne. A dead archbishop would be a small price to pay for a larger Scotland.

Then they appeared. The first horsemen turning towards us at the bend in the road. They saw us and stopped, and gradually the succeeding warriors joined them.

'We'll go to them,' Oda said.

'We won't,' I said.

'But . . .'

'You want a slaughter?' I snarled.

'But . . .' the bishop tried again.

'I go,' I said impulsively.

'You . . .'

'I go alone,' I gave my shield back to Aldwyn and swung down from the saddle.

'I should come with you,' Oda said.

‘And give him two priests as hostages? A bishop as well as an archbishop? He’d like that.’

Oda looked towards Guthfrith’s men who were slowly arranging themselves into a line that overlapped ours. At least a score of them were on foot, their horses too lamed to be mounted. All were pulling on helmets and hefting shields which showed Guthfrith’s symbol of a long-tusked boar. ‘Invite him to come and talk to me,’ Oda said, ‘promise him he’ll be safe.’

I ignored that, looking at Finan instead. ‘I’ll try to meet Guthfrith halfway,’ I told him. ‘If he brings men, send me the same number.’

‘I’ll come,’ Finan said, grinning.

‘No, you stay here. You’ll know when to come, and when you do, come fast.’

He nodded, understanding me. Finan and I had fought together for so long that I rarely needed to explain what I planned. He grinned. ‘I’ll come like the wind.’

‘Lord Uhtred . . .’ Oda began.

‘I’ll do my best to keep Guthfrith alive,’ I interrupted him, ‘and the hostages too.’

I was not sure I could succeed in that, but I was certain that if we all rode forward until we were within shouting distance of Guthfrith’s men then there would almost certainly be a fight or else blades would be held at the hostages’ throats. Guthfrith was a fool, but a proud fool, and I knew he would refuse a demand that he give up his prisoners and meekly agree to return to Eoferwic. He must refuse because to agree would be to lose face in front of his warriors.

And those warriors were Norsemen, proud Norsemen who believed they were the most feared warriors in all the known world. They outnumbered us and they saw a chance for slaughter and plunder. Many were young, they wanted reputation, they wanted their arms ringed with gold and silver, they wanted their names to be spoken with terror. They wanted to kill me, to take my arm rings, my weapons, my land.

So I walked towards them alone, stopping a little more than halfway between my men and Guthfrith’s tired warriors who were then about a long bowshot away. I waited, and when Guthfrith made no move, I sat on a fallen Roman mile-stone, pulled off my helmet, and watched the sheep on the far hill crest, then looked up to admire a hawk balancing on the wind. The bird was circling, so no message from the gods in that.

I had come alone because I wanted Guthfrith alone, or at most with only two or three companions. I was sure he was ready for a fight, but he knew his men were tired and his horses blown, and even a fool like Guthfrith would explore the chances of avoiding a fight if he could win this confrontation without sacrificing a dozen or more of his warriors. Besides, he had hostages and doubtless reckoned he could use them to force me into a humiliating retreat.

And still Guthfrith made no move. He was puzzled. He saw that I was alone and apparently unafraid, but a man does not become a king without some measure of cunning and he was wondering where the trap lay. I decided to let him believe there was no trap and so I stood, kicked at some of the half-buried stones in the old road, shrugged and started walking away.

That prompted him to spur forward. I heard the hooves, turned back, pulled on my helmet, and waited again.

He brought three men. Two were warriors, one of whom was leading a small horse that carried Archbishop Hrothweard who was still dressed in the brightly embroidered robes that Christian priests wear in their churches. He looked unhurt, though tired, his face burned by the sun and his white hair tangled.

I also heard the hooves clattering on the stones of the Roman road behind me and glanced back to see that Finan had sent Berg and my son. ‘Stay behind me,’ I called to them. They had

seen that Guthfrith and his two men had drawn swords and they too now pulled their long blades from their scabbards. Berg was behind and to my right, facing the man who held Hrothweard's horse. My son was to my left, confronting the other warrior.

'What . . .' my son began to ask.

'Say nothing!' I said.

Guthfrith curbed his stallion just two or three paces from me. His plump face, framed by the steel of his helmet, glistened with sweat. His brother, the one-eyed Sigtryggr, had been a handsome man, but Guthfrith had drunk too much ale and eaten too much rich food so that he now sat heavy in the saddle. He had small, suspicious eyes, a flattened nose and a long, plaited beard that hung down his expensive mail. His horse had silver trappings, his helmet had a raven's black wing on its crown, and his sword was now held at Hrothweard's throat.

'Lord Archbishop,' I said in greeting.

'Lord Uht . . .' Hrothweard began, then stopped abruptly as Guthfrith pressed the blade's edge against his gullet.

'Address me first,' Guthfrith growled. 'I am your king.'

I looked at him and frowned. 'Remind me of your name?' I said and I heard my son chuckle.

'You want this priest dead?' Guthfrith asked angrily. The pressure of his sword was forcing Hrothweard to lean back in his saddle. His frightened eyes watched me over the grey blade.

'Not particularly,' I said carelessly, 'I like him well enough.'

'Well enough to beg for his life?'

I pretended to think about that question, then nodded. 'I'll beg for his life if you swear to release him, yes.'

Guthfrith sneered at that. 'There will be a price,' he said.

I noticed how awkward Guthfrith looked. Hrothweard was on his left and Guthfrith was holding the sword with his right hand. 'There's always a price,' I said, taking a small step to my left, thus forcing Guthfrith to half turn his head away from Hrothweard. The sword wavered. 'King Æthelstan,' I said, 'merely wishes to speak with you. He promises you both your life and your kingdom.'

'Æthelstan,' Guthfrith said, 'is shit from a swine's arsehole. He wants Northumbria.'

He was right, of course, at least about what Æthelstan wanted. 'Æthelstan,' I said, 'keeps his promises.' Yet in truth Æthelstan had betrayed me, he had broken his promise, yet here I was, doing just what he wanted.

'He promised,' Guthfrith said, 'not to invade Northumbria while you lived, yet he's here!'

'He came to talk with you, nothing else.'

'Maybe I should kill you. Maybe the little turd would like that.'

'You can try,' I said. My son's horse stirred behind me, a hoof clicking against one of the road's broken stones.

Guthfrith edged his horse towards me and swept the sword over and down so the blade was in front of me. 'You have never sworn me an oath of loyalty, Lord Uhtred,' he said, 'yet I am your king.'

'True,' I said.

'Then on your knees, Jarl Uhtred,' he said, sneering at the word 'jarl', 'and give me your sworn oath.'

‘And if I don’t?’

‘Then you will feed Boar Tusk.’ I assumed Boar Tusk was the name of his sword that was now close to my face. I could see the nicks in the sharpened edges, could feel the heat of the steel on my cheek, and was dazzled by the sun reflecting brilliant from the vague whorls in the hammered steel. ‘Down!’ Guthfrith commanded, jerking the blade.

I looked up into his small dark and suspicious eyes. ‘I shall demand the Archbishop’s life in exchange for the oath,’ I said, ‘and the lives of the other hostages.’

‘You can demand nothing,’ he snarled, ‘nothing!’ He prodded the sword hard, grating its tip on my mail until it lodged in one of the links, forcing me back a half pace. ‘You will be my sworn man,’ he said, ‘and you will get only what I choose to give. Now down on your knees!’ He prodded again, harder.

There was a gasp from my son as I knelt and lowered my head. Guthfrith chuckled and held his sword’s tip close to my face. ‘Kiss the blade,’ he said, ‘and say the words.’

‘Lord King,’ I said humbly, and paused. My left hand found a stone about the size of a fist.

‘Louder!’ Guthfrith snarled.

‘Lord King,’ I said again, ‘I swear by Odin . . .’ and with that I brought the stone up and smashed it into the stallion’s mouth. I hit the snaffle, crushing the silver decoration, but the blow must have hurt because the horse reared and whinnied. Guthfrith’s sword vanished from my sight. ‘Now!’ I bellowed, though neither my son nor Berg needed the encouragement. Guthfrith was struggling to stay in the saddle of his rearing horse. I stood, cursing the pain in my knees and seized his sword arm. My son was to my left, keeping that man distracted by thrusting a sword at his belly. I hauled on Guthfrith, pulled again, was jerked to my right by the stallion, but Guthfrith fell at last, crashing down onto the road. I wrenched his sword free, dropped on his belly with my knees and held Boar Tusk’s blade at his straggling beard.

‘You’ll only get one oath from me, you miserable slime-toad,’ I snarled, ‘and that’s a promise to kill you.’

He lurched up and I forced the sword down hard which stilled him.

And behind me Finan was charging. My men’s spears were lowered, the blades glittering in the harsh sun. Guthfrith’s men had been much slower to react, but now they were coming too.

And once again I was not certain I was fighting for the right side.