





ENGLAND

888 AD



# ONE

Alfred was tired. It had been a long, hard war, and though he had won it, he had barely rested since. He knew that the peace would not last long. For an English king, he had learned, it never did. There was always another war.

He had spent his entire reign defending his homeland and his faith against the hordes of Norse barbarians from across the sea. For nearly a century, they had been arriving in fleets of longships, raiding England's coastline and laying siege to its villages and towns, their incursions growing more daring—and more bloody—with each passing year. When Alfred was still but a boy, Danish invaders had established permanent footholds across England, seizing all of East Anglia and Mercia, two of the largest kingdoms in the land. Danish power spread so far and wide after that, and so quickly, that within three short years only Wessex remained unbroken. The last free, sovereign kingdom in all England. Alfred's kingdom.

He was not King then, nor did he have any wish to be, but he would soon have the crown thrust upon him. The Norse wasted no time in attacking Wessex. Alfred's King and elder brother was for a short time successful in repelling the invaders. But after that, defeat followed defeat, and when the King met his death shortly after his army was routed at Reading, his crown passed to Alfred, his sole heir. And so it was that by his twenty-first year, Alfred had

become England's only remaining Anglo-Saxon king, and in all likelihood its last.

For a short while, Alfred had considered surrender, and with good reason: the Norsemen were notorious for their brutality and lack of mercy. Other English kings, those who had not fled, or who had refused to yield, had been tortured to death when their walls inevitably fell. The Danish king at the head of the invading force, a godless thug named Guthrum, was driving deeper into the heart of Alfred's beloved Wessex, sacking every town and village before him. Alfred's army was forced to retreat as far west as Somerset, where the seclusion of its tidal marshes afforded him time to regroup. Summoning men from the neighboring counties, he set them to building a fortress from which they could rally and stage attacks. Tired of running and hiding, Alfred finally began to take the fight to the enemy.

He defeated the Norse in battle at Ethandun, driving them all the way back to their stronghold and laying siege to it until he starved the heathens into surrender. It was a decisive victory, but the Norse were still too many and too widespread to be driven utterly from the land. Tired of bloody battles and dead men in numbers more than he could count, Alfred offered armistice to his hated enemy, Guthrum: if the Norse agreed to lay down their arms, they would be granted their own lands in the east. The English territory they already occupied would be formally recognized as the Danelaw, a kingdom in which Guthrum and his people could—and would be expected to—live in peace.

And so it was agreed. And so Wessex was saved.

Throughout his kingdom, Alfred's subjects, grateful to have been spared the horrors of a Norse occupation, began to call him Alfred the Great. It was a title that did not sit well with him, for he did not see greatness within himself. He had studied the life and campaigns of that other "Great," Alexander III—the Macedonian king who had been driven by a firm conviction in his own greatness, one so deeply held he believed it was his destiny to conquer

the entire world. And so he had; by Alfred's age, Alexander had vanquished the vast Persian army, once thought invincible, and had gone on to preside over one of the greatest empires the world had ever seen, ruling all of Asia Minor from the Ionian Sea to the Himalayas. Alfred, by contrast, had barely managed to hang on to his own little kingdom.

Alexander had famously never lost a battle, while Alfred had lost many. Far too many.

He would not lose another, he told himself. In the years following the Danish accord, Alfred refused to grow complacent. He went to London, a city sacked and ruined during the Norse invasions, and restored it to life, buttressing it against future attack. Alfred's own royal palace at Winchester was fortified similarly, as were villages and towns throughout Wessex, until every man and woman within his kingdom's borders could feel secure that the horrors of recent years would never visit them again.

Everyone except Alfred. Wessex was as safe as he could make it, and yet he did not sleep easily. Every messenger and scout brought fresh reports of Danish naval activity, fresh rumors of a coming invasion. And now, Guthrum, long rumored ill, was said to be on his deathbed.

Though the Danish king was a barbarian, Alfred had come to respect him—and more importantly, to trust him. In the years since the armistice, Guthrum had always held his word to keep the peace. But it was known that many ambitious and hot-tempered men of war among the Danelaw Norse were waiting to take power after Guthrum's death. Men who would have no respect for the treaty their predecessor had honored. And the only thing Alfred feared more than another Danish invasion from across the sea was a Danish uprising from within England's own borders.

And so here he sat, on his throne at Winchester, as uneasily as he ever had. He had sent word to his military commanders throughout the kingdom to be on close watch. After all, it took days for word to travel here from the Danelaw; for all Alfred knew,



Guthrum might already be dead. Even now, as he sat here, Danish forces could be massing under some new king in preparation for an attack. But he had done all he could. Now all that was left to do was wait, and worry.

“Your Majesty?”

Alfred looked to the page standing before him; he had been so lost in thought he had not heard the boy approach. “What is it?”

“The archbishop requests your presence in the courtyard,” said the page. “He says he has something you must see.”

Alfred groaned. Aethelred, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was the last man he wanted to see today, or any other day. Though Alfred cherished his Christian beliefs, he did not likewise cherish the man who was leader of his church. The archbishop had been inherited along with the rest of Alfred’s kingdom, and there was something about the man that had troubled him from the beginning. Had Alfred’s reign been one of peace, he likely would have moved to replace the prelate, but he had been too busy fighting a war against the Norse to also embroil himself in a battle with the church. In recent months, however, he had come to sorely regret having not done so, and never more so than at this moment. What Aethelred had to show him was certain to sour his appetite and send him to bed with nightmares. As if sleep was not hard enough to come by these days.

Alfred gave the page a reluctant nod. “Tell him I will be there presently.”

The page bowed low, then hurried away. Alfred sat a while longer before making his way to the courtyard. Whatever fresh horror Aethelred had in store for him, he was in no hurry to see it.



Five months ago, Aethelred had come to Alfred in feverish excitement. During the rebuilding of London, a common laborer had by chance discovered a cache of ancient Latin scrolls buried beneath

the earth. The laborer brought them to his parish priest, who, so startled by what he saw within them, rode them to Canterbury himself that same day.

Aethelred, too, recognized in the scrolls something remarkable the moment he saw them. They were old, so old that the Latin text they contained, some earlier, arcane form of the language, was barely understandable even by his most learned priests. But what they were able to translate both chilled Aethelred's blood and excited him so he could scarcely keep his hands from shaking. The scrolls spoke of powers even more ancient than they. Of incantations and rites that could change the shape of flesh, create new life from old. Of the power to make any man who wielded it into a god.

It took Aethelred and his most senior scholars months to decipher the text of all nine scrolls. When at last their work was finished, Aethelred brought it to Winchester and presented it to his King as a way to finally secure peace for all the English kingdoms—to annihilate the Danish threat, once and for all. When Alfred heard the archbishop's promise that he could accomplish all this without a single drop of English blood spilled, he was intrigued; when he heard how Aethelred intended to do it, he did not know whether to be appalled or simply think the man mad.

It took a demonstration for Aethelred to prove to his King that his mind had not taken leave.

Aethelred had one of his curates bring forth a hog appropriated from the castle's livestock. Alfred, and everyone at court that day, was at first amused to see the leashed pig pulling the hapless curate along by its leash as it sniffed the stone floor. Was this some kind of jest? At best, Alfred thought, Aethelred might embarrass himself before the entire royal court. Which would give Alfred just the excuse he needed to ease the man quietly from his seat at Canterbury and replace him with someone less irksome. The poor man had obviously been working too hard. It was time.

The curate threw a half-eaten apple before the pig and backed away as the animal scarfed it down. Few noticed the look of pale dread on the young priest's face as he retreated; all eyes were on the pig, a common beast running loose in this highest of halls.

As the pig chewed greedily, Aethelred cautioned the royal guardsmen standing nearby to be at the ready, then threw back his arms with a flourish. Courtiers exchanged awkward glances; some of them giggled. *This is already enough to finish him*, Alfred thought to himself from his throne. *The Primate of All England, waving his arms about like a court jester performing a conjuring trick.*

And then Aethelred began the incantation. The giggling stopped. So did the amused glances. All eyes were fixed on Aethelred as he mouthed the ancient words decrypted in Canterbury.

The language was familiar, and yet not. *What is that, some kind of Latin?* Alfred wondered. Only one thing was certain: as Aethelred continued with the incantation, his voice slowly rising, a chill descended upon the room. Though none understood the words, every man and woman somehow knew that there was something *wrong* about them. As though they had come from a place not human. Several of those watching felt a strong urge to leave the room, and yet their feet would not carry them. They were rooted to the spot, paralyzed, unable to look away.

The pig, who had been happily devouring the apple, suddenly dropped it. Its jaw went slack. Its head twisted and turned in an unnatural circular motion, as if tortured by some infernal sound only it could hear. It let out the most horrendous, piercing squeal, then fell sideways onto the floor, where it lay still.

For a moment the room was eerily silent, all present rendered speechless by the bizarrely morbid display. Aethelred had, seemingly, killed this animal without laying so much as a hand on it. With the power of words alone.

It took Alfred to break the silence. "I demand to know the meaning of this—" The pig squealed—louder than before—cutting



Alfred's words short. Then its body jolted back to life, writhing on the floor through a series of violent spasms.

*Some postmortem reflex?* Alfred glanced up from the stricken beast to Aethelred and saw the broad grin spread across the archbishop's face. As though full of delight in what he knew was to come next.

Something burst from the belly of the pig, blood spraying across the floor. Several onlookers shrieked in dismay, and those standing closest backed away in revulsion as another protrusion erupted from within the pig's body, then another, each glistening with dark, viscous blood as they unfolded and took form. Bony, jointed, stalk-like appendages, resembling the limbs of some monstrous insect, they slipped and slid across the smooth stone floor like the legs of a newborn calf trying to stand.

And then the *thing*—it could no longer reasonably be called a pig—rose up on its six newly formed legs, each bristling with thick, fibrous hairs. The creature's jaw unhinged and dropped wide, revealing a mouthful of sharply pointed fangs. The royal guardsmen drew their weapons and Alfred watched with grim fascination as the creature ambled forward. Its eyes were wild and bloodshot, searching the room, seemingly half-blind and in the grip of some rabid fever.

The beast lifted its head, opened its jaw wide, and howled—an appalling sound that defied nature and raised gooseflesh on the arms of every person present. The callow young guardsman who stood closest to the beast moved to strike it down with his sword. Before Aethelred could warn him off, the guardsman's blade came down on one of the beast's spider-like legs, releasing a spray of black blood that splattered his tunic. As the beast screamed, the guard tried to draw back his blade for another blow, but it was stuck fast in the bone and gristle of the beast's leg. Wounded and enraged, the pig-thing wheeled, wresting the sword from the guard's hand. Before he could withdraw, the beast lurched forward and its two front legs closed around his waist like pincers.

As the young man flailed helplessly, his comrades came to his aid, some trying to pull him free of the creature's grip, others hacking at it with their swords, the screams of the beast and of the guardsman in its grip mingling in a hellish cacophony. Then the creature's pincers closed tight and the young guardsman vomited blood as his body was sliced in two. The beast threw both lifeless halves of the man aside, trying now to defend itself against the other guards, who were stabbing and slashing at it furiously. But it was too late; the thing had sustained several grievous wounds and was bleeding out quickly. Weakened and dying, it finally toppled, gasping, blood bubbling up in its throat. The guard captain moved in, sword drawn high, and with all his strength brought the blade down, taking the monster's head clean off. For a few moments more it continued to move, its chest heaving, its arachnid legs twitching reflexively. And then, finally, it was still.

His face spattered with the blood of the beast, the guard captain glared at Aethelred. Alfred stepped down from his throne and marched across the room to the priest, who had not stopped smiling during the whole bloody episode, and who smiled still.

"Did you enjoy the demonstration, Sire?" asked the archbishop.

"I did *not*," hissed the King through gritted teeth, his fists clenched.

Aethelred's smile arched wider. "The Danes will enjoy it even less, I suspect."





## TWO

Alfred ordered the throne room cleared of all but his guards before interrogating the archbishop about the horror they had just witnessed. Aethelred calmly explained that while he had taken care to ensure accurate translation of the scrolls' incantations, their precise recitation was still something of a work in progress. Had the guardsmen not slain the beast, it likely would have died within minutes anyway, as had the other test subjects on which the archbishop had performed the rite in Canterbury. But he was confident that with more time, and a meager portion of the kingdom's resources, he could perfect the process—and thereby transform the common creatures of the realm into an army of savage war beasts that would strike fear into the hearts of the Norse. In time, he went on, these beasts could be brought under control and trained to kill not just the Danes but any enemies of England who might yet present themselves.

Alfred, still fuming, had the archbishop escorted to his chambers and convened with his ealdormen to seek their counsel. And though none denied the abhorrent nature of the event they had all witnessed, the great majority nonetheless argued that what Aethelred had brought before them should not be rejected out of hand.

All shared Alfred's concerns about the possibility of fresh hostilities with the Norse, particularly in light of Guthrum's ill health.

And though Alfred had done much to bolster the kingdom against attack, Wessex still bore the wounds of its long conflict with the Danes and could scarcely afford another open war so soon after, in blood or in treasure. The council's advice to Alfred was near unanimous: as sworn defenders of the realm, it was their duty to be strong as much in stomach as in purpose. They could not allow their distaste, intense as it might be, for Aethelred's proposed methods—*unconventional*, one ealdorman euphemistically called them—to curtail what could be a potent opportunity to secure a peaceful future for Wessex, and for all England. So powerful was the promise Aethelred had brought them that, in all their conversation, no man present dared utter the one word that privately haunted each of them. *Witchcraft*.

And so Alfred had reluctantly agreed. Aethelred and his entourage from Canterbury were to be quartered at Winchester and provided with whatever they needed to perfect their arcanery.



God only knew how many poor beasts suffered and died in the archbishop's twisted experiments during the months that followed. Alfred had lost count, when he could no longer stand the sight of the wretched abominations Aethelred conjured daily.

At first none of them had lived long. The malformed things borne of each dog and mule and horse on which Aethelred practiced his art either collapsed and died after a few minutes or had to be speared by pikemen when they turned on the archbishop or his assistants. Over time, as Aethelred made refinements and corrections to the pronunciation and cadence of the incantations written in the ancient scrolls, and to the accompanying hand gestures described therein, the monsters he brought forth began to live longer. For hours, then days, then indefinitely. But one thing did not change. In every case, no matter how long-lived, the beasts were viciously aggressive from the moment they were birthed.

They would attack anything, without provocation—even each other. Aethelred once watched as two hunting dogs, brothers from the same litter who had never shown any aggression toward one another, were transformed by the rite into a pair of scaly, ridge-backed hellhounds that proceeded immediately to tear each other apart. Fascinated, he made a detailed note of it in his journal.

Aethelred also discovered that with subtle changes to the summoning, he could create many varied forms of beast from each base subject. He could turn a swine into the same quasi-arachnid he had created in Alfred's throne room, or with a minor rephrasing, bring about a kind of horrific, beak-nosed, oily skinned jackal. All of these experiments were carefully documented by Aethelred's apprentices in an ever-growing bestiary. Aethelred practiced tirelessly each day for months on end, creating dozens of variations, until he was satisfied he had exhausted all possible permutations for each base subject. A cat could become only so many things, he learned, and when there was no longer anything new to be created from a cat, he would start again on a goose or a badger or whatever poor, unsuspecting creature was next on his list. In time he learned to bring forth all manner of creatures with flawless specificity, down to the length of the tail and the manner in which it breathed fire. The ones that breathed fire were his favorites; the day he discovered that particular variation prompted one of his most enthusiastic journal entries, and fire-breathers now warranted their own section in the bestiary.

But for all Aethelred's accomplishments, the problem of control remained. He had enlisted all of Alfred's most skilled animal handlers—men who had broken the wildest horses and could train a feral wolf to eat from the palm of one's hand—but none could tame any of Aethelred's creations. Increasingly it seemed that these beasts were beyond any form of mastery, though Aethelred himself stubbornly refused to accept that. While he insisted that he could eventually control them, Alfred's impatience grew. Finally,



the King, already haunted nightly by visions of the things he saw in the courtyard each day, decided that he had seen enough.

When a leathery reptilian monster that had once been a fox pounced on the handler who was attempting to feed it a haunch of meat and took the man's arm off at the shoulder instead, Alfred went into a fury. He told the archbishop that he wished to see no more of his "progress" until the priest could prove that the beasts could be controlled. Otherwise, what use were they in battle? They were as likely to attack their own handlers as any enemy they might be set upon. Before the King stormed out of the courtyard that day, he warned Aethelred that if this final problem were not solved, and soon, he would put an end to the archbishop's experimentation altogether.



Now, two months later, Alfred returned, albeit with reluctance. He had seen many horrors in war, but none compared to what he had witnessed here in his own courtyard since the archbishop began his experiments. The ground was now scarred and pockmarked like a battlefield and stained dark by great swaths of dried blood. The timbers of many of the surrounding structures were charred black and white by fire. And most noticeable of all was the nauseating stench of sulfur that hung ever present in the air. The entire courtyard was rank with it. Alfred pulled from his sleeve a cloth that he kept for these unhappy visits and held it over his nose and mouth as he strode across the bloodstained quadrangle. Even the strong perfume in which his apothecary had soaked the cloth was not enough to mask the smell entirely.

Aethelred was waiting for him, dressed as always in the ecclesiastical finery befitting his high station, and with an air of confidence. Alfred had not seen him in weeks; the archbishop had kept to his King's command, not once requesting Alfred's presence since that poor trainer had been maimed, and so Alfred assumed

he must have good cause for doing so now. He found himself wondering what he hoped for. Did he want Aethelred to succeed in attaining mastery over these beasts, and by extension, over England's enemies? Or did he wish for failure, which would finally give him reason to shut down this whole loathsome undertaking and unseat Aethelred from Canterbury? *Something I should have done long ago*, Alfred told himself once again.

"Thank you for joining me, Your Majesty," Aethelred said as the King approached.

"After the failure of your last demonstration, I must assume you would not ask me here without good reason," Alfred replied.

Aethelred ignored the slight and simply nodded. "Indeed. I think you will be most pleased with our progress since you were here last."

Alfred sighed, in no mood for a preamble. "Can you control them or not?"

"I doubt we shall ever be domesticating them as pets, but for their intended purpose—as weapons of war—yes, I believe I can now control them. It has not been easy, but this is the breakthrough I have been working toward."

Alfred just looked at Aethelred expectantly. If the archbishop was fishing for a compliment, some kind of recognition for the hours he had dedicated to creating these heinous aberrations, it would not be forthcoming.

"Very well, then!" Aethelred declared, and he turned to the guards standing nearby. "Stand ready, if you please!" A dozen of Alfred's best and most battle-seasoned pikemen were already in position, their arms drawn. All were hard men, but from their expressions it was clear they would sooner be patrolling the Danelaw border, freezing in some remote watchtower, or mucking out the castle's pigsties. Anywhere but here. Nobody wanted this duty. Those who were assigned it rarely slept well.

Close to them was a small troop of servants carrying buckets filled with water, ready to douse anything that the archbishop's

beast might set ablaze. That lesson had been learned hard, when one of the first “infernals,” as Aethelred liked to call them, put a torch to the courtyard’s old wooden stables with a single breath. The fire might have spread and consumed the castle’s kitchens and library but for the fast response of a hastily improvised bucket brigade. The stable was beyond salvage; on Alfred’s orders, its blackened timbers were left standing as a reminder, and now the dousers stood ready before every incantation.

Satisfied that all was ready, Aethelred signaled the apprentice across the yard who manned the gate to the pen that held the test animals. The apprentice raised the latch on the gate, and as it swung open with a rusty groan, Alfred shuddered; he had come to abhor that sound. He had heard it many times: it was the sound that pre-saged the squawking and screaming as some poor, damned creature found itself transformed via Aethelred’s words. *What manner of beast has he selected for today’s bloody show?* Alfred wondered.

For a moment, nothing happened. Alfred was puzzled; usually the penned animal emerged immediately into the yard, happy to be released from its confinement, unaware of the grim fate that awaited it. He glanced at Aethelred, who appeared briefly embarrassed before gesturing impatiently at his apprentice. The apprentice looked at first hesitant, but in the face of the archbishop’s glare, reluctantly stepped inside the pen to coax out its occupant. He disappeared briefly from view, but Alfred could hear him cajoling the beast. *Get out there, go on. Go on! The archbishop is waiting! Don’t you dare embarrass me or I’ll see you gutted!*

Alfred blinked in puzzlement as another man emerged from within the pen. Stripped to the waist, barefooted, rib-thin, pale, he looked as though he had not eaten in days. The apprentice was behind him, shoving him toward the center of the yard.

Alfred turned to Aethelred. “What is this?”

“A breakthrough,” replied the archbishop.

Alfred looked back at the half-naked man, and now recognized the signs: the emaciation, the faraway look, the whip scars across

his back. The leggings were those worn by his own infantrymen. The man was a captured deserter, one of many who routinely languished in the castle's stockade. Desertions had risen lately, particularly here at Winchester, as men increasingly decided they would rather take their chances on the run than risk being assigned to yard duty under Aethelred and subjected to the nightmares that had traumatized so many of their comrades.

"Explain this now," Alfred demanded.

"I have observed that transformation greatly diminishes the base subject's cognitive faculty," said Aethelred. "A dumb animal, even a well-trained one, retains not enough intelligence to recognize even basic commands. But a *man* . . . a man survives the process with intelligence to spare. Enough, I believe, to be reliably controlled."

Alfred's face turned a paler shade. He stared at Aethelred, aghast. "You cannot be serious."

"Our mistake was using animals to begin with," said Aethelred. "We learned much that was useful, but this practice was never intended for use on the lower forms of life. I am sure of that now."

Alfred glowered at Aethelred. "I will not permit this."

"Sire, must I remind you what is at stake here? The godless barbarians in the Danelaw are growing in strength, and awaiting their moment to launch a fresh attack upon us. With Guthrum dead or dying, that moment will surely come soon. We must use every means at our disposal to defend this realm and our faith, or risk seeing them both destroyed by a race of heathen savages."

"I was uncomfortable enough with you experimenting on beasts," said Alfred. "I will not abide this . . . this *witchcraft* to be practiced upon men!"

Aethelred raised an eyebrow. "Witchcraft? Your Majesty, this is the very farthest thing from it. The discovery of the scrolls was no accident. It was a gift from God himself. He favors us with this knowledge—this *power*—and intends for us to use it. He has seen the crimes these Danish heretics have perpetrated against his

church. Monasteries razed to the ground, holy relics destroyed, good men of cloth put to the stake and burned. Theirs is a war against God himself, and he has blessed us with the means to smite them in his name.”

“The God I believe in would never mean for such blasphemies to walk upon his earth,” said Alfred. “Whatever the origin of those scrolls, this cannot be their purpose.” He had grown tired of his word being challenged. He turned to the pikemen standing nearby and gestured to the ragged prisoner standing in the center of the yard. “Send this man back to the stockade. And see that he gets a hot meal.”

As the pikemen moved to take the prisoner away, Aethelred drew back his arms and began an incantation. He had become well practiced, and more than proficient enough to say all the words he needed in just a few moments. Alfred, though fast to realize what Aethelred was doing, was not fast enough.

“Stop him!” he shouted to the guards, who raced toward the archbishop. But Alfred could see that the prisoner’s body was already contorting, racked by a sudden onset of painful convulsions. Aethelred completed the incantation just as the guards seized him by the arms. He did not resist; his eyes were locked on his subject, now doubled over in agony. The poor man’s eyes bulged as though they might burst, and he opened his mouth wide, letting out a tortured scream.

Alfred grabbed Aethelred by the collar. The deserter was on his knees now, arms folded tight around his midsection, and he stared blindly at the ground, apparently trying to cough up something caught in his throat.

“Undo it now!” the King commanded.

“I cannot,” answered Aethelred, as he watched with fascination. “It must take its course.”

Helpless, Alfred looked back at the prisoner. All eyes in the yard were on that man now. He had fallen onto his side, and now he convulsed, kicking wildly in the dirt as he clawed at himself,



raking bloody fingernails across his chest and neck as though trying to crawl out from inside of his own fevered skin.

And then he did exactly that. His rib cage swelled against his chest, then burst clean through it like the points of a dozen bone swords. One of the fire dousers dropped his bucket of water and fled; the others backed away in horror as the prisoner's entire torso seemed to turn itself inside out. He wailed in agony, his organs spilling out onto the dirt as some dark, wet thing emerged in their place. And then the rest of him began to split open and come apart, the skin of his arms, legs, and head peeling away as pulsating, bloody shapes sprouted from within.

Alfred stared at the thing that just moments ago had been a man. It reared up on new hind legs while tentacled appendages slithered and unfurled and felt around at the ground beneath them. The man no longer had a head; instead, a tangled cluster of long saliva-coated tongues protruded from the riven stump where his head had once been. They licked and lashed around the beast's shoulders, which were now covered by some kind of armored bone plating. What little was still recognizable as a man hung limp around the creature's misshapen waist, a macabre belt of flayed human skin.

The beast made a sound not of this world, a dreadful, tormented howl. Alfred felt as though an ice-cold stone was growing in the pit of his stomach. "Kill it," he cried out. "For God's sake, kill it!"

Several guardsmen moved to surround the abominable creature, pikes thrusting outward to hold it at bay. It roared and lashed out with a tentacle that wrapped around the staff of the closest pike and pulled, bringing the pikeman along with it. Before he could retreat, the tentacle coiled around his waist and squeezed, crushing the man's ribs. He let out a strangled, gurgling cry, muffled when another fat, wet tentacle wrapped around his face and tore his head from his neck. Blood spewed from the pikeman's neck as the beast tossed his lifeless body aside. His head was given to the

tongues, which grasped at it and pulled it down inside the monster's neck, swallowing it greedily.

The other pikemen were attacking now. But this was not like the pig-thing, nor any of the creatures Aethelred had conjured before. This one was heavily armored, and the pike-heads merely glanced off its thick hide. The beast whirled around and skewered an unsuspecting soldier with a boned claw that sank deep into his chest and out his back. He slid backward and fell, dead before he hit the ground. A third pikeman was grabbed around the ankle and flung across the yard with such force that Alfred heard the man's bones break when he hit the stone wall. Five desperate men still surrounded the beast, which was yet unhurt and becoming more enraged.

"Let me stop it!" Aethelred cried. "Before it kills us all!"

Alfred was loath to let the man free even for a moment, but he knew he must act quickly, and he had few other options. He nodded to the guards to release the archbishop. Shrugging free of their grip, Aethelred raised his hands in his contorted sorcerer's grip and shouted a command that neither Alfred nor any man present could understand, though they all recognized it as the same arcane language used in the incantations.

The beast stopped instantly. It had two men cornered and would surely have killed them both within moments, but instead it turned to face Aethelred, suddenly docile. Aethelred spoke in the strange tongue again, and the beast approached, seemingly compliant.

As it shambled toward the archbishop, Alfred and the other men standing nearby took cautious steps backward, but Aethelred raised a hand to reassure them. "It is all right," he said. "It will not harm anyone else—unless I command it to. It is perfectly under my control, of no danger to us or our troops in battle. But set against the Danish horde . . . a very different matter."

The beast stood at least seven feet tall and towered over Aethelred, who yet showed no fear of it. Alfred stiffened as the

archbishop reached out to pet the horrendous creature with the affection one might show to a beloved dog. In response, the beast gave a miserable whimper. To any sane man, the sight of this vile, wretched thing would inspire a combination of fear, pity, and disgust. Alfred saw the way Aethelred looked at it—in admiration—and he knew: *he has gone mad*.

Aethelred was so besotted with his creation that he did not notice the pikemen, now regrouped and taking position behind the beast. With a nod, Alfred gave them the order they were waiting for. They lunged as one, driving their blades hard into the creature's back, finding the tender muscle and flesh between its thick plates of bone. The beast let out a hideous screech and sank to the ground, its limbs giving way. Before it could recover, the pikemen were climbing up onto its back to stab it again and again, driving their pikes deep. Aethelred protested, but none were listening. The beast finally slumped forward onto its belly, its tongues thrashing like rattlesnake tails for a moment longer. And then, at last, it was dead.

More pikemen rushed into the yard, attracted by all the screaming and commotion. Alfred pointed to Aethelred. "Take this man and place him in the tower under guard," he ordered. The pikemen surrounded the archbishop, taking him firmly by each arm.

"You did not need to kill it," said Aethelred, still thinking more of his precious experiment than of the four men who now lay dead. "There was much we could have learned from it."

Alfred was barely able to contain his fury. "I have learned all I needed today. I learned that I have allowed these experiments of yours to go too far. Well, now I am putting an end to it. To all of it!"

"And discard all the progress we have made?" Aethelred protested. "This was my most successful subject yet. If you will only hear me out—"

"Nothing you can offer could possibly justify this atrocity!" Alfred bellowed, red with rage. "How many others have there

been? How many men did you mutilate before this poor bastard here?"

"None that you would not have put to death anyway," said Aethelred. "All came from the lists of condemned men."

"I would never condemn any man to such a fate as this! I tolerated this foul enterprise because of your assurance that it would allow us to wage war without spilling the blood of Englishmen!"

"Sire, one man transformed is worth twenty of any other! In strength, in resilience, in aggression! See here what this single one did, and imagine the havoc that a hundred such beasts could wreak upon our enemies! A mere hundred, compared to the thousands we might lose in a conventional battle."

Alfred's tone lowered, but he remained no less resolute. "I will not suffer this curse to be put upon even one more man, be he condemned or not."

"The transformation need not be permanent," offered Aethelred. "I assure you, given more time, I can find a way to reverse the effect—to restore them to their original form when they return from battle."

With a heavy sigh, Alfred rubbed his brow. "I've had about as many of your assurances as I can take. Guards, see the archbishop to the tower. There he will stay, until I decide what to do with him."

The pikemen marched Aethelred away, leaving Alfred to survey the carnage in the yard before him. He shook his head, cursing himself for being so foolish as to believe that this could ever have come to any good.

Barrick and Harding, the two largest and least obliging of Alfred's jailors, marched Aethelred roughly up the stone steps of the spiral staircase. Torchlight flickered on the walls as Barrick unlocked the heavy oak door to the solitary cell atop the tower and Harding tossed the archbishop inside. He landed in a pile of dank straw, with barely time to right himself before the door slammed closed again and the key turned in the lock.

He dusted himself off and straightened his robe. For a moment he sat there in the dark, listening to the idle chatter of the two guards now standing post outside. And a thin smile played across his lips. *Alfred is more blind than I thought*, he delighted in thinking to himself. *After all that he has seen, he actually thinks that he can cage me.*



Alfred had convened his senior counselors in the war room. All by now had heard of the slaughter in the yard; some had seen it for themselves. Though months ago all had voted to explore Aethelred's proposal, they had, like Alfred, grown increasingly uneasy with where it was leading. Today's events had been the final straw. None needed convincing that it was time for this ill-advised episode to be brought to a close. Alfred had already ordered all record of it destroyed, including the accursed scrolls that had begun it all. The only question now was what to do with the Archbishop of Canterbury himself.

"He is finished as archbishop, and in the church. That much is certain," the King declared to unanimous nods of approval. "The senior clergy will not dispute it. Many of them were also disquieted by what Aethelred was doing here. For that, I will apologize and ask them to put forward a successor of their choosing."

"What, though, is to be his fate beyond excommunication?" asked Cromwell, one of Alfred's high reeves and a trusted military advisor. "Is he to be charged with a crime? Is there to be a trial?"

"If Aethelred is guilty of a crime, then I am equally guilty for condoning it this long," Alfred said. "And a public trial of such a . . . bizarre nature would only spread superstition and fear throughout the kingdom."

There was a long pause before anyone spoke again. This time it was Chiswick, another of Alfred's war counselors. His special responsibility was to manage the army's apparatus of spies and



subterfuge, and he could often be relied upon to suggest unconventional solutions to difficult problems.

“Perhaps, then . . . an accident?”

Alfred and the others looked at him.

“It is well-known from here to Canterbury that the archbishop was engaged in dangerous work, though not the exact nature of it,” Chiswick went on. “Perhaps he died in faithful service to his church and his King. Aethelred is largely unloved. I doubt many would pry into the truth of things.”

All now looked to Alfred, who found himself disquieted by the notion. “I love the man least of all, but to simply execute him . . .”

Chiswick leaned forward. “It seems to me your options are few, Your Majesty. He cannot continue as archbishop, and a trial, as you rightly say, would be a catastrophe. And he certainly cannot be set free; this dark knowledge he possesses makes him far too dangerous.”

A cold shiver ran down Alfred’s backbone. *Yes, it does, doesn’t it? How could I have been so stupid?* He turned to the guard captain standing nearby with a sudden urgency. “Triple the guard on the tower! And I want the archbishop gagged and his hands bound! Do it now!”



Four guards raced up the tower steps. One of them carried a length of strong rope and a cloth for a gag. They did not understand their orders, but there was no question of their captain’s urgency. They took the steps three at a time.

They arrived at the top of the stairs to find the cell door at the end of the short hallway wide open and hanging half off its hinges as if it had been beaten down with bare hands, its heavy oak beams splintered and smeared with blood. But no ten men could have broken down that door. Stranger still, it looked as though it had been broken into from the outside.

They approached gingerly, swords drawn, calling out the names of Barrick and Harding to no response. The torch that lit the hallway had been broken free of its iron housing and lay on the floor, flickering. The frontmost guard picked it up and held it out to shine inside the darkened cell.

Something warm and wet encircled his arm. He dropped the torch in shock—and was pulled suddenly forward, disappearing into the darkness of the cell. And then came the screaming, while the man's helpless thrashing was cast in shadow on the cell walls by the light of the fallen torch.

The screaming ended almost as quickly as it had begun; the shadows went still. For a moment, silence. The three guards outside the cell now had their swords drawn, yet dared not venture farther, their hearts pounding in their chests. And then they jumped back in alarm as their fellow guardsman fell forward out of the darkness and collapsed, blood spilling from a gash across his neck so deep that his head hung to one side, askew.

Barrick emerged from the darkness behind him. Or what had once been Barrick. Now he—it—was some kind of wolf-like monstrosity, its sinewy body covered in gray, matted fur. It walked on its hind legs with four more limbs to spare—long muscular arms with great razor-clawed hands.

What was once Harding slithered out from behind the wolf-thing and up the wall. Some kind of giant two-headed lizard, its leathery skin was covered with sharp, bristling spines, and a clubbed tail swished lazily back and forth as it crept toward the three guardsmen.

The closest of them panicked and foolishly lunged at it with his sword. The lizard easily dodged the blow, then responded by spitting a gob of sputum that burned like acid through the man's breastplate. The guard dropped his sword, screaming, trying desperately to unbuckle his armor, but before he could unfasten even one strap, the acid was through to his flesh and he collapsed to the

ground, writhing helplessly, his final screams echoing along the stone hallway.

The two remaining guardsmen looked at their fallen friends in horror. And then Aethelred stepped out from the cell.

He smiled.

“Drop your swords, and you have my word that you will not die here today.”

They did as he commanded. Aethelred raised his hands and, looking into the eyes of the two men before him, began to recite the words he had spent months perfecting.

And within moments, they were his as well.

