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Opening extract from

Harald Hardnut

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Chapter 1
The Raven of Death

The north of England – September 1066

It was late in the evening when the messenger rode into York. His horse's hoof-beats rang out, loud and echoey, down the narrow streets. He pulled his horse to a stop by a big hall, jumped from the saddle and ran inside. There was a feast going on in the hall – lots of people were eating and drinking and laughing loudly.

The messenger didn't wait for anyone to ask him what he wanted. He walked right up to the top table. "My lord, I bring evil news," he said to a richly dressed man who was sitting there, a cup of wine in his hand. The man's name was Morcar, and he was the Earl of Northumbria, the most powerful Saxon chief in the north of England.

The messenger went on, "A Viking army has landed ... and it's on its way here!"

"What?" said Morcar as he leapt to his feet. There were gasps and grim faces all around the hall. The Vikings were tough warriors, raiders and invaders who had been bringing fire and death to England for over 250 years.

"Call out the men!" yelled Morcar. "There's no time to lose!"

It was 1066, a strange and dangerous year for England. King Edward had died in

January, and the great Saxon warlord Harold Godwinson had made himself the new king. But there were others who thought they should be king. Duke William of Normandy had been King Edward's cousin. He thought he should be King of England now. After all, King Edward had promised him he would be.

Everyone expected William and his army to invade in the south. So who was leading this army in the north?

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"We'll try and hold them here," Morcar said to his second in command, his brother Edwin. It was dawn and Morcar's army was taking up its position in front of them, across the road to York. Their spies said the Viking army was very close.

"I've sent a messenger to London for help," said Morcar.

"King Harold would come if he could," said Edwin. Morcar and Edwin were friends of the new king. "But I don't think he can. He's too far away, and he needs all his men in the south for when Duke William invades. It looks like we're on our own, brother ..."

"There they are!" Edwin pointed at a hill in the distance. The Viking army was running down it towards them, crowds of fierce warriors yelling and screaming for blood. Sunlight glittered on their helmets and swords and axes and spears. One Viking carried a tall pole with a flag fluttering at the top.

The flag was huge and red. On it was a terrifying picture – the raven of death.

Morcar stared at the flag. "Oh no, it can't be!" he murmured. "He's too old, isn't he?"

"I know whose flag that is, too," Edwin said grimly. "It must be him. We're for it



now. Quick, men, form the shield wall!" Edwin yelled.

There was the clunk of wood kissing wood as the Saxons joined their shields together. Soon Morcar and Edwin could see the Viking chief at the front of the attack. A giant of a man with long golden hair flowing from under his helmet. There was a huge grin on his face and a sword in his hand.

Morcar and Edwin gulped. They knew now who it had to be. They had no chance. Heading towards them was Harald Hardrada – the greatest Viking of them all.