

The War Wolf

Monday 15th May 1066

The Village of Grim's By, Mercia

“War-wolf horrid, at Heorot found a warrior watching and waiting the fray” – Beowulf

Tostig Godwinson cleaned the blood stained steel of his fine sword on the poor cloth tunic of the dead ceorl who lay at his feet. He returned the weapon to an equally fine leather scabbard decorated with gold fastenings that glinted in the sunlight. The body of the man lay on its left side, he was still holding onto the hoe with which he had attempted to defend himself and his family. The sword stroke administered by Tostig had not granted instant death, however. The unfortunate peasant had had time to pull himself into a foetal position as his life's blood ebbed through the wound in his stomach and stained the hard packed earth beneath him. His eyes might have seen the last death throes of his people as he lay helpless at the feet of his killer but now those eyes would see nothing more.

They did not see the black smoke rising lazily into the beautiful and cloudless early morning sky. Undisturbed by so much as a breath of wind it formed into a slowly twisting and expanding miasma, hanging heavily over the land like a shroud that was about to fall. The scent of burnt flesh tainted the air. Many of the bodies were animals such as oxen, hogs, horses, hounds even, many more were human. Their hair had been singed and blisters licked by naked flames formed on heads, torsos, and limbs, the skin cracking and spitting out fluid to reveal a raw redness beneath. All had been trapped with no hope of escape.

It had been a village, so typical of the many small settlements dotted along the eastern coast of Mercia, in the region known as Lindsey. A habitation made up of simple timber framed buildings with daub and wattle walls enclosing single rooms in which entire families lived together. Thatched roofs, dried by the long hot summer, were quickly consumed by the fire that fed the dark smear on the endless blue of the sky above them. A palisade and a ditch surrounding the village had offered some degree of protection to the occupants, but it had

proven to be no kind of barrier to the determined band of raiders who had broken through the defences as the occupants rose to greet their last day.

Indeed it was no obstacle at all to the men who had come out of the early morning mist in many ships, which even now could be seen moored just off shore. Ships crewed by warriors who did not even know the name of the village that they had attacked obediently at their lord's command. If they had taken the time to ask any of the inhabitants before putting them to the sword they would have discovered that the place was known as Grim's By, a Danish name that meant 'Village of Odin' in the old Norse. It would have made no difference to them, however, whether the village had belonged to the Danish Odin or the Saxon Woden or to any other god for that matter; its fate would have been the same.

Death by fire and its place in the landscape signalled by the winding grave-marker of black smoke that rose from the charred remains. Death brought by Saxon swords and Saxon spears. The people of Grim's By had been largely Saxon as well.

Tostig looked around, taking in the destruction that his men had wrought, but gave it no further thought because he was looking for something in particular; or rather someone.

"Osberht!" he exclaimed in a tone that indicated that he was both used to exercising authority and to being obeyed.

"He is here! He is here!" the man named Osberht appeared from behind Tostig with an exaggerated bow from which he did not fully rise. His entire manner was one of supplication; there was fear in his eyes too. "I saw his banner as we approached, My Lord; I saw his banner."

Tostig hoped that the peasant was telling the truth because there was precious else here to make this adventure worthwhile. The men might find supplies for the fleet, mayhap some weapons too, but little else. The village had possessed no buildings of note, nothing that they could put a torch to that would hurt his brother Harold and his allies in the north. The fight was already over, which was not surprising as there had been barely a hundred people in the village, including women and children, when the struggle had commenced. Tostig's force was significantly greater than that which these peasants of Lindsey had been able to muster in their own defence. Some might have escaped in the confusion of battle but most had been caught within the palisade.

"I will exact some form of revenge in this midden, be it against Gunnvor or yourself!" he told the cowering man.

"He is here just as I told you, My Lord!" Osberht insisted with a weak smile. "He is here."

"The peasant does not lie," Oswyn, once a high-theign of Northumbria and still a loyal supporter of his exiled lord, announced as he approached Tostig from the centre of the village. He had barely broken into a sweat during the fight despite his heavy armour and numerous

weapons that a Saxon warrior habitually carried into combat. Behind him came a group of fighters dragging a man with them. "We have captured the rat in the trap."

Two of the weapons-men stepped forward and pushed their charge before them, keeping a tight hold of his arms. The captive wore good quality armour, stained with a little blood mayhap, but the stain could not hide the quality of the harness. His face was damp with sweat and besmirched with ash and dirt. A ring of gold the thickness of a man's finger still kept his hair in place however, so there was no mistaking the face. If they had expected to see fear written there it was absent from his eyes; instead he expressed nothing but contempt for his captors.

"High-Theign Gunnvor." Tostig recognised him with satisfaction. He noticed that blood ran freely down the side of the man's face from a wound to the scalp. It did not surprise him that the theign had been in the thick of the fighting. If nothing else he was known to be a brave man.

"Tostig Godwinson!" Gunnvor replied with a sneer.

Suddenly he spat catching both his captors and Tostig off guard. His spittle hit the Saxon lord in the face. Oswyn responded by driving the pommel of his sword into the other man's stomach. Even with his steel byrnie to protect him, a coat of chain mail that only the rich could afford, the force of the blow drove the wind from his lungs. His guards let Gunnvor fall to his knees at their lord's feet, expressing their contempt for his enemy with laughter.

"What is a man of your towering station doing in a hole like this?" Tostig asked in a reasonable tone as he wiped his face with the edge of his expensive cloak. "Moreover, what do you in Lindsey, your lands are in Northumbria as I recall?"

"I came to be the cause of thy doom," Gunnvor replied once he had recovered his breath. With a little difficulty he climbed back to his feet so as to be able to look his enemy in the eye.

"It is as I said, My Lord," Osberht had retreated at the sight of Gunnvor but now he sidled back to Tostig's side. "Eorl Morcar sent High-Theign Gunnvor to be of assistance to his brother Eorl Edwin. He makes a tour of Lindsey to see how things lie within the elder brother's lands."

"You will be paid for this act ceorl!" Gunnvor promised in a cold tone.

"He will, but not by you," Tostig retorted. He pulled a linen bag from his purse and shook it gently so that they could hear the coins it held. "This is the price of your head, Gunnvor, a treasure to this peasant, a trifle to me, and much less than what you probably value your own hide at."

He gave the coins to Osberht who bowed repeatedly in his annoying fashion as he received them in his cupped hands. The peasant glanced at the captured theign and gave another bow towards him. Oswyn noticed this unnecessary display of etiquette and wondered at it, but

Osberht withdrew quickly from their presence and once more the captured theign attracted all of their attention. For his part Tostig noticed that Gunnvor's hair had greyed since they had last met and that there were many more creases in his face now. He looked as if he had lost weight too. If he could see beneath the grime of battle, if he had seen the theign when he arrived at Grim's By yester-even, then he might have noted that he did not look hale and hearty at all. Gunnvor was getting to be old but that would be a condition that would not haunt him for much longer.

"I will have revenge all the same," Gunnvor declared defiantly.

"You seem to be somewhat lacking in spears for such a grand ambition," Tostig observed. "Were these ceorls to be your power, these farmers of swine with their pitchforks and langseaxs for swords, tools that are poor enough for the butchering of their animals never mind for matching the steel of my wariors?"

"It sorrows me to use such people to the end I designed," Gunnvor admitted, "but you left me no other means to bring you in off the whale-road and make you tarry."

"Why would I stay?" Tostig enquired with a frown. There was something in the manner of the theign that vexed him. He had expected Gunnvor to be at least angered by falling into the hands of his enemy but he seemed calm, almost resigned to his fate. "There's nothing for me here. The best that I can say is that my men got some exercise and I rubbed a little salt into Edwin and Morcar's envy; although laying hands upon you, one of my accusers before the king, was the sole purpose of this endeavour."

"Aye, I swore against you in York and cast my lot for Morcar to take thy place as Eorl of Northumbria, and I'm proud to admit it," Gunnvor pulled himself up straight and glared at Tostig. "You were never fit to be our eorl! You were ever a cruel and spiteful lord over men, a man without honour; a nithing true."

"Cruel am I? Mayhap we can put that to the test." Tostig spoke in a calm voice but a sudden wave of hatred for his former vassal washed over him. Gunnvor's words had opened a wound that had had barely anytime to heal. Indeed, it was the chance to ease that very sore that had brought Tostig to such a place as this in his quest for vengeance. "Oswyn, he raised his hand against me."

It was all the prompting that Oswyn needed.

"Bind him to that cart!" he ordered.

The warriors knew what was to come. They roughly stripped the theign of his mail byrnies, then the thick woollen jacket that he wore beneath it, and finally the fine linen shirt. Next they stretched out his arms and tied a hand to either end of a large cart that someone had been loading with vegetables before the surprise attack had interrupted their plans. The ox that was to have drawn the vehicle lay dead between the spars in a pool of its own blood, several arrows protruding from its body. One of the warriors thought to remove for himself the

theign's circlet of gold, his badge of rank, letting the captive's shoulder length hair fall free about his head.

Oswyn hefted his fighting spear and looked at the theign speculatively. He lunged forward suddenly and thrust the point into the man's right palm. With a quick twist he withdrew the gleaming steel as Gunnvor, a man of Danish descent, bit his lip in cold determination to fight his pain. Fresh blood began to course down the side of the cart.

"Your hand offended me," Tostig repeated with a cold smile. "Though this may cause my enemies little pain even a prick from a small thorn causes festering, as they say."

"I would that my hand were about thy throat," Gunnvor retorted between clenched teeth.

"You would do better to beg me for mercy, before the pain robs you of your manhood."

"This is nothing!" Gunnvor asserted.

Oswyn stabbed again, this time aiming for the bicep on the theign's left arm. The sharp steel of the spearhead cut through skin and muscle with ease, nicking the bone but not proceeding through to the wood where it might have become stuck. The spear was quickly withdrawn again.

"You will have no place in the shield-wall again." Tostig observed. A warrior who could not heft a shield into position was of little use to his fellows in battle and of what value was any man who could not acquit himself on the field of combat?

"I will have my revenge," Gunnvor hurled back defiantly.

"How?"

"You will wonder at it," the theign promised him through gritted teeth. "My son has inherited my title, my lands, and my fortune, my line will continue, but this day I bring about your ruin and he will not ever be at thy mercy for it."

"Intriguing." Tostig now affected a bored tone.

Oswyn pressed the point of his spear against the theign's right thigh and began to lean against the shaft of the weapon. Gunnvor clamped his teeth together and fought against the pain. Oswyn looked into his face and smiled. With a slight movement he twisted the spearhead as it penetrated the muscle. He pushed and twisted, working at breaking down the other man's will to resist the hurting. Blood ran freely down the theign's linen trousers and began to pool at his feet, staining the leather of his shoes. Eventually it proved too much for Gunnvor and his scream rang out at last. Again Oswyn withdrew the spear, making sure that it would not become stuck in the thick and heavy thigh muscles.

"Your position is hopeless," Tostig told him. "Pain is your only future until such time as I allow death to claim you. You see, I am your master once again. You have no power over me."

Gunnvor's head had fallen forward and his loose hair masked his face. Tostig thought that he heard something uttered from between the man's lips but he could not make out what

might have been said. He glanced at Oswyn who stepped forward, grasped a hand full of hair and pulled the man's head up again; with every intent of causing further pain.

"You do not agree?" Tostig asked.

"I have power over you now!" Gunnvor summoned up enough strength to answer clearly.

"I fail to see your power," Tostig looked bemused. "Clearly you have taken all that you can, which is much less than some men I have known. You do not deserve an honourable death. You give us no sport."

"It is my power that kept you here." Gunnvor tried to shake Oswyn's hand away with a defiant twist of his head but the other kept his painful hold.

"Kept me here for what?" Tostig demanded with some irritation.

"FOR DEATH!"

It did not rest well with Coenred that they had to sit and wait beyond the bounds of the village and offer a brave man like High-Theign Gunnvor up to Tostig Godwinson's reavers. He recalled to mind the passage from the poem where Beowulf had lain and watched the monster Grendel consume his brave Geat warriors before he stopped the carnage by challenging the creature.

"...he seized a sleeping warrior for the first, and tore him fiercely asunder."

The oft remembered lines ran through the warriors mind and gave rise to the question once again;

Why had Beowulf not acted sooner?

To his own thinking the warrior was the shield of his people. Coenred would no more stand by and see one of his own men come to harm if he could prevent it than he would command ill prepared men into the fight.

He glanced at the eorls who lay some feet behind him. They were both dressed in fine armour, their helmets scarcely hiding the excitement that filled their young faces. Their duty was to protect the people but they had offered the ceorls of Grim's By up to Tostig as bait, seasoned with the presence of High-Theign Gunnvor like a rich dish, for there was nothing but bitterness between the ealdormen of the house of Aelfgar and the exiled Tostig Godwinson. It was true that Gunnvor had come willingly to the eorls and counselled such a scheme as this, but Earl Morcar's offer to reward the theign's son if Tostig could be brought to battle had been the honey to seal the compact. It may also be true, as some of the men honestly stated, that Theign Gunnvor felt his last days were upon him and that he looked willingly to go from this middle-earth at the point of a spear rather than in a sickbed, but it seemed a needless waste of life to the huscarl all the same.

The eorls had about them a power sufficient to oppose Tostig; there had been no real reason to suffer this unnecessary bloodshed. The eorls feared only one thing; that Tostig

Godwinson would simply take to ship again and sail out into the northern sea where they could not reach him. Unlike King Harold they did not have a sizeable navy on which to call.

The land around the village was flat. To the north stretched the great River Humber, the powerful estuary that led out into the wide northern whale-road. The flat land stretched many miles to the south, offering no cover whatsoever. For this reason the warriors had approached the village like skulking brigands in the night. They had lain wrapped in their fine cloaks as dawn had broken over them and patiently had each and every one of them waited for the king's exiled brother to take the bait.

For his part Tostig Godwinson had ravaged the eastern coast of Mercia since being forced from Sandwic in Kent when his elder brother Harold arrived with a considerable power of ships and weapons-men. The settlements of Lindsey were easy prey, as the Vikings had discovered many generations ago, but they offered little in the way of a tactical gain. Nevertheless Tostig had pushed ever northwards towards Northumbria and although not certain Grim's By had seemed a likely victim to fall before the king's outlawed brother. Getting word to Tostig that one of his chief accusers was present in the village had been the lure that they had set; the capture of a seeming traitor was the encouragement to take the bait.

Earl Edwin and Earl Morcar both admired and envied the Godwins and believed that defeating even a disgraced son of the famous Earl Godwin would attract to them some of the glory and power that had raised Harold Godwinson up to be the King of England. Despite their motive it was an expected duty for the ealdormen to defend their people. In that respect no one could condemn them for being here no matter how they had come to be laying in the grass watching the smoke rise slowly into the clear blue sky. Tostig represented a real threat to the peoples of Mercia and Northumbria and a successful repulsion of his raids would at least protect the majority of them from further harm.

The warriors watched as a figure came around the wooden palisade and hurried towards the gathering although he could probably see nothing of the weapons-men in hiding. A Saxon huscarl positioned in advance of the main body rose and intercepted the man, telling him to crouch and accompany him back. When he came close Coenred recognised High-Theign Gunnvor's servant Osberht. The peasant and the warrior fell to the soft grass beside him.

“Is Tostig present?” Coenred demanded.

“Aye and my lord doomed,” Osberht answered in a voice wracked with emotion. “They kill him slowly.”

“You know that this was Theign Gunnvor's intent,” Coenred told him, not unaware of the loyal servant's pain but more concerned about the violent encounter that was about erupt.

“He will die bravely and not in his sickbed,” Osberht said to no one in particular. “But I will not keep this! It is cursed.” He held out the bag of coins given to him by Tostig as if it contained something loathsome.

“Give them to the poor for that is an act that would anger Tostig greatly,” Coenred told him. He turned to the young warrior who waited on his command. “Aethelmaer, pass the word, we go.”

Aethelmaer smiled, such a grim expression on so young a face, and crawled back to where the eoldermen lay with their favourites around them. The word spread quickly and the army began to muster, rising from their hiding place in the long grass. Normally they would advance in close order, shield overlapping shield and bodies pressed together for mutual protection but such a formation did not allow for speed of movement. Instead they were more loosely placed, far enough apart to be able to move unencumbered, but close enough that they could form the shield-wall if threatened with danger.

Coenred glanced left and then right as they strode on legs that ached with muscles kept too long in one position and inactive. He was rewarded with the sight of the front line keeping its integrity. The left was commanded by Hereric, the right by Thrydwulf; both fellow huscarls. They were professional warriors in the pay of the eorls. Their armour of mail byrnies and steel helmets were the best that money could buy. The rank of a huscarl was not held by a poor man, as attested by the gold, silver and rare stones that decorated their weapons, their armour, and their rich clothes of many bright hues. Their swords were the badge of that rank, embellished with gold and silver. Their large round wooden shields were highlighted in many colours and styles, some abstract, others with stylised animals. The gold dragon of Mercia on a black background was a favourite with many of these men for that was the land of their birth or, in the case of the professional fighting men, their allegiance.

The brightly mailed warriors demonstrated their discipline, the product of countless hours spent training as only professional men at arms could afford to do. They all moved at the same pace with their shields held ready before them. In their right hand they gripped their fighting spears or large Dane-axes at the ready. There were about a thousand Saxon warriors descending upon Grim’s By. Almost to a man they were huscarls; the elite of the Saxon army. Their numbers were added to by several high-theigns and sons of eoldermen who were companions of Edwin and Morcar. Like the huscarls they wore mail byrnies and steel helmets for they were all rich men who owned large estates or the sons of such. It was also the way of many to wear their wealth for all to see. Saxons did not hide their station in this life; least of all upon a field of battle.

The warriors kept the walled settlement immediately to the front of them to mask their approach and made no noise whatsoever. Normally battle-horns would be blowing, standards waving, and the men tapping out a marching rhythm with spear or axe shafts or sword pommels against their large wooden shields. Today they were as silent as the early morning mist that had hidden Tostig’s coming from the villagers.

It was as they had hoped it would be.

No alarm was shouted from the enemy's ranks, they were clearly distracted by something else, something that the Saxons could only guess at. When they came within a few paces of the village's ditch the war-band swung south in a smooth, controlled motion, heading for the gate that they had spied out earlier in the evening. The front ranks began to increase their pace despite the weight of the arms and armour that they carried. The second, third and fourth lines followed suit. They were men practiced at war, their muscles hard and strong. Their breath came deep and slow. Their minds were dark with thoughts of violence. At last a battle-horn ripped the smoke stained sky.

The sound of the horn grabbed everyone's attention within the village. Heads snapped round, looking for the source of the challenge, and then the warriors who stood in and around the gateway to the village saw it. A dark mass punctuated with many gleams of sharp steel coming around the wooden palisade, moving in one direction, with one intent and with one mind.

"Morcar?!" Tostig snarled disbelievingly. He had wandered towards the gate at the sound of the horn and saw the excited reaction of his men. His quick mind deduced the true nature of his position; the trap had been sprung. He looked back at High-Theign Gunnvor. "You knew this?!"

"It was my purpose all along," the other laughed back despite his pain and weakness from the blood that flowed too freely from the wound in his thigh. "You listened too greedily to my spy, he did not lead you here for your gold; he brought you here for my revenge! You have no time to take to the sea and escape this time Tostig, cur of Godwin. Morcar sends his huscarls to take you, the best swords he commands; your dogs don't stand a chance."

"My Lord, you must to the ships," Oswyn urged with some alarm.

"They are too close," Tostig answered, his experience of previous military command coming to the fore. "Form the men up. Form a shield-wall. FORM A SHIELD-WALL!"

Oswyn knew that his lord was correct in his assessment, but he knew also that Gunnvor was right too. They had some 800 warriors, many of whom were former theigns like himself who had followed Tostig into exile, but mostly they were mercenaries, hired swords, adventurers looking for plunder. The weapons-men coming on at a quick pace did indeed look to be huscarls, their armour was of undoubted quality, their carriage purposeful, their weapons held in trained hands. They were experienced warriors who had sworn death-oaths of loyalty to the brother eorls of Mercia and Northumbria, not adventurers in search of loot.

The reavers began to form up but with many a longing glance back at the ships that lay behind them, rocking gently on the waters. The safety offered by those stout timbers called to the men. Fighting peasants caught unawares was one thing, fighting huscarls was another. Their hearts were more for flight than fight.

Coenred gave a moment's assessment whilst they were still some paces from encountering the enemy. If it had been Vikings that they were about to face then he would have halted the men and had them form a proper shield-wall, close packed and presenting a hedge of spears. He saw, however, the lack of will evident in the faces of the cowards that awaited the inevitable clash of arms. They were not concentrating upon their defence; they were hesitating. He decided to move to a full charge and announced his decision with a war cry that his brother warriors picked up and yelled with disdain at their enemy.

Tostig's men had tried to form up with the remains of the palisade on their right and the still bound High-Theign Gunnvor just beyond the open gateway. There was insufficient room to form up within the village itself so the reavers had to exit Grim's By and draw their lines in the open where they could better encounter their enemy. The captive could not see the Saxons rounding the settlement from the west but he could see the hated Tostig trying to prepare his men to receive them. He hurled his vocal abuse upon them with a passion and longed to be free from the cart to wield his sword once more despite the wounds that he had suffered.

The huscarls came within a few paces of the roughly formed mercenary shield-wall and hurled their throwing spears in a coordinated volley. It was a manoeuvre that broke their stride but it was a drill that they were much practised in. The throwing spears were not aimed at individual men but rather at the large round shields that they held up for their own defence. The weapons struck home and added a considerable weight to the shields, dragging the wooden implements down. Inevitably some of the spears did find flesh to bite into as well. The blood began to flow again.

With another cry the huscarls charged the mercenaries with stabbing spears, chopping Danish axes and gold decorated swords that sliced through muscle and tendon. Tostig urged his men to stand firm, to maintain the shield-wall, to resist the onslaught. He was not new to war, his family were well steeped in the art, but it was that very experience that told him that his cause was already lost. He realised too late that Gunnvor had indeed been the bait to entice him to wait until the Saxon spears had closed upon him in this trap. Knowing that there was now little else that he could do Tostig chose to obey his own courage and stood in the foremost rank with his sword in his hand.

The two forces came together and for a moment it seemed that they would resist each other, but that notion was deceptive. The shock of the impact went only one way. Tostig's adventurers lacked not only the quality of armour and weapons of the huscarls; they also lacked their unity. The reavers' brotherhood was disparate in origin and bound only through the same desire for wealth gotten through the sword. They lacked the Saxon's cohesion, spirit and single minded determination. A huscarl swore to obey his lord, to defend him with his life, and if that lord should die on the field of battle to remain upon it until either death took him too or all of his enemies were slain. In the face of this grim resolve it was not long before

the first of the mercenaries broke away to escape their formidable enemies. As soon as one left the fight others quickly followed.

Coenred pushed hard from the centre of the front line, keen to cross swords with the king's brother. He fancied that he could see him, a little to his right. There stood a Saxon lord some forty years old, his head protected by a fine gold decorated helmet and swinging an equally fine sword. His face was clean shaven and fierce, his carriage tall and powerful. He gave the impression of being the son of a fabled eorl, a man born to command; one who had trodden over fields of battle previously. He was what Coenred expected a Godwin to look like.

Determined to reach him by breaking through the enemy ranks immediately in front Coenred dropped his fighting spear and drew from his belt the large Dane-axe that all huscarls carried. Powerful muscles propelled him forward until he collided shield to shield with the enemy. The huscarl's axe head rained down on the man who held the opposing shield, the bright steel biting into the wooden rim. By the strength in his trained arm Coenred beat down that shield, hewing large pieces of wood out of it in the process. When the opportunity offered itself he cut into the man's body, smashing through his collar-bone, rendering his left arm useless. A fighting spear flashed over the huscarl's left shoulder and pierced the mercenary's now unprotected chest. The warrior wielding it was adept in his art; he twisted the shaft of the spear to stop the blade being held by the muscles and bone of the now inert body, and then drew the weapon back ready to thrust forward again.

The breach having been made Coenred surged into it with his axe going to work once more. Brother huscarls followed him, their shields pushing the enemy away to the left, their weapons hewing and stabbing to the right, irresistibly opening the gap. The enemy front line began to buckle under such merciless pressure. Coenred pressed to his right, coming behind the front two ranks of the enemy. He used his large shield to deflect spear thrusts and half hearted sword swings on his left, trusting to his comrades to follow him and kill anyone who dared now stand against them.

Oswyn glanced to his right and saw the Saxons open up the shield-wall with their ferocious attack. He marked the tall huscarl who was busy with a blood stained Dane-axe. Their eyes met in the madness of the violence and Oswyn read a cold intent there. Ever loyal to his lord Oswyn decided to press him to retire now before that huscarl could carve a path to them through the thinning ranks of their hired adventurers.

“My Lord!” Oswyn beseeched Tostig.

He had no need to say anymore. Tostig, although unaware of the huscarls pushing through the ranks to his right, understood the danger only too well. He had stood as long as he could to face his enemies, now was the time to sacrifice the men who followed him for pay and loot in order to save his own life. He turned and ran for the beach.

Many thought to follow their leader but those at the front of the shield-wall were pressed too hard and too closely to disengage from the fight without presenting their unprotected backs to the huscarls' weapons. They had to stay to preserve their own lives and in doing so they helped to save the former Earl of Northumbria as well.

“Quarter!” Voices called out from among the dismayed ranks. Men stepped a pace or two backwards and shields and weapons were dropped quickly, empty hands raised to show that they no longer offered any resistance. Better a life as a slave than a harsh death before these grim warriors thought many a sorry individual.

“Give quarter,” Coenred commanded when he saw that the mercenaries were giving up the fight. The discipline of the huscarls saved many a mercenary’s life as they responded to their captain’s order, sheathed their weapons and took to binding their captives’ wrists instead. Try as he might Coenred could no longer see the man he had presumed to be Tostig Godwinson and that disappointed him greatly.

The fight itself had been short but bloody. A large number of the adventurers lay either dead or wounded. An equally large number could be seen running north towards the mud flats of the Humber, or south along the beach. They would find little comfort out there in the wilderness no matter in which direction they ran.

“The eel escapes the net,” Sigbert, a brother huscarl, commented and pointed out to the breakers with his long fighting spear. They could see a small boat being rowed furiously towards a larger sailing ship. On board that vessel men were already preparing it for getting under way, the dark rectangular sail unfurling. “The wind, such as it is, is a south-westerly; it will blow them to Scotland if not into the mouth of some whale.”

“His power is broken,” Coenred masked his own disappointment. “Tostig Godwinson will not be ravaging these lands again.”

“Coenred! Coenred!” a young voice called out from behind them. Turning the warriors beheld Edwin, Earl of Mercia, approaching.

“My Lord,” Coenred closed the ground between them and gave him the bow that etiquette required of a servant to a lord.

“Do we have him? Do we have Tostig?” Edwin asked with youthful excitement. He removed his heavy helmet and his shield-bearer took it without waiting to be asked.

“He escaped us, My Lord,” Coenred confessed. “His power is broken, however. Many of his men have deserted him and he leaves behind a number of ships that you can press into Mercia’s service.”

The last was added to dull the edge of disappointment that he knew the young earl would feel at the news. It did not seem to work. Edwin had only one thought on his mind, the humiliation of his brother-in-law’s younger kinsman.

“All gods damn him!” Edwin railed. “How could this fail? How could he escape us?”

“He turned and ran before our spears,” Coenred replied. He removed his own heavy steel helmet to let the cool breeze kiss his sweating head, revealing a beard that was uncommon amongst his kind. His shield-bearer, a man by the name of Eanfrid who was some ten years his senior and dressed in good quality armour, took the helmet and also relieved his master of his shield and throwing spears. Eanfrid had already recovered the tall fighting spear that Coenred had dropped earlier in the fight.

“Your men did well,” Coenred commented.

Edwin only scowled. His younger brother Morcar joined them, still touched by the excitement of the fight. In his wake came several of their followers, all of a similar age to the eoldermen.

“We have taken many prisoners,” Morcar told his brother elatedly, “there will be many slaves to work the land.”

“Tostig Godwinson has escaped us but cost us not a single man,” Coenred added. “You have defeated him, taken prisoners in war, captured arms and armour and several ships that once belonged to him. Today has been a good day.”

Edwin considered the words of his captain of huscarls and it changed his mood. He looked around at the scene that surrounded them. He did not acknowledge the burnt buildings, the dead animals or the peasants who had already died this day. He looked at the several hundred defeated men who now sat on the ground with their hands bound, the bodies of the fallen, broken spears and abandoned swords. He saw his own men, splendid in their armour and exuding a martial strength that reflected his own authority as an eorl, a nobleman of Saxon England, and this moved him.

“It was worth the effort wasn’t it?” The question was entirely rhetorical; Eorl Edwin was merely justifying the fading of his initial anger at the escape of Tostig Godwinson. The thought of the new possessions that had fallen into his hands did not overly concern him, that place was taken by his ambition to rival the greatest of the aethelings; the House of Godwin. Today he felt that he had taken a step in that direction.

“The village can be rebuilt,” Morcar assured him.

“The village will be rebuilt,” Edwin agreed. “It will ever remind Tostig of how we bested him here. We will send riders to London to tell Harold of how we put his brother to flight. If only we had killed him too.”

“My lords, High-Theign Gunnvor,” Hereric approached the group respectfully but a note of concern coloured his voice. Like all of them he had removed his helmet to allow the fresh air to cool his forehead, and in doing so revealed a handsome face that did not indicate the years of experience that he had earned as a huscarl.

Without another word they followed the warrior back to the laden cart where a group of the Saxons had gathered around the theign who now lay free of his bonds, stretched out upon a cloak taken from one his former tormentors. The men made way for their young noblemen.

“High-Theign Gunnvor,” Morcar called out to his vassal.

In truth he barely knew the man but he was astute enough to realise that Gunnvor had had a hand in his promotion to the earldom of Northumbria and valued his support accordingly. His expression of concern would not be lost on the warriors gathered at that spot either.

“Is he dead, My Lord?” Gunnvor asked in a rasping voice. His face had paled from the loss of blood that he had suffered and he seemed much older than he had looked only yesterday. It appeared that Oswyn’s spear had cut the femoral artery in his thigh. Hereric had tied a leather belt tightly above the wound but a lot of blood had already escaped.

“Sadly, My Theign, Tostig Godwinson escaped us. He had the luck of the Godwins again,” Morcar told him. The young eorl glanced over his shoulder at Coenred who read the meaning of the look. He shook his head to indicate that the brave man would not survive his wounding.

“But you broke his power?” This was said with some urgency.

“Aye, we broke his power,” Coenred answered. “We have captured many of his men, his ships, his weapons. The rest have deserted him.”

“Then that is good,” Gunnvor asserted. For some reason his vitality decreased rapidly following this statement.

“We will take you back to Northumbria,” Morcar told him, “your people will know of your bravery on this day. Your son will be proud of you.”

“My son will rule in my place as your loyal theign?”

“On my honour, as we agreed so will it be,” Morcar reiterated their bargain. At another time he might have been irked being so pressed by a servant in respect of an oath already made but the thrill of the battle still coursed through him and he was acutely aware that he was in the presence of many brave warriors; he wanted to appear to be a deserving lord of such men.

“Give me my sword?” Gunnvor requested. From somewhere a weapon was produced and pressed into the dying man’s hand. He did not look to see if it were indeed his own but just gripped the hilt with both hands, the tip of the sword pointing to his feet. He sighed and closed his eyes as if allowing the last of his strength to escape him only now that all things seemed settled as he had desired.

“He fulfilled his wish to die with his sword in his hand,” Hereric said with approval.

“A fair death honours a man’s life,” Morcar added, somewhat moved.

“May he be the last Saxon to die in battle this year,” Coenred said.