

The Village of Skaroaborg

Even the hardest of warriors, the most experienced of sailors, even a king of men, might stop and feel insignificant before the world when they witnessed such a change in the weather. The sky was rolling down upon them from the north, great tumbling boulders of dark granite for clouds that threatened to crush everything beneath them. The light faded quickly, as if it were being extinguished by an irresistible weight, remaining only as a thin ribbon as bright as silver but pushed to the far horizon. It was only a half-light, however, and it gave a weird aspect to everything that it touched. Beneath the keels of the ships the sea turned black and the waves began to roll in their turn as if a mirror image to the sky above.

The brave men within the great Viking long-ship crowded the sides of the vessel and looked with dismay at the changes that were being enacted all around them. The sky had been dark all day but the clouds were always moving, blown by a north-easterly wind that had aided them in their journey across the great northern whale-road that lay betwixt Norway and England. The voyage had not been a direct one, however, as they had lately come from Orkney. Their course had brought them down the eastern coast of Britain and that in turn had allowed them to stay within sight of land as the threat of a storm had been almost ever present since they had sailed.

“The old gods grow angry,” Eystein Orre remarked as looked north past the stern of the great warship. “The superstitious read runes in the water and in the clouds.”

King Harald Hardrada only grunted in response. He could read the signs as clearly as any man onboard but that was not sufficient, he had to weigh up his next choice of words carefully. Behind him there followed a huge fleet of ships in the wake of his vessel Long Serpent. They were not all warships, however, almost half were much smaller craft used to carry the supplies that a large army in a foreign land would need. The loss of any one of those ships would be regrettable.

“We must put into shore,” Jarl Steinkel announced suddenly. He stood before the mast, his legs apart to allow him to ride the growing roll and pitch of the vessel. “Turn to shore!”

His voice called out over the growing wind that already made the cable sing. Those that heard it could not mistake the tone of command used, nor hidden their surprise at it.

“Run before the wind!” Hardrada cried out in an even more thunderous voice. “Run before the wind I say as there’s naught to landward that will shield us from this blow!”

“Odin has turned against us!” someone commented from the rowing benches, his words were given quick support by many more mouths. Another even suggested that it was the end of the world.

“Ragnarok doesn’t begin on this day,” Hardrada asserted but his voice was lower in tone.

He still stood by the port side of the ship from where he had been watching the phenomenon of the threatened storm develop. The sea had become like jet, a shiny black flecked with silver from which they could watch the undulation of the waves as they grew in strength and size. Over their heads the clouds seemed to increase in magnitude so that the air around them began to feel oppressive. A few drops of rain began to fall, the precursor of what was to come; everyone expected it to turn into a downpour of terrible ferocity.

“We turn to shore or we die at sea,” Jarl Steinkel countered the king.

He was joined now by two of his own men. Eystein Orre noticed that they had weapons at hand but that they were feigning a disinterest in everything about them despite the curious change in the weather, which alone had already attracted so much attention.

“It is not your place to give commands here!” Orre corrected the jarl and took a step towards him, laying his hand on top of the pommel of his sword as a warning.

Jarl Steinkel looked passed the faithful Orre and directly at the King of Norway himself. Hardrada seemed unperturbed as he stood with one hand on the timber rail at the side of the ship, but then that was to be expected. The giant Viking was not only tall but fully formed, not long and lank like some men of height. His arms and legs were thick with muscle made strong by many years spent sailing the known world and fighting countless battles against all kinds of peoples.

Despite his impressive stature and a formidable reputation Steinkel also saw a man who was somewhat down on his luck. Challenging the king in Norway had been unthinkable, the odds were too much in the old man’s favour even if the people were much cooler towards him since the Danish war had led to naught but a miserable peace treaty. Within his own court Hardrada was surrounded by his loyal favourites, Jarl Siward, the captain of the king’s companions, Jarl Orre, the steward of the royal keep, and of course the princes Magnus and Olaf. Here on the ship, even this royal ship, the odds were much better to his mind.

As the sky darkened further and the wind began to howl like a wolf the men at the oars gave fresh voice to their fears. They were all battle-hardened warriors but that did not mean that they were not ruled by the superstitions of the sea. They feared to drown.

“It is a Viking’s right to voice his thoughts when the luck runs ill and we stand on the point of destruction,” Jarl Steinkel answered Orre, all the time keeping his eyes on the king. “This expedition has been plagued from the first, that’s what comes from making alliances with the enemy.”

Eystein Orre was about to speak when he was silenced by a great hand that casually but firmly pushed him to one side. Instead the Norwegian looked to his right, craning his neck to see the face of his king as Hardrada stepped slowly past him and towards the rebellious jarl. It was a face of concentration and cold intent.

“Steinkel, I wonder why you journeyed on this voyage seeing as you have done nothing but bellyache since we left Norway?” Hardrada had to raise his voice to combat the growing wind but he seemed, unlike his men, unperturbed by the worsening conditions around them. “I wonder as well why you have lodged yourself on board my ship when you have one of your own?”

In truth Hardrada would have, if he had had the choice, postponed this encounter with one of his own jarls for when their feet were back on dry land but clearly Steinkel had decided to precipitate matters. He could appreciate the timing, however, what with the peculiar developments in the weather. Men were given to reading doom and disaster in such moments. It was always wise to seek an advantage over an enemy but it was not always wise to act upon the first opportunity without careful consideration.

He should, mayhap, have felt angry at the jarl’s challenge but he found himself feeling surprisingly calm. Of course he knew very well that Jarl Steinkel opposed his rule, well not so much opposed him as sought to replace him as king. That was something that was never going to happen of course. Prince Olaf voyaged with the jarls of Orkney on their own ship, safe from a back-stabber’s blade, and Prince Magnus sat as regent in the court of Norway.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer!

In truth Hardrada had not imagined that Steinkel possessed the courage to launch a bid for power so soon. However, once the moment had arrived the king had already looked ahead and seen how this incident might benefit himself, and restore something of his reputation with the men as well. He was, after all, the War Wolf, a vicious, cunning and ruthless man and chieftan; the defeat of one of his enemies at court would not be a bad thing.

“You see where your leadership has brought us,” Steinkel shouted back with no show of etiquette before his lord. It was clear that both men now knew that they had crossed a line but as to whether or not that would lead to violence no one could yet tell. “The black wind of the gods would dash our ships upon the rocks of England’s rugged shoreline, drown our bodies in icy waters and wash us up for the plunder of the Saxons. What glory is there in this fate? What merit for a man of the sword and of the spear in this doom that you, great king, bring upon us?”

Jarl Steinkel had moved away from the mast and towards the bow of the ship but always facing Hardrada. He was a typical Viking, his body was strong and his hand practiced with the sword, but before the King of Norway he looked like a child. Those who watched the altercation wondered at his reasoning for picking such a seemingly unequal fight.

Hardrada now stood upon the deck between the rowers facing Steinkel with the mast to his back. His great hands closed and opened reflexively. A sudden peal of thunder erupted over them and many a man flinched at the sound that reverberated through the very timbers of the

ship. Hardrada did not move a muscle. Despite this sudden reminder that the storm was at hand and their safety threatened no one could take their eyes from the confrontation.

The two men who had been with Steinkel when he first spoke were now behind the giant king and on either side of him. They exhibited an air of interest in the proceedings just like their fellow crewmen but their eyes often flitted to Steinkel as if they were awaiting a signal.

“Give me an oath of fealty,” Hardrada spoke loud enough so that he could be sure the crew heard his command.

“Your day is done old king, die with some grace for the pity of all those you lead to hell!” Steinkel retorted drawing his sword and moving into a fighting stance. The jarl did not hurl himself into an immediate attack, however, that came suddenly and unannounced from the king’s left.

A man holding a short-sword in his right hand launched himself at the great Viking chief. He voiced no challenge; his attack was both silent and swift, but not swift enough. Hardrada turned with amazing agility for such a large man. His right hand fastened around the throat of his attacker, his left closed like a vice on the other’s right forearm. With a quick twisting motion he snapped the bones in the man’s arm as if he were twisting straw between his fingers and then spun again to his left, lifting the man from his feet in the process.

Even though the ship pitched and yawed in the swell the great Viking never lost his footing. A second attacker had attempted to close with him from the starboard-side but he had been too slow. The position of the mast had protected Hardrada’s back. Using the helpless would be assassin almost as a club the king crashed one body into another. They collapsed to the boards of the ship, the sailors scattering before them. In an instant Eystein Orre was upon them with his sword in his hand, which quickly emerged into the weird half-light stained with their blood.

Jarl Steinkel watched the seconds pass with disbelieving eyes from the moment the attack had begun to when Hardrada faced him once more, untouched by either blade and still without a weapon of his own in his hand. Steinkel felt the grip of his sword, the weight of the cold steel, judged the length of the weapon. He looked once more into the king’s eyes and knew that it would not be enough.

“Your oath,” was all that Hardrada said in response.

For a moment the two simply stared at each other and then the king started forward with a purpose to end the matter once and for all. Jarl Steinkel hesitated only to weigh up his chances and then he turned and ran to the bow of the ship. His pace did not slacken as he reached the rail but he jumped over it without breaking his stride.

“That will suffice,” Hardrada commented.

Several seconds passed without a word from anyone else on board and then the silence was broken by another thunderbolt from the heavens.

King Harald Hardrada had stopped his advance just before the rail of the ship. He did not look down into the black sea that had closed above the head of his enemy but rather out further forwards and a little off to the west. The whale-rod was becoming violent now, the waves tossing the great ship up into the air by many feet, the bow sending up a shower of black water as it crashed back down again. To replace the excitement of the violent encounter the fear of the storm seeped into men's hearts.

"To shoreward!" Hardrada suddenly boomed. He raised a great hand and pointed ahead of them. "Mark me, make for the headland."

"Where, My Lord?" Eystein Orre came to his side quickly and squinted into the almost darkness. The ribbon of silver light continued on the horizon and it gave them enough illumination to see a great formation of rock jutting out into the sea.

"You see it?" Hardrada demanded.

"Aye, My Lord, I see it," Orre grinned at his king.

Abiorn the Dane pulled his cloak around himself and scowled back at the black clouds quickly approaching from the north. It may prove a bad night tonight if the weather did not change. He fancied that the wind would shriek through the village and the rain would find a way in through the walls and roof, it always found a way in, but they would remain warm and mostly dry. He glanced eastwards out to sea and was rewarded by the sight of the last of the fishing boats coming back to shore. He bent down and picked up a woven bag from the grass at his feet, he was not sorry that this duty as watchman was almost finished. There was little to see now that the weather was closing in anyway. He desired nothing more than to return to his hearth and home and while away the evening with his family.

It was a decent walk back down to the village and he was eager to get under way, you did not have to be a man of the sea to know that the rain was coming. It was still a little early in the last hour of his watch, however, and so as if to make up for that fact he walked towards the edge of the headland and looked out to sea once more. The sky was grey to the south but there was nothing on the sea. To the east the last of the vessels making their way back home had slipped beyond his field of vision beneath the cliff upon which he stood and to the north....!

Below the roiling clouds and riding a pitch black sea Abiorn saw a vision from his nightmares. A great Viking warship was running before the storm and in its' wake came hundreds of other vessels. For several seconds he could not believe what he was seeing. Never in his life had he seen a fleet so large. It chilled his heart more than the threat of the great storm that drove those ships south to Skaroaberg ever could.

An echo of thunder rolled up to the headland and it gave the watchman a sudden impetus. He turned upon his foot and ran inland praying to the Lord Jesu Christ that he would be in time for his family's sake.

With a wave of his right hand Tostig Godwinson halted the party of armed men at his back. Obediently they stopped and let their lord continue his walk to the edge of the cliff. Only their captain, Oswyn, continued to follow in the nobleman's footsteps.

The grass-topped headland jutted out into the North Sea, rising some three hundred feet over the dark churning waters. Tostig turned and looked in land. The fresh kiss of the westerly wind was on his face, tugging at his clean and combed hair, held fast by a golden band. His blue cloak fluttered but the wind was much weaker now, having changed direction and losing its violence. Just a few hours ago it had threatened to wreck an unimaginable doom upon his expedition, to ruin all of his careful plans, but they had reached safety.

He moved closer to the edge of the cliff and looked down into the southern bay. He was, despite himself, impressed by the sight of so many ships moored there. The great headland protected the combined Viking and Saxon fleet from the worst of both the northerly and westerly winds. It was a natural harbour and the shallow beach made it an excellent site for craft to be both launched into and recovered from the sea. Many of the smaller vessels were indeed pulled up onto the shore and a small habitat of canvas shelters had sprung up around the beached vessels. Camp-fires littered the sands, each attracting a host of men intent on cooking or drinking or talking or singing ribald songs.

The bigger ships, such as the massive warship Long Serpent, the King of Norway's flagship, rolled majestically on the swell. They had been anchored in the bay and left to ride out the storm, their crews trusting to the strength of the ships' timbers and cables. Thanks to the protection that this superb harbour gave they had survived with little mishap.

The setting sun was painting the sky blood red in the west. Ribbons of wind torn clouds stretched out across the darkening horizon, vibrant with the hues of a wound, from bright crimson to the dark purples of a bruise. The blood light fell on the Viking long ships, their nodding dragon-heads rose and fell in the undulations of the surf, painted with light and shadows that constantly changed and made it appear as if they were taking on a life of their own.

All would be blood red soon.

Seagulls drifted like lost souls amongst the masts of the ships or rode the crimson coloured swell in between the vessels as if in anticipation of the killing to come. The sun was slipping behind the highland to the west beyond which an unsuspecting City of York lay.

Tostig pulled his fine woollen cloak closer around him but not out of a desire to feel warmer, if anything this September weather was milder than usual. He took no more notice of

the fine weave of the cloth than he did of the ships below. Another Saxon may have envied him the good quality cloak so expertly made and so dearly priced but he had lived a life of privilege and such thoughts did not occupy him; his mind was elsewhere now.

“I have returned Oswyn!” he declared.

“Indeed, My Lord,” his captain of weapons-men replied.

“When this land was mine, when I was the Eorl of Northumbria, I never thought to visit this place.”

“Why would you, My Lord? It is just a stinking fishing village.”

“I owned it though,” Tostig glanced at his captain, “now they do!” He nodded down into the south bay where the Viking ships lay.

“I ruled over both Saxon and Viking alike then. I am no longer a prince of the kingdom, but a common adventurer now, at war with my own brother,” he smiled ruefully.

A clamour from the cliff top further inland attracted their attention. In the faint light the shadowy figures of a number of Vikings could be discerned building a bonfire. They were drunk and being their usual boisterous selves.

“It amazes me that not a single one of them has yet managed to tip himself over the cliff edge,” Oswyn commented derisively.

“Harold of Wessex, King of England, has everything now and I, our father’s third son, have but the daughter of a foreign count for a wife and a band of mercenaries to command.” Tostig paid no heed to either the Vikings or to Oswyn’s observation about them. He was revisiting an old subject and a familiar anger was rising within him. “Brother. There is a word of treacherous portent. The most powerful nobleman in the kingdom is both my brother and my enemy.”

“It’s natural that brothers should rival each other,” Oswyn commented, “that Harold shines now in the people’s eyes is in no small part due to the poor light cast by Eorl Godwin’s first born; your brother Sweyn.”

“Sweyn! That man was an idiot who squandered every chance given to him. He actually believed himself to be the illegitimate son of King Knut,” Tostig looked exasperated as he remembered with little love the brother who had been elder to both himself and Harold. “What fame he won the family by abducting and raping an abbess for which he was rightly exiled. Killing our own cousin Beorn and him the only member of the family willing to support his return from that exile and ready to plead his case before the king.”

“He did indeed prove himself a nothing,” Oswyn agreed.

Tostig smiled at the irony of his older brother's fate. He remembered how the news had come to them that Sweyn had repented his crimes and previous life of debauchery. He had gone on a barefoot pilgrimage to Jerusalem to atone. Only a few days after his return from the Holy Land God had, in Tostig's mind at least, so far absolved Sweyn for his many crimes that

he bestowed a final blessing upon him; death at the hands of a murderer! That event had rid the family of an annoying fool but it had also left Harold as the heir to Eorl Godwin's title and fortune.

"Father always had a design upon the throne, I doubt not. He thought the now dead King Edward weak and undeserving and many shared that opinion even if they did not speak their own minds."

"Your father's breaking of the king's exile did little to strengthen Edward's hold on the crown," Oswyn agreed.

"He needed the strength of the House of Wessex to hold his kingdom together under the threat of the Welsh and other disgruntled nobles at home. Mayhap, like so many weak men, he hated those that his own infirmity made him lean upon? Mayhap that was why he chose not to consummate his marriage to my sister Edith?"

"But you were a friend to King Edward in other days, ever looking to broker a friendship, an alliance even, between him and King Malcolm of Scotland. Lady Edith supported you at court."

"To no avail Oswyn, to no avail, lesser men merely numbered me amongst the Norman advisors that the king had surrounded himself with. They understood me not. This land is so resistant to change and the eorls so jealous of their positions, they see a threat in every action, a challenge in every word. Like King Edward, who grew up in exile in Normandy, I have seen more of the world beyond our shores and it is indeed changing. It is growing bigger. Scotland, Ireland, Wales, France, Norway and Denmark, these are the powers against which England has to measure her strength."

"Your acceptance of Edward's Norman advisors made you unpopular with the eorls," Oswyn observed again, as he had done many times previously. This conversation was not new and it was often repeated. It probably would never be forgotten until Tostig had achieved his revenge on those he judged to have wronged him.

For Oswyn it was just one more burden that his position in Tostig's now much diminished household subjected him to. There were, however, advantages to being the right hand man of an eolderman, even one who was disgraced and banished. Tostig still had some wealth, the now King Harold had not denied him that, and should he prove successful in recovering all the power that he had previously lost then those who had stood by him would be justly rewarded too. The Godwins valued loyalty and they had always been generous in recognising it.

"They lacked the wit to see that my aim was to supplant those same foreigners with good Saxon advisors, but Saxons educated in the ways of the new world that is dawning around us. Craft must be employed at court. Clever words traded with powerful individuals to oust the Normans from their hold over Edward's court. So many men of title and estate have power

over people and animals but little more brain than an ox driver. My mistake was in not recognising sooner that Harold had grown afraid of me.”

“Mayhap there can yet be peace between you and Harold?”

“Peace?!” Tostig looked as if he had tasted something foul. “It was Harold who counselled the king to strip me of my eorldom when the people of Northumbria revolted against me. Murder and butchery were suffered by my own vassals while I hunted with King Edward at his pleasure; you know this Oswyn. Harold was commanded by the king to return me to my station but he saw a chance to be rid of an able competitor instead. I was the one man best placed to challenge him so he sided with the sons of Aelfgar and had me exiled.”

“Weak King Edward could not choose any other path despite all the promises he had made to you, My Lord; Harold was too powerful.” Oswyn agreed, still managing to affect an interest in what his lord had to say.

“Edward and his promises. There was a man who made promises that he never meant to keep and traded upon his reputation for piety to fool men into trusting him. It was King Edward's promises to brother Harold and to Guillaume of Normandy both that have brought these several claims to the crown. In such times as these might those who have been wronged not seek their revenge? In such times as these might not one brother strike down the other and suffer no sin for an act of war? Harald Hardrada's claim to throne may be no more certain than either the Saxon's or the Norman's but it is the one venture that gives us a promise of retribution”

“Then there will be two more brothers who will not be happy to see the return of the rightful eorl,” Oswyn grinned maliciously. “Edwin and Morcar.”

“Cousins, but only by marriage not by blood,” Tostig agreed. “They seek to emulate the achievements of the Godwins but with none of the Godwin craft. There is no sin to be feared in the spilling of their blood.”

The sun had sunk lower now. The sky overhead was growing dark but the clouds on the horizon glowed like hot coals. With only a little use of their imagination they could see the undulating hills of the Wolds burning under the fire that was to come. Their ancient enemy's fire that they had willingly brought from across the cold sea to their own land.

The bonfire on the cliff top flared into life and was greeted by an outpouring of rowdy drunken cheers. As it blazed it silhouetted a group of men steadily following the path that Tostig had taken only recently.

The poor light could not disguise the approaching party. Tostig glanced at Oswyn, the captain signalled the bodyguard and they responded immediately. Moving in an unhurried fashion they surround their lord as he, in his turn, moved away from the cliff edge and towards the approaching king. The execution of their duty pleased Tostig. The warriors had

not rushed so as to seem panicked, nor did they dawdle as if underestimating the threat that the Vikings could pose even to their allies.

Hands drifted unconsciously to sword pommels. Like two bears the lords of men approached each other with a respectful wariness. Both parties were capable of inflicting great hurt upon each other and although mindful of the need to maintain the status quo between them they were also keen to avoid any unnecessary bloodshed through either a misunderstanding or a lack of due etiquette. It had to be remembered that Saxon and Viking were in this instance actually allies and not the traditional enemies of yesterday.

"My Lord, you come to watch the sport?" The King of Norway's voice rumbled into the evening air.

Hardrada grinned in the torchlight but there was little humour and less warmth in his kingly greeting. He did not like his new ally being beyond his ability to watch and liked even less the inclination of Tostig's men to stand apart from the revelries of the Vikings.

"And to consider our next move, My Lord," Tostig replied without hesitation.

The king's train outnumbered the Saxon's own by several. Tostig recognised within it Siward, a friend so close to the king that they were almost brothers. Eystein Orre stood just behind him, another loyal companion accounted with the coolest of heads in the heat of battle, although the hair on that head was now turning grey. Norse huscarls accompanied them, without armour it was true but they carried swords, all except for one. He was a titan, bigger even than the great King of Norway. Blond hair flowed over his shoulders like a mane, braided into tails clipped at the ends with gold fastenings, and held in place at the temples by a gold circlet as thick as a man's finger; no doubt a prize given by the hand of Hardrada himself. This colossus carried only one weapon, a two handed Dane-axe that seemed to weigh nothing in his massive hands. His arms were thick with muscle and crossed with scars flashing white against a skin burnt by the sun of much warmer climes. In battle he had the honour of carrying the king's pennant.

Hardrada was older than this Viking Goliath and almost as big. The tales told of his exploits had seemed as exaggerated as the references to his size, with that personal detail verified, however, mayhap all but the most outrageous of deeds attributed to him were true. The King of Norway was indeed of heroic proportions, as were his tempers and his lust for power and wealth. He was indeed the War Wolf personified.

The king's son, Prince Olaf, was also in the party and that gave Tostig reason to relax somewhat. King Hardrada was a dangerous man but he had a habit of being more tractable when in the presence of his own kin. A pity then that he had left his womenfolk at the Isle of Orkney. No doubt the Viking Jarls of those islands felt the same way as it was said that they had their eyes set on King Hardrada's daughters. Those two young men also made up the king's train having become friendly with the prince. They believed that they could impress

the great warrior-king with their own courage in battle. They had also brought much needed men and ships from Orkney to support this expedition to England.

“Ah, thinking. You should take time to enjoy the moment, My Lord; that’s the Viking way. Today we own this worthless pit and use it to mark the return of the old days.”

The king threw up a hand and a loud cheer went up from the Vikings at the cliff-side bonfire, which they then attacked with pitchforks. Burning bits of wood began to fall over the edge, tumbling down towards the abandoned village. Some struck the side of the cliff, bouncing off rocks and exploding into a shower of sparks in the growing gloom, beginning a literal rain of fire.

Harald Hardrada watched the Vikings as they laboured drunkenly but he also watched the Saxon lord too. These were not the old days; he would not fool himself about that. Thirty years ago a great war-chief like himself would have sailed to England with a mighty army of Vikings to crush the gold out of these Saxons, not make alliances with them. This Tostig was a clever man, however. He had climbed from being the third son of the Eorl of Wessex to a position of high prominence in the kingdom. The Saxons of the north might not welcome Tostig’s return from exile but the lords of the south would be a different matter. Not every man was swayed to the banner of Harold of Wessex. Hardrada knew very well that today a man achieved as much, if not more, by the use of clever words than he did with the sword.

Slowly the bonfire started to topple over. It cascaded down onto the village sending up a huge shower of sparks as it landed amongst the wooden buildings. A great roar of approval went up and Hardrada added his own voice, smacking a warrior on his back with enough force to make the man stagger a step forward.

“Today we burn our enemies’ homes, tomorrow we stick them with our spears and make them squeal like pigs!”

He laughed loudly and his men laughed with him. It was a good show of boisterous humour. Below them the fire spread quickly. It would not be long before every building in the settlement would be consumed.

Wooden hovels can be rebuilt, Tostig reminded himself.

“’Tis not the fisher-folk of Scarborough that we should be concerning ourselves with,” Tostig said, showing no sign of enjoying the Vikings’ sport. “York is defended with stout walls and a fyrd.”

“This we know,” Hardrada replied in a quieter voice. “If the storm had not threatened I would not have put into this place but the winds did rise and my men have an opportunity to enjoy themselves; that I would not deny them. Let the fishers of the sea become the fishes of the land, they will be caught in a much bigger net than this.”

He waved to the settlement below. A column of dark smoke now poured upwards, lit from underneath by the voracious fires and speckled with bright sparks that both lived and died in the blink of an eye.

“They will head for York and alert them of their peril,” Tostig pressed.

“Good! I find men hiding like sheep behind their walls are more given to fear than boldness. I will make them fear my name and know why my standard is called ‘Land-Ravager’! Jorvik will fall to us and all of Northumbria with it.”

He raised his voice towards the end of this speech and his men, hearing what they wanted to hear, responded with roars of delight.

“We should march on York before these flames die down,” the Saxon lord suggested. “’Tis not that far over yonder hills to the Vale of York.”

“As the raven flies no doubt, but that would still put some distance between us and our fleet. Though I fear no ill luck I would rather have my ships closer to hand than Skaroaborg.” The king’s tone was in-flexible.

Clearly he had already made up his own mind on this subject and Tostig wondered fleetingly if the Norwegian had some misgivings over this adventure after all?

“And the fyrd of York alarmed,” The Saxon mused.

He glanced down at the distant ships in the harbour below. They had taken on a weird aspect in the dancing light of the flames.

The army had to move, that was obvious. Whilst the local theigns may indeed choose to bar the gates and man the walls of York that did not mean that they would simply await their fate. The eorls Edwin and Morcar were probably in the north and Harold was definitely to the south in London. Messengers could be sent in both directions, however. If they did not act quickly this Viking army, as formidable as it was, might find itself trapped between two equal Saxon powers coming from different directions and the Norsemen would have no firm base from which to fight.

“I think, My Lord, that we might move both fleet and army within reach of York, though it would take us longer to reach the city walls,” Tostig ventured at last.

“And how’s that, My Lord?” The king demanded.

“We sail upon the wide Humber,” Tostig suggested. The simplicity of the idea suddenly spurred him on. “We put the marshland of the Isle of Holderness to our northern flank and head west up the great river.”

“And how would that bring us to York?”

“The River Ouse that flows by York flows also into the Humber. We sail to its mouth and then up the river, as far as your Long Serpent can still draw draft. From there we moor and make safe the fleet and come at York from the south.”

“From the south? Ha! I like thy thinking, My Lord. By the time we reach a mooring point all of York may still believe us marching over the hills to the east. We might catch them with their heads turned with all the gods’ luck.”

“Should there be any need the men left to guard the fleet could be called to our aid also; they will be within distance of a messenger,” Tostig further prompted.

The idea had genuine advantages and he chided himself for not thinking of it earlier. Mayhap he had suppressed the very notion at birth because sailing down the Humber would bring him close to the village of Grim’s By again? He dismissed that notion immediately but it felt like he had touched upon an open sore all the same.

Hardrada looked down at the fiercely burning village, despite the distance between them and the flames they could feel the heat from the fire even where they stood on top of the headland.

“Let this be the end of our sport. Siward!”

The king’s lieutenant stepped forward, the flames glinting on the gold that adorned him and reddening his blond hair.

“Once the flames have died down we’ll ready the ships and head south to the Humber River.”

“Aye, My Lord, the men have had enough of Skaroaborg; it offers no more in the way of distraction,” Jarl Siward agreed readily enough.

“Then give my command. The sooner we are ready the sooner we’ll be in Jorvik.”

Siward turned and headed back down the cliff, making the long walk to the destroyed village with equally long strides and accompanied by a number of warriors to help get the revellers in line.

“It will take some time to get the fleet seaworthy again,” Tostig commented.

“Hours!” Hardrada insisted. “They have only brought ashore what was needed and there was little found in this midden to fill their holds with. The fleet can be back at sea by first-light and if the wind is fair we will make the Humber well before evening.”

It crossed Tostig’s mind that he should voice his fears concerning the Saxon’s being better prepared than they had so far allowed themselves to believe, but he also worried that he might appear weak before such a mighty warrior. And Harald Hardrada was a mighty warrior, there was no doubting that. It was said that he had not known defeat in battle since the very first time he had participated in one, and then he had been but a boy. No, Tostig decided, getting the Vikings moving again was all that was needed. Once this great army was landed and properly prepared, an accomplishment that Hardrada excelled in, then there would be little to fear indeed even if messengers did get to London in time.