

The Vale of York

Wulphere the butescarl sat before his meagre fire listening intently. Dawn had broken but the early light of the rising sun was masked by the foliage of the trees. In the depths of the wood it was still as dark and close as it had been when he had made his camp here last night. He was both tired and hungry. Since travelling to York on his master's orders nothing had gone right when wyrd seemed to have promised him the realisation of his ambition; an easy life.

Wyrd was a two faced harlot!

Life as a weapons-man to Theign Ricbert, a man of some wealth and property, had proved reasonably easy. Ricbert was enamoured with Eorl Morcar of Northumbria and always looking to win his favour, hiring a few butescarls helped improve his martial image before the eorl, or so Ricbert thought. Wulphere neither cared nor worried about the theign's social climbing. He had enjoyed steady pay, food and somewhere indoors to sleep. He had also had the opportunity to travel throughout Northumbria on his master's orders and spy out other likely opportunities to increase his own wealth from choice pickings. There were many isolated farms in the countryside that were vulnerable to attack from a small band of determined men like the one he had secretly led before the return of the Vikings.

He wondered casually what might have happened to his bully-boys? He had been training up two ruffians to act as his muscle in a small hloth that worked under the guise of being the theign's men instead of living in the wild like other outlaws. That was a life he had already tried when he lived down south and it had not agreed with him. He did not doubt that the two lads were likely killed yesterday at Fulford Gate. His men had been as strong as oxen and just as stupid. Their own thirst for blood had probably led them into the heart of the battle where they had been stuck with Viking spears like hogs. A loss to him, it was true, but one that could be remedied in time. There were plenty of Saxons possessed of the same attributes as those two, although he had admired their ruthless eagerness for knife-work irrespective of their victims being man, woman or child.

The sound reached his ears again.

For the first time since fleeing the battle Wulphere regretted losing his war-gear. He still wore his leather byrnie and was armed with both a scramseax and a langseax but a shield, a spear, and a helmet would help him pass himself off as a warrior all the

more easily. In his full regalia as a mercenary warrior he knew that he could present a more formidable character to those that lurked in the shadows of the forest.

The loss of that war-gear brought another bitter memory back to his mind; that cursed woman and her servant. Always Wulphere kept his ears open and this was such a small world that it was not difficult to discover the business of others. This Mildryth was the young widow of a middling theign and she had lodged a complaint against, of all people, Tostig Godwinson, the brother of King Harold, for the murder of her husband and son, and the loss of their lands. Wyrd had arranged for him to be present in Ripon on some paltry business of Ricbert's when her complaint went before the Hundred Court and was passed up, at no surprise, to the Shire Court. If King Harold, a man bent on healing the wounds inflicted in the north by his younger brother, accepted her complaint then she stood to receive a small fortune by way of compensation.

She was alone and lost in the world, why shouldn't he enjoy her fortune?

Seeing Mildryth again in York had only confirmed in his own mind that wyrd was indeed leading him to a better life, but it seemed that she was no longer alone. A huscarl, some warrior of repute, had his eye on her too. It was his servant that had taken Wulphere by surprise when he had tried to spirit the woman from out of the city when the Vikings had clearly won the field at Fulford Gate. He had lost the better part of his war-gear in order to escape that peasant and his langseax, not to mention the other commoners who had come to her aid. They owed him now; both of them. If wyrd brought them within arm's reach again he intended to make them pay for what they had done to him.

Another sound but this time closer and off to his right.

Wulphere snapped out of his reverie, there would be more time to indulge that luxury later; right now he had to rescue his neck from imminent danger. There were people out there in the woods, dangerous people, and they were drawing around him like a noose. He doubted that they were Vikings; they were never so subtle. Besides he was far enough away from York, or any other habitation that he knew of for that matter, that they could have little reason to be in the vicinity. He did suspect them to be hloth however. Running would avail him nothing. They could be expected to know the paths and ways through this woodland and no doubt they had already placed someone on the most likely escape routes. Fighting was only to be considered as a last

resort and even then he would rather fly before them. He decided to put his faith for his deliverance in his craft.

“You may as well step into the light as your heavy footfalls have announced your presence to me already,” he called out upon hearing yet another sound caused by the clumsy oafs attempting to creep closer.

There was no reply to his words; the silence of the forest went unbroken for several moments. Wulphere rose from the ground and stretched in a manner that suggested he was unperturbed by his danger. He looked around the small clearing, into the nearest bushes, at the trunks of the larger trees, trying to spot their hiding places.

“Come, I will not hurt thee,” he goaded them.

A man stepped from behind a tree that was several yards away, nowhere near enough to take the butescarl by surprise. He was quite a large man and carried a wood-axe in his hands, hardly a suitable weapon for a robber. Like his clothing his face and hands were dirty; his hair unkempt.

They were living wild then. Good!

“Give over what you possess and you’ll live,” the brute declared.

One by one the other members of his gang revealed themselves and showed that they had Wulphere surrounded. There were eight of them in total, of varied age but all male. They all looked wild and hungry. The axe was the most formidable weapon that they possessed, the other robbers were reduced to scramseaxs that had seen better days or large sticks or even stones. This was no organised group of outlaws, just a feral pack of outcasts.

“I could do that,” Wulphere admitted, “but it would profit me nothing.”

“You would have your life,” their apparent leader pointed out.

Wulphere guessed that he held that position more through brawn than brains; they certainly did not look to have prospered under his leadership.

“And you would have a few coins to get you through the next day or two, but not the winter. You look half-starved even now; how will you survive when the snow comes and travellers stay at home?”

“Kill ‘im Imminric!” one of the would-be cutthroats called out.

“We’ll survive,” the one called Imminric insisted. He moved his axe in his hands and seemed upon the verge of making a fateful decision.

“But you could do better if you had someone to show you how to get treasure like this.”

Wulphere reached into his byrnie and withdrew a large silver crucifix. He let it dangle on its' chain so that it spun in the weak early morning light, making the purity of the metal gleam a little brighter. He saw the wonder etched on more than one face, quickly followed by the greed that lived in each cold heart.

"Why don't I just take it off your hands and leave you headless where you stand?" Imminric demanded.

"You could do that and everything that you take from me would help ease the hunger in your bellies, but again; what then? What will you do next when you've spent my coin and bartered away this trinket for half a hog to roast out here in the forest? Where will the next treasure hoard come from?"

Wulphere delighted in seeing Imminric's confused scowl. The man was no match for the butescarl's craft; that was clear. He relaxed a little, convinced that the immediate danger was now passed.

"We will take it from another lost soul like yerself," one of the gang finally answered on their leader's behalf.

"And you have come across many such as me have you?" Wulphere sneered. "I can tell by your fine linen and fat bellies."

There was an awkward silence into which only the muted sounds of the forest intruded.

"Of what do you speak?" Imminric demanded eventually.

"You look like a strong and brave heart Imminric, but do you have the craft of a fox? Can you find a lair for your outlaws and easy pickings to make the long winter nights bearable?"

"Tell me of what you speak?"

The command only confirmed Wulphere's assessment of this band of robbers. They were men who had singly or as a group fallen on hard times and could find no other employment. They had strayed outside of the law to live wild in the woodland but there they had found the life hard and unforgiving. Even when they had come together to pool their meagre resources they had not influenced wyrd to smile upon them.

"I can show you a better life. I can teach you how to take such jewels as this without hazarding your life. I can lead you -"

"I am the leader!" Imminric insisted with a bellow.

"And you still will be," Wulphere assured him. "I will be your eyes and ears in this world. I will show you where we can make an easy life and not get caught by the

weapons-men of the burghs.” He tucked the crucifix back into his byrnie and brought out a purse that he made jingle to reveal the presence of coins within. “Here is a token of my ability.”

He threw the purse to Imminric.

Clearly the Saxon was not gifted with quick thought but he displayed admirable agility in switching the heavy axe to his left hand and catching the purse with his right. He weighed it speculatively then handed it to the man who stood next to him. Without hesitation the outlaw opened the purse and poured a collection of gold and silver coins onto the flat of his hand. The sight of the money brought the others gathering around him. If Wulphere chose to run now then there was no one to stop him, the magic of the coin had worked so well upon them all. However, he saw in this incident an opportunity and he decided to grasp it.

“You could take my life now, and all that I have, but that would only ease your want for a little while, or you could work with me and we could live like eorls?” Wulphere delivered his bargain in words that he knew their hunger and greed could not ignore. “What say you?”

“Imminric?!”

The vocal appeal from one of the would-be outlaws was obvious but there was some loyalty within this pathetic gang. They felt the pull of the coins and they wanted it but they also wanted more. They wanted a degree of security that Imminric’s leadership had so far failed to deliver. For his part Wulphere did not want to challenge Imminric for that leadership, he preferred a life within the settlements than out here in the wild. Better to control this band of cutthroats from a distance, sending them to do the dirty work, than to risk his own skin before rough weather and the pursuit of the tithingmen. He saw, however, that passing unnoticed amongst the theigns might offer opportunities to which he could direct this gang of outcasts to and that there would be a share in the haul for him afterwards with very little danger to his own neck. The idea appealed to him greatly.

“I am the leader!” Imminric insisted.

“Then I make my bargain with you.”

Wulphere walked towards the big Saxon with the axe. He exuded confidence but was careful not to seem arrogant. He did not want to do anything that might provoke a violent reaction.

“You will lead and I will guide.”

“Do you have more of such coin to prove your words?”

“Even better, I know a place, just an hour’s walk away, where you can find food, money and women,” he replied with a cold grin.

He saw the heads of the other gang members snap towards them both as they heard those words and knew then that he had succeeded in beginning a new life.