

## Fulford Gate

*Strike now!*

The thought kept coming back into his mind.

Morcar looked the length of the Viking line before him and swore that he could see holes in the shield-wall created by groups of men who had not yet formed up properly. The road north from Riccall was narrow; the Viking army was stretched out in a long column to the south. Most of it had not yet taken up its place in the line of battle even though they were being encouraged to advance at a trot by their captains.

*How long has it been since the first of them had arrived?*

*One hour? Two hours?*

*Who decided when a battle was to be begun?*

*Who threw the first spear?*

*Who claimed first blood?*

*Now was the time to strike.*

He glanced up at the morning sun and judged it to be ten of the clock. If that was right then they had been waiting well over an hour since the first Vikings had arrived.

The church bells in York rang out the hour only minutes ago surely?

September had been warm this year. It would soon become uncomfortably so, exhausting weather in which to fight a battle. He felt sweat trickle down the back of his neck, under his byrnie and moistening the padded jacket that he wore beneath it. His shoulder length hair, bound by a woven plait to keep it out of his eyes, itched from the warmth of the helmet. The day would only get warmer; that was for certain.

*Strike now!*

Edwin's plan was to hold this position along the beck, to resist the Viking onslaught by the strength of their shield-wall, but what if another opportunity offered itself?

What if he saw an advantage that was denied to his elder brother? How many weapons-men had Hardrada and Tostig brought with them?

If their force was greater than that which he and Edwin had been able to muster then did it not make sense to strike before the full strength of the Vikings was assembled before them

How many Saxon lives might be saved by taking the advantage and pushing the Vikings back before they had time to exert their full power against an outnumbered Saxon fyrd?

He glanced around at his own men. He had eleven hundred huscarls, all heavily armed and armoured. He also had the pick of the fyrd; the richer thegns and the better equipped

fyrdmen, over three thousand in all. Behind them was a motley collection of peasant villagers who would fall on the wounded enemy like hounds on a deer.

Hereric glanced at the young lord. The expensive helmet was a little too large for the boy; it almost hid the whole of his face from this angle making it difficult for the huscarl to read his emotions. As he stood beside his lord, however, he was loath to move so as to make it obvious that he was concerned. It had impressed him greatly that Morcar had taken up a position in the front of the shield-wall, a duty demanded by his noble birth but not always honoured by a man of title. This would make protecting him somewhat easier as Morcar would use his shield to ward off the weapons of the enemy and Hereric could assist him if necessary. If the battle should turn against them then Hereric was ideally placed to rescue the eorl.

He looked at the enemy troops forming across the beck and was not impressed. They looked like adventurers only, nothing, men without honour. That did not sit well with his expectations; this was supposed to be the army of the fabled King of Norway! Hardrada had fought everywhere from his own land to the steppes of the Rus and from there to even the Holy Land. His Companions were warriors of great repute, heroes who haunted the hearth-talk of the Saxons in the long dark nights, not this ragged collection of mercenaries! The War Wolf had turned into a mangy hound. The Saxon warrior grunted his disappointment into the morning air.

Tostig Godwinson turned in his saddle and looked back down the road that led to Riccall and up which the army was even now still marching. Siward had taken the Jarls of Orkeny and their retinue to the centre of the line. Hardrada was over on the left and his men were beginning to bunch up behind him. Tostig had barely two thousand men, only half of whom had so far arrived. It crossed his mind that Hardrada might offer him up as bait in a trap and that thought might have taken hold if it had not been for a Viking captain leading several hundred Danes over to Tostig's line to help bolster his men.

A small flock of starlings flew overhead, possibly early arrivals coming to spend winter in England. He wondered if the Vikings might stay as long as those raucous birds.

*Where should I stand?*

There was a number of Danes immediately to his left and he knew that they probably would not take commands from a Saxon even if he was the ally of the King of Norway. His right wing was weak but important, it would benefit from a leader, but should it be a captain or an eolderman?

"I will take the flank, My Lord," Oswyn announced as if reading Tostig's mind, "will you give me that honour?"

“It will require a steadfast heart to hold,” Tostig commented. He looked at Oswyn with genuine appreciation. His father had always taught his sons to value true loyalty and Oswyn had proven a very loyal vassal. “I doubt not that you possess the quality to do this thing though. My only command is that you survive this fight Oswyn,” Tostig spoke with genuine sincerity.

The captain smiled at his lord’s words and started directing men to form the far flank as best as they could.

Tostig turned now to assess the enemy from the advantage of his horse. The Saxon line looked strong and he prayed that they would not have the foresight to attack just yet!

*Strike now!*

Eorl Morcar gave the signal, raising his sword in the air and slowly bringing it down and pointing at the enemy. A strident peal erupted from the battle horns behind them, raucous enough to set teeth on edge. From the rear of the Saxon army archers began to loose their shafts towards the Vikings. Most of the arrows would fail to find flesh, but many would strike the great round shields and, if they held, they would add weight to tire the warriors further.

“No, My Lord!” Hereric shouted in alarm but his voice was drowned out in the initial din.

Morcar gave out his war-cry and, hefting his own shield higher, started forward. He felt a rush of blood as the excitement took him. For a moment he was totally unafraid. Above his head the flag of Northumbria flew, spread out more by its movement through the clear September air than by any wind or breeze. He was young, rich, powerful, and he commanded an army. He had never felt so alive.

A great cry went up from his troops as they followed the young eorl's example. They marched to the bank of the beck and then down into the cool water through which they splashed without concern for their leather shoes or linen trousers. Like a machine they came on shields locked and spears gleaming. Those behind the first rank struck their own shields with their fighting spears and set up a thudding rhythm as if marking the time of their enemy’s doom. The ground shook with the impact of their leather heels marching in the thousands. The chests of men felt the reverberation of wood on wood. The air bore the rhythmic, almost guttural chant of the warriors as they sought to bolster their own courage and incite fear into their enemies. Battle horns gave out long peals of strident notes that threatened to rend ears by their volume alone.

Hereric could not break the shield-wall once the march had begun; he was borne along with it. He knew in his mind that this was what Coenred had feared but still another part of him, the warrior steeped in the blood of his enemies, rejoiced. He found some pride in the bravado of his young lord who stepped so boldly to carry the fight to the hated enemy. His mail chinked as he walked, the leather fastenings of his harness creaking. The point of his

spear glinted menacingly in the morning light and his vibrant blood coursed through his body. Hereric sucked air into his lungs and bellowed a war cry like an angry bull.

What had promised to be a fine late summer morning now became something far more threatening and, despite the clear sunlight, much darker.

Tostig, still on horseback, looked over the heads of his warriors. He glanced at the wet ground, already turned into a muddy hole by the passage of so many feet. Despite the sun the ground was damp from lying so close to the marshes. They were stuck here and he saw that Hardrada had indeed used him. His men could not retreat because the mud would hold them, they would be hacked down with their backs to their enemies if they tried to turn and flee. The Northumbrian throwing spears would scythe them down without mercy. No one expected any quarter when Saxon and Viking met on the field of battle and they were right not to do so.

He also saw the Saxons marching forward and felt, for the first time, a moment of misgiving. His own men were not properly in position yet. His archers were still approaching the field and more spear-men were still making their way north. There was seven miles between Riccall and Fulford Gate and it remained lined almost its entire length by Viking warriors hurrying to the fight. It may yet prove to be a moment of good judgement to have launched the attack so early.

The Saxon's were coming on in good order, their shield-wall looking firm, and their spears held high, ready to strike down into their enemy. Tostig's men began to murmur their misgivings too loudly; too freely. The mud clung to their feet, their calves, sucking at their shoes. It made movement difficult. It robbed them of their mobility, their strength; their hope.

We are stuck here in the mud like wildboar at bay, well, let's show the hounds of Morcar our tusks!

Tostig swung down from his horse and grabbed his shield from his servant. It was not a traditional round shield, such as both the Saxons and the Vikings used, but after the Norman fashion with a long tapering point that covered almost the whole of the side of his body that he would present to the enemy. Quickly he donned his helmet and swung the distinctive great shield onto his left arm. He drew his sword to mark himself out as a lord and a leader of men and ran forward into the Viking shield-wall commanding them to stand with a voice that expressed authority. The men around him were wavering but the arrival of Lord Tostig seemed to do something to bolster their nerves. Whatever else men might say he was they could not deny that Tostig Godwinson was a brave Saxon warrior in the mould of his father, Eorl Godwin had raised no cowards amongst his many sons.

At thirty paces distance from the enemy the Saxons stopped. The chanting and shield striking ended just as suddenly and in its absence the silence was even more unnerving.

Instinctively the seasoned warriors in Tostig's line lowered their heads as a volley of throwing spears shuddered into their shields. Those who had not followed their example suffered, some fatally. Although the volley had been purposefully aimed at the shields of the Vikings some spears sailed higher than intended and if they did not strike an unguarded man in the front row then they might draw blood in the second line. The barbs on the spear heads made the weapons difficult to remove from either wood or flesh without doing further damage. The iron shanks of the angons made them impossible to sever with either sword or axe. Whatever they penetrated they made useless.

Immediately the Saxons began their march again at another peal from their battle horns. Hereric felt a surge of pride in the men, that they marched and executed their battle drill with such frightening discipline. Even the less experienced seemed to be in step with the huscarls around them. He knew that there would be a response from the enemy and hoped that the men, his men, would now have the courage to face it when it came. Some Vikings hurled their own throwing spears but they lacked the co-ordination and impact of the Saxon flood. Where a shield was hit the man simply stopped to rid himself of the spear and his comrade behind him would take his place, filling the opening in the wall.

Amongst the Vikings there was little movement to enter the front rank. Men attempted to free their shields of the encumbrance of fixed spears alone leaving themselves exposed to the approaching army. One Norse warrior wrestled with his shield and stepped from the line in his attempts to free the angon. Unconsciously he turned his back on the approaching enemy in his efforts to be rid of the annoying weapon.

Another Saxon volley followed. At the closer range the javelins bit deep into the linden wood of the shields. Some were thrown with such fury by practiced arms so as to pierce flesh as well as wood; joining the two together. The warrior who had strayed from the safety of the shield-wall presented too good a target. The warnings from his brother warriors came too late, before he could react to them a large spearpoint thrust through his back and exited red and gory below his breastbone. His face expressed his shock and agony as he fell to his knees before his countrymen.

The Saxons continued their march. Inevitably the two sides came together.

Morcar felt the impact of the shield-walls as wood and metal met, he felt the vibration run through his body, jarring his teeth and shaking his bones, and then he felt exultation as the enemy gave way. They did not collapse but they took more than a step backwards.

"Push!" He yelled, keeping his head behind his shield.

"Push!" Hereric echoed.

The Saxons pushed. Tostig's men attempted to hold them, warriors throwing themselves bodily against the pressing shield-wall. Their feet slipped in the mud. The weight of four thousand Saxons bore down upon them and it was fuelled with hate and violence. The Viking

line was pushed back, pressed by numbers greater than their own, and by a ferocity seemingly greater than their own as well.

As if in answer to his prayers more men arrived behind Tostig and they lent their shoulders to the task. Even though they were badly outnumbered still the Vikings fought back against the advancing Saxon war machine. Eventually they succeeded in slowing the push of the Saxons. Where it was joined to the centre of Hardrada's army, where the Jarls of Orkney fought, Tostig's line was strongest and that part had held firm, but the further to the right of the flank it extended it proved weaker so that the most extreme reach of his men had been pushed the furthest back. They were almost in danger of being on top of the Viking centre and the reinforcements still hurrying up the Riccall road.

Oswyn cursed the mud. He cursed the men around him and he cursed the Saxons, his own countrymen, in front of him. Their feet slipped in the mud and the greater weight of the Saxon shield-wall pressed them further back. He knew that they needed more men urgently but he did not waste time on that thought. He was a warrior-theign, a man trained to war. For better or worse he had committed himself to be Tostig Godwinson's man and he had enjoyed the benefit of the good times; he believed that his lord's alliance with the Vikings would bring those good times back again. He would stand his ground knowing that Tostig would prove a true giver of rings when this day was done.

From behind the Saxons a sudden flurry of spears were launched again. They sailed over the front rank of the Vikings and fell into the bodies of the men behind them. Screams and the scent of warm blood filled the morning air, assailing the nostrils of Saxons and Vikings alike.

As the Saxon warriors in the front pushed again with their huge shields the men immediately behind them started to stab over the shoulders of their comrades with long fighting spears aimed at the heads of their enemies. Some of these weapons were equipped with backwards pointing barbs as well as the sharp spear head. They did little damage in the forward thrust but as a strong Saxon arm pulled the spear back the barbs bit into metal, removing a helmet, flesh, ripping a face or neck, shield, pulling it down. One Norseman found his shield pulled forward by such a spear, the barb caught on the steel rim. As he stepped involuntary forward an axe chopped into his body, splintering his fine chain mail and crushing his ribcage. In the space created by the fall of the warrior spears thrust in to stab into the flesh of the warriors positioned behind him.

Morcar hacked over the top of his shield at the men in front of him. He did not colour his sword with their blood, they were too canny for that, but he kept their heads down and a warrior behind him would jab a long spear into the space vacated by the Viking helmet hoping to reach the man behind.

Hereric stabbed with his fighting spear and screamed obscenities at the hated enemy, goading them into being careless, daring them to respond, knowing that any poor judgement or weakness on their part would be instantly pounced upon by the Saxons around him and a savage toll exacted.

Blood began to stain the mired mud beneath the combatants' feet. Bodies fell to be trampled under the advancing Saxons. Tostig's line was beginning to give. He could see that by the marshlands his men were desperately trying to move back without turning but the mud was hampering them. Their shield-wall was disintegrating and fighting spears, swords and axes were beginning to cut into bodies. Arrows flew like angry birds over his head to fall into the men who were still advancing to join the battle, and still the Saxons pushed on with a relentless fury.

Coenred cursed passionately. Morcar had done exactly what Edwin had promised he would not do, and what he had known in his heart that he would. The Saxon line was now changing into an 'L' shape as Eorl Edwin remained where he was and Eorl Morcar pursued Tostig's bending line. The Vikings at the centre were holding, however, as those nearer the dam lands gave way and the enemy on the right had yet to move.

He ordered his men to spread a little more thinly in an attempt to keep the two flanks connected, but he knew that this was also a dangerous move. Their strength lay in a close, disciplined formation; the shield-wall. It would lose effectiveness if the warriors were placed too loosely. However, he hoped to spot a break between the two flanks and plug it with his own body and those of the men he commanded and to do that he would have to move quickly, something that the a close formation could not do.

"A bad beginning makes a bad ending says I," Sigbert muttered.

"Mayhap a stumble might save a fall," Coenred countered.

"There'll be some running to do this day I tell thee," Sigbert complained further.

"Towards the enemy or away from them?"

"From one end of this battlefield to another methinks. I hate running,"

"In this heat it'll more likely be the death of us than any sharp spear or Danish axe," Coenred mused.

"Mayhap, but it seems to me that this fight is about to reach a point of decision my friend. I hope to see thee on t' other side of it!"

At the centre of the Viking battle line the Jarls of Orkney stood and fought in a manner that would have made their famous father, Thorfinnsson the Mighty, proud. Each were joined by their own companions, men well appointed with arms and armour, and together they made

firm the shield-wall so that at this point the line remained unmoving even as Tostig Godwinson's men were forced to give ground step by step to their right.

They stood beneath the mythical raven banner of Orkney, an imitation of the ill-fated flag used by Jarl Sigurd the Stout. The folktales spoke that he had been granted victory whenever that banner flew before him but it was also said that the man who carried the banner himself was doomed to die. Legend maintained that eventually the jarl was compelled to carry his own banner because of the reluctance of his men to do so following too many of their comrades dying. Inevitably the jarl was killed by the spears of his enemies.

Today the banner man stood firm, brave and strong before the Saxons. The Raven of Orkney, a carefully embroidered stylisation of the bird of black on a sky blue background, stretched out its wings in the September sun without falling once. The men of Orkney retained their stand around their young lords, giving not so much as an inch before the pressing Northumbrians. In so doing they brought the battle to a critical moment.

Hardrada grunted absently as he stood on the small patch of high ground behind the Viking lines. He was not so vainglorious that he could not see when a battle stood to be won or lost. He had no love for Tostig but he still had a use for him. From his vantage point he could see the change in the two opposing lines on his right and he knew instinctively that the time to act was now.

"Siward, take men to the centre and send others to the right flank to offer Lord Tostig some relief," He commanded. "Olaf, come here boy and learn what it is to be a man."

The prince dismounted and joined his father, followed by his own retainers.

"Unfurl my banner Stykar; it is time to win this battle."

His giant bannerman stepped forward with a pole that he lavished great care upon. He removed a canvas bag from the end and shook free King Hardrada's infamous banner, Land Ravager! It was a triangle of red cloth with a rounded outer edge from which hung a series of tassels. A rod extended from the pole when inserted to uphold the top edge of the flag so that the symbol could always be seen even if there was no wind to catch it. On the cloth was painted a stylised Nordic representation of a black raven in flight, its head pointing up into the top of the triangle. This was Odin's bird and with it Hardrada would invoke the power of that particular god to strike terror into the hearts of his enemies.

"Now Stykar," Hardrada clapped the warrior on one massive arm, "show my bird to the enemy and run with me into their shield-wall so that we may see the fear in their eyes."

The Vikings gathered around the king grunted with satisfaction. They had listened to the sound of conflict to the east for long enough, now they were ready for their own moment of glory.



Jarl Siward hefted his shield into a more battle ready position on his left arm and gave the call to the Viking horns to announce the charge. With several hundred experienced warriors he ran in a loose formation into the left of the Viking's centre. Their arrival sent a ripple of encouragement through the battered line. Siward led them on into the right flank of the Northumbrians where they collided with savage violence. The influx of these new reserves gave the Norse army new belief and they began to fight back against the Saxon push.

Vikings painted blue, scorning armour, and carrying single handed axes and long knives did not pause to use throwing spears but launched themselves bodily into the Saxon shield-wall. A young Saxon theign stared disbelievingly as one of these berserkers leapt high in the air and came down bodily onto his shield. The theign staggered at the unexpected blow and his knees gave way. He fell to the ground with the wild Norseman on top of his shield. Over the bodies of both Viking spears shot into the opening that had been created and drew blood from the warriors who had been standing behind their theign.

The young Saxon tried to rise and felt the weight suddenly lift from his shield. He thought that he had a chance to rejoin the fight but instead the blue contorted face of his enemy appeared snarling over the top of his shield. The theign never saw the knife that flashed across his throat.

Coenred saw the Vikings making the push through the centre; it was exactly what he had feared would happen. He called his men to him and readied his weapons. He spoke a single word and the huscarls formed themselves into a wedge with their captain at the point. Sigbert fell in on his left-hand side. Coenred composed himself, watching the Saxons before him beginning to give ground. He opened and closed his grip on his great fighting spear, feeling the smooth grain of the wooden shaft beneath his fingers. With a great cry, he led the counter charge. Just as the Viking attack had staggered the Saxon line with its violence so did this unexpected surge of huscarls, supported by their fyrdmen at their centre, do the same to the Norsemen.

The first that Jarl Siward knew of the enemy's response was when a sliver of steel flashed into the neck of the man who stood next to him and release a crimson fountain from his neck.

"Thorald!" Siward shouted in alarm as his cousin staggered, the man's life blood pumping through the open wound. Thorald's eyes bulged and his mouth was open but no words ushered forth. The press of bodies was at this point so close that Thorald was kept upright even as his life ebbed away and his legs could no longer support him. He died whilst still upright.

A blood red anger descended upon Jarl Siward and he launched himself at the nearest Saxon, beating down his shield with the butt of his spear and then doing the same to the man,

ramming the wooden shaft mercilessly into his chest and rejoicing in seeing him collapse before the onslaught, coughing blood.

Sigbert the Huscarl felt the impact of his spear as it collided with a shield. He pushed knowing what the warrior should do, try to deflect the blow away and behind him bringing the Saxon closer. The Viking did not disappoint and Sigbert lurched forward with all the power in his squat, muscular legs. He rammed his shield bodily into the Norseman and lifted him from the ground. The force of this prodigious display of strength carried them both into the ranks immediately behind the Viking warrior.

The Saxons behind Sigbert dashed forward in support and struck with spears and axes and swords and langseaxes into any opening that they could find. Sigbert roared his challenge and engaged the men immediately in front of him again, his darting spear point glancing off one helmeted head and leaving the wearer with a thunderous headache in its wake.

Hardrada moved to the front of his men as was the Viking way, his bodyguard forming around him. He urged them on with words designed to fire their blood lust. His plan was simple. As Jarl Siward led the feint into the centre he would take the best of his own men along the river bank against the Saxon right flank. Part of the force would engage the Saxon's directly; his section would push hard against the edge of their shield-wall nearest the river and break through.

With a howl the giant Norwegian King raised his sword, swung it in a great arc and then charged towards the enemy. Olaf fell in behind him and marvelled that his father, despite his age, still had the strength and vitality of a wolf, if not also the awesome threat of violence that animal possessed too.

They ran down the narrow ford across Germany Beck but their numbers were so great that many had to wade through the waters themselves. It slowed them down and lessened the impact of their onslaught, but what an impact they made.

Eorl Edwin looked towards the sudden sound of the Viking advance and felt a cold chill run down his back despite the warming September sun. He had allowed himself to think that his brother's successful advance was turning the battle in their favour but now he saw before him what he feared the most; the real Viking strength.

“HOLD!”

Thrydwulf commanded his men in his deep, booming, voice. They hefted their shields and stood their ground. Throwing spears hammered into their defence, adding to the weight of the shields so that the weaker warriors began to let them droop. Then came the berserkers again. One individual ran towards the front line, a Viking spearman fell to one knee before him and

the wild warrior used his back to launch himself over the heads of the Norsemen. He came down with one foot on the chest of a Saxon eolderman and the other on his shield.

The Saxon had been unable to anticipate the attack but he was as strong as an ox and instead of falling he stumbled backwards, remaining on his feet. The berserker landed on his side on the trampled grass before him but sprang back to his feet like a cat.

The eorl recovered his own balance and attacked with his shield held forward and his sword ready to fall. The Viking showed contempt for the eorl and came at him with a flurry of blows delivered by the two short-swords that he wielded. The eorl retreated before the furious attack but not without purpose. As the berserker tried to close the ground between them fyrdmen loyal to the eolderman and armed with spears rushed around him and surrounded the Viking. As one they closed on him and then raised their spears upwards. Impaled upon the bright steel the Norseman was lifted into the air screaming as his blood coursed down the wooden shafts.

Eorl Edwin could feel the resolve of his men melt like butter in this un-seasonal heat. The noise was suddenly terrific. The beating of axe, sword and spear on wood and metal sent vibrations through their bodies. The screaming of war-cries and death cries together intermingled like an insane cacophony. Battle horns blasted the air as if seeking to do violence to one another. The world had gone mad around him. His teeth jarred as a great axe bit into his shield. He held his ground against the impact but was almost pulled off his feet as the Viking warrior corded his muscle and sinew to drag the axe blade free. The shield would not relinquish the blade but the impetus pulled Edwin forward. If it had not been for the equally strong arm of a warrior behind him that twisted itself around his waist Edwin would have been dragged bodily out of the Saxon shield-wall.

“Stay with us a little longer, My Lord,” Thrydwulf grunted as he righted Edwin.

The young nobleman looked backwards over his shoulder at the huscarl but showed no signs of recognition. His senses had been shocked by the violence of the impact.

The Viking battle horns rent the morning air again and again, announcing that the battle was now joined near the river.

Now Eorl Edwin knew fear.

Now Eorl Edwin stared death in the face.

This was not Edwin’s first battle but it was the first time that he had ever encountered the ferocity of the Vikings. He had heard the tales told around the fires of the long halls when he sat, just a boy, at the feet of his father and his father’s companions. He had listened to the poems of the Battles of Brunanburh, and of Maldon, but the words had not captured the terror of the violence. They had spoken of courage, of glory, of noble deeds and of brave warriors. They had not talked of the blood that soaked the ground, the stench of butchered men and the

wild viciousness of an enemy that sought not a noble combat but simply the destruction of all those that stood before them; clothed in blood and gore and touched by madness.

It was all that Edwin could do to keep his head down behind his shield as it was battered by spears and swords and axes. He dropped his own spears but had the presence of mind to draw his sword. The rain of blows against him did not cease but just the feel of the weapon in his hand gave him some renewed courage.

Men shouted all around him, in Norse, in English, with accents as varied as the lands from which they came but it did not matter; in the chaos of the battle little of it made any sense. Their bodies were pinned together and Edwin could only move if the men on either side of him moved too. He felt ineffectual. His rank did not matter. His status was little higher than that of the dead man at his feet and only then because he still drew breath. He felt death closing in on him like some hungry animal. He did not see his banner fall but fall it did. The dragon of Mercia surrendered the English sky to the raven of Odin.

Tostig Godwinson paused to recover his breath. His helmet was dented; his sword scratched and dipped in blood. An armoured Saxon, once a high-theign of Northumbria, stepped into his place in the front of the shield-wall so as not to allow the enemy any advantage following his lord's withdrawal. The warriors carried so much weight in arms and armour that even the strongest of them had to rest after twenty minutes of violent activity. As a rule the well armoured men in the front row concentrated on keeping the cohesion of the interlocking shields that protected everyone, relying upon their comrades standing behind them to deliver telling strokes with spears, axes and swords. As a leader of men Tostig had taken a place in the front rank and used his sword whenever possible to inspire those around him by his example and like many a warrior he could not resist the urge to attack the enemy when faced by them.

As he drew in long breaths of hot summer air, interspersed with sips from his flask, he took the time to try and assess their position. He could see that the far right flank, which was the weakest point in the line, had been pushed back a long way from its original position adjacent to the eastern marsh despite Oswyn's best efforts. The left had remained anchored to the centre, however, meaning that they had now pivoted at that point so that the wetlands were almost in front of them.

In his heart he knew that Hardrada had offered him up as bait to tempt Morcar into leaving his position of strength. It had worked. As a tactician he could not fault the king's thinking, but as a man facing those determined Saxons he could rue the loss of so many of his own men all for another's advantage, not to mention the threat to his own life that Hardrada's plan had engendered.

A fox is not taken twice in the same snare!

At that moment Tostig Godwinson, once judged to be a man of craft, swore an oath not be used again in such a fashion.

Now, however, the Norwegians were committing their reserves and Tostig could see that his position was improving as fresh warriors came to bolster his tired adventurers. The only flaw he could see in Hardrada's plan was that it still left the far right flank dangerously weak. If a resolute group of Saxons pushed hard on the edge of the flank then they might break through yet and reverse the Norse army's gains.

With this dire thought in mind Tostig began directing the men new to the fight to support the line where he saw it was the weakest, hoping that his own actions would be in time to avert a possible disaster.

For his part Oswyn had no time to appreciate the extra men directed by his lord to help his position. He was exhausted, overheated, his throat ached from thirst, but he refused to give way. Only the press of bodies before him and the fact that his shield was locked in the formation forced him to take steps backwards, but every step was marked with a swing of his sword. He rejoiced whenever he saw it stained with blood.

Coenred swore under his breath again. He felt no better for having warned against this. The Vikings were fighting like demons and his own counter-charge seemed to have done little to halt the push against Eorl Morcar's right flank. It was getting pressed away from Eorl Edwin now, there was a real danger that the two Saxon forces would be separated creating a gap into which Hardrada's forces would pour, splitting one brother from the other.

In desperation Coenred pushed on into the Viking ranks once more. His spear darting in and out of flesh, using his shield and even his helmet as a weapon but no matter how many warriors he cut down there seemed to be two or three more to take the place of the fallen. His men followed him but their wedge formation had now lost its cohesiveness and they were no longer as effective. Indeed it seemed that they were merely diverting the greater part of the enemy's reserves into Eorl Morcar's right flank and it was being driven further and further away from the Mercians. The tide of the battle was truly turning.

"Things go ill for us," Sigbert declared as he took a breather just behind Coenred. His fighting spear was broken and cast aside, his double-edged sword was in his hand now and it was already stained with the blood of the enemy. "There are more of them than I feared, I admit to that."

"Then we can do no more than what we are meant to do," Coenred replied tersely.

"Aye, kill more of the bastards," Sigbert agreed.

Thrydwulf could see it even if Eorl Edwin could not, but then the huscarl did not stand in the shield-wall with his head buried, too terrified to look at the enemy in their onslaught. The Mercians had not recovered from the initial attack and a large knot of Vikings pushed now with real intent along the riverbank. By weight of numbers alone they were rolling up the Saxon's right flank. He could see the large triangular red banner that led the Viking charge and he instinctively knew that he would find the famous King of Norway there. If he had been a younger man he might have sought out that banner man and come upon the legendary Norse warrior-king to try his own mettle with the War Wolf, but not today. He was a huscarl with a sworn duty to protect his lord or die trying.

"Step back," Thrydwulf ordered.

His voice was deep and booming, a voice trained to command in this chaos called battle. The huscarls, ever the professional soldiers, responded with cold determination, taking a measured step back and then anticipating the sudden rush of the Norsemen as they found an unexpected space between themselves and their enemy. The Saxon spears shot forward and pierced the unwary or foolhardy Viking but it was not enough.

Thrydwulf knew that he could not reverse their fortune by such tactics alone. He was looking to withdraw the best of the Mercian army in good order, not win the battle. As he knew they would the villagers took this sudden and repeated manoeuvre to mean defeat was imminent. They threw down their weapons and ran for safety, wherever it might lie.

He did not blame them, they were little more than eager amateurs caught up in the excitement but not knowing what madness they had let themselves in for. The reality terrified them. No, it was the reaction of the fyrdmen that concerned him.

Again and again he gave the order and the huscarls responded with discipline. Those fyrdmen who stood close to a huscarl seemed to copy their example but those in the rear, seeing the villagers bolt in panic, became nervous. They looked behind them rather than to where the danger lay and Thrydwulf could see the disaster about to take shape. He had no choice, however. There was no other way to extricate these brave men and the eorl who led them than to sacrifice the weaker fyrdmen to their own fear.

Jarl Siward took in great breaths of warm September air and quickly reviewed the situation. The battle was almost won, he could sense it. The Northumbrians had lost touch with the Mercians and the Norse were beginning to push in between the two. Only a small band of huscarls fought to retain the integrity of the line. Siward resolved to shatter that resistance knowing that doing so would spell the end of the Saxon army.

He chose a large huscarl in splendid armour and came onto him like a charging bull. The Viking rammed into the Saxon shield to shield taking him by surprise and forcing him back several steps until they collided with the warrior behind him. Only then could he regain his

footing and stop the Viking's charge. The two separated and glared at each other with a wary hatred.

"Saxon, I am Jarl Siward, Royal Companion to the King of Norway. Know that you have killed my kinsmen and I will have vengeance upon you," Siward declared. He did not know if this was indeed the warrior who had killed his cousin Thorald but it did not matter; any Saxon would do right now. He hoped that his words would instil a little fear into the Saxon's heart and make this fight all the easier to end.

They seemed to find some space in the madness of combat that surged around them as if the lesser warriors knew that two champions had come upon each other on the field of battle and chose now to try their arms in a fight to the death; no other dared to intrude.

"Fight if you wish but save me your words, they are as unwelcome as you in this land." The Saxon huscarl lunged with his spear almost catching Jarl Siward on the left thigh. They parted again and assessed each other cautiously as the battle surged around them, lost in their own individual confrontation. It was just one more violent engagement upon a field turned a dirty red by the outcome of countless other such contests.

Siward judged his enemy with experienced eyes, noting the quality of the other's armour, with its lack of any unnecessary decoration, the kind that appeals only to the vainglorious. He observed the ease with which the Saxon held himself in full battle-gear. This was no fyrdman but an experienced warrior, a huscarl like himself. He rejoiced inwardly at the prospect of crossing spears with a weapons-man of quality at last.

Two, three, four times they swapped strokes, their spear points flashing forwards and backwards, but neither drew blood. Jarl Siward pressed the Saxon, testing his skill, and found him well versed in the art of combat. Once more he attacked; a fearsome flurry of blows from both his spear and shield. When they parted again Siward noted that the Saxon let his shield dip a little, the point of his spear came closer to the ground, and he took shorter, faster breaths.

Siward read the signs and smiled darkly.

*This Saxon is tiring!*

He launched another quick series of strikes against him, barged into him with his shield, the two metal centre bosses clanging together. The Saxon gave ground. Siward increased the pressure, raining blows down upon him, stabbing incessantly with his spear. He became ever fiercer in his desire to kill his enemy.

The Saxon huscarl counter-attacked but Jarl Siward defended himself easily with his shield and went back on the offensive, putting everything into a forward lunge so as to put even more power behind his spear. The huscarl moved with a particular intent. As the spear came in looking for his stomach he stepped both forwards and to his right, swinging his own shield away from his body. He brought his left arm back down swiftly and momentarily trapped the

spear point against his mailed body with the weight of his heavy shield, his flesh protected by his byrnie.

Jarl Siward was momentarily surprised by the manoeuvre, then he was thrown off balance as the Saxon lunged forward, throwing the Viking onto his back foot. The huscarl's spear stabbed out like lightening. Its point went beneath the other's shield, below the protective mail byrnie, and dipped into Siward's left thigh.

With a quick twist the warrior extracted the spear before it went too deep and became stuck in the thick muscle where it had struck. Jarl Siward tried to free his own weapon but the Saxon still held onto it with his shield arm and sent his own spear out again, this time into the Viking's right side, bursting the fine links of his bright mail coat.

Jarl Siward collapsed to his knees, his fingers losing their grip on the shaft of his fighting spear. The world seemed to become remote to him. He could hear the sounds of battle still but it was as if he were underwater, swimming. It was darkening around him also. He was swimming too deep.

*What will the king do without me now?*

*I must remind Olaf to sharpen the axes.*

*It is so hot here and yet I feel so cold.*

These and many other thoughts drifted through his mind with no apparent association. He was seemingly aware and unconcerned about his fate at the same time. There was no fear and surprisingly little pain. A shadow was growing around him and he noticed that the tiredness that came from his exertions in battle that day was leaving his bones.

*I die a worthy death and this grim Saxon grants it to me.*

Coenred felt no elation as he sent his spear into the Viking's flesh once more, this time aiming for the throat. He spilt his enemy's lifeblood without celebration, but also without a second glance as he turned away and looked for Eorl Edwin. At his command the men closed around their captain.

"That were some grim fellow thee killed there," Sigbert commented.

"To Edwin," Coenred commanded, he gave the death of the Viking no further consideration. "There's naught more that we can do than save the eorls now."

With harsh determination Coenred plunged into the Saxon wall in search of Eorl Edwin. To his credit the youth had maintained his proper station in the front ranks of his Mercians, but this now isolated him from escape and safety. Fear began to run through the hearts of the men. The Viking reinforcements had pushed through the centre too, coming between the forces of Edwin and Morcar. The Mercians were in danger of being surrounded.

"Give way!" Coenred commanded to the men about him. "Give way and fall back to York!"



They needed little encouragement but they ran instead of walked. The Saxon warrior cursed them, even hitting one or two with the shaft of his fighting spear. The fyrdmen were the first to crumble, many throwing away their weapons as they turned and ran. The huscarls held their nerve, holding the shield wall even as it shrank around them, always falling back in good order.

“Coenred!”

“Thrydwulf!”

The two warriors pushed towards each other against the tide of bodies.

“I have Edwin,” The warrior declared.

Coenred saw the eorl at the warrior’s side, looking somewhat small, lost and afraid. The Saxon shield-wall continued to attempt to move backwards without disintegrating. Behind them they had the fleeing fyrdmen, in front of them the bloodthirsty enemy. Once more Thrydwulf gave the command to step back. He was glad to have a seasoned warrior like Coenred at his side but he knew that even with Coenred's men there would not be enough of them to hold back the wave of Vikings.

“Stand and fight if ye be men,” Cried Sigbert in disgust.

There was hope, however. Not all the fyrdmen were running. Many of them recognised that there was a greater chance of safety in staying with the more disciplined huscarls and that was what they chose to do. Within a sea of confusion and despair Thrydwulf’s men became a rock of cold determination. They retreated one step at a time, their shields still closely woven and their spears protruding. From behind this protection some even threw javelins at the Norse ranks, a further reminder that not all of the Saxon resistance had crumbled. Coenred and Sigbert momentarily joined the huscarls and their men followed their example, adding to the core of warriors that refused to be routed.

For their part many of the Vikings were out breath due to the ferocity of their assault and although they still thirsted for more blood they were cautious about pressing too close to such a resolute band of warriors. The gap between the two forces began to widen.

Wulfhere saw the men running for the path over the Ings Marsh, and heading for York. They were Mercians and that could mean only one thing; defeat. For a moment he had believed that the young eorl might succeed. His attack had been well timed with the enemy still lacking its full strength. He had marched forward, prompting the rear ranks with the butt of his spear, but always he had kept an eye on the proceedings around him.

He glanced forward. The Saxon wall had stopped its advance and showed no signs of continuing. The Mercians were running, his path was clear. Wulfhere the butescarle, the sword for hire, turned and started to run. He did not panic because he could not see the enemy to his left. He jogged in an easy manner but kept looking to the west as he headed north. He

would not drop his battle gear unless absolutely necessary because of the expense of replacing it.

Mayhap it might be time to try a different profession other than that of a mercenary weapons man?

He thought of the haughty woman in York, alone now, and decided that his warrior days may indeed be well and truly over.

Hardrada laughed madly. The battle was all but won. He had always known that the riverbank was the key. The ground was firmer here and he could launch a force forward to take the remaining Saxon army on its right flank now that he had dislodged the smaller but still significant band of Mercians. Styrkar planted his feet and waved his King's banner so that the whole of the battlefield could see to where it had advanced. The Vikings would take heart knowing that their king had pushed back the enemy on this side of the battlefield. The Saxons would lose heart knowing that the War Wolf had won the ground and probably the day.

He let the Saxon huscarls withdraw before a light harrying force, they were too few in number to be of trouble to him but there was no reason to let them think that they could return to the battle while his own back was turned to them. Although victory was at hand it was not yet assured, the next important objective was to destroy the Northumbrians of Eorl Morcar.

"Come now, the Saxons by the dam lands await your blades my sons," Hardrada encouraged his men.

They trotted forward towards where the Jarls of Orkney and Tostig Godwinson were still fighting the Northumbrians. The sudden violence of battle had winded them, but they had the stamina of seasoned warriors. They followed their king and pushed to the east where Morcar seemed yet able to get the better of Tostig Godwinson.

Coenred grabbed Edwin unceremoniously by the shoulder and spun him around. The warrior's face was grim, the youth's frightened.

"Leave with your men. Go in good order showing only your shields to the enemy," the huscarl commanded. The eorl looked at him but said nothing. "Edwin, do you hear me?"

"All is lost!" Edwin moaned at last. "Morcar is lost!"

"I will retrieve Morcar but you must to York. These Vikings will not let you return but I doubt that they will follow you far whilst there is still a battle to win. Get you gone and I will see you as soon as we can quit this fight."

"Coenred, we are lost."

"Mayhap. Thrydwulf get thee to York and then beyond to the safety of the vale."

"We can fight for you," the mighty warrior insisted, his visage grim and his eyes blazing.

“No. Your duty is to protect the eorl; it has not changed. Get him to a safe haven; now go. Sigbert.”

“No need to shout, I'm at your shoulder as always,” the huscarl complained.

“Then get thee with Thrydwulf and back to York,” his captain commanded him.

“There's war work yet to be done if Morcar is to join his brother,” Sigbert pointed out.

“Aye, that there is but it will mean a hard run from here to Morcar's position and unless you lied to me you're not a running man?”

“Running eh? I'm not built for it. Hacking and hewing is my strength.”

“Then get thee to York and I hope many will see thee walk rather than run and take some courage from your resolve.”

Sigbert put his sword in his left hand and clapped Coenred on the arm.

“I cannot thank thee for this but Hilda would,” he said.

“Follow Edwin and I hope to see thee after this matter is settled,” Coenred told him. He watched as Sigbert joined Thrydwulf's party and then turned his attention back to his own men. “Come Aethelmaer!” He barked at his retinue.

The hundred loyal huscarls with whom he had hoped to stop the eorls from losing touch with each other would now be the only force at his command with which to rescue Eorl Morcar from capture or death. The fyrdmen that he had also selected, and whom had proved both brave and steadfast, he now ordered to follow their fellows back to the presumed safety of York. At least they would retire with their pride intact and the safety of the Eorl of Mercia as their duty.

Coenred pushed west whilst Thrydwulf took Edwin and his men north to safety over the track between the Ings Marsh and the Dam Lands. Most of the Vikings sent to harry the Mercians followed the larger body of men but some began to track the smaller determined group of Saxon warriors. They exchanged throwing spears but did little harm to one another. As the Saxons turned south-east towards what remained of the larger battle the following Vikings seemed to lose interest, no doubt expecting their comrades would deal with them whilst they began to search the bodies of the Saxon dead that littered the field around them for gold and silver.