

The Vale of York

Thrydwulf and Sigbert had passed quickly through the city with Eorl Edwin safely within their charge. They had not paid heed to the frightened citizens knowing that there was precious little that they could do now to help the people of York. Wyrd would decide their fortune at the hands of Hardrada of Norway. This did not sit easily with Sigbert who looked longingly to the west of the city, he even considered deserting Eorl Edwin and looking to the safety of his own family instead.

The inclination passed quickly, however. Honour dictated Sigbert's every action. Whilst his children might rejoice at his safe return from the battlefield Hilda would not accept being married to a nithing. When the children had slept on the first night of his return home he had discussed this very eventuality with Hilda. Defeat had always been a possibility, and it was agreed that she would keep the family together and do whatever it took to survive. There was a cache of gold and silver hidden not far beyond the city walls and she would use it to buy their protection if necessary. He would rely upon her good sense and do everything he could to stay alive and return to them at a later time, but to do that he had to keep Eorl Edwin safe.

They were but an hour's march from York which now lay to the south of them. Members of the eorls' household had had the presence of mind to empty the stables and take the horses out through the northern gate where they waited not knowing if they would see their masters again. Meeting up with the servants had made the flight all the swifter as the horses had been made use of.

Eorl Edwin himself now sat disconsolate upon the warm ground, his head in his hands. All bravado had left him. Even though he still wore his armour he looked less of a leader of men and more like a frightened youth, a boy who needed his father.

"The watch is set," Sigbert told Thrydwulf, "if more come upon us then we will know of it and they will receive a friendly welcome."

"And if the enemy come upon us?" His brother huscarl growled.

"Then we will know of it as well and have time to spirit the eorl away. It worries me that we have seen no sign of the Norse though?"

They watched silently as in ones and twos more Saxons came upon them, only a few carrying light wounds. All those that could not run had been abandoned.

"If Eorl Edwin hopes to regroup his power here then he is going to be sorely disappointed," Sigbert commented.

“Where there were thousands this morning there are now only hundreds,” his brother warrior observed disconsolately.

“Morcar is dead,” Edwin moaned. “We are ended.”

Sigbert glanced at Thrydwulf and from the expression on his face he gathered that they were both thinking the same thing; they wished that Coenred was there with them to deal with the young nobleman. He had known them since birth and although the young noblemen, since entering their maturity, had strained their relationship with him Coenred was still able to exert some influence over the brothers.

As the hours passed their small group grew but not into anything formidable. They were a collection of huscarls, eoldermen, theigns and fyrdmen but they all had one thing in common, irrespective of their station they were beaten men.

“We should think of moving,” Thrydwulf suggested, “there are but stragglers coming this way now, our brothers have fallen.”

“Except for those,” Sigbert pointed south.

They were in the late afternoon now but the light was still good. In the distance they could see the largest body of men yet to come from the city appear over the brow of a small hill.

“The enemy?” Thrydwulf pondered.

A part of him almost wished that it was, a black despondency had settled upon him since they had escaped immediate danger and it was one that made the prospect of death on a battlefield seem glorious to his mind.

“I think not,” Sigbert answered, “they move too slow for a chasing pack of hounds and too disciplined for fyrdmen alone, also they have horses.”

“I could have stayed with the Lady Mildryth,” Edwin insisted.

He walked the pack horse, one hand on its bridle. A silent Eorl Morcar rode Coenred’s horse with the huscarl walking just behind it. His men marched in a loose column so as to be able to respond to any threat of danger but since leaving the battlefield they had not seen anything of the Vikings. Coenred had expected them to send a determined party after the eorls but so far they had not detected any sign of a pursuit.

“Your duty was to protect Lady Mildryth and yet I found you out on the main street awaiting the enemy,” Coenred replied with a hard tone to his voice. He glanced back over his shoulder, the sight of Edwin with his new war-gear had surprised him initially and he still had not yet come to terms with it.

“She was safe in the house of her friend Branda,” Edwin insisted, “I only went to see if I could find her husband, a man by the name of Hereward. He went to the battle with a spear like many other townsmen.”

“Then likely he went to his death,” Coenred said bitterly.

He found the thought that Mildryth was at least not alone comforting and it had already occurred to him that the Vikings would not treat a Saxon man carrying weapons kindly regardless of his peasant rank.

The sight of the gathering ahead of them was in no way encouraging, other than to suggest that Eorl Edwin was also safe. He passed this thought onto Morcar but the young nobleman remained silent, his head hanging low as he brooded in a world of his own.

It occurred to Coenred that Morcar might be outraged by his treatment since leaving the battlefield; they had been less than respectful towards him. Not that this concerned the experienced warrior greatly, but he knew how easily the younger brother could give in to his passions and it would not be beyond him to seek to punish the very men who had saved his life simply because of a matter of etiquette. However, when they drew within shouting distance they saw the Eorl of Mercia rise from where he had been sat and heard him call out to his brother. Morcar raised his head and life returned to his eyes. He slipped from the saddle and ran on tired legs to embrace Edwin. Even for men who knew the pride and occasional arrogance of the two eorls there was something touching in their joy at being safely reunited.

Coenred told Aethelmaer to rest the men, his brave and loyal men, while he went to talk to the eorls. As he walked towards them Sigbert and Thrydwulf intercepted him.

“What news?” Sigbert demanded.

“Hereric is dead along with all the huscarls he commanded at the last,” Coenred replied bleakly.

“All of them?” Thrydwulf said disbelievingly.

“All of our brothers, with the last five hundred huscarls of Northumbria Hereric held back the Viking advance long enough for us to spirit Morcar from the field. They honoured their death-oaths.”

“They honour those of us who yet live,” Sigbert commented sadly.

“How does Lord Edwin?”

“Not so well until thee came with his brother safe,” Sigbert glanced at the two noblemen.

“Whatever else they may be they are loyal brothers to each other.”

Coenred left his friends and approached Edwin and Morcar.

“My Lords,” he announced his presence.

“Coenred, you honour your oath, you brought Morcar back to me,” Edwin actually managed a smile. He had his arm around his brother’s shoulder and it seemed as if he would not release him again.

“We must take counsel.”

“For what purpose?” Edwin asked.

“To decide what plan of action to take next,” Coenred explained.

“Plan of action. What action could we possibly take? Look around you man, this is the extent of our power that survived this day.” With his other arm Edwin indicated the tired men that were gathered around them. “There is nothing more that we can do.”

“We will not gamble our lives again,” Morcar added.

“You are still responsible for the people of York,” Coenred told them, “we must do what we can for them, even if it is only to know their fate.”

“Their fate is sealed. The Vikings will do as they always have done in the past. They will murder, rape, pillage and put the town to the torch. We will rebuild after they have gone,” Edwin retorted with pessimism.

“I do not think that they plan to leave.”

“What makes you think so?” Edwin demanded.

Coenred pointed south to the city.

“There is no smoke,” he said simply, “they have not put the city to the torch. Tostig Godwinson did not return with the King of Norway as an ally, a man who has made a public claim to the Crown of England, simply to raid the City of York. The city does not burn because he means to own it.”

“You cannot be sure of that,” Morcar insisted.

“No, but it would explain why the Vikings have not pursued us, they have taken the city instead and look to make it secure.”

“So what would you suggest?” Edwin asked with a derisive note.

“That we discover their plans whilst retiring to Tadcaster to rebuild your power.”

“Tadcaster! That place is to the south, why should we go there and not north where we will be safer?” Demanded Morcar. “Durham would make for a place of safety.”

“Before you arrived in York I sent riders south to London to warn the king of the Norse invasion. King Harold will send a force northward to meet this danger and it will pass close to Tadcaster as it moves up Ermine Street.”

“You sent riders to Harold Godwinson?” Edwin looked momentarily angry.

“In the absence of High-Theign Aethelwine and yourselves I was asked to make a decision as an eorl’s man. It was the correct one,” Coenred insisted.

“And now you expect the Godwins to ride north and save us?” Edwin could not keep the emotion from his voice.

“I expect the king to defend his kingdom.”

“Do what you will, I am finished with this!” Edwin said abruptly.

“My Lord?” Coenred looked at him in amazement.

“Go to York and discover why Hardrada doesn’t put it to the torch. Go to Tadcaster and see if the Godwins do send help beyond the borders of their beloved Wessex. Do what you

will just don't expect me to take a care over it. We are beaten and can take no further part in this. Wyrð has decided so."

"No, you have decided so," Coenred glared at him.

Edwin only turned away and stalked back to the place where he had been sat before his brother's safe arrival. Morcar, as always, followed. For his part Coenred wasted no more time on the pair, he could read their defeated spirits easily enough. They contrasted starkly with their father who had never surrendered hope, even when in exile at the king's command. Always he had sought a way around his problems, sometimes directly but also occasionally with guile and craft. These were not the gifts that he had seemingly given to his sons. Coenred left them where they moped.

"What do we?" Sigbert asked when Coenred returned to them.

"I am minded to return to York, we must know what the enemy will do next," he replied, his tone suggesting that this was no great undertaking.

"That is a dangerous task to brave," Thrydwulf commented.

"And better done alone."

Coenred began to remove his armour. Edwin his retainer came to assist him.

"If you do this thing there is a favour I would ask of you?" Sigbert said.

"I know, speak no more of it. If I can I will do it." Coenred grasped his friend's forearm to indicate that he would indeed tell Hilda that her husband was safe. "I also intend to let Hereric's woman know of what befell him today. He has children I believe?"

"Two," Sigbert confirmed, "boys."

"Where are you going?" Edwin son of Octa wanted to know.

"Where you cannot come this once," Coenred replied. Edwin's face darkened.

"I am your shield bearer; I should go where you go," he insisted.

"You will stay here and help the men rest. They will need what food and water you can gather. When I return I am making for Tadcaster to await the king's power. The eorls have given me leave to do what I think best, they are for heading north, for Ripon and then for Durham most likely. Each man is to make the decision that best suits them, they can come with us or go with the eorls and carry a clear conscience; the war-work has been done this day for many a man. I would like them to have chosen before I return though."

"That is not a difficult choice when your family resides within the power of your enemy," Sigbert said with feeling.

"Nor when revenge for fallen brothers burns in your heart," Thrydwulf agreed.

"The men are to choose for themselves," Coenred reminded them. "Those who go to Tadcaster with us must do so with a will to fight again."

"So be it," Sigbert agreed.

As there was nothing left to discuss the huscarls left Coenred to finish his preparations.

“Have I failed you?” Edwin asked. He carefully placed Coenred’s belt with the heavy sword, the Dane-axe, and Mildryth’s scramseax upon the ground.

“You mean by not staying with the Lady Mildryth?”

“Yes, and mayhap in other ways?”

“No.” Coenred answered with conviction. “You said that she was safe with her friend Branda and safe is where I wanted her. You have done your duty. As to other ways, I know not of what you speak. Time has not been given to us to get to know each other better Edwin. From what I have seen of you I believe you to be a loyal, reliable and hard working man. These are qualities I value, but you must be obedient too. You do not realise that when passing hidden amongst the enemy one can move much faster, and more safely, than two. I tell you to remain here not out of any failing on your part but because there is no service that you can do for me in this matter. Stay here, look after my war-gear and the horses, we will need them. Help the others if you have a mind to. Tomorrow we will go to Tadcaster and there I hope to have time to train you so that you can use that war-gear of your own and not just carry it about.”

Edwin looked upward as if he could see the helmet that was upon his own head. He wondered for a moment if he should explain how he came by these things but then remembered Mildryth’s insistence that it remain a secret between them two alone. He was heartened by what his master had said and decided that there was no dishonour in obeying the wishes of either him or the lady to whom he had extended his protection.

“Help me now,” Coenred instructed.

He bent over and stretched his arms out before him. Edwin understood what was required and gripped the mail byrnie with both hands. He pulled the heavy armour over Coenred’s head and gathered it to himself. It weighed a surprising amount and the young man wondered how the warrior had been able to spend most of the day fighting and running in such a garment.

Next Coenred removed his quilted jacket and gave that to Edwin too. The cooler air on his skin was a relief. There were several noticeable scars on the warrior’s body and Edwin found himself staring at them unintentionally.

“A sword is not the only badge of rank a huscarl carries,” Coenred told him.

He dressed quickly, putting on his linen tunic and woollen cloak. He removed Mildryth’s scramseax from his leather belt and placed it securely in a woven belt that he fastened around his waist over his tunic.

“I hope to see you soon.”

Edwin stood and watched as his master turned and retraced his steps back towards York. He knew himself not to be a coward but as the warrior strode away Edwin the ceorl wondered if he, an untrained peasant, could truly summon such courage to face the victorious enemy so

soon again. After all that Coenred had witnessed that day, all the death and the destruction of the fine men who had been his comrades, to go now back into danger for the sake of others. Edwin felt that he had had a glimpse into what really made a warrior and it was not the war-gear that he now stood there wearing, nor the dreams of glory painted so bright in the poems. It was the spirit within the man.

“God go with you,” was all that he could say.