

Thursday 21st September 1066

The City of York

Coenred slipped through the shadows of York, finding his way down the dark, narrow streets as he headed towards the River Ouse. The moon was in its first quarter so there was very little natural light to guide his movements by. Not a single light shone from any of the houses he passed by, all the doors were barred and windows shuttered; the city now lived in fear.

He had expected the Vikings to put the city under a tight curfew but they appeared to have shown little interest in securing it properly. King Hardrada had forbidden them to pillage the city, clearly he already saw it as his own; his capital in the north of England. The garrison had set about a half-hearted patrol but those pressed to walk the streets of the city were only too aware that their comrades sat in the Saxon mead-hall drinking, eating and finding pleasure with the easier serving wenches. Their minds were not on their duties.

At least the earth underfoot was hard, baked by the late summer sun. Coenred's leather shoes made no noise as he stalked the shadows. He had to be careful, however, for sudden dips where occasional rain and frequent use had scoured out potholes in the ground, hazards that he could not see in the dark and threatened to make him lose his balance or make a noise.

He made his way silently up the dark, narrow street where Mildryth's house stood and turned left when he came to the main street. Here there were bigger houses and the street was broader but just as cloaked in shadow. He became like a wraith, flitting from one dark place to another but stopping frequently to listen to the sounds of the city at night. Before him, on the right, he could see the tower of St. Mary's Church rising higher than any other building. Its dark mass stood out against the cloudless and slightly lighter sky and helped to guide him on his way.

He slipped past the Church, its grey stonework blending into the shadows created by its mass. The size of the structure set it apart from the mostly single storey timber and thatch buildings that crowded around it. The area immediately surrounding the church was fenced off allowing for an oasis of space. Grave markers dotted the dark ground but none were particularly large. There were several new mounds in the cemetery and work on a new grave had begun but then left off for the morrow for completion. He kept the church to his right as he headed west and soon came upon the bank of the River Ouse. Here he turned north and followed the slowly moving river against its current, keeping low and treading quietly.

Alder and willow trees were dotted along the riverbank and they offered protection through the deep shadows cast by their branches, still thick with foliage. There was grass underfoot now, guaranteed to keep his footsteps quiet. Coenred flitted from tree to tree, but he continued to take the time to stop and listen to the night sounds around him.

As with the rest of York there were no lights showing in any of the buildings he passed that faced the river. People were keeping their homes tightly secured, afraid as to what the loss of the battle and the presence of their old enemy might mean for their immediate futures. A few stray hounds roamed the area but they were wary of the skulking Saxon, more concerned with scavenging for food than in seeking a confrontation. A more superstitious man than Coenred might have hesitated at the sight of the hounds not far from the church and its cemetery. The black hound, a particularly feared omen, was renowned for appearing in graveyards after a funeral and there would be many of those services occurring soon.

Up ahead the old Roman walls that protected the northern limit of the city rose out of the night. They continued down to the riverbank but they did not bridge the Ouse. The original walls had enclosed a fort on the eastern bank of the river whilst a town for civilians had been founded on the west-bank, and that also enclosed by stone walls. This was the nucleus of York, the settlement that both the Saxons and the Vikings had developed after the Romans had left the governance of Britain some five hundred years ago.

He passed the stone bridge built by the Romans to connect the two halves of their town. The military fort had been swallowed by the houses of the new settlers, Saxon and Viking alike. This part of the city was dominated by the Church of St. Peter, first built to baptise Edwin, King of Northumbria, and rebuilt in stone by his successor King Oswald some four hundred years ago.

Coenred moved to the very edge of the riverbank and stalked forward in the darkness, progressing slowly and carefully. The last of the trees were situated some distance from the wall and he was forced to move in the open, depending on his stealth and the weak moonlight to remain unseen and unnoticed.

A Viking coughed then spat from on top of the wall, giving away his position. He was supposed to be a sentry, looking out to the north for enemies but everyone knew that there was no fight left in the local population, and no army out there to threaten them. The Vikings saw no danger and treated their guard duty with a lax attitude accordingly.

The huscarl treated them with more respect. He dropped to a crouch and proceeded forward almost doubled over, his outstretched hands skimming the grass before him trying to detect any obstacle in his path before it tripped him up. He came to the foot of the wall and was swallowed in shadow. With his back to the stones he moved to his right, following the stone work with his hands. The wall jutted a couple of feet into the river and that made this point somewhat more treacherous to pass. The ground began to give way sharply underfoot as

he descended the riverbank. He used the wall for support. The soft lap of the river against the stone told him that he was almost at the water's edge. He gathered up his cloak so that it would not get wet, being woollen it would soak up the water quickly and become uncomfortably heavy. With a searching hand he found the lip of the wall and then stepped carefully down, moving slowly, tense and with his ears attuned for any sounds of alarm from up on top of the wall.

The water was cold as his right foot disappeared into the river. He waded further in but kept his right hand on the wall. His linen trousers became soaked and his feet felt uncomfortable in their sodden leather shoes. The current was strong but slow and he was able to swing around the edge of the wall without mishap. The water made little noise as he moved carefully through it. He used the Roman stonework again to help himself climb up the riverbank on the opposite side of the defences. Being at the foot of the wall also gave him some protection from being seen from above as the sentries would have to look straight down to spot him. He would only attract their attention now by giving himself away with some careless noise.

Pausing for a moment in the immediate shelter of the wall Coenred let the water drain from his clothes and lowered his cloak. The September air was still warm even with dawn only an hour away. It would not be long before he was dry again.

Of far more importance would be getting away from the city before the light betrayed him even to the eyes of such disinterested sentries as the Vikings seemed to be. Again he set off, moving close to the top of the riverbank and following the curve of the river as it swung north-west. There were no trees within a hundred yards of the wall; this was the most dangerous part of his escape from York. He moved as cautiously as ever, even though running in a crouch made his muscles ache, and he was rewarded by the sounds of a quiet night unbroken by cries of alarm from the watchmen.

He rose from his crouch when he slipped under the branches of the first alder tree that he came to and stopped to turn and look once more on the City of York. A few days ago it had just been one of the many places that his duties as a huscarl to the House of Aelfgar demanded that he visit. He liked it enough, certainly he had not found the high-theign's hospitality wanting, but now he had another reason to be fond of York. He thought of her lying on the floor of her small house where he had left her; so close to the enemy. He had risen quietly and found enough light from the hearth to be able to gather his clothes without disturbing her. As his eyes had become accustomed to the warm half-light he had looked at her often and his heart had ached. It hurt worse than any wound that he could remember.

“You leave me now without a word,” she chastised him softly from the bed.

“I would not leave you at all,” he responded.

“I know, but you must go. They wait upon you to return.”

“You must bar the door behind me,” he told her as he pulled on his shoes. “If they ask you have never seen me other than at the great hall.”

“They will not ask,” she told him. “They think me nothing more than a widow-woman, a pitiable creature at best. What would the likes of me have to do with huscarls who fought them yesterday?”

“I ask myself what a woman of quality like you would have to do with a man as mean as myself?” He retorted.

She smiled at the compliment, still wrapped in the warmth of the blanket, Mildryth felt a world away from the horror that had visited them that day.

“If the world was as full of men as mean as you huscarl, it would be a better place for it,” she declared.

He fastened his cloak about himself with the brooch in the fashion of the stylised horse that he wore everyday. It was made of iron and inlaid with silver, an item beyond the purse of a peasant but far from an expensive jewel. It had been a gift from, of all people, his younger brother Osred, given in recognition of the sacrifice the warrior did for them all. It was the only expensive decorative item that he regularly wore.

Again he simply stood and looked down at her, following the outline of her body as it was betrayed by the folds of the blanket. He was swept up with a surge of emotion for her, not desire but a longing to wrap his arms around her and just hold her tightly. He wanted to hold her so tightly that she could never leave, as if he could, through the power of these muscles that were hardened for war, squeeze the two of them into one being and know peace.

“Mildryth-”

She rose quickly and stopped his speech with her lips pressed tightly against his, her hands cupping his face.

“Say nothing,” she implored him. “No speeches of farewell, no words of comfort. I need neither. We know a truth that nothing in this world can take from us Coenred. We can be happy together but first there are things that must be done, things that it is not a woman's place to have a hand in. All I can do is stay here and look after the others, friends like Branda, and watch the tide of events crash over us like the waves of the sea. But I will be strong, strong for Branda, strong for you. The best that I can do is to survive these days without you and I will. Go now without fear for me, I will be here when you return with the king's army. Go now!”

They kissed again and this time Coenred did crush her in his arms, but gently, ever so gently. When she pulled her face away it was to rest her head against his chest, warm and strong beneath the soft linen tunic, and hide her tears. She felt him rest the side of his face on the top of her head and she squeezed him just a little bit more tightly.

That her heart could love again!

“You must go!” she implored.

It would be so easy to be selfish, to give into this moment and keep him here but she knew that in trying to win that one moment, in the hope of making this embrace last that much longer, she ran the real risk of losing him altogether.

“You must go!”

“Then I go,” he agreed. “Bar the door.”

Without another word or glance he crossed the threshold and stepped out into a night full of danger.

The moment of leaving now seemed so long ago. It was a dream, a moment from a life now gone and one that he may never recapture. He shook his head, as if trying to dispel those memories. He had to be strong now, stronger than he had ever been before. He had to put her to the back of his mind because there was nothing more that he could do for her. Whatever wyrd given fate she faced it would come without him there to protect her and all he could do was trust in her abilities and strength of character. He had to believe in her because he did not believe in anything else other than his own martial strength. He had to surrender her to the world and it was the most difficult task that he had ever faced.

He turned his back on York and in doing so became once more the warrior. A coldness set upon him. A coldness of intent for vengeance not born from the chill of the river he had waded through to escape the enemy. As he walked into the night he thought of Hereric and his brave five hundred huscarls who had given their lives to protect Morcar from the Vikings and in so doing kept their oaths to defend their lord with their lives. He thought of the Viking warrior who called himself Siward and how his death had angered King Hardrada. That brought a grim smile to his face. He thought of the traitor Tostig Godwinson and the hurt he had done to Mildryth in a life now past and he resolved to put an end to the source of that particular pain. It even occurred to him that he had had just such an opportunity at the village of Grim’s By; he vowed not to fail a second time if he should ever come within a spear’s length of Tostig. He thought of the young eorls and how they had succumbed to their defeat so readily, showing none of the character of either their father or their grandfather. He thought of his own grandfather’s sword and how good it would feel in his hand once more. He thought of the vengeance that he would deliver with that bright, shining weapon. He thought no more of the woman he had come to love but only of blood and death and the horror of battle that he would visit on his enemies.

When the night closed in around him he was more deadly than any danger that he might meet in its shadows.