

Saturday 23rd September 1066

The City of York

Thorald halted his walk down the subdued streets of Jorvik at a Saxon beer shop. The proprietor greeted him with a cowed salutation but did not dare to offend his Viking customer in any other way. Ordering a cup of fruit wine Thorald sat down at a table looking out onto the main street that ran from the north to the south gates of the city. He could see the spire of St. Peter's Church further to the north reaching above the rooftops and glanced casually at the larger houses of the more prosperous merchants and tradesmen that looked out into the main thoroughfare. There were lodges for the rich nobility here also. Well appointed houses that would make worthy residences for the victorious Vikings.

He had heard tales of Jorvik back in his native Norway but this was his first visit to the city and he was not disappointed. Although browbeaten and submissive at the moment he could imagine it as a hive of activity during more peaceful days, a place where merchants made handsome profits and farmers brought their wares to market. People could make a good living in a place like this, in the days of peace at least.

Peace; that was a rare commodity!

For ten long years he had followed the banner of his king, Harald Hardrada, in his struggle with King Sweyn of Denmark. Many battles had been fought but not one of them had proved conclusive. Always had the Danes been able to retire for the winter and field a new strength in the spring. Year after year had he been dragged from hearth and home by his king who promised gold and land in return; promises that had proved empty when the long fight was finally concluded with a treaty that merely confirmed that neither side had any strength left to continue the pointless blood-letting.

Thorald had also spilled some of his own blood only recently. Standing in the shield-wall under the command of the king's favourite, Jarl Siward, at Fulford Gate, he had done his duty and suffered a Saxon spear point to pierce his mail byrnie and cut into his body just beneath the collarbone. The wound was more aggravating than life threatening thanks to the heavy armour that he had worn, although it had forced him to retire from the victorious battle early, otherwise he might have still been present to see the epic encounter between Jarl Siward and the Saxon huscarl. Witnessed it and mayhap even have helped turned the tide in favour of his lord who

had died pierced by the Saxon's spear. Two days after the battle and his sword arm was still sore but the cut was clean and neatly stitched. A poultice sat beneath his linen tunic, which seemed to help with the pain, and he had not suffered an infection, unlike some.

Jarl Eystein Orre had appointed him as one of several of the garrison commanders seeing as Thorald was known to have a calm head and that his wound would keep him from most other active duties for awhile. This decision agreed with Thorald. The Saxons had been obedient to the terms laid down by King Harald and in truth maintaining the garrison gave them very little work to do. They lodged at the great mead hall with plenty of food and drink on hand. Indeed, the greatest problem seemed to be the Viking garrison itself. Unoccupied, except with the light duties of patrolling the city and watching the gates, they tended to make trouble for themselves due more to their own idleness, and, in some small part, their contempt for their defeated foe.

As if events were attuned to his thoughts Thorald heard a commotion from further down the street; the gruff noise of men finding something to shout about. He was not surprised to see three Vikings at the centre of it but his attention became more interested when he heard a woman's voice raised both in complaint and apprehension. Rising he threw a coin onto the table and walked over to see what this new disturbance was about.

"And so we meet again eh?" One of the Norsemen declared. He seemed to have hold of someone. His two companions were laughing at the sport. "Thee never did bring the beer but what matters that? I had a thirst for something else that night and it's not been slaked yet."

The figure in the centre was pushed from one Viking to another. Thorald saw long tresses of blond hair whipped about in the sunlight. It was indeed a woman then. With no men to goad into fighting it was so often the women who became the unwilling centre of the victorious warriors' attention.

"What goes?!" Thorald called out as he approached the group through a submissive crowd of Saxons who watched with reproachful eyes what was going on but made no attempt to intervene.

The Vikings did not stop their torment of the woman at the Norwegian's approach. One of them grabbed her cloak and made an unsuccessful but determined effort to remove it from her. It was obvious where this was leading and Thorald knew all too well that the outrage these three had in mind might provoke the Saxon population into

doing something rash and dangerous. He became more authoritative as he closed on them.

“I said, WHAT GOES?!”

“Away with thee dog, this concerns thee not.”

Their leader was a Dane, well built and with a face full of beard. He wore a leather byrnie and carried a large Dane-axe in this belt.

“I am Thorald, commander of the day watch,” he replied with some anger, “you will do as I say!”

“Why?” The Dane asked. He had hold of the woman by her wrist now and all three men had turned to face the Norwegian.

“Because it is the will of King Harald Hardrada that I enforce,” he told them in a stern voice. “Norse or Saxon, all will be punished for breaking the king’s law.”

“A moment’s pleasure with one Saxon whore ain’t gonna break no king’s law,” insisted one of the Vikings with a leer.

“Saxon or Dane she lives in the king’s city which makes her the king’s subject. You raise one hand to spoil that which belongs to the King of Norway and the War Wolf’s bane will fall heavy with you!”

There was a tense moment as the men glared at each other and then back at the watch commander. Thorald could see that they were mulling things over in their minds and deciding whether to spurn his authority, and that of King Hardrada, or to acknowledge his command and comply. He decided to urge them to the latter.

“The city is ours.” He shrugged his soldiers to both emphasise the point and suggest that he was relaxed about the matter. “The Saxons in the north are defeated and soon so will be their king. Then there will be rich pickings for all of us. Would you hazard all that you will gain in land, titles, gold, and women just for this one?”

The Dane looked at the woman he held and grunted to himself. She was good looking there was no doubt, as good looking as he remembered her being when he had first caught hold of her in the Saxon’s great hall after old Hardrada’s speech to the defeated men of the city.

But was she worth it?

He knew that the Norwegian spun the same tale that had been told to them back in Norway at the start of this adventure. It was a tale designed to whet their appetite for something more than plunder, and Hardrada did have a reputation for ruthlessness even amongst his own people. As his passion ebbed he began to see the reasoning

behind waiting a little longer, after all, this one would not be going very far. She had escaped him once and he had found her again. It would play out the same tomorrow more than likely.

“She is not worth it,” he finally declared. With some violence he pushed her away from himself.

“Besides, there are women here of Dane-blood who might be more willing to pleasure a warrior from the homeland,” Thorald suggested.

The Dane grunted again and scowled at the Saxon woman. He turned and started to walk away with the other two following, both looking disappointed. Only when they had gone several paces and not looked back did Thorald remove his hand from his sword hilt.

“Are you hurt?”

“I am not,” Mildryth answered curtly.

Her heart was beating fast and her hands were shaking but she made a determined effort to retain control of herself. She glanced around at the ground to see that the food that she had been carrying had been trampled or kicked about the street, mostly spoiled beyond use.

“I am sorry for the dishonour done to you,” Thorald spoke calmly, “not all of these men are suited to the tasks that their masters put them to.”

“They should not be here to begin with,” she retorted with some passion. “You should not be here to begin with.”

“I am a king’s man, I go where he commands me and he has ordered me to your city.”

“To visit such pain upon us?” She spoke as she recovered what items of food that she could, at least those that had not been crushed under the feet of the Vikings.

“The world turns in such ways,” Thorald said in a meditative tone. “Please, let me be of service to you.”

“How can you be of service to me?” She demanded quickly.

Her instinct told her that this Viking was not so apt to resort to violence as the others. He seemed possessed of a greater self-discipline, in fact he had a calmer disposition altogether. Nevertheless she saw no reason as to why she should spare him her wrath.

“Allow me to escort you to your home, you will remain unmolested whilst in my company,” he suggested reasonably, his expression unperturbed by her anger.

Mildryth knew that he was speaking the truth. It had been her misfortune not to have noticed the Dane sooner, noticed and recognised him from the night in the great hall when King Hardrada had accepted the surrender of the city, otherwise she would have shied away from him all the sooner and probably avoided any altercation whatsoever. There would always be a chance that they would encounter each other again, however.

“Is that all that you want of me?”

He understood both her anger towards him and her reluctance to trust him any further than a Saxon woman should trust a Norseman. Her features and the colour of hair suggested that she was of Norse descent but clearly she thought of herself as wholly Saxon. She reminded him of someone left far away to tend a lonely hearth and await his return.

“I am husband to a wife I count more precious than any amount of gold that the king may promise me,” he told her honestly, “because I care for her I will not willingly see other women treated so badly.”

“Women are always treated badly in war.”

“I am a Christian. We were married in church. The vows I took mean something to me. I fight my lord’s enemies but I do not count wives, mothers, and daughters as meet for a warrior’s anger.” Thorald found himself quite determined to explain himself to this Saxon woman. He did not want to have himself associated with the likes of the Danes who would have taken her against her will and he was somewhat impressed with her character. Despite the incident with the other three Vikings she remained un-cowed before him. She was not openly hostile but neither was she afraid. If tasked he would admit to admiring her courage. “Please allow me to do you this service in recompense to what my fellows have already done to you?”

“If it pleases you, but I do not ask this favour of you and I feel no further obligation as a result.”

He nodded and then fell in beside her as Mildryth turned and headed south down the wide road.

“My name is Thorald,” he said after a few moments of strained silence.

“I do not need to know that.”

“You may be glad of it if you fall foul of the Danes again. I did not lie when I said that I was a commander of the garrison. The men do know me. Mayhap if you find yourself receiving unwanted attention once again you may wish to mention my name

and you will be spared any further trouble?" They walked on in silence for awhile then he spoke once more. "May I ask you your name?"

"You said that you were married?"

"Yes, happily so. We have children; two boys and a girl."

"It makes you happy to be parted from your family?"

"No. Indeed, before this voyage was announced, I had thought of hanging up my sword. I own some land, bought from my lord. We talked of building a farm there, raising cattle and growing crops. It sounded good." He smiled wistfully at the memory.

"And yet you left it behind to go to war once more."

"I had the land but not the cattle nor the seed. All the promises given during the Danish War came to nought. I need money to build the farm and when King Hardrada called upon his veterans to undertake one more adventure with him I decided to make a last throw at being a warrior so as to become a farmer."

"You look for land here in England then?"

"No. All I want is the land that I already own; I want none of yours. I hope that when the fighting is done King Hardrada will honour his promises, pay me what is due, and then let me sail back to Norway to be with my family once more and never to leave them again." His tone was almost happy as he spoke the final words of his reply.

Mildryth glanced at him and noted that he was of a similar age to Coenred. It was a surprise to her that he should share her lover's dream too. For generations it was told that the Norse only ever came for plunder and pillage. They were the demons in the long dark nights of winter, sailing across the great black ocean of the north in their dragon ships to visit fire and sword upon Saxon settlements. Except this one did not appear to be such the monster of people's nightmares. Of course Mildryth's father had been of Danish blood and she knew well that despite all the tales told in horror of the Vikings they were in truth just people like the Saxons themselves were. Many had settled in Northumbria since the time of the Danegeld and stayed even when the Saxons had driven the last of the Viking kings from England.

"You do this for your family then?" Her voice had softened.

"Yes. The priests in our church have talked long about how this life of raids and blood spilling is one of bitterness. The gold is fleeting, gone from one hand to another. Friends are fleeting, taken off by spear thrusts and sword strokes. Family is

what lasts. Family is what gives man and woman true happiness in this world. Do you have family?"

"They are dead."

She had responded abruptly and saw a shadow cross over his face. Obviously it had just occurred to him that her men-folk would have fought at Fulford Gate and probably would have died there. For some reason she wished to absolve his guilt.

"They were killed by Tostig Godwinson."

"Then you are widowed, I am sorry to hear that." He did not look at her.

"There are many widows within these city walls now."

Mildryth could not help but think of Branda's pain so recently inflicted upon the peasant woman.

"Such is war. Mayhap the priests are right; war brings nothing but sorrow to one and all. "

Mildryth stopped at the top of the curving lane that led down to her small house. She was grateful to this curious Viking for his kindness, which she recognised now as having come from his own sense of honour, but she had no wish to reveal to him exactly where she lived.

"I will leave you here," she told him.

"As you wish," he smiled easily. "You know war can make monsters of men, and some fall more quickly than others to it. I think that one kind turn to someone who was once your enemy can repay many ill strokes. It might not put everything aright but it shows that we are both people despite the different names of our countries. People, eventually, have to learn to live together."

He performed a small bow that was only courteous in intent, and such she took it for, and then continued onto the great hall without paying her anymore attention. Mildryth watched him leave for a moment, pondering what he had said. In truth he did not seem that different to Coenred, a man who would be his enemy if they should meet on the field of battle, and she found this something of a revelation. The Norse were not, mayhap, quite the monsters of men that she had been told they were when she was a child.