

Sunday 24th September 1066

The Town of Tadcaster

The lone horseman reined his steed to a halt on the crest of the small hill. The animal breathed heavily and its' muscles quivered as a result of coming to a sudden halt after a prolonged gallop. Foam flew from its' mouth as it shook its' head and sweat soaked its' neck. The rider stood in the stirrups to look out over the land. Below him and to the north a settlement lay on the south bank of a river. It was so typical of the many settlements that he had recently passed through. The only obvious feature that separated it from most other Saxon towns was the considerable earthworks along the southern bank of the river that raised a wooden palisade and made it into an even more formidable obstacle at that point.

In between the earthworks and the modest looking long hall stood a wooden church, also of moderate size. Around these buildings crowded the many small houses with thatched roofs from which trailed snakes of smoke born from warm hearths. The settlement was surrounded by pastures occupied by oxen and sheep. There was also tilled land from which most but not all of the ripe crops had been harvested. Some villagers could be seen still out in their fields completing the season's work.

As the rider took in the scene before him he was joined by some twenty other horsemen who brought their steeds to a halt behind him. Their cloaks had been pulled back by the passage of the wind, revealing bright steel mail byrnies and gold decorated swords in richly furnished leather scabbards. Expensive war helmets encased their faces and pennants flew from spear tips.

"This be Tadcaster?" One of the riders asked.

"Who knows," their leader replied, "we have come so far so fast that I've lost track of where upon the road we are."

"I know one thing, this is not East Anglia; too many hills!" another complained.

"If this is Tadcaster then there is a Roman quarry to the southwest but doubtless it is lost to our sight in the woodland."

"We come not for stone," answered the first horseman, "we come for war."

"Then let's test the mettle of these Saxons and see if they have the stomach for it."

As if that were the only prompt that they needed the party started forward down the hill and moved at a trot towards the town. They were quickly spotted by the peasants in the fields who needed no other reason to turn and run for the safety of their settlement before the advancing strangers. It was not without good reason that their habitation was surrounded by a palisade that could be closed against danger with stout gates.

"Men come!" the fyrdman panted. He had run from the southern gate to the earthworks where the warriors had set up their camp and a training area in the shadow of the palisade. They were occupied in all the rigours of combat, training today just as they had been every day since Coenred had arrived with his complement of fighting men. "Horsemen riding from the south, they wear bright armour and fly pennants that none have seen in these parts."

"It is too soon for the king's army to make their way north," Sigbert asserted, "they must be Vikings."

"But coming from the south and at this late hour of the afternoon?" Coenred queried.

He called out to Edwin who was learning the art of spear thrusting against a straw target. Without waiting for his retainer to respond Coenred began walking towards the southern gate to the town. His huscarls, Thrydwulf, Aethelmaer, Hengist, and Alfrid, noticed their captain's sudden cessation of training activity and began to follow in his footsteps.

"Muster the best of the men but don't make too much of a show of it," Coenred told Sigbert.

This could be a false alarm; they had had several in the past few days already, men presumed to be Vikings but who turned out to be Saxons, weapons-men who had heard that there was a war-band at Tadcaster and who wanted to join it for reasons of their own. Edwin ran after his master bringing the huscarl's war gear. Without breaking stride the Coenred donned his helmet, took his shield, and gripped his fighting spear as he strode purposefully down the street. His mail byrnie glinted as he marched in the late summer sunlight. Around his waist a thick leather belt was fastened from which suspended a large axe, his sword and Mildryth's scramseax.

"Is it the king?" Edwin asked as he kept pace alongside Coenred.

He wore his own helmet, a quilted jacket and carried a spear and shield also. His body carried several bruises and some scratches, a testament to his dedication in learning how to handle the weapons of a Saxon warrior. It seemed that Edwin had taken to his training with a good heart, however. He certainly always seemed to be full of energy and ever eager to learn something new.

"I know not," his master answered truthfully. "I hope that it will be riders sent forward from the king's army to scout the land before them. If it is then we can at least let them know that the way to York is presently clear of enemies. It seems, however, too soon to hope for such a thing."

The local town's people stopped and stared as Coenred marched resolutely down the street in almost his full war gear. A group of fyrdmen followed just behind Sigbert and his brother huscarls, they all came on at a trot to catch up with their captain. The townspeople had still not grown use to having a large group of warriors in their midst, especially as these were veterans of the recent battle at Fulford Gate, and the weapons-men seemed determined to spill yet more blood. They took the actions of the fighting men for a warning and began to call their children home, to shutter their windows and bar their doors.

Coenred led his men out of the southern gate but they did not go too far. With speedy discipline they formed a shield wall, spears protruding threateningly, and awaited the arrival of the horsemen who still came on at an easy trot. One of the two gates was closed so as to make it small enough for them to defend the opening with a hedge of spears should the number of the approaching strangers prove too great.

As the riders neared they slowed their horses to a walk and just short of throwing spear range they stopped. There was a tense pause as each group of warriors assessed the other. A lone horseman eventually moved his steed forward at a slow walk. Coenred stepped forward in response, leaving his own men behind him but holding his shield in front of his body and his long fighting spear at the ready.

"I am Coenred, Captain of Huscarls to the Eorls of Mercia and Northumbria. Know that we hold this land in the name of King Harold of England!" he called out in an authoritative tone.

The rider stopped.

"Well met proud Saxon. Your readiness to repel the enemy does you credit. I am Gyrth Godwinson, Eorl of East Anglia, and by virtue of brotherhood to your king, a prince of this realm."

It seemed to take a moment for this declaration to sink in. The fyrdmen retained their composure but they could clearly be heard discussing what had just been revealed to them.

"Eorl of East Anglia? My Lord, the king sends you north with a power to fight the King of Norway then?" Coenred asked over the sudden chatter of his men.

"Say not that he sends me huscarl, but rather that he follows."

Gyrth pulled his horse around so that he could point south. In the distance they could see a dark undulating mass cresting the hill behind the riders and from which they had just ridden.

The holders of the gate could now see Saxon warriors.

Many Saxon warriors carrying spears were approaching. Their numbers grew into first hundreds and then thousands as the front of the army began the descent down the hill following the road to Tadcaster. Steel glinted in the sunlight, the steel of spear points and helmets. Pennants and banners flew in abundance, their bright colours splashed against the blue sky. Each design represented a different part of the kingdom, a different lord. The army was a Saxon sword come from far away to defend the people of Northumbria.

No one in the north of England had ever seen such a thing before.

"Prepare to meet your King who will warmly welcome you all to his banner," Gyrth told them with a grin.