

For Rapture of Ravens

Thursday 21st September 1066

The Village of Ovretun, Northumbria

“Some with the morrow his sword should kill, some should go to the gallows-tree for rapture of ravens.” - Beowulf

“Why do they send us to middens like this?” Geir demanded as he reined his horse to a stop. “Why do we have to do the damn Norwegians work for them?”

Ulf scowled into the early morning sky and glanced at Torstein with a meaningful look. The Dane’s expression told him that his brother warrior shared his own tiredness of Geir’s constant complaining also.

“The old War Wolf commanded it of Jarl Vidar and he commanded it of us.” Ulf repeated the answer that he had used several times already on this early morning.

“Hardrada is king of the Norwegians, not we Danes, why do we do his bidding? Why don’t we sit in the Saxon mead hall in Jorvic and garrison the city?”

“Because we crossed Odin at some point on this expedition and he’s cursed us,” Torstein offered.

“You believe that?” Snorre the younger asked.

“Well we have to suffer Geir’s moaning don’t we?” The older man retorted with a forced smile.

“All I say is that such as we deserve better duties than this, riding around Saxon villages that ring Jorvic to tell them that they have a new king, a Norwegian king at that. If Hardrada is King of Northumbria now it’s because of the blood that we spilt yesterday at Fulford Gate; we Danes!” Geir refused to be silent.

“Is this really so bad?” Ulf demanded of him. “We ride from one village to the next to spread the word of our success. The Saxon army was destroyed and their King Harold sits in London awaiting the Normans, leaving us to build a new kingdom here in lands that were once his. Hardrada has promised us wealth and titles so I use today as a chance to spy out such holdings as I would have in repayment for the Saxon lives I ended yesterday.”

“Lands and titles? Even the Norwegians complain that after his long war against our King Sweyn Hadrada owes them for promises that he failed to fulfil when peace was forced upon him,” Geir countered.

“One battle has been won but not the war, the King of the Saxons will push north with his army because the fall of Jorvic demands it of him,” Ulf explained their position to them all once again. “This task is meant to let the Saxons hereabouts know that their lords have been vanquished, that we Vikings now rule Northumbria. We show ourselves to them and tell the men of Norse blood to come to our standard, to fight for their new king under his raven banner. Only then, when all the Saxon arms have been beaten down, can we take what we have earned.”

For a moment the five horsemen sat upon their steeds in silence looking at each other as their minds took in their leader’s words. He had spoken of nothing new, it was the speech made by King Hadrada himself when they had left Norway, and again when they had sailed from the Isles of Orkney, but they did like the images that the words created within their covetous minds.

“Once we have done this task we can return to Riccall and the company of our brothers, mayhap one or two of us might get a turn to walk the streets of Jorvic as part of the garrison, but I tell thee this, only those who are seen to obey their jarl’s commands are likely to get so easy a watch as that, so do what I say and remember that King Hadrada now owns this land so spoil nothing and take nothing, unless you want to feel the cut of the War Wolf’s axe?!”

With that Ulf walked his horse forward down the track of beaten earth towards the village of Ovretun. They had ridden at first light north from Jorvic more or less following the River Ouse for four miles, their intention being to swing east and ride in an arc that would take them back to the city again. They were not sure of where each village lay but hoped to encounter several along their way and encourage the local Saxons to spread the word that the warriors had been commanded to deliver by their jarl. So far they had passed through Clifton and Skelton and done just that with only Geir’s incessant moaning to sour an otherwise pleasant early September day.

For its part Ovretun looked to be very much like every other Saxon habitation that they had seen so far, except perhaps being a little smaller. Woodland almost enclosed it except where it had been cleared to allow fields to be worked; enough for six ploughs it seemed. The outer buildings were all peasant huts, single rooms with low thatched roofs that came down to the ground. In the centre, however, there was a large

lodge, neighboured by some other large buildings, probably belonging to the local theign. Only a few people were stirring as the Vikings approached.

Leofe was one of those few early risers. She had opened the door to her house and stepped out into the morning light with a heavy heart. Her husband, Theign Ceneric, had ridden with Eorl Morcar to York a couple of days ago and she had expected either his return or a call for her to join him at the nobleman's lodge in the city; neither had come. Instead there had been ill-favoured rumours of a battle to the south of York.

She hoped that this day would bring some reliable news and she set her mind to that conviction, but still her heart laboured in a manner that told her that things were not right with the world. Her eye took in the fine proportions of the lodge of the young Eorl Morcar immediately across from her house. How she wished that Morcar had spent the night there instead of heading straight to York. As she thought upon recent events she cleaned her teeth with a twig from a walnut tree. Life had been so good to them since Morcar had replaced Tostig as the Eorl of Northumbria in October of last year. Ceneric had been recognised for his good management of the ceorls of Ovretun, of how productive they were, and he had been promoted to the station of a middle-theign and given more responsibility over the neighbouring villages of Scelfton and Hipton. They were richer for it too. For her part Leofe supported him as much as she could, she was proud of, and in love with, her man.

The five horsemen appeared at the southern edge of the village and her heart sank with the conviction that she would never see her husband again. Someone shouted a weak alarm and several peasants quickly appeared from inside their homes in response to the cry. An air of apprehension began to grow in more than one breast.

For a moment she felt her heart miss a beat. Leofe was the wife of the ruling theign, however, and determined not to show herself as weak before either these unwanted visitors or the villagers that looked to her husband for leadership. There would be time later to mourn his passing from this world, if such was indeed his fate, but before then she would prove herself theign-worthy. She threw away her tooth-stick, pushed her long brown hair back and stepped forwards to meet the unwelcome visitors.

“Woman, where is your man?” Ulf called.

“What do you want here?” She returned with a tone of authority.

“She's not the friendly type,” Geir commented.

He looked her up and down, noting her good quality dress, the gold torc on her wrist, the clean and brushed hair. She also had a strikingly beautiful face that, to his eyes, suggested a proud, almost haughty attitude that seemed to challenge him.

“We bring news,” Ulf told her, “you are theign-worthy, yes?”

His accent was thick and she recognised it as Norse. Her face betrayed nothing but her heart sank even deeper within her breast. The rumours were true then, there had indeed been a battle and it had been the Saxons against the Vikings once more. The fact that these warriors were here riding Saxon horses confirmed her worst fears; the Saxons had lost.

Now I know that my husband is gone from this turning world!

“I am Leofe, wife of Theign Ceneric, we rule Ovretun on behalf of Eorl Morcar.” She spoke loudly, trying to inflect her authority and courage into the timbre of her voice.

“Eorl Morcar is it?” Geir swung down from his horse, his eyes never leaving the figure of the woman. “Then you should know that your Eorl Morcar fled the field at Fulford Gate yesterday, with all his Northumbrians, at least those that survived our spears and there were precious few of your warriors that managed to do that. Mayhap I speared your husband too?”

“Geir!” Ulf snapped at him.

A small crowd of peasants had gathered around them, not too close as they were afraid of the men in steel byrnies and carrying swords, but close enough to hear what was being said. Some of the ceorls openly carried knives along with farming implements that could easily be turned to use as weapons. Although wary that did not necessarily mean that they were fearful.

“I say again, what do you here?”

Leofe betrayed no reaction to Geir’s taunt but stood before them with her hands on her hips and a defiant air. From inside she summoned up the strength to suppress the emotions that threatened to swamp. This was not the time to succumb to such feelings; the people were dependent upon her. She heeded the greater calling.

“We bring word from King Harald Hardrada of Norway,” Ulf told her, “he is now also King of Northumbria since the defeat of Eorl Morcar and his brother Eorl Edwin yesterday. Your army is destroyed and you will pay homage to Norway now, not Wessex. Obey the King of Norway’s rule and things will go well with you.”

“Harold of Wessex is our king.”

“You Saxons, you never know when you are defeated do you?” Geir commented.

He walked slowly towards the woman and she read the intent in his eye as surely as if he had spoken it to her. Her hand went to her belt and closed around the handle of the scramseax she had hanging from it. Behind her she heard the soft footstep of her servant Ina. He was not a man of physical presence being of more use in the running of the household servants but his coming gave her some added reassurance.

“Geir, stand your ground!”

“Keep your own counsel Ulf,” the warrior shot back without taking his eyes from Leofe. “I have travelled far and fought hard, I want some spoils of victory.”

A murmur rose from the assembled peasants, some thirty or so now. Ulf glanced at them and realised that they were indeed loyal to their theign’s wife, mayhap loyal enough to even attack five armed and armoured Vikings.

Ulf knew very well what was in the mind of Geir and he could see far enough ahead to realise that blood was going to be spilt if he did not act quickly. This was not what he had looked for, the duty was easy enough; there was no need to provoke the Saxons to anger. It also occurred to him that Jarl Vidar might take this badly if he heard of it and was called before the King of Norway to answer for his men. Hardrada had been clear on this point, Northumbria and everything in it now belonged to him and his wrath would fall heavy on any man who looked to spoil his possessions.

“Geir!” Ulf jumped down from his horse and walked quickly to the other Viking, grabbing his arm and pulling him around. “Our task is to bring the word of the king and do no other, this is not meet.”

“I take what I want and fear no man.”

“This is madness!”

Geir pulled his arm free and turned on Leofe again.

“Inside or outside, it’s all the same to me?”

“Leave my lady alone!”

Ina suddenly put himself between the two of them. He was a slight man and his voice quavered as he spoke but there was a kind of desperate courage in his eyes.

“Away dog!”

Geir grabbed Ina by his tunic and shoved him roughly. Leofe brought the blade of her knife out into the early morning light and slashed at the Viking. The steel edge of the scramseax scraped across the chain mail sleeve of his byrnie but then cut through the sleeve of his linen tunic and into the flesh of his right forearm below it.

The Viking shouted out in pain but the wound seemed only to anger him. With the back of his hand he hit her in the face with enough force to knock her to the ground. At the sight of this the Saxons began to shout angrily and several strode forwards raising various implements in protestation, a wood axe, a scythe and even a langseax.

“Geir damn you!”

Ulf cursed him and drew his sword. The remaining three Vikings jumped down from their horses and joined their chief with their own weapons in their hands. Norse warriors did not fight on horseback.

Ina staggered a step or two but then came back at Geir, clutching at his arm to try and draw him away from his mistress who lay on the ground before them still. The Viking turned on him once more, his face creased by anger and ruddy in complexion. With a quick movement he drew a weapon and lodged the blade of his own knife in the Saxon’s stomach. Geir held the servant, staring into his eyes as the realisation dawned upon Ina that he had suffered a mortal wound, and then the Dane pushed him away again. The faithful Saxon fell heavily and did not move.

The scent of blood was now truly in the air.

“It’s time you Saxons learnt that we are your masters once again,” Geir roared at the peasants. He strode over to where Leofe now sat, having watched the killing of Ina with horror filled eyes. He reached down and grabbed a handful of her rich hair and dragged her up to her feet roughly. Leofe tried to stifle her cry. “Masters take; slaves give.”

“You go too far Geir.”

“I tell you Ulf that this is my just reward and there’s no man here, Saxon or Norse, who is going to stop me.”

Ulf pondered the situation but knew in his heart that no matter what Geir did he was not going to stop him. He could not bring himself to side with a Saxon woman over a brother warrior. Geir was a man who had stood next to him in the shield-wall of companions facing the spear-points of their enemies. He fought well and could be relied upon to save a man’s life when the fight was at its hottest. It was in moments of peace that Geir became a problem.

“Do what you must but do it quickly,” Ulf finally conceded.

“With one as beautiful as this, why would any man rush?” Geir leached. “I mean to enjoy her.”

He turned to look at the villagers who were shouting at him to let their mistress go free and laughed. In his eye they posed no threat, there was not a man amongst them who was brave enough to draw a sword against him. They could shout and rail but none of them would dare stop him from taking the theign's wife.

A dark shape suddenly caught the eye of Geir, something that sang through the air in a blur of motion. It moved so fast that it was impossible for him to know it for what it was and yet in his mind's eye it seemed all too familiar. It was an object that he knew well, one that he had often used himself. The actual realisation of what it was came only after the impact, however. With a thud the long, thin, heavy object sundered the chain mail of his armour. An iron shaft penetrated his body, stopping only when the squat, heavy head protruding from out of his back. For a moment the wooden shaft fastened by rivets to the iron shank quivered before its weight began to drag the butt end of the throwing spear to the ground. Geir the Dane fell to his knees, his mouth moving although no sounds issued from it. His hand fell from its tight hold on Leofe's arm. Slowly he fell onto his right side and the life went from his blue eyes.

Leofe did not hesitate to step quickly away from the body of the Viking, snatching up her scramseax from where it had fallen and glowered at the remaining Norsemen but they were now paying her no attention whatsoever.

Ulf had stared at his fallen comrade with disbelieving eyes before he turned on his heel and raked the faces of the peasants to see who could have thrown the angon with such skill. At first all he saw were faces as equally surprised as his own, but then he saw the man who had thrown the weapon standing openly in the front rank of the crowd. He was a large warrior dressed in heavy Saxon armour, his mail byrnie stained with dried blood, his shield battered by sword and spear blows, his helmet scratched, his eyes burning in the shadowed recess of his steel headgear. With all eyes on the unfolding scene acted out by Geir and Leofe no one had seemingly noticed the weapons-man enter the village.

“Huscarl!”

The Saxon strode forwards without a word, the golden dragon of Mercia etched onto the black background of his shield. He held a beautiful gold inlaid sword in his right hand, two more throwing spears were strapped to the inside of his broad shield. His intent was clear and he clearly did not lack the confidence to carry it out.

Torstein of Daneland was the first to react, stepping into the path of the huscarl with his weapon in his hand. Like his fellows he did not carry a shield, just his sword, but he was a proven man and he had killed Saxons before; many Saxons.

The huscarl moved easily despite the heavy weight of his armour. He chose not to accept the blow from Torstein's sword onto his shield as the other expected but instead stepped forward and to the right so that the weapon missed him completely. The Saxon then lunged with surprising speed into the Viking and rammed the great wooden round shield into the man's body. Torstein staggered back onto his heels, his sword held uselessly away from his body having been extended as far as his reach allowed and only just beginning to react to his own instinctive decision to swing it back into action again. Like lightning the huscarl's own sword flashed through the morning air and the point bit deeply into his enemy's ribs, bursting chain links, scraping bone, and piercing his lung.

The Viking fell. The Saxon peasants roared with both anger and delight, their courage now bolstered by the sudden appearance of the warrior; one of their own. Ulf turned to meet the huscarl and saw his two remaining countrymen run for their horses like frightened hounds before the charge of a wild boar. The peasants chased them but were careful not to get too close to their swords. He wasted no time on cursing the lack of resolve of his countrymen but instead tried to lead the Saxon swordsman onto better ground.

"I have a message for your king, not all the Saxons have been defeated yet."

The armoured warrior came on at a charge, the great shield before him and offering Ulf very little in the way of a target. They crossed swords several times but Ulf knew that he was at a serious disadvantage. The Saxon was indeed a huscarl, a professional warrior trained in the use of sword, spear and axe. He moved as if his equipment weighed nothing on him, his limbs thick with heavy muscle trained to nothing but war. The heavy wooden shield, strengthened by a steel rim, moved before him lightly, one moment protecting his body, the next pushing the Viking back.

Ulf called upon all of his experience to try and match the man but in his heart he knew that he was losing the fight. He could not land a telling blow no matter what he tried. The long sharp blade of the Saxon sword dipped beneath his guard and the steel edge scraped the mail that protected the top of Ulf's thigh. If it had not been for the byrnie that he wore the blow would have crippled him and no doubt led to his death.

The peasants ringed them but did not attempt to interfere with the fight; rather they were enjoying the spectacle. Sweat ran down Ulf's face from under his own heavy helmet and his breath came more quickly. The September air was warming once again as it had done yesterday before the battle at Fulford Gate.

The Viking became desperate. In a mad flurry he rained a series of heavy blows down on his adversary, trying to get him to duck under the safety of that shield with the yellow dragon. The huscarl obliged momentarily and Ulf turned and ran. Over the heads of the villagers he could see a horse and as he expected the peasants scattered before his flashing sword, opening up an avenue of escape. Ulf ran to the horse and grabbed its mane as it started away from him in fright. With frantic athleticism he vaulted into the saddle and spurred the horse to the gallop.

Looking back over his shoulder Ulf saw with relief that the huscarl was making no attempt to follow; obviously he had no horse of his own at hand. Also it seemed that he did not have the confidence to launch another throwing spear at him either, probably because the crowd of villagers did not give him a clear line of sight. The peasants shouted profanity and waved their meagre weapons but what did that matter, he had escaped.

Turning in the saddle Ulf looked to find a path out of Ovretun, saw a clear one to the north, away from the huscarl and the villagers, and spurred the horse harder in that direction. The animal had only completed two or three bounds when Ulf felt his heart turn to ice. At the edge of the village and all across his path was ranged a shield-wall, a hedge of spears, held by some four hundred men. Saxon men. He did not have the time to consciously acknowledge that he saw them but the bodies of his two fellow warriors who had ran from the peasants when the Saxon warrior had first attacked lay in a bloody heap before this wall.

The horse shied in terror before the obstacle of gleaming steel and came to a sudden stop. Ulf pulled on the reins and forced it turn back towards the village. He could see the grim huscarl walking towards him, sword still in hand. He had no training in fighting from horseback, that was not the Viking way, but he reckoned that he could use the horse as a means to push that Saxon warrior out of his path and make his way south back to Jorvik instead.

“Aldfrid!”

A gruff voice barked out from amongst the Saxon warriors and in response a mailed warrior stepped forward with a throwing spear in his right hand. He took only

one step before launching his weapon at the horseman. Just as Ulf put his heels into the sides of his steed the spear hit him from behind with terrible force, pushing him over the neck of his steed. The horse bolted. The Viking fell heavily and the horse ran swiftly away towards the villagers, some of whom successfully got the animal back under control.

A huscarl left the shield-wall and walked over to the dead Viking who lay now in a slowly expanding pool of blood. The man who had thrown the spear joined him to view his grisly success.

“And that,” said the elder of the two, “is how you make use of a throwing spear. Well done young Aldfrid.”

“My throw travelled further,” the large warrior approaching them from the village commented.

“Aye, but mine was a moving target,” Aldfrid replied with a voice noticeably younger than his two brother huscarls.

“Saxons!” a female voice called out to them. “Who be ye?”

Leofe marched towards them carrying her knife still in her hand and trailed by her villagers. Her hair was ruffled and her face flushed from the violence of the Norseman and yet she exuded an air of courageous authority still, and commendable self-control. The taller of the two huscarls removed his helmet and revealed a face some thirty summers old, a scar that ran over his left eyebrow down onto his cheek, and, uncharacteristically for a Saxon, sporting a trimmed beard.

“I am Coenred, Captain of Huscarls to Eorl Edwin of Mercia and Eorl Morcar of Northumbria. This be Sigbert of York, Aldfrid of Cyricbyrig, and this is our war-band.”

“If you march to York to fight with the eorls you should know that you come too late, or so these scum told us.” Leofe scowled at the body of Ulf that now lay before her feet.

“We fought yesterday at Fulford Gate,” Coenred told her, “we are almost all that is left of the army of the north.”

Her faced paled at his words and Coenred could guess the reason why. He had seen enough women’s faces look the same when he had told the tidings of war to Saxon families in York last night even as the Viking garrison patrolled the streets.

“All our brave men, they are gone?”

“I made my way into the city last night to learn the plans of the King of Norway, I spoke with some survivors who elected to stay with their families in York; it was told to me that a group theigns fought their way free of the battle and escaped the slaughter, mayhap your husband was one of them?”

“Mayhap,” she spoke too quietly to suggest that she was convinced by his words. “Where do you go now? We cannot house you, killing these rats today was a fine thing but others will surely follow and Ovretun is too small a village to be able to swell your war-band with many men.”

“Have no fear, we are for Tadcaster,” Coenred told her. “Keep what men you have for your own protection. I ask only that you get rid of these bodies and say to no one that you have seen us.”

Leofe looked at the tall huscarl. To her eyes he seemed weary and she knew it had nothing to do with the fight with these Vikings that he had so recently concluded; he was haunted by an experience of violence that was much greater than this skirmish. The other two had removed their helmets as well, allowing the morning air to refresh them. She noted that the one who was shorter but solidly built and called Sigbert looked to be the same age as his captain, and that the other known as Aldfrid was young indeed but very fair faced.

“I know of you, Coenred son of Aethelred, you were a companion of Eorl Aelfgar, father to Edwin and Morcar.”

“I was.”

“Then go to Tadcaster with my glad tidings and know that we will keep your passing here to ourselves. If my husband, Theign Ceneric, be there tell him that I, Leofe, his wife, hold the village upon his return.”

She said the last with little genuine hope but Coenred’s words concerning a group of theigns escaping the battle at Fulford gave her reason to believe that wyrd had spared her husband and her love for Ceneric would not let her abandon him until his death were proven to her either through time or the return of his body for burial. Her sense of duty would not allow her to display any sentiment that might be construed as weakness, even as a woman, however. In truth there was some solace in acting the theign to the villagers.

“If he is in Tadcaster then he will know with what spirit you protect your people,” Coenred told her.

“You best take the horses with you; I have no reason to explain their presence here.”

“We’ll take their arms and armour too, they will serve my fyrdmen well, but whatever gold or silver is upon their bodies you may keep.”

Leofe nodded to them and then turned and led her people back into the centre of the village; they would busy themselves with the bodies of the fallen Vikings before going about their everyday labours.

“That be one of the finest looking women that I have ever seen,” Sigbert observed, “my Hilda being another, as is natural.”

“Aye, she is comely indeed,” the young Aldfrid agreed with an appreciative glance at the retreating figure.

“There is no favour in a woman looking pleasing to a man’s eye in such times as these,” Coenred replied, “if she had been less comely then she might not have spurred the Viking’s lust for her and we would not have had to draw sword against them.”

“I do not agree. Men of our mettle would have drawn swords against the Vikings no matter how poor a Saxon woman may look if she stood in danger of them. I only wish that you had let us all have a turn with these Danes dancing before our spears. We live to protect our people after all is said and done,” Sigbert countered.

“I did not go looking for a fight, just to see what manner of a disturbance it was that concerned the village. Now that our work here is done our protection for such as Leofe must be withdrawn to Tadcaster; we must march on.”

For such as Leofe, for such as Mildryth.

As Coenred turned back to his men the image of the woman he had recently come to love entered his mind once more. Since leaving York in the early hours of the morning he had not thought of her once but this encounter with the theign of Ovretun’s wife had reminded him of the danger in which Mildryth stood, left behind the walls of the captured city and ruled over now by Vikings who minded not the station of a lady when their hunger for her flesh consumed them.

Would Mildryth fall to the kind of fate that Leofe had escaped?

Would there be a Saxon warrior with hard steel to protect her in her moment of need?

He knew that he could not answer such questions and that to dwell upon them would only distract him from the task at hand, the one that he was best suited to carry out, which was to lead the survivors of the army of the north, to take them on a

hopeful journey to meet the power that King Harold was sure to send to reclaim his lost city.

Coenred returned to his young shield-bearer Edwin and took back the reins of his horse, which was splendidly appointed as befitted a man of means and station. He secured his broad shield to the saddle and mounted the fine animal once more. The horse started forward at a walk and the Saxon warriors fell in behind their captain in column formation. They had killed five Vikings but it had done nothing to satisfy their appetite for revenge but each and every one of them knew that nearly ten thousand Vikings were encamped hard by York; there would be enough Norse blood to quench their thirst for it when they returned. In the meantime several of the fyrd busied themselves in stripping the fallen Vikings of arms and armour, and recovering the Danes horses for their own use.