

The City of York

The City of York was alive with excitement. People from the surrounding areas were flocking to the gates seeking sanctuary behind the stout walls and the palisade. Many had also climbed the same walls hoping to gain a view of the coming battle.

Mildryth could not.

She felt a sickening knot in her stomach. At first she went outside to get some fresh air but the throng of people and their excitement only made her feel worse. She returned to her small house but had to open the shutter. Despite her house standing at the end of the street, far from the main road, she seemed to hear and feel all the noise and emotion generated by the city-folk.

Do any of these people have anyone they care about risking their lives today?

Coenred came back to her mind and she tried to recall last night when all this had seemed so far away. She struggled to remember how he had looked in his fine tunic and trousers, his hair banded by a silver circlet, not as showy as the young lords but far from being a mean man of war too. The image of her remembrance seemed to change all too quickly, however, and unwillingly she saw him as he might look dressed in his armour and battle harness. The thought chilled her and she felt the sick feeling take hold of her stomach again. She needed some distraction, something to take her mind off the terrible events that were about to unfold barely two miles to the south of them.

“My Lady!”

She heard an unfamiliar voice calling from outside and on going to the open window she saw a well dressed servant stood in the street looking towards her house.

“Do you call me?” She asked through the open window.

“If you be the Lady Mildryth, yes,” he replied. “I am a retainer to Lord Coenred. He has sent me to be of service to you.”

“Of what service can you be to me?”

Thoughts of the other man who had presumed to speak to her through the window cast a shadow over her mind.

“Protection.” He moved aside his new cloak and she saw the langseax hanging from his belt. “However the battle goes I am to stay with you until Lord Coenred returns or we must flee. I can do him no other service on this day but I will not fail him in this charge.”

Even now my protector thinks of me.

“Then come in,” she told him and went to open the door. Edwin entered with a small, nervous bow. “Please, be seated.”

Edwin took a small stool from beside the wall and sat down near the open hearth. Mildryth went to pour him some wine.

“I should do that, My Lady!” He rose quickly when he realised that she was about to serve him.

“You are Lord Coenred’s servant, not mine,” She replied handing him the cup. “Under my roof you are my guest.”

He smiled his gratitude but his unease was obvious. After seeing Coenred leave the great hall with this lady Edwin had asked in the kitchens after her and quickly discovered her story. The fact that she was theign-worthy had made a great impression upon him and he now found it difficult to sit in her presence as a guest when in his mind he should be a servant to her.

“You were working in the great hall last night,” she chose to ease his discomfort with some polite conversation.

“Yes, My Lady. Lord Coenred thinks that it would help me to learn how to serve. I wasn’t born a retainer.”

“Where are you from?”

“A small holding near Inderawuda, just to the southeast actually. Near the river that runs into the Humber. It was attacked by raiders in the night some weeks ago. My parents were killed, my brother also.”

“These have become lawless times,” Mildryth observed. “I am sorry for you. Excuse me, you know my name but I do not know yours?”

“Edwin son of Octa, My Lady. Like the eorl only not so great.” He took a sip of the fruit wine.

“Greatness is earned through deeds Edwin, not by birth alone,” she told him. “Do you know anything of battles?”

“No, I am no warrior,” he replied meekly.

“Good, then you will not feel the need to tell me what might be occurring out there in the field.”

She sat down on another stool placed near the hearth but found her hands clutching each other nervously. For a moment there was a strained silence when neither could think of anything else to say and yet both felt that someone should.

“I think that it is as at least as bad to be on the fringe of a battle and capable of doing nothing as it is to be in a battle, My Lady,” Edwin finally suggested.

“Mayhap you are right, therefore we will do something,” she asserted rising to her feet again.

“What would you have me do, My Lady?”

“We’ll cook an evening meal,” she said quickly. “Yes, for when they return. It will keep both our hands and our minds busy.”