

The City of York

Where she came from Wulfhere could only guess but he cared little after losing his helmet to the upwards swinging stroke that he took from her broom-shaft.

“You let her go!” Branda demanded. Her eyes were wild and her face flushed.

Mildryth pulled free at last and stepped out of the mercenary’s immediate reach as Branda attempted to land several more blows on his exposed head. Wulfhere raised his shield and took a step forward towards the large angry woman. Branda stepped back but the butescarle followed his military training and quickened his pace, giving her a shove with his shield that sent her sprawling. With his hand now free he took hold of his spear once more and moved it to a higher position, the clenched fist close to his head.

“NO!” Mildryth screamed at him.

Genuine fear crossed Branda's face as the mercenary's right arm drew back, the point of the fighting spear aimed directly at her heart. As the arm started forward the butescarle was suddenly catapulted away from the helpless women as Edwin careened into his side. The young Saxon let out a short cry of pain but unlike Wulfhere he kept his feet. For a moment he staggered but it was only in response to his already bruised side. Mildryth saw that the langseax was out of its scabbard and in his hand. It seemed that blood was sure to be spilt.

Wulfhere managed to turn as he fell and landed on his hands and knees with his back to them. It was an undignified position to find himself in and one that offered no protection against his attacker whatsoever. He tried to push himself off the ground by bringing his right knee up to his chest but the shield on his left arm gave him no proper purchase and the fingers of his right hand were trapped beneath the spear that he still clung to. He rolled to his right in a cumbersome manner instead, hindered by both his armour and weapons. Lying on his back he found himself looking up at Edwin and realised that his position had not improved any. Without hesitating Edwin kicked the spear out of the butescarle's hand and pointed the tip of his langseax at his chest.

“You wouldn't dare,” Wulfhere insisted, not without a little fear, “I am a fighting man of the eorls.”

“You fight women and attack men from behind,” Edwin accused him angrily.

“And you are quick to leave the field without any hurt.” Mildryth observed.

“A hog never smells its own stink!” Edwin spat at the cowering man.

Branda got to her feet and gripped her broom menacingly again. Several people noticed the commotion and despite the distraction of the battle beyond the city walls they were curious

enough to come and see what was happening. One of them called out to Branda by name. Wulfhere was quick-witted enough to realise that the odds were going against him now, the townsfolk would be sure to defend one their own against a stranger. He scuttled backwards, releasing his shield so as to be able to use his left hand more easily. His spear lay where it had been forced from his grasp. Edwin followed him with grim determination, his knuckles turned white from the force he exerted in holding the long knife.

“Go,” Mildryth snarled at the butescarle with contempt, “be gone wretch!”

Wulfhere required no further prompting. He jumped to his feet and ran north, pushing his way through the people. Edwin glared after him but made no attempt to pursue the fleeing coward. Instead he returned his langseax to its scabbard and retrieved the fallen shield, helmet and spear.

“Tha’s trophies of war young warrior,” Branda congratulated him, a wave of relief sweeping over her as the encounter concluded more peacefully than that it had promised to do.

“Are you hurt much?” Mildryth enquired coming to his side.

“I feel like I was kicked by a horse,” Edwin admitted, “but I think I will live.”

He held the spear upright and looked up at the steel point. This war gear cost more than he had ever earned in his young life. They were indeed trophies won in combat; although they were not quite the fabled weapons and it had not been the epic encounter that the scops sang of in their sagas and heroic poems.

“I ne’er liked the look of that man,” Branda asserted.

“Thank you for your assistance Branda,” Mildryth said, “he attacked Edwin from behind and gave him no chance.”

“I doubt it not,” Branda told her, “but I came not looking for a fight. I’m at home with the bairns; Hereward has carried a spear to Fulford. I thought we might pass the time together until the men come home again?”

Mildryth glanced quickly at Edwin and hoped that he would understand the meaning in her look. He stayed quiet, which persuaded her that he did. Clearly Branda did not know the way the battle seemed to be going.

“Why would Hereward go to the battle?” She asked, genuinely amazed that a man of such mild manners would take up a spear.

“He said it was expected of him as a tithe man,” a look of concern crossed her face. “Will thee not come sit with us?”

“Of course, but I have also a duty at the mead-hall. I will sit with you until they have need of me, however. Come Edwin, you will join us.”

They headed back to Branda’s house and Mildryth marvelled that the woman seemed incapable of sensing the panic that was beginning to grip the people around her. She hoped

that her attempt at suggesting the need to see to normal duties might delay the terrible news that she knew was coming their way, the loss of the battle, at least a little longer; long enough for two men at least to return home.