

## The City of York

“Know that my temper is hardly soothed by your open gates,” growled King Harald Hardrada of Norway.

He sat in High-Theign Aethelwine’s hall and faced the Saxon men who were all that was left in the way of authority to govern the City of York. The high-theign's own chair had been placed on a trestle table to raise him above everyone else and with his own substantial height this made the Norse king seem an even greater conqueror. He was surrounded by the best of his own men who all still carried the stains of battle upon them. Styrkar, the giant who carried the king's banner in battle, was now chief amongst them since the death of Jarl Siward.

“I have lost many good men today, particularly one good friend, because your young eorls were so ill-advised as to make a stand at Fulford.”

Tostig was suitably impressed by the king’s behaviour. The force of his character was both terrific and terrible. He had taken control of the army even as they had hewed the fallen five hundred huscarls who had made such a futile sacrifice in the closing stages of the battle. He had stopped the Vikings from rampaging through the city’s open gates in search of more blood. The news of Siward’s death had been greeted by a fine royal fury, a display of anger that had even brought the hairs on the Saxon’s own neck to stand up. Just for a moment, he had thought that everything would be lost in a callous instance of personal revenge, but Hardrada had mastered himself just as he had mastered the army.

Mounted once more on his black stallion he had parleyed with the remaining villagers of Fulford Gate, promising them no harm would befall them if they stayed indoors and respected his authority. Both sides had kept that bargain, which let the Vikings advance on the City of York without distraction.

The city-men had seen that further resistance was useless after the destruction of the northern army and allowed the king and his warriors within the walls without a struggle. Now they stood, bowed and beaten men, before this artful monarch. Despite the fact that there were barely a hundred of the king’s warriors present they exuded a threat that was domineering. There was no fight left in these Saxons, only fear, and Hardrada knew it.

“My Lord,” one of the city-men stepped forward, raising his hands in supplication, “it was not by our counsel that the eorls met with you so violently. They are young and headstrong and desired of glory.”

“It is because I know this that I choose to spare you all your lives,” Hardrada replied. That at least brought some relief to their faces. “In times past I would have razed your city to the

ground for the loss of a man like Siward; one I held to be as close as a brother. I do not come for plunder though; I come for the crown that was promised to the Norwegian kings in days gone by. I will make a pact with thee but know this; none have broken faith with me and still live.”

The threat was implicit and clearly understood.

“We accept your authority, My Lord,” the Saxon affirmed.

“Then these are my terms: I will take hostages now, men of import whose lives you value, and what supplies you can muster. In four days time you will send to me at Stamford Bridge more hostages and supplies as a sign of your goodwill. I will reside there with my army but a garrison will be put in command here and you will not dare to touch them. For every man of mine that you harm I will kill ten of yours.”

“As you wish, My Lord,” the Saxons acquiesced.

“Further, all men of the city are to stay within their own homes at night-time and this rule to be obeyed until I say otherwise. My garrison will be given authority to kill any they find out of doors after eventide. They will not, however, harm any who abides by this curfew. Nor will they take anything that is not theirs. Northumbria is now part of the Kingdom of Norway and I give leave to spoil what is mine to no man. Now go, leave us.”

The Saxons were quick and undignified in following their new lord’s commands. Tostig Godwinson glanced at the king with barely disguised surprise.

“I thought the plan was to stay within the city?”

“And now I think differently Lord Tostig,” Hardrada rose from his seat and with an easy agility descended from the table. He took the offered cup of ale from the hand of one of his men. “In truth I do not trust these city walls until I have stamped my full authority upon this land.”

“My lord-”

“Oh, I know, you thought that you might remain here with the garrison eh?” He drank noisily. “Indeed, why would you not?”

“It makes sense,” Tostig protested, “I know this city-”

“That came to my mind also Lord Tostig, you may have friends here eh?”

“You doubt my loyalty?” Tostig looked offended.

“Come man, you’re not stupid and neither am I,” Hardrada declared, “and that I am still alive is testament to at least half of that truth.”

He laughed good-naturedly but Tostig was now on his guard. Of his own men here within the hall he had but a handful, certainly no match for the king’s warriors. He wondered if Hardrada had decided that he had no further use for their alliance.

“We are allies for it suits us to be. You want your brother’s head and I want his crown; neither act has been achieved yet. There may be those who call themselves your friends who might counsel that you could yet succeed without my help?”

“My lord, I have fought for you, counselled you true-”

“I am not saying that you haven’t,” the king interrupted, “but just suggesting that you might be tempted by those who do not know the full extent of our plans or abilities.” He smiled, almost benignly, but Tostig understood the hidden meaning.

The truth was that if he could secure his own return to England without the Vikings’ aid then no doubt he would do so, but Harold, his own brother, would not allow that to happen. No, he needed Hardrada for he doubted his own strength to keep a hold of the crown when Harold died, and that event must happen if he was to succeed in his plans. Hardrada was more the man to take and keep the crown, Tostig already knew that, just as he knew the King of Norway was as generous in his gifts to those who stood by him through loyalty as he was vindictive in punishing those who broke faith with him.

“I will not break my word,” Tostig asserted.

“And I am glad to hear it. Now, my Saxon friend, let’s drink to our victory before we mount up once again and return to Riccall. I will spend this night in the shadow of my Long Serpent.”

“As you wish, My Lord.” Tostig picked up a cup of ale and joined in the toast to the victory that they had enjoyed.

“My men tell me that there were so many Saxons slain that they could fill the beck with their bodies and walk end to end without getting their feet wet!” Hardrada announced to the hall. A general roar of approval went up at this macabre statement. Despite declaring his intent to leave the city Hardrada showed no haste in quitting the hall, at least not whilst the ale was still abundant. He left the ordering of the garrison to one of his captains and instead drank with his favoured warriors, bestowing his praise upon them in lieu of the prizes that they had yet to win.

Mildryth watched the events unfold from behind a group of Saxon ceorls. She had left Branda when it had become clear that the battle was over. The declarations of the people running past the house where they were all shuttered in made the result obvious. Edwin had gone to find Branda’s husband Hereward if he could, but he had not returned. She feared the worst for him as he had insisted in wearing Wulfhere’s war gear. It had been her intention to go to the great hall knowing that that would be the place where she would find Coenred; if they had won the battle. She had not thought about what to do if the Saxons were defeated. Here, however, seemed to be the best place to gather any news of their friends following the catastrophe and she believed herself best suited to the task. Besides, Branda had her children to keep her at home.

For her part Branda had implored her not to leave but Mildryth could not resist the urge to see what fate might now befall them all. In her mind it seemed safest that she go alone, whether that was true or not was a different matter. She was somewhat reassured when the Vikings had entered the city in good order, marching in a column behind their giant of a king mounted on a black stallion. It had not been difficult to enter the great hall through the kitchen and find a place to observe the proceedings. She watched now as Tostig Godwinson broke away from the Vikings and began to wander in a distracted manner through the hall. Her hand went unconsciously to her belt and found the vacant space where her scramseax would normally be. She glanced down as her hand failed to find the familiar handle and the truth dawned upon her.

She swore under her breath.

It came to her mind that the kitchen was but a few steps away and she knew that in there she could find a replacement, something long and sharp. She felt the desire for revenge burning inside her at the sight of the man who had murdered her husband and son, and possibly caused the death of her new protector.

Moving through the throng she headed towards the kitchen, trying not to attract attention. She walked to the nearest wall and followed it as if hugging the shadows there that resulted from the flickering light of the lamps and the numerous people in the hall. A rough hand suddenly grabbed her arm and spun her around. Mildryth found herself staring into the face of a Viking. He was all beard, stale breath and drunken eyes.

"Ale woman!" he bellowed but he did not release her. "My but you're a fair one for a serving wench!"

"I'll bring you more beer," Mildryth said quickly. She had seen that look in men's eyes before and knew what it might mean for her.

"Mayhap you'll do just fine instead?" He turned to his comrades with whom he shared the table. They voiced their encouragement for his obvious lust. Mildryth pulled hard as soon as he was distracted and broke away from his grip. "Stay thee!"

"More ale! Straight away!" She tried to calm him.

The Viking turned back to her with an oath and reached out to grasp her again. She spun on her foot and made to dash away, heading away from the wall and back towards the centre of the hall. Having gone only a few steps, her eyes on the table behind her expecting to see the warrior chase after her, she collided with another man. She looked up into his face and her blood froze.

"You should be careful," Tostig Godwinson advised her, "Saxon women can expect little courtesy around victorious Norsemen."

“My Lord...” she floundered. Mildryth cast her eyes down almost believing that he could read her intent through them. With the Vikings immediately behind her and the murderer right in front she was effectively trapped.

“You do not look like a servant,” Tostig commented. He looked her up and down and noted that her dress, although plain, was better than what most ceorls could afford.

“I am a friend of High-Theign Aethelwine. This is his hall,” she replied.

“Was,” Tostig corrected her, “now it belongs to King Hardrada of Norway and soon of England.”

“Mayhap...”

“Fear not. King Hardrada comes for a kingdom and has commanded his men to behave accordingly. He does not want his new subjects punished for the poor decisions of their former lords,” he continued to look at her and Mildryth began to feel a cold dread seeping into her bones. “Nevertheless, you should be careful. A woman of your rank had best keep to her own.”

“My rank?” She raised her head and looked back at him, almost as a challenge. “I have no rank.”

“No rank? You look to deceive me. Even if your husband is dead you still hold a station above the common people.”

*He knows me!*

Fear flooded her being.

“There will be many such as you,” he told her, “battles leave many widows behind but even if your husband lies dead at Fulford Gate you still have his property, wealth and name. You are obviously theign-worthy.”

*He knows me not!*

“I would counsel you to look for another husband, My Lady, but from amongst the victors if you wish to keep all that wyrd has left you with.” He smiled and then turned away.

Even as she realised that Tostig had presumed her to be the wife of one of the fallen theigns who had fought for the eorls, Edwin and Morcar, her fear gave way to anger. She understood then that not only did he not know her but also that he did not even remember the crime that he had committed against her family. Her resolve returned with a burning edge and she started once more for the kitchens.

Inside the close room she dodged between terrified servants and slaves, looking for a scramseax, one with a long thin blade that she could hide in the sleeve of her dress. She saw what she was looking for but as her hand closed on the handle a larger, ruddier hand enclosed hers.

“No, My Lady,” Branda said quite firmly.

Mildryth looked at her but the desire to do violence misted her eyes.

"Release me," she demanded.

"No, My Lady," Branda repeated. "If tha even attempt this thing tha'll bring about tha's death."

"What matters that to me? The man who murdered my husband and my son stands within the hall; within my reach."

"I know, but even if tha struck him down tha would bring death upon us all." Branda argued. Her grip tightened on her friend's slim hand.

"I alone will suffer and gladly too."

"No, tha won't. We all heard the Viking's decree. Many will die for the death of any one of their own. They know it in the kitchens so they know it in the hall. Besides, did tha not set Lord Coenred to be thy protector?"

"Likely he is dead," Mildryth declared angrily.

"No, he awaits thee at my house."

The words came easily, almost carelessly, and yet they robbed Mildryth of her breath.

"Your house?!" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Aye, my friend. He survived the battle and more. He asks for thee. Come."

"Tostig-"

"Can wait," Branda said quietly. She still had hold of her friend's hand but her grip had relaxed. "He's in danger every moment that he waits for thee and truth be told having a huscarl in my house after this day is a great danger to me and mine too; but I do it for thee."

Mildryth could not deny the truth of Branda's statement. If the Vikings found Coenred they would know him for what he was if not for who he was. His life would be taken, violently, and the people who sheltered him would fare no better. She felt her anger wane before this new conflict. Her fingers released the scramseax.

"Take me to him," she implored Branda.

"Then put tha arm through mine and cast tha eyes down. We be but two serving maids going outside for more of anything the Viking scum might want," Branda told her.

As they pushed through the frightened kitchen staff Mildryth felt waves of competing emotions rage through her. She berated herself for not returning to the hall with a suitable weapon and taking her revenge on the smirking Tostig.

*Had Coenred been hurt?*

What he had done this day to not only survive the battle but to find his way into the captured city?

She chided herself for discovering so late that the living now meant more to her than those who were dead.

Within a heartbeat they rushed through Branda's door which was firmly closed and barred behind them. The house stood on the main street that ran north to south through York. The

front was wide, one half being a store for the grain that Hereward sold. That part of the building was fronted by two large doors that opened out onto the street so that customers could enter directly. There was a more normal door giving access to what was properly the living area. The house was unusual in that the residential part was spread over two floors with bedrooms situated above over what for most Saxon families would be the main living and sleeping area. Downstairs another room had been added onto the rear and an open doorway knocked through the daub and wattle wall. This was where Branda cooked although a hearth was maintained in the other room as well. Tradition placed great domestic value on there being a lit hearth at the centre of every home but few peasants knew the luxury of owning a home with more than one room.

Branda's children were laid on the floor wrapped in blankets in the room at the front of the house. They looked up with fearful eyes that did not diminish even upon the recognition of a well known face. They knew that all was not well. Mayhap that was why they chose to be downstairs and not in the privacy of the children's bedroom upstairs.

The larger Saxon woman led her friend into the back room. It was dark with only one lamp burning fitfully. Someone lay on the floor, covered in a woollen blanket. Instinctively Mildryth went to the bed and crouched down. In the low light she recognised Branda's husband, Hereward; the pallor of his face shocked her.

"Hereward?" She could not help but voice some confusion.

"He's been wounded," a familiar voice told her.

She turned and saw him for the first time, cloaked in shadows in the corner of the small room. Coenred stepped forward. He no longer wore his battle-gear, just a normal woollen cloak, a linen tunic and trousers. There was no sword at his side but Mildryth's scramseax was tucked into his belt.

"I found him amongst the throng at the southern gate."

"And I thank God that it was such a great man as thee who did," Branda declared.

"It is no great thing to help a wounded friend," Coenred told her, "I only wish that I were skilled in the arts of healing."

Mildryth looked at Hereward and saw that his eyes were distant. He moaned lightly and moved his head as if in response to a memory but no words passed his lips. She rose and looked at Branda who was making a brave attempt to hide her fear.

"I owe you an apology," Mildryth said.

"Oh hush now," Branda looked embarrassed.

Mildryth crossed to her and took her hands.

"No. You housed Lord Coenred despite the danger to you and yours and you left your husband to come and fetch me when he needed you most. That is twice today that you have

looked to help me when I needed assistance. You are a greater friend than any I have ever known.”

She hugged Branda and felt the other woman’s sobs erupt. There was a long moment when nothing was said.

“I must get some water,” Branda gently broke away from the embrace.

She looked longingly into Mildryth's face and then turned and left the room without another word.

At last Mildryth turned to Coenred.

“You survived.”

“Too many did not.”

He saw her eyes cross to Hereward and then back to him and knew what the look meant. He shook his head. Hereward had suffered a spear wound to the stomach. A warrior's experience told him that there was little chance of the man surviving the night.

“What was he doing there?” She asked almost angrily. “A battle was no place for a kind man like you Hereward.”

“The fever of the moment caught him like so many others,” Coenred explained. “They thought that they would be part of a great victory, not victims of a slaughter. Edwin told me that he had gone to look for Hereward on Branda’s behalf so when I returned to the city I carried out his duty for him. I called out his name and he was then strong enough to answer, that’s how I found him amongst the throng.”

She looked back at Coenred and found herself assailed by conflicting emotions. A part of her wanted to rail against him for encouraging the belief in these people that they could fight and defeat the Vikings, but she knew that this was untrue. It was not Coenred who was to blame but rather the people he represented; the eorls. They had hungered for glory. They had excited the people into believing a weak truth. As if to assuage her feelings she placed a hand on his right arm. The touch was reassuring.

“I am glad that you survived,” she told him, “if not for you Hereward might have died out there, on the field, alone and unknown.”

“Then you do not blame me?”

It was as if he had read the emotions in her heart through the expressions on her face. She could not hide her feelings from him any longer.

“You are a warrior, battle is your trade. You were where your lords told you to be, but you did not ask for the likes of Hereward to be there with you.”

“If I had been in command none but warriors would have fought, but then if I had been in command the Vikings would still be banging their heads on our closed gates and high walls, and all the people of York safe within.”

She looked up into his shadowed face and saw the weariness in his eyes and with it also a sadness that she had not expected to see. Instinctively she put a hand to the side of his face. She felt a sudden wave of relief and would have wrapped her arms around him then and there but for the return of Branda.

"I have sent for a healer, mayhap they will bring my brave Hereward some relief eh?" She blustered about making a fine pretence that the situation was not as grave as they all truly knew it to be.

"I cannot impose upon you any longer," Coenred told her, "the fewer people who know that I am here the safer it will be for you and yours."

"But where will you go?" Mildryth asked. "How did you even get into the city?"

"I came from the battlefield with Morcar and what few of my men I had left to command. We passed through the southern gate on our way north to meet up with his brother Edwin. That's when I met with Edwin son of Octa, my retainer, and some curious war-gear that he had come by. I was not happy with him as I had thought that he had deserted you but he told me that you were safe here with Branda. The eorls decided to head for Ripon, against my advice. Why Hardrada had not pursued us I did not know, he has won a battle but not the war. I thought that we should find out what his plans were so I returned."

"With the danger so great?"

"The danger seemed no greater to me than it was to anyone else left within the city," he told her, gazing down into her lovely face hoping that she would understand what he could not bring himself to say in front of Branda, "I left Edwin with my horses and harness just a few miles to the north; he was not happy. Mayhap he will tell me how he came by his new shield, helmet and spear? It was no difficulty to re-enter the city amongst the confusion and I wandered to the southern gate where I came across Hereward amongst the wounded."

"And I thank God for that!" Branda declared again as she gently wiped her husband's face.

"And what now?" Mildryth pressed.

"I will go south." He said firmly.

"South?"

"Aye, messengers were sent to London at my command before the battle today. King Harold will either come north or send a force to meet the peril. The raid on Scarborough may not have worried him overly but he cannot afford to ignore the fall of York. The whole of Northumbria may now be lost and King Harold will find himself between two hard enemies. He must act if he wishes to keep his crown and I mean to meet with the army he sends before it reaches York and tell them how things stand here."

"Tis a pity that there are not more of you," Mildryth commented.

"I think that there are," Coenred told her. "I have talked with many survivors and I have learnt that a large group of theigns and their retainers broke from Eorl Morcar's left flank

when their fate was made clear to them. They cut their way through the Norse lines and pushed south. I believe Aethelwine was amongst them. The safest place for them now would be Tadcaster, there they could re-group, distant from the immediate attentions of Hardrada but still close enough to York so as to know what befalls the city. I will make for Tadcaster and then decide where to go from there.”

There was a knock at the door. Branda glanced up at them with a worried expression.

“I have stayed too long,” Coenred admitted.

“It maybe the healer,” Mildryth told them both, “I will go and see.”

She left Coenred and Branda to exchange worried glances in the low lit room. The children had remained where they had been when Mildryth had first entered the house. They watched her silently as she opened the door. To her relief there was not a party of the Viking garrison but only a woman in a hooded cloak.

“Branda sent for me,” She said in a tired but sharp voice.

“Yes, this way. Through to the back.”

The healer did not stand on ceremony but walked straight through the house with Mildryth following.

“I need more light,” She insisted curtly, “and space.”

“We were just leaving,” Mildryth said, “come husband.”

She looked at Coenred, slightly embarrassed at using that word again and yet feeling it necessary to explain his presence. She did not know the healer and so did not completely trust her.

“Branda, I wish you good fortune,” Coenred said.

He walked to Mildryth's side. They moved through into the other room with Branda following.

“Send for me if you need anything,” Mildryth told her before they opened the door, “I will come by in the morning.”

They embraced quickly in farewell. Coenred opened the door carefully and looked about outside but could see no one in the dark street.

“God be with thee both,” Branda said.

“You need Him more than we,” Mildryth replied.

They stepped into the quiet night and the door shut behind them. She started to slip her arm through his but Coenred moved quickly so that she was on his left-hand side. He had only her scramseax as a weapon but still he preferred to keep his sword arm free should he need to react quickly to danger.

“What now?” She asked quietly.

“I must leave the city before dawn,” he answered.

His eyes roved the shadows ahead of them and his ears strained to discern the approach of danger in the scant sounds of the late evening. Branda's house was close to the hall, but not as close as Mildryth's. It also stood on the main street that led from the great hall to the church of St. Peter's where resided the Archbishop of York when present in the city. At Mildryth's house they would be uncomfortably close to the Vikings and they would have to walk down the widest street to get there. He did not fear the enemy but he did worry about what his discovery might mean for Mildryth.

The closer I am to danger, the further I am away from harm!

Mayhap there would be some truth proven in that saying?

"Have you eaten? I prepared a stew earlier. I can warm it up quickly. You must have something to eat before you leave. There is drink also." She spoke rapidly, trying to disguise the fear that ached in her stomach.

It occurred to Coenred that he had not eaten since the early morning when they had prepared for the battle. He did not feel particularly hungry; the sight of so much death and violence had suppressed his appetite. However, he found himself in no hurry to leave Mildryth now that he was back in her company.

"You can rest too. There is time yet and the dark of the night will help hide you from the watch when you must leave York." She continued nervously.

"Tis too soon to go yet," he agreed with her, although in truth this was just an excuse, "Edwin is not alone and can wait a little longer for me."

They reached her small house without incident and passed quickly over the threshold, barring the door behind them. Mildryth lit a candle with a taper from the low burning hearth and then set to with warming up the meal.

"You are not hurt?" She asked him as she worked.

He shook his head in reply. He had some cuts and bruises but they were nothing to complain about.

"Edwin was very good; I must thank you for sending him to me. It was a comfort not to be alone during that time, although if I had known that Hereward had been so foolish as to pick up a spear I would have gone to reassure Branda sooner."

She decided not to mention anything about the fool Wulfhere. Nothing had come of it and Coenred, she believed, did not need thoughts of the cowardly mercenary to occupy his mind when he would be leaving the city again so very soon. She was glad that Edwin had clearly not said a word about the incident either.

"It was the least that I could do," he told her, knowing that she was talking because she was nervous and not just being polite. "Many good men died today to no avail. I have visited others in the city to bring them the grim news."

The breaking of their hearts reminded him of why he had chosen to remain unmarried but he found that he could not admit to such a thing in front of Mildryth. She had made the first move in asking for his protection and he had followed her lead almost blindly.

Mayhap it was the thoughts of retiring from this life as a warrior and going to the farm in Holderness that had allowed his feelings for her to grow so quickly?

Even the violence of the day had not dispelled them; rather it had seemed to make his heart beat more strongly. Eadgyd's tears at the news of the death of Hereric had touched him but her sorrow could not make him regret his own situation now. The truth was that here in Mildryth's company he had quickly realised that he was glad of what had happened between them; as little as it was so far.

"I am sorry for Hereward's injury. He is a good man but no fighter. His death will go hard with Branda I fear."

"Mayhap he will not die," she said this more in hope than expectation, "if the healer is skilled mayhap she will mend his wound."

Coenred did not look to correct her even though he knew for certain that the man's injury would prove fatal. He moved to sit down beside the hearth and rest his wearied limbs.

"What were you doing in the hall?" He asked her.

She glanced at him and then returned her attention to stirring the stew that she had placed on the hearth to warm up. She left the hearth to pick up two clay bowls and a couple of spoons.

"I think that we should not talk of such things in the time that is left to us." She eventually answered him with some degree of conviction. "I had not thought to feel this way about anyone again after my Aethelheard was slain, but today I found myself fearing for you. It was not a good feeling and yet it made each minute of the day drag out into an hour seemingly, and I knew that I was alive. I prayed for you. I prayed that you would return alive to me. You have captured my heart Coenred."

She looked up and at him from across the hearth, the warm light from the glowing coals bathing her face with a soft radiance. She smiled at him, almost shyly as if she had admitted a great secret and did not know yet how he would respond.

"In times past I have entered battle with no one on my mind except the enemy and then my thoughts were ugly," he told her. "Today I thought of you, often. You said to me, when we first met not so long ago, that love for another might give a desire to my sword arm to maintain my life; you were not wrong. I thought that concern for another might be a distraction, that my guard might slip if my mind were not upon the danger at hand, but it did not. Instead I fought harder and better than I had ever done so before and I escaped injury."

"They say that a mighty Viking warrior, a Royal Companion who fought at the side of the Norwegian King for many years, was killed today by a Saxon huscarl upon the field of battle.

The Norse King told the city men of the death of Siward and how it vexed him so that he thought to burn the city and kill all its inhabitants.”

“I killed a Viking who called himself Siward,” Coenred admitted.

“Then you are indeed a mighty warrior, mightier even than the greatest of the Vikings,” she declared.

“And you have made me this great fighter of men,” He smiled grimly.

“No, My Lord, you have always been this great, but only now have you found the need to prove it. If I have given you reason to discover this then I am glad because you have given me reason to discover that life is still worth living, even for a widow.” Her smile was tinged with sadness but heartfelt all the same.

“I should not leave you.”

“And betray who and what you are? No, you are now what we need. The eorls have abandoned us and the king is still, as far as we know, in the south whilst the enemy is within the walls and proclaims himself our conqueror. The people need someone to give them hope.”

“I am but one man.”

“So is King Harold but we look to him all the same,” she replied quickly. “I know that you would say that you are no king, but consider what you have already told me, that you already plan to go south and meet the king's army and bring them against the Vikings. This is the action of a real leader of men. This is what the eorls should do. This is what you would do. I said before that I had found in you a noble heart that I much admired, you will not maintain that admiration by using me as an excuse to act in a way other than what your honour tells you to do.”

He felt a weight lift from his shoulders as he listened to her words. In truth a conflict had been growing inside him between the soldier that already knew what must be done and the would-be lover that was still uncertain as to what was the right thing to be done in favour of her. He did not want to leave her in danger but he knew that as long as the city men obeyed the commands of Hardrada then there would be peace in York. Her danger would be no greater than at any other time. Of course that might change if he did indeed meet with the king's army and they pushed north to re-take the city.

“You are making it easier for me to go.”

“I could be selfish and keep you here, that is true, but then Tostig Godwinson would bask in his victory and I would have no revenge upon him. Also you might be discovered and that might result in both our deaths with nothing to show for it. Now is not the time for selfish actions,” She recalled her recent intent to kill Tostig within the great hall and it seemed to her that that had been a totally different woman. “You must go to the men who fought and survived this day and I must go to Branda and offer what comfort I can to her. These are our callings.”

“You are indeed a wise woman Mildryth.”

“And a good cook too I hope,” she passed him an earthenware bowl full of pork stew and a spoon. “Or at least I hope you find me so.” He thanked her and made himself comfortable. “Now rest and eat, we have some hours to enjoy each other's company yet.”

They ate for awhile in a comfortable silence.

“Another time and some would make sport of your name to know that you had invited me in after dark,” he said at last, breaking the peace between them.

“We are man and woman Coenred, what we choose to do behind a shuttered door is no one else's business but ours. I care not for the gossip of others, and there is no sin where our hearts truly agree with one another.”

“There is no sin where the intent is honest,” he agreed with her, putting down his now empty bowl.

She rose and came to sit beside him. Again she surprised him with her quiet confidence as she raised his arm and wrapped it around her shoulders and nestled her head on his chest. He could not resist the urge to stroke her soft hair with his other hand. With her free arm she embraced his body and pulled herself more tightly into him.

“For now there is no one but us,” she said quietly.

He kissed her head and squeezed her gently but firmly.