

## The City of York

Mildryth was somewhat surprised to see Branda suddenly enter through the only door into her small house without so much as a knock to announce her presence. She immediately realised that all was not well with her friend, her face poorly disguised a consternation that made her act with in an uncharacteristic haste. She also wore a cloak with the hood raised and held a walking staff as if she were prepared to go out beyond the walls of the city.

“Branda, what brings you here my friend?” Mildryth spoke in a welcoming manner as she rose from a stool where she had been sat enjoying a cup of fruit tea.

“Oh Mildryth, I wish I had no cause to bother thee, but it is Caelin thee see!”

Branda shut the door behind with a little too much effort causing it to bang noisily in its frame. She glanced back at the portal as if it were to blame and then turned her worried eyes back to her friend.

“What is wrong with Caelin?”

“The poor lad’s been robbed!”

“Robbed?!”

“Aye, tricked out of his due by two ruffians when he sought only to trade fair by them, such are the lessons we must learn these days.”

“Was it much in money that they took?”

“Enough.” Branda looked as if she were about to burst into tears, Mildryth could understand the woman’s state, her grief was still raw.

“I have a little put aside if that will help?” Mildryth could think of no other way to offer assistance to her friend and started towards the locked chest that held all of the valuables that wyrd had left in her possession.

“No, no. We don’t need thy coin, we have enough, it’s just that we don’t have it to hand,” Branda explained, reddening a little. “Hereward’s funeral cost us a fair penny, monies that we would have used to see us through these troubled times, but I thought that we had enough, we did have enough, until those two nithings robbed poor Caelin who is working so hard to take the place of his father.” Tears started forth as Branda finished speaking, her emotions getting the better of her.

“Then what do you need from me Branda? I will do whatever I can.” Mildryth took her friend’s arm, wanting to convey her support.

“Will thee take a walk with me out along the northern road?”

“Leave the city? Branda, these are lawless times, it will be dangerous beyond the walls of York.”

“Nay more dangerous than it be within the walls, what with the Norse ruling our city as they do, but it cannot be helped. Hereward hid a stash of coin out there and marked it so that I would know it. It’s money meant for dire times and such is what we find ourselves in now as we owe money for grain bought on my husband’s reputation and ‘tis the harvest time when Caelin really should be buying up more grain to sell; he needs all the money that I can raise for him.”

“You have nowhere else to turn?” Mildryth bit her bottom lip pensively. She had to admit that the thought of going out beyond the city limits did not appeal to her.

“Afore the Vikings attacked Hereward had lent money to others, money that I could call in, but those families are much like ours, their men-folk dead now, carried off on spear-points. I could not ask for them to return what is owed when wyrd has already plunged them into despair.”

In truth this answer only served to raise Branda in Mildryth’s estimation, she could see that her friend was trying to resolve a difficult situation without causing any further grief to others. Perhaps the situation was not quite as bad as she envisaged? There may be other monies put aside that Branda had forgotten about for the moment? In truth that mattered little. Mildryth understood her friend’s predicament and realised that there was a means to resolving it that would cause her only a little interruption to her daily activities, none of which were of any great importance.

Before Branda’s arrival she had been contemplating Coenred, first fondly as a man who had only recently inspired her to love again, then more apprehensively as she inevitably thought of the danger that he was bound to put himself in when the time came for him to face their enemies again. As a trained warrior she knew that this was an act that was second nature to him, nevertheless, even with their steel armour and long spears huscarls died in battle. It still took courage to join the shield-wall despite what some might say. It seemed to her that in this instance wyrd was calling for her to test her own courage in favour of a friend as the man she loved did without hesitation.

“The Norse garrison has on the whole been true to the word of their king, life within these walls has not been as dangerous as we might have feared, but such is not the same, I fear, beyond the reach of their rule. Hunger drives the wolf out of the woods, as they say, and the woods around York will be filled by men as desperate as wolves. If we go then we go prepared.”

“I have my staff and I can box the ears of any who dare to even look upon us!”  
Branda spoke up defiantly.

Mildryth picked up a braid and tied her hair back before throwing on a cloak, a soft shade of blue and made from much better quality cloth than Branda’s. Next she looked amongst her kitchen tools and selected a long seax that had a sharp blade and a wicked point. She would have liked to have had her own scramseax to hand, the one that her husband Aethelheard had had made for her, but she had given that weapon to Coenred as a token of the contract that had been verbally agreed between them, back when she had sought his protection from the dark and dangerous times that wyrd had seemingly given her a warning about. When he had come back to York after the fateful battle, only three days ago, he had worn her knife in his belt but she never thought to ask him to return it to her.

*“It is mine to keep or to give as I see fit. Take this knife and wear it in your belt. Use it to keep the threat of our enemies at bay. Mayhap one day, in your last battle, when your shield is splintered, your spear broken, and your sword too heavy to wield, my knife will indeed come between you and death. It may preserve your life so that you may return it to me when the great lords’ argument of the day is over and he who wears the crown of England cares little for such as we. I will await you.”*

Those were the words that she had spoken to Coenred when she had handed the knife over to him and she knew that the great argument of the day had not yet been settled. Perhaps their love had flared into life too quickly, too fiercely, fanned by the flames of war, or rather, as she preferred to think, the fact that she had been widowed once already made her all the keener to live her life in each and everyday that came to her. Ethelheard had impressed upon her this love of living and she honoured his memory by living in that way because she knew that it was what he had wanted for her and that had meant something in more peaceful days. Coenred was not Ethelheard, however. They shared some traits and they may have liked each other as friends had they ever met, but her husband had not been a warrior in the same character as Coenred. He had donned his armour and drew his sword when commanded by his lord to do so but he had never gone looking for the poet’s glory of battle.

That was Coenred’s preserve. He was a huscarl and an eorl’s man, but he was as unlike a warrior as she could imagine. He spoke quietly, wore clothes for as long as they were good, decorated himself with little gold, always well spoken, and in

reputation a man second to none. She had found him honourable and brave, considerate of others and loyal even to the ceorls who served him.

*“I sought to commission you as my protector Lord Coenred, but I find in you a noble heart that I much admire.”*

How true those words had been that passed between them on the eve of battle. All of a sudden her own heart ached with a terrible pang. She could not move for a moment, her entire being seemed rooted to the last memory of her lover as he had exited through that same door that Branda had entered. Coenred, dressed in the clothes of a theign with her scramseax in his belt, with a look in his eye that she could not doubt.

“Mildryth?!” Branda took a step towards her friend with a concerned look.

Mildryth turned her face and forced a smile that she did not feel, a presentiment of danger haunted her thoughts. She held up the seax that she had selected.

“It can be no bad thing to arm ourselves against any perils that wyrd might bring our way,” she told the other woman.

“We will walk with care,” Branda agreed, feeling relieved at the return of Mildryth’s resolve. “We must pass out through the northern gate.”

They left the small house and followed the winding street up to the main road that linked the north and south gates of the city. The streets were busy as life in York seemed to be returning to some degree of normality but beneath this appearance there was a tangible air of strained relations between the Saxons and the Norse garrison.

Once on the main street Branda and Mildryth turned and headed towards St. Peter’s church, passing Branda’s house as they went. The large door on one side of her property was swung open and sacks of grain were arranged for selling by Caelin who was working within, negotiating another sale with a Saxon man several years his senior.

Branda did not attempt to attract her son’s attention. She preferred that he did not know what she was about and so she took advantage of him being preoccupied to pass by unnoticed. They approached the gate and had to wait to pass before the Viking guards who were busy checking everyone who either entered or left the city. The Norse were mostly interested in the men, however, and they paid the women scant attention, so slipping out of the city proved much easier than Mildryth had expected.

Beyond the gate they found things much as they had ever been. To either side of the portal there was a collection of makeshift houses, some little more than lean-tos, which had been erected by poor peasants who could not afford a dwelling within the city walls. Here they traded what they could with those who passed them by.

The two women followed the northern road, walking along the side so as to avoid the carts drawn by oxen. The sun was high overhead and burned warmly down upon them, but Branda had brought a flask of weak beer so they did not have to suffer thirst. They walked for two miles before woodland began to rise around them.

“’Tis not much further,” Branda assured Mildryth.

“You remember the way?”

“Aye, I know it well enough, we must walk a little ways further and then go east into the forest a little ways again, to where a rock covered in moss rises before a spring.”

True to her word Branda soon indicated that they should head under the canopy of the trees along a path that seemed seldom travelled. The peasant woman stopped to slake her thirst and took the opportunity to see if they were being followed but there was no one else around. Mildryth also searched the foliage that surrounded them but could neither see nor hear anything to concern them.

After the short break Branda set off once again down the narrow track with Mildryth following. It was not too long before they came to the rock that Branda had described, a large gray slab that was covered in green moss washed at its’ base by the lapping of a little stream. Again Branda stopped and searched the area with her eyes and ears for several minutes.

“God grant us a lonely moment,” Branda breathed.

She moved to the south side of the rock and stared hard at the ground before walking several paces with the stone immediately behind her, stopping when she came to a mature downey birch tree. Branda moved around the tree until she was at its’ south side and then stopped again. She lent her staff against the trunk of the tree. At the base of the trunk there was a broad stone that was covered in moss. As Mildryth approached she saw her friend carefully move the stone revealing a clear patch of earth beneath. Branda withdrew a seax from her belt. It was a broad bladed tool with one edge sharpened, with this she began to dig at the soil that had been hidden by the stone. In a few moments she had revealed the top of an earthenware pot. The soil was loose and very quickly Branda freed the vessel from its hiding place.

“Once revealed best moved,” Branda said to herself while she removed a length of cloth from a bag slung over her shoulder beneath her cloak. With this she wrapped the pot and placed it into the bag for safekeeping. “All done!”

“Then we had best be on our way,” Mildryth suggested.

She glanced around them but there seemed to be no other living thing within their vicinity. This did not put her at ease however. She felt that it was better to be out in the open where they could see danger coming if it were to present itself.

“Just a sip to chase the dryness,” Branda insisted as she raised her flask to her lips.

It was quite warm under the branches of the trees and Mildryth did not complain at the delay, especially when she slaked her own thirst with the warm weak beer. Branda recovered her staff and her expression looked much lighter than it had at any time since Mildryth had seen her that morning.

“The sooner you are home the easier my heart will be,” Mildryth confessed.

“The worst is done,” Branda assured her, “now we have but a warm walk home and I feel more like talking as we are wont to do.”

“I enjoy the sound of your voice, my friend, but I think that we should keep our silence until we are back upon the open road once more.”

They returned to the rock and picked up the little used trail once more and set off in silence heading westward. It seemed to be no time at all before they were passing through thinning woodland and they could see a large cart pulled by two oxen through the staggered boles of the trees. Mildryth judged that it would be well clear of them on its’ journey to York by the time they reached the road and thought that it might be better for that; any chance to avoid notice should be taken when recovering money from a hiding place.

“Has thee been to the hall recently?” Branda asked, her spirits rising as the foliage over their heads lessened and let more light fall upon them, seemingly making the air freer too as it had seemed close deeper in the woodland.

“Nay and I’ll not set foot in there whilst the Vikings hold the city.”

“My thoughts also, though there are some possessed of less conviction and even less shame.”

“Indeed, there are some young women who mind not who flatters them for their charms, what matters it to such as they that their would-be lovers brought down brave Saxon men on the field at Fulford Gate?”

They stepped out of the tree-line and onto the northern road. For a moment Mildryth felt her heart soar as they left the enclosing confines of the forest behind them but then she saw a figure to her right and her breath caught in her chest.

A man had also stepped out of the wood some two hundred yards north of the two women. He had a furtive movement as if he wished not to be seen making his way into the sunlight just the same as them. His hair was lank but his eyes were bright and ever watchful, he saw the two women immediately and stopped in his tracks.

*Wyrð is a teasing bitch!*

Wulfhere stared at Mildryth and Branda in disbelief.

He had skirted York moving westwards from Herewode, walking with confidence through the woodland aiming to strike the north road. He had no firm plans other than to locate another village and find some easy money to steal. If necessary he would call in his ruffians but he had no scruples about taking an opportunity for just himself if he could. His way had not brought him close to any habitations but he was not concerned as he had money for food and he knew that Imminric's outlaws would be satisfied with their haul for a day or two yet. He had not expected to encounter the scornful slattern on the open road however. He had daydreamed about what might occur when he came upon her in York but that had been nothing more than a pleasant diversion, one that had just turned into a reality.

It occurred to Mildryth that the cart was only a little way off and that they might be able to catch up with it.

"Run Branda!"

"Run? Run from what?"

"From that villain Wulfhere!"

Branda glanced around and saw the butescarl striding towards them with menace in every step. She needed no more incentive but started to run, gripping her friend's hand.

The two women had a good start on him and Wulfhere was not keen on running but this was too good a chance for him to give up. He could only guess at what errand had brought them to the forest, although it probably would not take him very long to think of a probable reason, but it did not really matter to him now. He had his chance of revenge on the both of them and he would take it. He burst into a charge with his langseax now in his hand.

It took only a few moments for Mildryth to realise that they were in a race that they could not win. Branda was weighed down by the pot full of coins that she carried, not to mention her own greater weight, and neither woman could move too freely in their long dresses and cloaks. Wulphere was much faster than them and closed ground with every step. The road to the south turned eastwards and the cart that they had seen earlier had already disappeared from view. She realised that their only hope would be to attract the attention of the men who accompanied the cart.

Wulphere put on a burst of speed and reached out with his left hand and caught hold of Branda's hood as it hung down her back. He jerked it savagely and slid to a stop at the same time. The large woman was dragged backwards with sudden violence, her hand torn from Mildryth's. She landed on her back before the outlaw.

"Bitches!" Wulphere spat at them.

Mildryth spun on her foot and screamed.

"Scream all you want, no one will come," Wulphere assured her. "I am going to give you reason to scream."

His eyes blazed and his face was contorted by evil intent; they could not expect any mercy at his hand that much was clear. Mildryth glanced at Branda where she lay and knew that her friend was in great danger.

"Leave us be nothing!" an angry note filled her voice as she called upon a memory of the authority that she once had held as a theign's wife.

"Leave you be?" Wulphere sneered even as he caught his breath once again, "I have a debt to pay with you."

"A debt of your own imagining," Mildryth told him, her voice becoming harder. "I never gave thee leave to expect anything of me, I am theign-worthy and what are thee? A peasant! One who sets his aim too far above his own ability!"

"I'll gut thee wench!"

"For what? For knowing you for what you are? For knowing you to be less the man than you pretend to be?"

Wulphere leapt at her with a snarl. The rough sword in his hand swung backwards as if he intended to land a blow upon her with it. Mildryth stepped back quickly, trying to keep the distance between them. The butescarl kept coming, his face contorted with rage and eyes only for the scornful woman that he had once coveted but now only felt hatred for. He could close the distance between them easily but that was not to be his way. Normally he killed quickly when moved to it but today he



fancied that he might take his time to inflict pain upon his victims. He would not let her suffering cease too soon.

With his eyes only for Mildryth Wulphere did not see Branda recover her feet once more. Her face was pale with fear but that trepidation was not sufficient to stop her from picking up her long hardwood staff from where it had fallen in the road. She gripped it with two hands, holding it across her body, and marched on the man who had already crossed blows with her once previously.

Mildryth knew that they might have only one chance of defeating the butescarl and stopped retreating before him. She drew herself up as her right hand slid to the scramseax that was held in her thin belt. The handle felt surprisingly reassuring as her fingers fastened around it.

“I’ll not bow down to thee!”

“Oh you’ll do so much more than bow to me woman, you’ll know me in ways your pretty head has not imagined,” Wulphere’s words were spoken with an icy tone.

He stopped before her, just short of reaching her with his langseax. He paused for a moment, both rejoicing in her apparent helplessness before him and recovering his breath once more. The weapon was raised to point at her bosom, he glanced at the weapon and followed its’ length with his eyes from the hilt to the very tip where it threatened Mildryth.

“I will inflict such humiliation upon thee before I spill thy heart’s blood. I will see thee grovel in the dirt like a hound’s bitch! I’ll make thee sing for death! I’ll –“

From the corner of his eye Wulphere saw the movement and instinctively stepped away from it, a motion that took him away from Mildryth too. The blow that Branda had aimed at his outstretched arm collided with the iron of his sword instead. The staff continued its downward trajectory and its tip joined the langseax in the dirt of the road.

Wulphere swore in both pain and alarm. The strike had been strong enough to knock his weapon from his hand leaving it tingling from the impact; it also put Branda into a position of poor balance. Not wishing to allow her a second chance with that heavy staff Wulphere lunged at her and pushed her roughly backwards. The momentum proved too much and once more Branda fell backwards to the earth.

Quickly Wulphere changed direction and closed down on Mildryth. They came together with his hands reaching for her throat. There was a sudden flash of light between them as the blade of the scramseax caught the September sun. The thief cried

out in pain and shock, spinning away from Mildryth and suddenly clapping both hands to the left side of his face. Blood ran freely between his fingers.

“What have you done?!”

“I’ve marked you for the cur you are defiler!” Mildryth spat back at him.

She glanced at the weapon in her hand and saw a thin trail of blood on the edge. She had never cut anyone before and the sight might have unnerved her except that her heart was racing and her body was flushed with anger.

Wulfhere looked towards her and reached out with his right hand again taking a step forwards. She wondered if he would be stupid enough to pursue his attack and prepared to strike again, raising the blade in her hand. Suddenly the outlaw realised his position as one of peril. Two men appeared in the road several yards south and called out to them. The men driving the cart had finally responded to Mildryth’s cries. Not only that but Branda had once again recovered herself and was bearing down upon him with her heavy staff held at the ready.

With an outraged roar Wulfhere turned, snatched up his fallen weapon, and ran back into the wood from which he had emerged so recently, his left hand still clapped to the side of his face and stained red with his own blood.

“Once again you flee before women!” Mildryth scorned his disappearing back.

“Is thee alright?” Branda asked with genuine concern. “I thought he did thee an injury.”

“He came no closer than my knife, which is to say that only the nithing suffered a cut this day, but how do you Branda?”

“He fair bruises my dignity when he knocks me over like that,” her friend admitted, “but that is all the harm he does me and it is the soonest mended.”

“What goes here?”

The youngest of the two peasant men had reached them at a run and he carried a langseax in his hand. He was well built and seemed ready for a fight. Looking upon him Mildryth thought ironically that they had actually saved Wulfhere’s skin by driving the villain away before this young hero could get to grips with him.

“Hloth,” Mildryth told him. “We were attacked by an outlaw who thought us defenceless maids.”

“Are there more of them?” He demanded, his eyes searching the nearby woodland. Unconsciously he put himself between the two women and the forest, a protective gesture that gave them some measure of his sense of honour.

“Nay, he were a solitary fellow.”

“Come walk with us, it will be safer until we get to York,” the young man insisted. His eyes kept travelling back to the tree-line but it was more in hope of spotting the villain than in fear of being surprised.

Without another word Mildryth and Branda accepted the young man’s invitation and began heading south down the road. The young peasant’s father was waiting for them at the turn, casually leaning upon his staff. As they neared the man’s attitude changed.

“Manwine, where are your manners, this lady is theign-worthy!” the elder declared.

“It matters not,” Mildryth insisted.

“But it does, My Lady. I am Tatwine and this is my son Manwine, we are free ceorls-“

“And you have done us a service by chasing off the outlaw who accosted us,” Mildryth interrupted him to press her argument. “If you are willing we will walk a ways with you so as to be safe from such attentions again?”

“Of course, My Lady,” Tatwine nodded to her and looked at his son with a certain degree of pride. “I would offer that you ride in the cart but it is full of vegetables and might prove uncomfortable.”

“I thank you for your consideration but it is not far to York and the weather is pleasant, we will walk with you,” Mildryth smiled.

The two peasants returned to their cart again, Manwine moving to lead the dull oxen on along the road and his father walked at the tail of the carriage. Mildryth and Branda trailed gratefully behind him.

“I hope never to set eyes on that cur again!” Branda declared. “I ken not how he comes to haunt thy footsteps or why wyrd gives him leave to appear at such times as these?”

“The weak will always terrorise women-folk when men are lost to war, they think it makes them strong,” Mildryth replied.

Her heart had slowed its pace and the knife was back in its sheath. She was surprised to find that her hands were shaking involuntarily and presumed that this resulted from the violent encounter. Thinking thus she wondered if Coenred suffered from such tremors after a battle but she could not envisage him being so moved. He was too experienced in such matters and she was not.

“But why do we encounter that foul being every time?” Branda pressed. “What does he in the woods and how comes he to be stepping onto the road at the same time as we?”

“Wyrd is not to be understood easily. Mayhap he will think better of persecuting us again, especially as I have given him a constant reminder of this last encounter?”

“Aye. That thee did lass; that thee did!”