



The Demon of Harlech

Coenred the Huscarl



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In 1055 King Edward of England sent Eorl Aelfgar of Mercia into exile in Ireland. The eorldean departed as commanded by his liege lord but chose not to remain abroad for too long. He had taken with him his household, including a large number of loyal warriors, among whom there were counted huscarls, hearth-companions, formidable professional weapons-men who swore a death oath to protect their lord or die doing so. These men honoured their oath and sailed with their eorl to Ireland and from there to the fractious kingdom of Wales.

In days past Aelfgar had been tasked with holding the Welsh in place along the border with his beloved Mercia. He knew them to be a subtle and stout enemy, the kind of men that would make an ally to trouble even the King of England.

For his part King Gruffydd ap Llywelyn could also use the support of equally stout Saxons in his bid to rule over a yet to be unified Welsh kingdom. So it was in September of the year 1055 that the exiled Saxons and the men of North Wales came together as allies. While the eorl and the king took counsel together to decide which path they might both go down to achieve their separate aims, their men sat around several campfires and waited patiently for the call to arms, getting to know their new allies a little better in the meantime.

“It is decided then, Eorl Aelfgar is to unite with the King of Wales,” Sigbert the Saxon spoke to the campfire around which the small company sat.

“We are to be allies, we the Brythoniaid and you the Saeson.” Meilyr conceded in his lilting Welsh accent.

“The Iras were not so welcoming or as willing to assist our lord, you Walha have proved more hospitable,” Coenred added in his turn.

“None can out do the Brythoniaid for hospitality,” Meilyr returned, “as long as the guests are friendly of course.”

“It is a curious state of affairs that we Saxons sit with you around this fire in Wales and now consider ourselves friends. There are other Saxons who would not share that opinion,” Coenred observed.

“Aye, we’ve fought often enough to know each other well as honoured enemies,” his fellow Saxon agreed.

“’Tis true, but it meets the needs of both parties that we sit in peace around a warm hearth eh? Your eorl is at odds with the King of England, as is my lord. He deigns to unite Cymru into one kingdom, to end the existence of the three Brython kingdoms, but that does not suit your King Edward. He fears a strong Cymru.”

“He fears many things, the Walha, the French, the Norse and even his own Saxons. He was born in England but grew up in Normandy; some say he’s more Norman than Saxon now!” Sigbert complained.

“I think King Edward has good reason to fear King Gruffydd, he led you to victory at Leominster only three years ago over a Saxon fyrd led by his favourites at court, Normans all. Eorl Aelfgar is adept in war as well you know. The union of his household with that of King Gruffydd will give sincere reason for concern to the court at Westminster.”

“That may well be friend Coenred, but though the deal has been struck one toast in a meadow does not mark the commencement of war. There is much to be done yet thinks I. You Saesons are not like us Brythoniaid in matters of the sword; we fight differently.”

“Mayhap. I agree though that the eorl’s household is in disarray since we arrived from Ireland.”

“That’s not the work for huscarls like us Coenred, ‘tis for the servants to put the house back into order. I fear that wyrd will demand us to sit around and while away many a day in waiting,” Sigbert complained.

“’Tis spoken abroad that the eorl’s daughter is to be married to my lord the king to seal the alliance?”

“That would seem to be the way of it,” Coenred nodded.

“Nothing will happen until after the wedding then.”

“Agreed.” Coenred stared absently into the flames of the fire.

“Except that we must be idle and await a wedding before a war.” Sigbert scowled.

An uncomfortable silence fell on the three men as they sat and watched the flames flicker before them. It was eventually broken by the Welshman.

“Know thee of Branwen and her sorry tale?” Meilyr asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“No, we know nothing of such a maid.”

“Now there’s shame seeing as you reside in her country and all.”

“Is she some famous noblewoman then?” Sigbert pressed.

“Oh aye, famous throughout Cymru. Branwen was the sister of Bendigeidfran, King of all Brythons, and it was while sitting on a rock near the sea hard by Harlech that he spied the sails of Matholwch, King of Ireland, who was come to Cymru to ask for her hand in marriage. It is a sad and sorry tale that forms the second branch of the Mabinogion and it is begun not too far from here at a place where I hold lands. I am minded to take you there, to the seat of Harlech, if you were minded to go?”

“Travel abroad to see the place of a sad and sorry tale, what diversion would there be in that?” Sigbert mused unconvinced.

“We would be away from the household while the marriage is being arranged,” Coenred pointed out. “No need for us to stand a guard of honour for giggling maids.”

“Well, there is that I suppose.” His fellow Saxon nodded to himself.

“It is said that you Saesons don’t consider us Brythoniaid to be civilised, to have culture and such, I would like to prove those so minded to be wrong, in their opinion, for the sake of friendship of course!” Meilyr prompted.

Coenred smiled. “I don’t share that opinion my friend, I have heard your singing; I have heard none better.”

“’Tis a lyrical sound indeed,” Sigbert agreed.

“Then if your lord has no particular use for you over the next few days why not come with me to Harlech, to see the place where Princess Branwen wrote her story?”

“Why not?” Coenred mused. “I’ll ask the eorl presently.”

“Tell him that it will allow us to get to know our new allies all the better,” Sigbert suggested with a grin.

The following morning the party of three set off heading south through the mountains of Gwynedd on stout Welsh ponies. The cloud lay low, covering the peaks, and seemingly pressing down onto the land but the countryside was green and vibrant. Many sheep could be seen grazing over the rich pastures through which they passed. They travelled to Harlech from the north, coming from Caernarfon. Meilyr led them into the mountains of Snowdonia, heading for Beddgelert, which was a journey of some thirteen miles.

The Welshman was in very good spirits and regaled them with folk tales of his people who were inhabitants of the immediate area as they travelled through it. Meilyr had an infectious spirit, light of heart but strong with passion. The journey was not onerous and they took the time to view the landscape about them, particularly when they came to places as pleasant looking as the village that sat at the confluence of the rivers Glaslyn and Colwyn.

“To the west you can see the Moel Hebog,” Meilyr told his companions and waved a hand in that direction.

“And what is a Moel Hebog?” Asked Sigbert. He found the Welsh language somewhat difficult to pronounce never mind to understand.

“’Tis the Bare Hill of the Hawk; a mountain!” Meilyr told him enthusiastically.

“If it’s a hill why do you call it a mountain?” The Saxon pressed.

“Ah that’s because what passes in Cymru for a hill is a mountain in Lloegyr and you have no other word that could describe our mountains here sufficiently!”

“There is one truth in your country my friend, Cymru certainly has more mountains than we Saxons are used to seeing,” Coenred told him. The compliment seemed to have the desired affect, the Welsh warrior grinned even more expansively.

“The Christian priest Celert is said to have resided here some three hundred years ago and why not, it is a pretty enough place is it not?”

“Are we to reside here?”

“Yes, it is another twenty miles at least to Harlech, a journey best not made in the dark.”

“I don’t suppose they have a longhouse here?” Sigbert enquired. He had a taste for some ale and the warmth of a good hearth.

“The longhouse is not our way of it friend. We will camp on the edge of the village and I will seek hospitality from the headman. Mostly, however, we will make our own merriment I think.”

They had not brought their retainers thinking that they could best serve the eorl's household in preparation for the coming wedding. It fell to the warriors then to build a modest fire and erect the simple tents. It was an employment that they were both practiced and skilled in, however. They were Saxon huscarls, professional warriors who spent many days travelling the lands of their lord to enforce his rule and protect his possessions. Although they were required by their high status to have servants it was understood that in times of war and alarm it was not always possible to employ them in every event. As warriors they were also charged with protecting the people against raiders, Saxon and Welsh, and, perhaps the most to be feared, the Norse from Ireland and across the northern sea. Meilyr was not a huscarl but fulfilled similar duties to his king. He explained to his new friends that he owned an estate in the Nant Gwynant valley, just north east of their present location.

When Meilyr returned from the village the warriors sat around a fire eating bread, cheese, and a little cured meat washed down with weak beer. They talked amongst themselves as they watched the sky darken in the east and the first points of starlight appear there. The night was spent pleasantly in good company and passed without any alarms being sounded.

The next morning the party continued their journey to Harlech. The day was brighter and their horses had been well rested. The small group of warriors made good time heading south towards Maentwrog where, Meilyr insisted, they could cross the Afon Dwyryd, which he explained to Sigbert was a mighty river. The Welshman was proved correct when they arrived on the north bank of the Dwyryd and a villager ferried them across safely for a silver coin. With the river winding its way out to sea to the west they rode through more hills heading southwest, passing through woodland and good pastures.

Throughout their journey they had encountered peasants who had turned mostly disinterested faces towards the group, although on one or two occasions they had been met with open hostility when the locals had heard the Saxons talking in their own language. Meilyr had smoothed their passage, however, with some choice words of

his own, occasionally spoken in a harsh tone as a lord to a serf. Nevertheless the people had seemed on the whole content with their lot. They had food, homes, an abundance of sheep, and the protection afforded by their valleys against both the weather and other men of base intent.

Harlech appeared to be much the same as the other villages that they had seen when they finally approached it from the north east. It stood facing the sea, overlooking Tremadog Bay, with hills to the east stretching both north and south. There was a notable spur of rock jutting out towards the sea.

“That was Bendigeidfran’s seat when the King of Ireland came calling for his sister’s hand in marriage,” Meilyr told them when they came close enough to see the imposing cliff.

“The village was not like to impress a royal personage,” Sigbert observed.

There was nothing to distinguish the place from anything else that they had seen other than its proximity to the sea and the fact that it was spread over the steep hillside. The houses were all made from the local dark grey stone with daub and wattle walls and thatched roofs that came close to the ground. Suspicious eyes stared at the party as they wended their way towards the centre of the habitation.

“That was not here when last I visited!” Meilyr admitted as he spied a wooden church. “Indeed they lacked for a clergyman last I came by this way.”

“Seems they have one now,” Coenred nodded towards where a man in the habit of a priest stood talking to another man who indicated the new arrivals even as they were noticed in their turn. The priest turned to look at them and a sudden cloud passed over his face. He spun sharply on his heel and disappeared into the church. The man he had been talking to followed him presently. “Mayhap there’s been trouble here recently, there’s a house there that has been burnt to the ground.”

The Saxon pointed along the earthen road that led up a steep hill to the south. Some distance beyond the last building and a little higher on the hillside they could see the charred beams of what had once obviously been a peasant home.

“That was not burnt when last I visited either,” Meilyr admitted. His expression darkened.

“Seems that there’s much that’s changed since last your path wended its way to Harlech,” Sigbert observed.

“Come, we’ll talk to the headman,” Meilyr insisted and started his horse towards the church.

He dismounted outside the crude building and called a boy over to stable the horses for some coins he proffered in a cloth purse. With Coenred and Sigbert following he entered the large wooden building. Inside it was gloomy, there were no windows only lamps burning animal fat. The floorboards were covered with fresh straw. Before the altar the priest stood with his back to them, apparently lost in thought.

“I seek Ifor the Headman if he still holds that position!” Meilyr announced as he closed on the clergyman.

“Then you have found him!” From the shadows near the wall a tall man stepped forward. He looked to be about forty, dressed in peasant’s clothing but of a good quality. He was the man that they had seen talking to the priest outside but a moment ago.

“Do you not know me man?!” Meilyr demanded in an authoritative tone.

“Aye, I know thee My Lord Meilyr.” Ifor’s face darkened but he remained respectful in tone. “I had not expected thee here today.”

“I come from the court of King Gruffydd with these Saeson lords as guests. They wish to see the seat of Bendigeidfran. You will find us a lodge and show due hospitality to the king’s allies.”

“As you command, My Lord,” Ifor responded without gusto.

“These are not good days in which to pay idle visits My Lord,” the priest turned from the altar and looked directly at Meilyr as the headman left to do the lord’s bidding.

“Who would you be to give me such counsel?” The Welshman demanded.

“Forgive me, My Lord, I am Gerraint, a humble priest. Harlech is my parish.” He bowed his head respectfully.

“And what brings you to Harlech?”

“God, My Lord.”

“And the devil!” Ifor added from the distant door with some heat. Gerraint shot him a quick look and the large man seemed almost to cower before it. He left immediately.

“What curious words you choose to speak with,” Meilyr observed. “Mayhap you mean that God brought you here to fight a devil?”

“I believe that may well be the cause, for you see Harlech is beset by such a demon.” Gerraint responded in a calm voice.

“Was it the demon that set fire to the house?” Coenred asked. He and Sigbert had stood watching the conversation but both were becoming somewhat bored with the proceedings.

“The house was consumed during a confrontation with the demon,” Gerraint conceded.

“Well, my friend, you brought us here to see where kings met and a princess was given in marriage, we never expected to come into the realm of demons.” Sigbert laughed.

“This is no matter for levity,” Gerraint chastised him. “People have died!”

“If villagers have died then this is a matter for such as we!” Meylier interrupted with a more forceful tone. “I am the local lord, this matter passes into my jurisdiction.”

“I agree, My Lord, with the exception that in the question of the cause of the deaths, by which I mean the demon, it is a spiritual matter and falls into the churches’ area of authority.” Again Gerraint bowed politely.

“You have seen it then?” Meilyr demanded.

“I have seen it in the shadows, My Lord, it is a frightful beast.”

“How would you describe it?” Coenred enquired with obvious curiosity. He was not a baptised Christian, unlike so many of his fellows; his father had maintained an interest in the old ways of their people. He chose to let his son decide his spiritual path for himself and so far it had not led him to seeking redemption under a cross.

Gerraint glanced at Meilyr, his reluctance to respond to the Saxon obvious. The Welshman’s face coloured with anger.

“It is not enough that you impugn my friend’s rank but that you also sully the hospitality of the valleys!” His voice rose and echoed throughout the wooden church.

“I meant no such discourtesy,” Gerraint hastily insisted, bowing once more to the warrior. He turned and faced Coenred. “I apologise, I am not use to being familiar with a Saeson, but Lord Meylier is correct, hospitality should direct my mind and the Lord Christ my heart towards a more friendly mien.”

Coenred was unabashed by either Meilyr’s outburst or the priest’s apology. “No harm is done. My Saxon lord was but recently the Eorl of Mercia, his dealings with the Walha have largely been peaceful but lords closer to the border have not always followed his commands in respect to your people.”

“You asked, My Lord, how I would describe the demon? Enough to say that in form it is rudely human but much disfigured. It stands like a man but is almost twice the height of a normal fellow and very strong with it. Yesternight it attacked the boundary of the village and struck down a guardsman with one blow of its open hand, breaking the neck and crushing the skull of a warrior armed and armoured.”

“Did it do further mischief?” Sigbert wanted to know.

“Aye it did Saeson. The demon battered down doors and tore stones from walls with its bare hands.”

“Did the men not face it down?” Meilyr looked mesmerised as he listened to the priest’s words.

“Aye they did. The one thing that the demon fears is fire. A number of brave souls assembled and lit pitch-torches. Armed with those and some spears they chased the beast from the bounds, but they have done this before and it has always returned.”

“Think you it will return tonight?” The Welsh warrior pressed.

“I know not, My Lord. It is the way of the beast that it comes not the same way or at the same time with each attack. We post a watch, it takes its toll on the men who have work to do the next day but it is something that we are pressed to do. The demon did not attack for some five nights and we thought that it might have moved on from hereabouts but then it came as I described and kills one more of our number. The people are a frightened.”

“My lords,” Meilyr turned to both Coenred and Sigbert, “there’s some work to do here that is mayhap more suited to men such as we. I will keep a watch into the late hours of the night, it is none of your concern, these are not your people, but I would be honoured to have you keep me company?”

“We are tasked with protecting our own lord’s people and now that he is allied to your king then mayhap we could say that our protection should fall over the people of the valleys as well?” Coenred responded. “As huscarls it would be becoming of us to lend you our spears.”

“Aye, well said,” Sigbert agreed. “Let us to our lodge so that we can prepare against the coming of this demon!”

The house in which the visitors were lodged was a dreary place but warmed by a hearth and offering comfortable pallets of straw on which to sleep. The local people evinced a cold and hostile attitude to the strangers. As he stood in the doorway

Coenred spied many of them talking to the priest and throwing hostile glances his way. He said nothing to Meilyr, who sat beside the low fire sharpening his sword and talking of Welsh warriors, dragons, and sorceresses to Sigbert.

As Coenred watched the sun go down over the sea his eye was caught by the approach of a young woman. She wore a plain dress of dark yellow and a linen cloak of blue. In her hands she carried a large clay pot closed with a lid. Her hair was as black as night and hung long down her back but kept in place with a braid around her head. On realising that she was approaching the house Coenred stepped forward and offered to take the pot, which was obviously heavy. She responded with a cold and unfriendly look.

“I have managed this burden the longest part of its journey warrior, I can manage a step or two more!” She snapped at him. Without ceremony she entered the house. Coenred followed after her, a look of amusement on his face.

“The village sends you food,” she told them, placing the pot close to the hearth. From a linen bag hung from her shoulder she produced three clay bowls and accompanying wooden spoons.

“About time!” Meilyr responded gruffly.

“Many thanks!” Sigbert rose from where he had been lounging. He was a married man and used to treating womenfolk with more respect than some.

“You are Saesons?” The woman spoke with a hard tone.

“We are but don’t let that frighten you, we come as friends,” Sigbert answered her.

“Saesons killed my kin!” She told him with a raised chin.

“Is that why they sent you with the food?” Meilyr asked with a cold smile. She glanced at him and her disdain melted somewhat.

“Ifor commanded me to bring you food, My Lord, so I bring you food.”

“Here!” Coenred held out his hand. The young woman looked at him and then at his hand. When she realised that he was offering her something she held out her hand and received more than enough silver coins for the meal that she had brought. “You will not go without for giving us hospitality.”

“It is too much!” She insisted.

“Then let the excess speak much for our intent in being here, as my brother huscarl says, we come as friends and friends do not steal from one another.” He smiled at her in a friendly fashion.

“Your manners speak more than your money.” She glanced at Meilyr who remained seated on the floor and was busy stirring the contents of the pot with his spoon. With that she turned and left them to their meal.

“That be a young woman with some fire in her belly!” Sigbert declared as he sank to the floor again.

“Which is probably why she won’t get a child in her belly,” Meilyr told him in a disinterested fashion. “That Rhiannon was born with a tongue too sharp and a mind too made up on her own importance. She’s just a peasant when all the days are done.”

“Not too popular then?” Coenred moved to join them.

“Nay, her words are felt too keenly. I expect they thought it a good jest to make her cook and bring this food. She is a healer and in some parts she would be known for a witch.”

“Is it edible or is it poisoned?” Sigbert asked with a look of alarm.

“Aye Saeson, you can eat it. A fine stew it is, with cuts of hare in it.” Meilyr grinned back at him.

Light clouds flittered across the face of the moon as the dark hours slowly passed. Harlech was quiet and lay in the shadow of the night. Around the bounds of the village four men stood as sentries with spears in their hands and long knives in their belts. Each was nervous. The killing of the man the previous night lay heavy upon them. Instinctively they sought to stand in any dark patch that they could find in the hope that they might go unnoticed by the horror that haunted the shadows. Only one thought raised their spirits and that was that a lord of their country and his two Saeson companions were positioned further out into the night. Those men were standing guard in their fine armour and wielding weapons of steel the likes of which the sentries could only dream of owning.

Coenred walked noiselessly in his leather shoes. He moved slowly and stopped to listen often. On his left arm he carried his large circular wooden shield decorated with the yellow dragon of Mercia on a black background. In his right hand he held his tall fighting spear tipped with a sharp and deadly steel head. From his belt hung a two-edged sword decorated with gold and silver, a large scramsaex, and a two handed Dane-axe. Sigbert was arrayed very much the same for they carried the war-gear of the huscarl. Before the night had fallen the two warriors had donned their armour of chainmail over padded jackets and placed steel helmets upon their heads. Despite the

weight of their equipment the Saxons moved with an ease that came from the many hours of training that only the rich could indulge in. They were professional warriors and they spent their time on perfecting their necessary skills with sword, spear, and axe.

Of only one thing was Coenred concerned and that was a simple piece of military consideration; there were not enough guards. Only four men had volunteered for the duty and Meilyr had decided not to press any others to it, agreeing with the priest that the villagers needed their strength for the chores that were required of them each and every day. So it was that the four village men stood close to the nearest houses while the three heavily armed warriors walked a little further out hoping to spot any signs of an intruder as they patrolled the darkness.

Coenred continued his silent stalk but was brought to a sudden halt by a strange sound that was born to his ears upon a breath of the night wind. The breaking of a stout stick might have been presumed but it was also accompanied by a wet ripping sound. And then the smell of blood. Coenred spun on his heel and tried to look through the gloom back towards the village. The moonlight was too faint, however, barely enough to show the bulk of the houses as they reared up in the distance, but it proved enough for him to spy a strange shadow move away from the blackness of a house. He could not be sure because what he saw was more of an impression rather than a clear vision of their presumed quarry. It looked vaguely human and yet monstrous at the same time even in the poor light.

On cat-quiet feet Coenred advanced. He knew that he could cry out an alarm, a call that would bring the others towards him, but first he wanted to see this so called demon for himself. Should he reveal himself to it then he believed the thing would flee before anything about it could be known.

When he reached the spot where he suspected the noise had come from the Saxon found a limp body on the ground. He bent down to feel the face but his hand that had known much of war retreated quickly as it came into contact with something warm and sticky. The head of the guardsman had been ripped from his neck.

Coenred rose quickly and instinctively set off in the direction in which he believed the shade had gone. He was entering the first line of houses that ringed the village now, which meant that the demon had easily penetrated their defensive ring. The priest had intimated that it was possessed of supernatural powers, that it did not so much haunt the darkness but was a part of it in and of itself.

A motion suddenly caught the Saxon's quick eye. A figure lurched back from under the overhanging roof of a nearby house and then threw its ponderous bulk at the stout wooden door that stood before it. Wood splintered and the portal was sundered.

"DEMON!" Coenred roared as he advanced at a trot. He raised the point of his spear as he moved to engage his enemy.

A woman's scream erupted from within the breached house but the dark thing remained stood on the threshold and did not cross over. Rather it turned its hooded eyes onto the mailed warrior charging towards it. As the Saxon voiced his battle-cry the beast drowned him out with a roar of its own and lurched towards its assailant. The thing moved in an ungainly fashion as if its legs were not properly formed and yet its thighs were massive with heavy muscle. As the two closed Coenred appraised his foe and would have been forgiven for seeking to withdraw. The thing was huge with long arms bedecked with sinews and more heavy muscles crossed over a broad but bent back. The fingers were splayed, held unnaturally as if one or more of its joints were dislocated. The Saxon was a tall man by his own people's standards but this dark creature was almost twice his height. A strange smell of raw flesh, the coppery scent of blood, and an unsettling odour of burnt meat assailed his senses as the last yard disappeared between them and they came together at last.

Coenred had looked to hit the other with his shield, a heavy blow that would have sent many a normal man to the ground in a heap, but that act did not come about this time. At the last moment the creature turned its huge right arm to the Saxon, hunched down so as to throw all of its considerable bulk behind the limb, and used all the power in its thighs to propel itself into a charge of its own. Wood and dark flesh met. The Saxon warrior was lifted from his feet by the power of the demon. He was flung backwards and involuntarily closed his eyes as the hard ground impacted with his back. His teeth were jarred by the fall. Instinctively he held onto his weapons. His eyes snapped open to see the beast stood over him, one great hand raised high in the air and beginning its descent. Coenred covered himself with the linden wood of his shield and felt the impact of the heavy blow reverberate through his body. The shield held, however.

Moving quickly the huscarl struck out with his feet and felt the leather soles of his shoes collide with the creature's body. It emitted an involuntary gasp. The Saxon released his hold on his spear and rolled to his right coming up and onto his feet. Quickly he rose to face his opponent again. Swiftly he reached down to recover the

long spear but the beast stamped down upon the shaft just as the warrior raised it from the floor; the wood splintered and the weapon was rendered useless.

From the darkness voices sounded. The village was stirring and the other watchmen were being drawn to the conflict. There was still not enough light to reveal the demon but Coenred got the impression that it was throwing its head about trying to see if danger was coming its way. As he drew his fine sword it let out a bestial growl and leapt towards him, misshapen hands grasping for his flesh. The huscarl ducked under the black talons and slashed at the large naked thigh presented to him. The steel cut into the dark flesh and provoked a howl of pain from the thing.

Coenred stepped out of its reach, his head held low as a dark hand hissed over him with a tremendous swing. In its rage the beast grasped at the roof of the house behind it and pulled the thatch and beams down on top of the Saxon. It advanced on the stunned warrior, looking to grasp him in a deadly embrace but it was frustrated by the sudden appearance from out of the night by a second huscarl who charged with a furious abandon, his spear aimed for the demon's black heart.

Sigbert grunted in dismay as the huge bulk somehow managed to pull itself out of the way of the coldly gleaming spearhead. He attempted to arrest his forward momentum but suddenly found himself closer than he wished to be to the foul thing. Its two hands struck his shield like a club and lifted the warrior from his feet. He was propelled through the air to fall heavily into the dirt just as his friend had been. With unnatural speed the creature was atop of him, one foot pressing down on the linden wood of the circular shield, mouth agape showing yellow teeth, and hands battering at what he could see of the Saxon beneath.

This time Coenred collided with the beast in exactly the manner in which he intended. His shield took the brunt of the force and the momentum of the large warrior in all his heavy armour, propelled by powerful legs trained to war, was sufficient to send the demon staggering. It tried to recover its balance but initially failed. Sharp Saxon steel hissed down its back leaving a long red line in its smoky flesh. Another beastly howl filled the night.

Torch light flickered and voices rose. Many voices. The village was stirring itself to action at last and men were coming out with whatever weapons they had at hand to face the terror. Meilyr was advancing at a trot from the south with two guardsmen in tow. He had every intent of joining the deadly combat but found himself slowing to

look upon the creature as it was finally revealed to them by the growing light brought by the villagers.

Clearly in pain the great thing turned and roared out its hatred at Coenred who now stood over his prostrate friend, shield and sword at the ready. Voices could be heard. A woman screamed, a man shouted, the beast turned and fled. Coenred stepped back from over Sigbert and returned his sword to its scabbard. With his free hand he helped his friend to his feet.

“Did it wound thee?” Coenred asked.

“Not me, thee!” The Saxon looked at him with a concerned expression.

“I felt no hurt.”

“And yet his talon gouged your face, on the left side there.”

Coenred raised his hand to the suggested side of his face and was surprised when his fingers touched warm blood. All of a sudden, as if it came with the realisation of the fact he had indeed been injured, his face exploded with pain.

“I felt nothing!” He insisted before biting down into his own lip.

“How goes it?” Meilyr demanded as he approached with the guardsmen.

“The demon is real, we fought it,” Sigbert answered him. “It has wounded Coenred.”

Meilyr glanced at the huscarl with a genuine look of concern. “I will call the healer for you my friend.”

“Look what thy actions have done!” A familiar voice suddenly erupted.

The warriors were surrounded by the villagers; none had gone in pursuit of the demon. They stood with weapons in their hands, mostly makeshift or farm implements. Behind the men in armour a man had appeared in the doorway of his now ruined house. In his arms he carried the body of a young girl.

“She is dead.” The man spoke almost in a whisper but then repeated himself louder again before breaking into a sob. He did not seem to notice the cut on his head or the blood that matted his hair.

“Your actions have brought death to us!” Gerraint accused them. Meilyr looked at him in total bewilderment. “You have provoked the demon to murdering us in the night!”

“We looked only to protect you from the demon,” Meilyr answered in a reasonable tone. “We did protect you from it.”

“At what cost warrior? How many are dead this night?”

As if in answer to his question another cry went up from the northern edge of the village. They had found the headless body of the guardsman. Another widow had been made.

“You have protected no one this night,” Gerraint accused them.

“Hold your tongue priest!” Meilyr finally lost his temper. “I will have my rank of you; I am the king’s man here!”

For a moment a strained quiet filled the space between the two groups in which only the sobs of the father cradling his dead daughter could be heard. Meilyr turned to Coenred.

“Can you walk man?”

“Aye, that I can.”

“Then come, we’ll get thee to the healer.” Meilyr turned and started walking purposefully.

The villagers seemed at first intent on resisting him, their faces were surly and their eyes angry, but he carried his sword in his hand and at the last moment they stepped aside to let him pass. Coenred followed in a similar manner, his face half covered in blood. Sigbert brought up the rear and glowered back at the people that considered to be ungrateful.

They came to a typical house made from a combination of gray stone and mud and wattle walls with a thatched roof. Meilyr banged on the door and it was promptly opened by a familiar face. The young woman with the long black hair glanced at the small party and then beyond them at the crowd at their backs.

“It is death if thee come here,” she spoke evenly without any trace of alarm or concern.

“Do you threaten me?” Meilyr demanded in a voice he forced to be quieter than his temper wished.

“No, the danger is not within but without. I make no threats but foretell what will follow.”

“She speaks in riddles,” Sigbert grumbled.

“Can you fix his face?” Meilyr chose to press on with his design. She glanced at Coenred and nodded.

“Know that I take no responsibility for what happens this night if you cross my threshold.” So saying she stepped back and opened the wooden door wider.

The warriors traipsed into a low house poorly lit with lamps of burning animal fat. There was a hearth at the centre and several animal hides thrown over the floor but no furniture to speak of.

“Sit thee down,” she told them as she closed and barred the door.

“What is your name?” Coenred asked as he remained on his feet like the others.

“Rhiannon.” Her voice was calm and collected. She crossed the single room to a linen bag hanging by its strap from a wooden post that was part of the structure of the house. “Again, I say to thee sit down. I am not as tall as you Saeson and would have trouble closing a wound at such height from the ground.”

Sigbert helped Coenred divest himself of his shield and helmet before the latter did as the woman asked of him. Meilyr followed his example and as he felt obvious by remaining on his feet with his weapons at hand Sigbert did the same.

Rhainnon brought a bowl of water that also contained some herbs and with a cloth she washed the side of Coenred’s face that had suffered the injury.

“’Tis a long gash that you have,” her voice had softened, “it stretches from your forehead down onto your cheek and stops short of your jaw. It will need stitching.”

“’Tis not the first such wound the likes have us have suffered,” Sigbert told her. “I have had worse.”

“I can tell that from your face,” she retorted without looking at him.

“I am curious, why did you give us such dire forebodings?” Meilyr asked.

“Hush now, this warrior would probably like as neat a stitch as I can manage and your tongues are likely to distract me,” she commanded in her lilting accent.

From her bag Rhiannon retrieved a bone needle and a length of twine. With quick and nimble fingers she set to closing the wound. Her white skin becoming stained by the blood that they had to work in. Coenred sat unmoving and unflinching. Sigbert had not been boasting when he talked of huscarls suffering such wounds. He had many scars on his body already. Each one had been cleaned and closed in just such a fashion and although he could not claim that he felt no pain he did not surrender to it.

“There you go!” Rhiannon announced when she tied the final knot. She rose and crossed to the pitcher to wash her hands under clean water.

“Now will you speak?” Meilyr grumbled at her.

“Yes, My Lord, though I have been bidden not to.” She returned to the hearth and sat down next to it. “I fear that you have doomed me also so I fear not to speak the truth.”

“Doomed you! How so?” The Welshman looked perplexed.

“I doubt not that you have seen the burnt house on the edge of the village?”

“Indeed we have, we mentioned it to the priest, he blamed it on the demon,” Meilyr replied.

“It’s not a demon, it’s a man!” Coenred broke his silence.

“A man?” Sigbert sounded disbelieving. “It was like no man I have ever seen!”

“And by heaven’s grace no man exists that is alike to the demon,” Rhiannon told him, “but your friend is right; it is a man.”

“How do you know this?” The Welsh lord demanded.

“Sit thee still and listen to my tale for we Brythoniaid love a good story do we not, My Lord?” She rested her chin upon her knees that she had brought up under her dress. “The house touched by fire is the birthplace of the demon, rightly enough, but he was no such creature when first he was born. Daffyd was a large boy from youth, as strong as an ox and as simple as a new born babe. There was no evil in his heart. Some said that he was touched in the head and that may be true, but it was not with a dark spell. The people hereabouts minded him not because they knew that he was a simple soul and that he would lend his great strength to any task given to him. He was a good boy.

“Then the priest came unbidden to our midst and he turned the people against the boy. His mother was not born under a cross and had no time for the Jesu Christ, always she was busy in the wilds, fetching wood, raising sheep, finding herbs. She was a healer, I was one of her pupils, but the priest called her a witch. He named her a sorceress when several flocks of sheep suffered disease. He claimed that because the few that she owned remained clean that this proved her guilt. The priest further claimed that she had placed curses on other’s flocks to increase the value of her own.”

“Was this proven?” Meilyr asked with interest.

“How do we prove such a thing? I am ready to swear on my life that there are many flocks in the valley that suffered no illness other than this poor families, but people chose to forget about that. They only saw the sick animals and looked for someone to blame. The old woman and her dumb son were easy to point out and hate. The priest started a rock rolling down the hillside and he rose in the eyes of the villagers, but he could not control the rolling rock.”

“What of the headman, what did he do?”

“That’s a curious thing thee speak of My Lord. Ifor did nothing. He tied himself to the priest very quickly and is always at his side.”

“You suggested that events got out of hand,” Coenred prompted. She looked at him as if expecting clarification. “The rock rolled faster than the priest expected.”

“That it did. Life here is not easy. The men fish and hunt hare but many rely upon only heir sheep for a living. We have been through hard times recently; the last winter was not kind to us. The coming of the disease mayhap seemed one straw too many, the people needed someone to blame; they blamed the old woman and her son.

“One night, not many moons ago, a temper rose in the village. I doubt not that the priest had not intended it but in his sermon he spoke of the ungodly nature of witchcraft and the doings of the heathens. He talked of how a witch might lay with the devil and birth him a monster in human form, taller and stronger than a normal man but lacking in all the finer points of manhood. The people became hostile to the old woman and her afflicted son. The man did not understand, he was not capable. When children threw stones at him, threw with a hard intent, he roared and chased them away, seemingly cruel and dangerous to many that witnessed the persecution of a soul usually calm and as childlike as his oppressors. They spoke then of what hurt he might do with that prodigious strength of his. They waited for the dark of night to come and then they attacked the home of the sorceress and one who they had come to see as her familiar.”

“What was their purpose?”

“I believe that at first they wanted to take them before a court, to see them tried and punished, such was the priest’s words, but their blood heated when they found that they could not force the door of the house. It was stoutly made and stood in a frame that they could not move. With axe hews they may in time have broken it down but no one was patient enough for that; they wanted blood. Someone, I know not who, threw a lighted torch onto the thatch of the house, others followed the example. In no time at all the house was alight with a fierce flame that drove them all back. I heard the screams inside. Many heart lost its resolve when those wretches called out their pain and fear to the people that they had once belonged to.

“The woman threw open door at last and came before us, her rags on fire and her lungs fit to burst with screaming. I would like to think it a kindness when the guardsman stepped forward and speared her to the ground but in truth I think that he was moved by revulsion and fear. She did not die immediately but called out to her

son who howled and raged even as the flames consumed him inside the house. And then it fell in on him, the roof and the walls, sending sparks into the night air. He died a horrible death amongst the heat of the flames and embers.”

“If he died from where came the demon?” Meilyr asked with rapt attention.

“The boy died within the body but the body did not die, though he were horribly burnt. He found somewhere to hide himself, not from the touch of the heat but certainly from the worst of the naked flame. We dispersed and when the last of us had gone I believe that he crawled out and fled into the night. He has been out there ever since.”

“The boy? The village fool?”

“That’s his body but no longer his mind. His heart has turned as black as ash and twice as bitter. He seeks blood now.”

“Revenge for what was unlawfully done to him,” Coenred suggested.

“And we fought him tonight believing him to be a demon, not a man wronged,” Sigbert observed.

“You know much of this matter. Why did you not tell us your tale earlier?” Meilyr asked.

“For they did not want it told.”

“And yet you tell it now, as if it no longer matters that we know,” Coenred looked closely at her face and found her look of resignation disturbing.

“Why does it no longer matter that you tell us?” Meilyr wanted to know.

“Because they are coming to kill us,” Coenred told him with his eyes on the girl. She closed her eyes and dipped her head.

“They would never dare,” Meilyr asserted, “I am the king’s man. I am a lord here. Peasants do not murder such as I am.”

“They do if they want to save their souls from the king’s wrath!” Sigbert told him.

As if the Saxons words were a portent the sound of many voices filtered into the small house. Rhiannon continued to keep her eyes down as the noise slowly increased. It was a murmuring rather than cries of outrage but it sounded ominous all the same. Coenred crossed to the door and placed his hand on its handle but did not open it.

“They are in league with the witch!” A voice was heard clearly to say.

“They consort with her, all three of them, even now as our dead lay beneath the evening sky awaiting Christian burial!”

“They did not fight the demon, they used it to kill us and destroy our homes!” A large roar went up from the crowd at that prompting.

“That was I for the headman,” Meilyr confirmed.

“They’re building up their courage to attack us,” Coenred told them.

“They will attack you but not in the manner of warriors, they will burn this house down like they did the other one. Just like them we will be trapped inside and burnt alive.” Rhiannon said with resignation.

“Burning’s not for me!” Sigbert rose quickly to his feet and drew his sword.

“Aye friend, let’s take them some steel,” Meilyr copied the Saxon.

“No, wait!” Rhiannon urged them suddenly becoming animated.

“To sally forth might seem like the proper response my friends but I fear that we would still lose our lives. They outnumber us some three to one and the front row is made up of men in armour. They carry spears and shields,” Coenred observed.

“What matters that, we are in armour and our swords are sharp!” Meilyr retorted angrily.

“True but even the brightest link can be sundered by a well thrust spear or just a piece of ill luck. While we fight the guardsmen the others would work their way around us and fall on our backs with langsaexes, scythes and such. We would be cut to the earth like standing wheat.”

“I like this not.” Sigbert paced back and forth with nervous energy.

“Evil is still present, it casts its shadow over all of us my friends,” Gerraint told the crowd. “We did right by killing the witch but we failed God when we allowed her her student to escape His wrath. This is our punishment. The witch Rhiannon is in communion with the demon and she has seduced the king’s man and his Saeson allies. If we do not act they will lend their steel to the demon’s talons and all will be lost. We have them now, what should we do with them?”

“Burn them!” The cry was quickly taken up and the voices of the crowd increased in both volume and anger noticeably.

“Mayhap thee are a witch Rhiannon? Certainly thee has the gift of foresight.” Somehow Meilyr managed a smile as if their situation were only an inconvenience.

“Mayhap I am.” She raised her head and looked him squarely in the eye. “Or mayhap it’s just that I witnessed what went before and knew enough to recognise that my death at their hands would come in its turn?”

“You believed that they would kill you as well?” Coenred asked from the door.

“Yes, when it suited the priest to do so. When he came here he was not a man to command authority, few paid him heed despite his priestly robes and office. The headman fell in with him, how or why I know not but they became as thick as thieves. Ifor never liked the old woman and would oft persecute her with unkind words. He riled the youngsters up to throw stones and abuse at her ox of a son, knowing all the while that Daffyd was younger in his head than any of them that threw those stones. The priest spoke sermons about the evil of witchcraft and then the people started to listen to him. Then he had power over them.”

“He used the old woman and her son to make a position for himself here,” Meilyr concluded.

“And achieved confirmation through her death,” Coenred added.

“I am one for the old ways, though I have no truck with the Jesu Christ I have not openly gone against their religion. My church is the mountains and the valleys. My God lives in the land and sky both, and the ocean too. For this they call me heathen but I am skilled in herb-lore. I know what plants can soothe and banish ailments. Like the old woman, my teacher, the people used my skills when it suited them and shunned me when it did not, but mostly they left us alone; until the priest came.”

“They do not demand that we come out and surrender our weapons to them,” Sigbert noticed.

“They do not want us alive, our tongues could still speak the truth we now know and condemn them all,” Coenred pointed out.

There was still plenty of shouting going on outside but no one had come any closer to the house as yet. Mostly it seemed to be Ifor the headman inciting the crowd. He whipped them up to a frenzy and just when they seemed to have reached a peak, to be ready to act, he commanded them all to silence. The priest stepped forward and raised his arms in the air.

“I tell thee that God will not be appeased until those who consort with the Devil be driven from our midst. They must go before Him to be judged for their foul sins for only the Father can cast them down into Hell where surely their black souls belong. Cleanse Harlech of their presence with fire.”

“Burn the house down!” The headman urged.

A man stepped forward and threw his burning torch onto the straw thatch of Rhiannon’s small house. Others followed his example until very quickly there was a steady stream of flaming missiles landing on the roof.

“What now?” Meilyr asked of no one in particular.

As if in reply Rhiannon rose and moved to the back wall of the house. She moved a pile of furs and a large clay pot that lay against the wall and then threw back a plain hanging that covered a portion of the wall. A light miasma of smoke had started to intrude into the house and the smell of burning wood filled their nostrils.

“I am still not for burning!” Sigbert said.

“We shall not burn this night,” Rhiannon told him. She indicated the wall near where she crouched and the Saxon saw a kind of wicker door. It was small, they would have to crawl to get through it, but it was most definitely a portal.

“What is the meaning of this?” Meilyr demanded of her.

“I said that I foresaw my death but I did not say that I accepted it. I made this door in secret; it leads to the back of the house that has a crude fence about it. There will be no people there, they are all to the front waiting to watch us die.” With that she pulled open the door and began to crawl into the darkness beyond.

“I know not what to make of this wench?” Sigbert admitted.

“She is our deliverer my friend so let’s make her dear to us,” Meilyr suggested with a smile. “Now if you’ll let me precede thee, I fear that your rotund bulk might block our route to escape.”

“Go now!” Coenred commanded.

He placed a large piece of firewood against the door to hold it in place. Above his head he could now see the flames of the fire and the heat had grown noticeably. Small pieces of burning straw fell into the single room. It would not be too long before large portions of the roof collapsed inwards and ignited Rhiannon’s few possessions.

Meilyr squeezed himself through the wicker door and was followed by Sigbert. Coenred came last and found himself passing through a short tunnel dug into the gray rock that formed the lower part of the house. In a second or two he was outside, crouched in shadow and still feeling the heat of the nearby fire.

“This way,” Rhiannon whispered in the dark. She moved bent over towards the back of the fenced area and passed through a narrow opening. From there she wended her way to the left and round a small rise that effectively protected them from the view of the villagers. In better days the mound had offered her house protection from the chilling sea wind in winter.

Eventually they stood some distance from the burning house that cast the hill before them in shadow. Beyond it they could hear the villagers cheering and cursing as the building fell in on itself. Their bloodlust made Rhiannon shiver in the dark.

“They call themselves Christians!” She complained to no one in particular.

“They will pay for this act,” Meilyr told her.

“How, we are but three swords and they are many?” Sigbert demanded.

“The two of you will return to King Gruffudd ap Llywelyn and tell him of what has passed here,” Meilyr answered him.

“Two Saxons seeking the help of the King of Wales?” Coenred inflected a note of disbelief into his voice. “It will not do well for us to go before the king even if he is now the ally of our eorl.”

“Aye, in times past we did cross swords with your people,” Sigbert agreed.

“The path is clear, you must go My Lord,” Rhiannon told Meilyr.

“I cannot leave thee in danger,” He insisted.

“I am no longer in danger, they believe me dead.”

“They believe us all dead!” Sigbert observed.

“This is the best course,” Coenred urged the Welshman.

“You know the journey I must make? It will be some days before I can return with a force of the king’s men. I will attempt to steal a horse but even then I must travel through the night.” Meilyr sounded as if he had accepted their argument. “What will you do?”

“We must find the one they call a fiend, the one no doubt they will blame for this attack on my home,” Rhiannon replied without hesitation.

“The monster?” Sigbert looked at her with disbelief.

“He is no monster, he is what they made of him, but what they fear most is that he survived their attempts to kill him. He can bare true witness against them.”

“He is deserving of justice,” Coenred agreed. “If this man be no monster then he has a right to seek justice from your king’s law.”

“He will get it if I can make my escape, and if he deigns not to kill the three of you. He felt your cutting steel Saeson.”

“He will mind me!” Rhiannon insisted. “Go now, they depart my house but yet you might have time to reach the stables and take your horse without being seen!”

For a second Meilyr hesitated as if he had something else to say. His eyes were fixed upon Rhiannon and she looked into his face without reserve. He opened his

mouth as if to speak but then he turned upon his heel and left them without another word. They watched his shadow merge into the darkness.

“Lead us away from this place,” Coenred said to Rhiannon. She nodded and turned north. In single file they made their way out of the bounds of Harlech under the shadow of the night.

Rhiannon walked with a surety that the two Saxon men admired. Clearly she knew the path that they traversed for she was so surefooted that she did not stumble once in the dark of the night. It had occurred to Coenred that she might have given in to anger at the loss of her home and possessions before the attack of her own people but if she felt such emotion she never betrayed it to them.

After sometime, when the moon had passed the apex of its course, Rhiannon suddenly stopped upon the starlit path. She remained both still and silent.

“What do you sense?” Coenred asked her with a whisper.

“He is here?” At her answer Sigbert began to draw his sword, the sound it made as came free of the scabbard seemed inordinately loud. “No!” Rhiannon turned to him and attempted to push his sword arm down.

“The fiend!” Sigbert protested.

“Means us no harm!” Rhiannon countered.

An animal growl erupted from the dark land before them. Against the night sky they suddenly saw a great shadow rise from the folds of the earth. Long arms hung at its side and a small head rose like a peak from between the massive mountains of its shoulders.

“Mayhap it does?” Sigbert whispered in awe.

“No, it fears for me. It thinks that you mean me harm.” Without hesitating she took a step forward.

“There is danger here,” Coenred warned her. His hand instinctively closed on the hilt of his own sword. Again the growl issued forth.

“The only danger is in misunderstanding each other,” Rhiannon said over her shoulder. She moved further away and began to speak in Welsh. The Saxons could not understand her and swapped a perplexed glance with each other.

Eventually Rhiannon came within arms reach of the brute. Her white hand floated out and rested upon a powerful arm. The fiend had repeated its growl several times

but with each utterance it had lowered the volume and lessened the duration. Now it sounded more like the gruff voice of a faithful but grumpy hound.

“He is wounded!” Rhiannon declared suddenly. She placed another hand on the great body before her and it seemed as if in doing so she robbed it of all its tremendous strength. The huge black shadow collapsed to the ground. “Come quickly!”

Coenred started forward and Sigbert followed, sheathing his sword once more. When they reached Rhiannon they could see only a large dark mass at her feet.

“Is he dead?” Coenred asked.

“No, he fainted. He has a hurt upon him and has lost blood. We must get him to his cell.”

“And where would that be?” Sigbert wanted to know.

“Hereabouts. Come, raise him from the ground and follow me.”

“This is no small task you ask of us,” Sigbert complained.

“You are hale and hearty Saesons and he is but one man, this task cannot be beyond you?” She chided them.

Together Coenred and Sigbert got the giant’s arms across their own broad shoulders and raised him up. His head lolled and his breathing was noisy but constant. Rhiannon led them a short way into a small dell where they found a simple cone shaped hut made from dry stone walling. An animal skin was hung over the entrance and Rhiannon passed through it without a moment’s hesitation. The two Saxons followed half carrying and half dragging their burden.

Inside they found a simple bed of straw and there they deposited the heavy body. Rhiannon lit a taper and turned to examine the senseless creature. As the weak light passed over its face and form the Saxons beheld a man heavily disfigured by the touch of fire on his once human skin. His deformity looked horrendous but there was no denying that he had once been of the same shape and appearance as themselves.

“Now that I see him in the light I no longer behold a monster,” Coenred said.

“Aye, thee speaks the truth,” Sigbert nodded his head.

“Your cutting steel has done for him,” Rhiannon accused the huscarl as she examined the large wound on the giant’s thigh.

“We fought in the dark of night. I was told that he was a monster and he had killed men before I drew my sword against him,” Coenred retaliated.

“We can mend this,” Sigbert insisted as he peered at the wound.

“I gave him another cut on his back,” Coenred admitted.

“We’ll tend to this one now and then roll the big fellow over to see to his back,” his friend suggested.

“I have some herbs to help, mayhap in the morning light I can make a poultice of others that I might find hereabouts?” Rhiannon responded in a more conciliatory fashion. “Can you really help his healing?”

“We are huscarls, war is our trade and mending wounds a consequence of such,” Coenred told her.

“Aye, we carry the tools for such on us at all times.” Sigbert fished in a bag tied to his belt and revealed several bone needles and a length of gut. “I have the hand for this sort of work.”

“I preferred Rhiannon’s, her stitching is neater,” Coenred grimaced.

“This is good for my healer’s bag was left behind in my house and will be no more than ash. I have nothing to help you with the stitching of the wounds.”

“This will suffice,” Sigbert told her.

There was not a lot of room within the simple cell but they managed to find space so that the Saxons could wash the wound on the thigh and Rhiannon could mix together some herbs with a little water in a crude wooden bowl. As Sigbert stitched the sword cut together the big man moaned but did not awake from his stupor. They then struggled to turn him over and set to work on the longer cut to his back. Once they had finished Rhiannon applied her herbs and they turned him back on his side and she did the same service to his thigh.

“Now we wait,” she said.

“We will build a fire and wait outside, I doubt when he awakes that he will want to treat us with hospitality,” Coenred told her.

So it was that when the sun rose it found two Saxon warriors asleep before a small fire and a Welsh woman laid upon the floor of a simple stone cell with a huge senseless man, deformed beyond recognition by hungry flames and other hurts, as the subject of her herb-lore.

It was the guttural howl of an animal that brought Coenred from his sleep. He sprang from the earth that had been his bed and drew his sword while turning to face the direction of the threatening noise. All he could see, however, was the mean hut of the monster. Sigbert joined him.

“Is he awake?”

“I know not, I just heard a voice,” Coenred admitted.

They then heard Rhiannon’s voice, low and musical to their ears. They presumed that she was speaking to the creature in her native tongue. This went on for some time but as the creature made no further outbursts the two warriors relaxed and put away their swords.

“The fire’s gone out,” Sigbert observed. Coenred crouched down and put some kindling on the embers, along with some dry grass, and busied himself with bringing the flames back to life. Sigbert squatted down beside him. “This is a strange event we’ve got ourselves mixed up with.”

“Aye!”

“Does thee think that the Welshman knew of these doings before he brought us here?”

“Meilyr? No. No, I don’t think that of him. I think that he’s an honourable man with a friendly spirit. We are his king’s new friends and he wished to make our acquaintance. I think that he only wished to show us another side to his people.”

“Well he’s managed that all right!” Coenred laughed at his friend’s comment. Together they watched the fire come back to life.

“I doubt verily that what he had in mind for us included battling demons and being burnt alive.”

“Me too. I agree with you. Meilyr is a good man at heart. I doubt not that he thought that this would be nothing more than a chance to show us his country and meet some of his people, many of whom never seem to have seen a Saxon before.”

“What has happened in Harlech is strange but I think it lies with one or two men who would present themselves as good people to other folk whilst harbouring evil hearts of their own.”

“The priest for one, the headman for another?” Sigbert identified the two main culprits.

“It is passing strange that Harlech was peaceful until his coming and then all of a sudden it is plagued by witches and demons. In an instant a priest that could command no one rises in importance and a headman shares in his good fortune. They have prospered by the ill fortune that they have inflicted upon others. They have enjoyed the adulation of the people by naming others as witches.”

“This Rhiannon being one of them.”

“That I think comes more from her sympathy for the creature inside. She was not fooled into thinking him some Grendel. It was when she helped us that she gave occasion to the priest to be rid of her as well.”

“I’ve heard of healers in other places being called witches by the priests of Christ.”

“It is a thing they seem to look to do as if they abhor the old ways of the people.”

“This Rhiannon is no witch.” Coenred nodded his agreement and looked closer at his friend.

“Are you keen on her?” He asked.

“What? You know that I’m married!” Sigbert’s face turned red and the other laughed to himself, an act that only spurred Sigbert onto greater bluster. “I have Hilda and look to no other. We have a son and she told me before I went into exile with the eorl that another child was on the way. They wait for me in York! I am an honourable man!”

“That you are,” Coenred relented. “I think rather that it is Meilyr himself who has found her passing pleasing but I don’t know how it stands with the Walha.”

“Her being a peasant you mean?”

“Aye, but even so he would not be the first man of middle to higher rank to take a peasant lass to wife and not be frowned upon for the act.”

“If he means to act so honourable that is. He would not be the first man of middle to higher rank to take a woman and just leave it at that either.”

“Saesons!” They turned at the summons and saw Rhiannon stood within the cell and holding back the animal skin that covered the entrance with one hand. “The demon of Harlech would speak with you!”

On entering the small habitation they found the badly disfigured man still laid down on his bed but propped up on his right elbow. His face grimaced as they entered but it was impossible to tell whether this was because of their appearance before him or caused by the considerable amount of pain that he must be suffering.

“Sit thee down,” Rhiannon told them. She herself sat down at the very edge of the bed near its occupant’s feet. Coenred and Sigbert complied and sat cross-legged on the beaten earth that passed for a floor. “His name is Daffyd.” She indicated the great man with a wave of her hand.

“So you told us when you stitched my face,” Coenred reminded her.

“I could have done the same for Daffyd if I had not left my healing bag in the burning timbers of my home. I also told you that he was a simple soul, a good boy to his mother, and that he possessed no evil in his heart.”

“And yet he is said to have killed the men of Harlech?” Sigbert mused.

“He has killed, that is true, but only after the gravest provocation.”

“They burnt his mother to death,” Coenred nodded to himself, “and the same flames did this to him.”

“Yes. How he survived such a burning I do not know. It is beyond my skill to know. Mayhap it was the anger in his heart that kept him alive but live he does and he sought vengeance on those who turned upon him and murdered his mother.”

“We’re Saxons, we understand the nature of the blood-feud,” Sigbert agreed.

“He seems much quieter than last we met,” Coenred observed.

“In part that is due to his weakened condition, in part it is mayhap because I have spoken to him and told him how the villagers turned on both you and myself for helping you. He sees us as being victims of the same fate now.”

“Although we lack his hurts. Can he understand us?”

“No, he only speaks our native tongue and in that he is no better than a child,” Rhiannon answered Coenred. “All the same he would talk to you as best as he can.”

“Then let him speak.”

Rhiannon turned to Daffyd and spoke in her lilting tongue. The two Saxons waited patiently as the large man with the burnt body conversed in a heavy accent with the healer. Eventually she turned back to them.

“Daffyd will speak and I will turn his words into your tongue. If you wish to speak to him then look him in the eye, I will speak your words in our tongue in turn so that he will understand what you say to him.”

Coenred nodded and turned to look at Daffyd. It was no easy task due to the terrible disfigurement that he had suffered but the warrior had seen many times before injuries inflicted upon the human body that when first encountered had made him vomit at their ghastliness.

“We swapped blows in the dark of the night when I knew not what you or your story were. That was wrong of me. I was a visitor to Harlech; I should have learnt more of what had happened before drawing my sword against you. Please forgive me for the wounds I have inflicted upon you.”

Rhiannon's soft voice followed only a few seconds after the Saxon's and as understanding fell on Daffyd they saw the light in his eyes change. He pushed himself up further upon his bed and then he spoke in his turn.

"I was wrong to attack one who I knew not to be of Harlech-born. You gave me these cuts, mighty fighter, and I forgive you for it was not done in hate. I gave you that talon rent on your face; will you forgive me in turn?" Rhiannon spoke Daffyd's words exactly as he voiced them.

"Gladly mighty foe," Coenred smiled at him. "A hurt will pass when not coloured by malice."

"My hurt will pass also."

"We are, however, now honour bound to you."

"How so?"

"In our ignorance we took the side of your enemies and hurt you. Now we know your story and believe it to be true. Your friend Rhiannon has also suffered because of us. We would see that both of you receive justice for the wrongs done to you."

"You and your friend are mighty fighters, as the Saesons are said to be, but you are only two and the men of Harlech are many. Too many even for me. I skulk in the night and fight them one at a time; this is not the Saeson's way."

"No it is not. You are right, the men of Harlech can point many spears at us, but we do not need to fight them. A friend brought us to Harlech, a man who serves King Gruffydd and who goes by the name of Meilyr. He has gone to find the king and tell him of what befell us here. He will return with many warriors and they will bring the king's justice. All we must do is wait until then."

"Then we will wait for I am as weak as a newborn and my friends will not go without me into that place again." Daffyd lay back upon his simple bed and in doing so concluded the interview.

"He will sleep now and that is good," Rhiannon told them as they rose to leave the small cell.

"It is like you said, he is very much a child," Sigbert commented.

"They say that the Jesu Christ loved children so why did the priest hate this one so much?"

"I am not a man of the cross," Coenred told her.

"Nay, you're a heathen still." Sigbert snorted.

"And you warrior, do you wear a cross?"

“Aye I do lass and when at home I go to church as my wife directs.”

“Then can you answer me why Christians treat those that their lord raised above others, the children I mean, with such a cruel spirit?”

“No, I can’t. The Christians do many things that are odds with the teachings of Jesu Christ and I am no great thinker. I go to church because it pleases my wife to do so and beyond that I hope that when I die I will go to heaven and that the sins I’ve committed in my eorl’s service won’t go so heavy against me.”

Rhiannon followed them outside where Sigbert set to stoking up the fire so as to warm some water for a fruit tea. She glanced at Coenred who stood staring at the great mountain to the south of them.

“That be *Yr Wyddfa*,” She told him. “It is said that a giant is buried at the peak.” The warrior nodded only. “Strange it is to meet a Saeson who does not wear a cross, we are told that the whole of the Saeson lands are given over to the worship of Jesu Christ.”

“They are and many people find comfort in such worship.”

“But not you?”

“I find no need to worship.”

“And yet you look at the land, the sky, the sea as if they are worthy of worship.” He glanced at here then.

“It is said that I am of the old ways.”

“Of Woden?”

“No, before even him. I find peace in the woods and hills of the land. I am at home in the mountains and on the beaches that fall beneath the sea. When I must step inside them I find churches too close, too small for my spirit.”

“Then we are alike indeed for I am not a child of the cross. I favour the old ways of my people. I cross the valleys in search of herbs and such that bring many benefits to the ill and those in need of comfort. The priest spoke against me on some Sundays and said that illness was a punishment from his god sent in response to some sin committed by the unfortunate. He said that we had no business to interfere with such a punishment, that it was blasphemy to do so. It matters not if we can remember the sin that brought the punishment; just that we meekly give into it. This god, he says, is the sole judge of who lives and dies and that my herbs are proof of my witchcraft only, not that I have any power to heal beyond that found in the living fibres of the herbs.”

“And yet you have healed?”

“I have, which is why I pay no heed to the priest.”

“He is dangerous all the same.”

“I know, he has the headman in his power, how or why I know not but it matters little, between them they now rule Harlech and bend the people to their will.”

“Their time will pass like all those who seek to rule, no matter how high their station, they all fall to the earth in the end.”

“Except the mountain, that rules over us ever. It will be many lifetimes beyond ours before that is brought down to the earth.”

“Like Sigbert I am no great thinker, just a wielder of spears and swords.”

“I believe that you think deep Coenred, just that you do not often voice your thoughts.”

“My thoughts, such as they are, be out of fashion these days.”

“And that can make them dangerous, like mine.”

“Mayhap?”

“What will you do next?”

“As I said to Daffyd, we will wait a day or two, give Meilyr time to reach King Gruffudd ap Llywelyn, and then to return with a power necessary to impose the king’s justice on the people of Harlech.”

“You will not abandon us then?” Rhiannon was surprised by the expression that crossed his face in response to her question. It was momentarily one that might have been thought of anger but then it seemed to give way to something softer. She realised then that she had inadvertently insulted him in some way. She thought to apologise but instead chose to hear what he might say in response. He in his turn waited a moment before answering her.

“I am a huscarl. We swear death-oaths to defend our lord’s life with our own. If he falls in battle then we remain with his body until either his enemies are slain or we are. We are the shield with which he protects his people. It is a matter of honour to us and we do not take questions of honour lightly.”

“I did not mean to question your honour; it is just that we are not your people.”

“No but my lord is an ally of your king, that makes us friends at least and I do not stand idly by while friends of mine hazard danger. I was wrong to fight Daffyd and no matter what the intent I did put you in harm’s way, my honour demands that I put right those wrongs.”

“A king and an eorl might deem those little things for their great concerns?”

“Then they would be wrong. Great evil does not come into the world fully formed. It grows from the petty actions of mean men that go unchallenged by those who could put an end to them before they become great concerns. The man who stands by and does nothing is not a man of honour, he is something worse. He allows the small evil to grow into a greater injustice and in doing so it can become something that does indeed threaten the king and the eorl both.”

“I had not thought of things that way,” Rhiannon glanced at him and offered a friendly smile. He accepted it with good grace, returning a smile of his own.

“These are the lessons taught to me by my grandfather and my father, huscarls both, and this sword that I carry is their heirloom to me along with the honour that I live by. I cannot act in a way that would stain either with infamy.”

“These noble qualities are at odds to what is often spoken within the valleys concerning Saesons.”

“Aye, and no doubt the same is said likewise of the Walha around the hearths of the Saxons but the truth is that we are both only people, more alike than different.”

“You are a curious man Coenred of the Saesons. I find your mind more alike to mine than many of my own countryman’s, and yet you are a foreigner in my land. Mayhap you state a truth when you say that we are more alike than different.”

“’Tis no great subject of debate but it presses on me passing close all the same, where is a hungry man like me to find his breakfast in this place?” Sigbert intruded.

“I will see what Daffyd has in his store but I doubt to find much, he is a simple man and relied heavily upon his mother to take such cares as cooking and the getting of food,” Rhiannon answered him.

“Mayhap we’ll have to go fishing?” Coenred suggested.

“Fishing? Well that is one way to pass the hour I suppose but a slow way to break a fast!” Sigbert complained.

The day passed slowly. Rhiannon found some bara lawr that Daffyd had taken from Harlech. The Saxons ate the dark bread and washed it down with a herbal tea that Rhiannon was able to concoct from local plants. After they had broken their fast she took delight in telling them that the bara lawr was made from seaweed, a truth that Sigbert did not thank her much for. The rest of that day they did indeed spend in fishing a nearby stream and came back to Daffyd’s cell with a reasonable catch. The evening was spent in cooking fish fillets over an open fire and eating them with their fingers, the meat hot and moist.

Daffyd left his pallet for the first time and joined them but remained wary of the fire. He sat on his haunches closer to the opening of his crude home than to the flickering flames. Rhiannon spoke gently to him in their tongue and he seemed happy enough to eat the roasted fish that she passed over on a simple board, accompanied with more bara lawr and some herbal tea. Night closed around them again and the stars began to pierce the velvet canopy over their heads. Rhiannon and Daffyd retired to his cell leaving the two Saxons to wrap their cloaks about them and sleep next to the warm stones of their fire once more.

The next day was spent in a very similar fashion but eventually Coenred raised the prospect of returning to Harlech. “We must be there for when Meilyr returns with the king’s men. You and Daffyd are the only ones who have witnessed the recent events who are not under the sway of the priest and the headman.” He told Rhiannon.

“I will tell you this; Daffyd will not venture out in the daylight.” She replied.

“Because enemies might spy him?” Sigbert guessed.

“No, he fears them not. He is, however, a feared of frightening others. He hates himself as he is. He could not bare to see his face in a puddle and even shuns his own shadow.”

“That is no state to live in,” Sigbert said with a note of compassion.

“All the more reason why the one’s who did this to him are brought before the king’s men,” Coenred insisted. “’Tis no matter that Daffyd will only travel in the dark, I would rather approach Harlech unobserved. We don’t know for sure when Meilyr will return and I would not ask Daffyd to venture once more into Harlech without some surety of protection beyond that which two huscarls could offer. We will set out tonight once the sun begins to set and it will be dark by the time we reach the boundary of the village. If Meilyr has not yet arrived then we will retire once more under the safety of the darkness and try again the next night.”

“He will go with thee under those conditions,” Rhiannon agreed.

“It is not easy to think of him as a child, his wounds rob him of that apparent innocence, and yet in this short time that we have been with him that is how I now think of the Walha-man,” Sigbert told her. She smiled at his words.

“We will eat one more meal together before setting out and think on happier outcomings for this venture,” Coenred insisted.

Once again they built a fire to cook a smaller catch of fish and made more of a meal of it with the last of Daffyd's bara lawr. In an act characterised by unexpected shyness the giant even brought a small wedge of cheese to the fireside. He made a speech to Rhiannon who told the Saxons that he loved cheese and that this store was normally kept for himself only. He chose now to share it with the only people who had been kind to him in a long time by his own reckoning.

After the meal was finished they put out the fire and gathered what few belongings they had brought with them. Daffyd wrapped his much hurt body in a simple cloak made from uncured goatskin. Rhiannon directed their march but stayed with Daffyd at the rear of the short column. Coenred led the way and followed the path that she pointed out to them. The Saxons remained silent, each happy with their own thoughts, while Rhiannon maintained a quiet conversation with Daffyd. They spoke of people that they had known in Harlech during happier times. Of events of particular note that would entertain a child, such as when Owyn was charged by the ram and suffered a sore backside for not standing his ground, or when Liam fell in his own midden after drinking too much ale. Daffyd mentioned his mother much and it became achingly obvious to Rhiannon that even during his moment of rage the man had felt very much alone and abandoned. This realisation only served to raise her own anger towards the people who had turned on a poor family that had done wrong to none of them.

The last rays of the sun were falling on the sea when they came close once more to Harlech but Coenred stopped well short of the place. He crouched down in the grass and looked down into the village from the advantage of the higher ground that they had climbed. Sigbert motioned for Rhiannon and Daffyd to do the same and sprawled at his friend's side.

"What be the matter?" He asked.

"There's a lot of light," Coenred told him and nodded towards the village. "Another fire mayhap?"

Looking down they could discern a number of fires lit almost in a circle in the middle of the village. At the very centre there seemed to be yet another bonfire but this one was awaiting the touch of a flame. From the centre of it arose a large, thick wooden pillar.

"They mean to burn someone!" Coenred declared.

"'Tis not enough that they burn people in their homes, now they tie them to stakes and roast them for sport!" Rhiannon spoke with anger.

“Meilyr cannot yet be here then,” Sigbert decided. “Surely this thing could not happen with the king’s men present.”

“What shall we do?” The Welshwoman queried.

“I would know what they are about but I have no wish to subject either you or Daffyd to further harm,” Coenred told her. “We will get as close as we dare without being discovered and know their minds.”

“If it is dangerous for us then it is dangerous for thee!” She protested. Daffyd said something to her and a short, terse conversation followed in which the big man became more insistent.

“What is it?” Sigbert demanded of her.

“Daffyd says that he will go. He says that he is steeped in the art of sneaking, that he has entered the village many times just so and carried out his revenge on the people. He will not be discovered unless he wants them to discover him.”

“But will he understand what he sees?” Coenred wanted to know. Rhiannon translated his words as he spoke them in her fashion. “He is brave and strong but the enemy are sly and cunning. This may be a trap to call him in from the shadows, to give proof to the king’s men that a demon haunts the dark borders of the town?”

“He says that your words have merit but he does not want his friends to hazard their own lives for his sake. He will go.”

“Daffyd should know that we are Saxon fighting men; that we are called upon in times to sneak into enemy camps and know their minds. Coenred and I can do this thing as we have done it many times before. We will return safely. We know our craft well.” Sigbert spoke up.

“He fears for your lives”

“As do we but my friend speaks true. We are huscarls, war is our trade. This is an act of war that we undertake. None, not even a great hunter of shadows as Daffyd is, can do this duty better than we.” Coenred insisted.

“Daffyd would have you know that if you are discovered and threatened then he will come to thy aid. He will not let you suffer a hurt without exacting a terrible vengeance on those who raise their hands against you. He will not be persuaded otherwise.”

“That puts my mind at ease in all truth,” Sigbert declared.

“Aye, mine too. I hope that we will not have a need of our ally’s strength but if indeed we do then come quickly and come terribly; then mayhap we will all escape with our lives.” Coenred agreed.

In the open space that served on occasional days as a marketplace the people of Harlech had seemingly gathered. In front the headman stood dressed as a warrior and with a party of watchmen also armed and armoured after their fashion standing close by. In their midst there was also the priest. He stood with his chin up and a disdainful expression on his face. A deacon stood to his side and slightly behind him. He held two lengths of rope that drooped to the floor. The end of one was tied around the neck of a young boy who knelt on the bare ground. The other was used in a similar manner on his older sister. A pole had been thrust between the boy’s arms and behind his back and his wrists tied across his stomach. Dried blood matted his dark hair and there was a bruise on the side of his face. Beside him knelt the young girl, seemingly of about seventeen. She wore only a linen shift that was stained by dark smears and her long black hair fell about her shoulders and her face. Her hands were tied in front of her like the boy’s but she lacked the disabling pole between her arms.

“You see them? You see this spawn of evil? They killed their parents. They are possessed of the Devil.” The priest called out to the gathering.

“We didn’t!” the girl denied in a quavering voice.

“LIAR! We have witnesses, these men found them, crouched over their God-fearing parents with knives in their hands. They sacrificed their mother and their father to the evil one. They were students of the witch. They are in league with the demon. They summoned him here!” The priest argued loudly.

“So this is how they’ve been passing the time since they burnt Rhiannon’s house,” Coenred mused in a cold voice, “they’ve found new victims.”

“I don’t claim to have the eyesight of an owl but even in this light I can see blood on the girl’s shift.”

“And there are scratches on the faces of headman.”

“Aye me, it seems a more baneful crime has been enacted to cover the lust of a man for a girl. The watchmen as likely killed her parents at the headman’s command.”

“And now they are to die as witches being as they are the only witnesses to the crime.”

“And doesn’t the priest indulge them so.”

“This is madness. Surely they searched Rhiannon’s house after the burning and discovered that we were not brought low in there?”

“I thought on that last night and the silence of the hounds convinced me that they had done no such thing. Mayhap it’s ill-advised to enter the home of a witch even after you’ve burnt it to the ground and believe all inside are dead?”

“Mayhap, but what do we do now?”

“It is as clear as day that Meilyr is yet to return with a power to confront these nithing. The shadow of night is still upon us, we could retire to the wild for another day and come back again tomorrow?”

“And what of them?” Coenred turned to face his friend with cold eyes.

“I had a hope that you would not mention them,” Sigbert admitted in a quieter voice. “What do you have in mind?”

“I am not your lord and cannot command any service of you but I will not let them die for a crime they did not commit at the hand of one that’s already steeped in blood, our blood too he so believes.”

“You are not my lord, I have been with Eorl Aelfgar for but a few months, in that short time you have become my friend Coenred, I will die at your side this night.”

“You weave too dark a tapestry of it!”

“Do I? That priest is in league with the headman who may turn out to be the very Devil himself. They rule Harlech with fear. I doubt not that the headman thought to force himself on the girl and her father sought only to protect her but was murdered for his sense duty. The mother as well if my thinking is true. Mayhap the boy, her brother I think, tried also to protect the girl in his turn and took that hurt to his head in payment for his courage. They are bound now to a dark and malefic path; murder has come easy to the two pillars of this burgh.”

“That it has.”

“And they have around them weapons-men, the town’s watch, who obey as they have been taught to do, believing it a question of duty. The people do the same even if the worm of doubt gnaws within their breasts. At the bidding of those two sons of evil they will rend us limb from limb no matter our stout armour and sharp swords.”

“All you say is true but you miss one point.”

“Which is?”

“We have a demon to call upon!”

“We have suffered nought but ill-luck since the first burning, why should this one change our fortune?” A stocky man asked from the crowd. Several people around him voiced their agreement with the question he raised.

“For we were fooled,” the priest answered him. “I thought that there was but one witch amongst us, the hag with the son touched by madness. We burnt them as the law demands but there was another whom we did not see; Rhiannon. She practiced secret arts, communed with the evil one, and called in armed men to rid herself of the rightful authority of this land and rid herself of me, one who does God’s work in this same land. We killed them also, cleansed them with fire, but there are more. These two devil-children, disciples to the two witches previously discovered. This night they have made a blood sacrifice of their own parents. See! She is covered in their blood! Their own daughter she, and a child of the Devil!”

The crowd murmured their support for this declaration but it was far from unanimous. Clearly doubt was beginning to creep in.

“The Saesons said they’d come to fight the demon and some say that so they did. Some say they killed the demon for it’s not been back to haunt us since that night.” A voice declared.

“Some say do they? Well I say the Saesons were liars called to the aid of the witch Rhiannon. The demon stands off, say’s I, because that night we showed it the true strength of the Lord Jesu Christ when we killed the witch and her familiars. These two sought to bring it back to haunt you all again, to curse you all again, by letting the heart’s blood of their father and mother both.”

“I like not being called a familiar!” Sigbert declared.

“But we are dead to them, seemingly returning to life would put the fear of their god into these peasants,” Coenred mused.

“I agree but the shock would soon be past and then they might look to kill us again, only with cutting blades this time.”

“A fair point, which is why we must close on the priest and the headman only. The two headed snake must be separated from its body!”

“I see your mind. Scare the peasants. Kill the two nithings. Save the children, then get out of this place and await the coming of Meilyr.”

“Something like that my friend.”

“Then before they can tie either of them to that stake and set it alight it might be best that we strike now. I am ready for a fight I say.”

“You say well.”

The two Saxons rose from their position and drew their swords. They uttered no war cry nor made any other sound as they approached the fringes of the crowd. Unmindful of who they encountered the two warriors began to push their way to the front.

“If this thing is to be done then let it be done now,” Ifor told the priest in a snarled whisper.

“It will be done, though mayhap you should not rile me so, it was your lust that brought us to this situation and my quick thinking that found a way out for you,” Gerraint threw back at him in an equally low but authoritative tone.

“Just burn the brats and be done with it!”

“People of Harlech!” Gerraint raised his voice and the crowd fell quiet. “This is the will of the Lord, our one true God. The witches must be cast from Harlech and fire is the brand that will drive them forth. It may well be that we have not found them all out yet but we have killed two previously and these here,” he pointed at the brother and sister where they knelt, “these be two more. Every one of their kind that we burn to death strengthens us and weakens them. God will look down upon you and smile when the smoke from their pyre rises to Heaven.”

“You claim too much priest!” Coenred roared as he stepped beyond the front rank of the crowd. Those nearest to him fell back in shock. “You did not kill us before and you will not kill them now.”

“The Saesons!” The man who spoke tried to push those behind him as he strove to put some distance between himself and the men presumed to be dead.

“We come back from the grave for you priest!” Sigbert shouted. He glowered at the nearest peasants and they shrank away from him in abject fear.

“This cannot be!” Gerraint looked visibly shocked.

The two Saxons marched forward with swords in their hands and shields hanging ready on their left arms. The torchlight glittered on the steel of their mail byrnies, reflecting from their stout helmets, and running the length of their deadly blades.

“Ifor, kill them!” The priest commanded.

“You said that we had killed them!” He threw an accusatory glance at his confederate. “You said that they were dead in the ruins of the house!”

“Hell spat us out again to claim thy souls!” Sigbert spoke loudly and laughed evilly. The two warriors advanced now at a trot, their weapons held at the ready.

Ifor glanced again at the priest and realised that the man was rooted to the spot, either by fear or by wonder. He did not care which, what he knew was that two heavily armed and armoured huscarls were bearing down on him and that he was not a match for either of them on his own. He ordered the guardsmen forward but they hesitated. Three of the bravest, however, eventually made an attempt to block the huscarls’ path to the headman.

The guardsmen were alike to the fyrdmen of the Saxon-lands. They were trained in the rudiments of war. They could use a spear and a shield but they could do little else for themselves. As Coenred closed on the first of them he let the hastily advanced spear pass harmlessly over his shoulder and then rammed into the peasant warrior with his shield. Their bodies came together with a sudden impact but all the impetus came from the Saxon. The Welsh warrior fell backwards, almost tripping over his own heels. Coenred exploited the other’s lack of balance and struck at his spear with his glinting sword. The fighting spear was knocked out of the warrior’s hand and he suddenly found himself facing the huscarl without a weapon to defend himself.

“Quarter?” The man implored with a terrified voice.

“Be gone!” Coenred snarled at him. The warrior took his opportunity, dropping his shield to demonstrate that he no longer had any stomach for a fight. Then he turned and ran for his life. Coenred quickly retrieved the fallen spear, his preferred fighting weapon.

Sigbert dealt similarly with the other two heroes who found themselves severely overmatched against a man for whom fighting was a trade and the weight of his war-gear as nothing on his sturdy limbs. The remaining guardsmen decided that fighting warriors newly returned from the dead was not a prospect that met well with their personal courage. They shied away from the Saxons leaving only the headman and the priest to face their doom.

“Fly not before the Saesons!” Ifor called out.

“They be but men not demons!” Gerraint added.

“You said that they were dead!” A man accused the priest from the safety of the watching crowd. “What manner of sorcery spared them from the burning timbers of Rhiannon’s house?”

“No sorcery just a warrior’s instinct.” Coenred spoke loudly but kept his eyes on the two miscreants. “We are huscarls, born to war, yours is not the first death blow that I and my companion have escaped from under.”

“They are just men, I told you, kill them now!” Gerraint urged once again.

“You said they are the familiars of the witch, if they yet live does she?” another demanded.

“I was never a witch, only ever a healer.” Rhiannon walked slowly towards the Saxons. Her eyes were bright and her chin lifted, not with arrogance but by courage. “These men came to me after they had fought in your defence against one they presumed to be a demon. They had a hurt that needed mending. I did only what I for demanded of me and for that you burnt down my home as you did another not so long ago.”

“Listen not to the lies of this witch!” Gerraint insisted. “She defies God by being here!”

“I defy your will to have me murdered in my own home for doing no wrong,” Rhiannon shot back at him with anger fuelling her voice. A number of voices in the gathering announced their agreement with the young woman.

Ifor could see that they were losing the support of the people by virtue of this unexpected intrusion. He drew his knife and walked over to the girl, grasping her hair in his left hand and pulling back her head. The two guardsmen who stood with the prisoners had proven to be the hardest under his command; their loyalty remained with the headman.

“Your priest told you that these two sacrificed their parents to the dark one; they spilt filial blood to call their witch and her servants back from Hell and here they stand before us, resurrected by evil. The incantation worked. This is proof of witchcraft most foul. A working of evil has been enacted here tonight and you would all abandon God at the appearance of their illusion.” Ifor spoke in a loud commanding tone, his eyes scouring the faces of the villagers. “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live! Be thee good Christians then prove it this night when Hell itself has cracked open and spat foul creatures forth to steal thy souls! KILL THE WITCHES!”

The crowd murmured, unsure of which way their wills would go. Some now shouted support for their headman, a fact that the priest Gerraint was quick to seize and he started urging them all on to a new religious zeal.

“He will kill the girl to get the scent of blood in the air,” Sigbert said.

“Aye and then they will twist it to put us on the end of their spears.”

“That were always the hazard that we ran.”

“Then let’s run to it and see if we can save innocent blood this night before we spill our own.”

“I’ve told thee before; I’m not one for the sprint.”

“Walk if thee will only let thy path be littered with the dead of our enemies,” Coenred told him grimly.

“You cannot do this,” Rhiannon implored, “not all of these people are guilty.”

“Then let them stay their hand and I will stay my spear,” Coenred told her and she recoiled somewhat at the hard determination that she saw in his eyes. It became clear to her then that the warriors had passed some line in the sand. Their minds had changed. They looked now ready to meet death this night, and to deal it also.

“Kill the witch, she is their power!” A woman screamed from the ranks of her fellows. As if in response to her command someone threw a spear. The weapon was meant for fighting, however, and did not fly as well as an angon, the smaller throwing variant. Coenred pulled Rhiannon out of harm’s way and behind himself, holding his large wooden shield up to protect them against any more missiles. The spear hit the ground behind where the young woman had been standing and skidded out of sight having achieved nothing but rendering its owner weaponless.

“Fire will not avail us, we must spill their blood!” Gerraint insisted. He stood now next to Ifor, protected by the presence of the girl and her brother and the remaining guardsmen. “We must wash ourselves clean in the blood of the evil ones!”

As the crowd surged forward at the priest’s prompting Coenred moved towards his enemies with startling speed. For a moment Rhiannon was left exposed as he had not communicated his intention to her but with a pace or two Sigbert was by her side and evaluating the approaching villagers to gauge their level of threat. They seemed wary of the two armoured warriors, as they had every right to be, but they were also fired to a religious fury once again.

The remaining guardsmen intercepted the huscarl and stood more resolutely than their fellows had previously. They stabbed at the large Saeson with their long spears

but they only found either empty air or the stout linden wood of his shield that they could not pierce. In his turn Coenred sent out the silver lick of his spear point with speed and dexterity. Although a black mood had fallen upon him, an intent to kill and if necessary be killed this night, he had already made up his mind that he would not take any life that might be spared if doing so did not increase his own danger. So it was that when he hit one of the Welshmen with his shield and the other staggered under the blow, lowering his guard, that the huscarl's spear pierced the side of the guardsman's thigh, slicing through muscle and rendering him incapacitated, instead of lodging itself in his unprotected stomach and delivering a killing stroke.

Gerraint continued to urge his parishioners on with a voice increasingly strident as the armoured huscarl seemingly brushed aside any resistance and drew closer to his quarry. The priest recognised his danger and also saw the woman Rhiannon stood alone and defenceless as Sigbert fought to protect his friend's exposed flank.

"Kill the witch!" The clergyman screamed at the top of his voice. "Kill the sorceress! She is the cause of all this bloodletting. She is a servant of the Devil. Kill her before she summons back the demon!"

The violence of the encounter appeared to inspire some of the men of the village to action, whether right or wrong did not cross their minds. They resolved to fight and sided with their fellows against the strangers, the intruders, and they now numbered the healer in that group. Several of the men ran towards her, voicing their intent to do her harm and brandishing crude farming implements to add substance to their threat.

Coenred was well aware that the fight was going against them now. He redoubled his efforts and a growing rage inside his breast lent new fuel to his powerful muscles. With quick and powerful strokes he felled another guardsman and chased off the last of them who had now decided that the fight was too one sided for him.

Ifor saw the huscarl come on at a fast trot, his body covered by his large circular wooden shield, the yellow dragon of Mercia growling out at the Saxon's enemies. His face was masked by a helmet with long cheek-pieces and he held his long fighting spear as if it weighed nothing in his trained hand. Of all the weapons-men of Harlech Ifor was the best trained and the best equipped, but he knew that he was outmatched. Deciding on a change of tactic Ifor snatched the leash from the deacon's quivering hand and pulled the girl up onto her feet. He was not gentle with her and neither was he again as he suddenly pulled her to him. Her eyes were wide with fear but if she felt

any pain at the crude tugs of the leash that was wrapped around her fair throat she remained silent.

Once the girl was within reach Ifor grabbed her and spun her about, pulling her close so as to use her young body as a shield against the Saeson's long and deadly spear. His right hand flashed to her throat and cruelly pressed a shiny blade to it, hard enough to bring a small rivulet of crimson to run down her soft neck.

Coenred came to a stop and assessed the situation. The Welshman moved his head continually, appearing on one side and then the other of the girl's head. He was trying to make himself as difficult a target as possible. Angry voices were sounding into the night. The villagers were being stirred by their new priest to beat down the foreigners. The huscarl understood that he had to act and do so quickly or else they all stood to lose their lives this night.

Rhiannon held a knife in her hand as a peasant lunged at her with clawed hands. He was shouting at her in their own tongue, calling her distasteful names. She cut one of his hands and he suddenly fell away from her with a scream and clutched the wounded member to his bosom, all thoughts of violence suddenly dissipated with the letting of his own blood.

Others came after him, however, and they had weapons that she could not hope to match for reach or weight. They were people that she had grown up with. People that she had healed in her own way. People who had previously shown her gratitude. It went against the grain to hurt them now with her small sliver of steel but Rhiannon understood perfectly well that they were all possessed of a madness, infected by the priest and the headman, and that they would not cease until they had spilt her blood.

The villagers fanned out around her as the young woman attempted to retreat and keep them at arms length. She scanned their faces and talked to those that she recognised easily. She ask them to remember her, to think on the good deeds that she had done in friendlier times. They did not seem to want to listen. A man jumped forward and she threatened him with the knife. It was a feint. A woman came upon her from behind, grabbed her cloak and pulled it violently. Rhiannon staggered and the shaft of a hoe smacked down on her right forearm. The knife fell to the earth even as her scream was raised to the night sky. Her attackers surged forward with only one intent.

A roar echoed the young woman's cry. It was guttural and loud and seemingly inhuman. Those who heard it clearly froze upon the moment. Rhiannon found herself

clasped by many hands. Fingers like talons were in the weave of her dress, the folds of her cloak, fastened upon her arms, and painfully tugging on her long dark tresses. They pulled her head back, her chin up, exposing her slender throat for the murderer's knife to cut. That blade hovered before her terrified eyes but it did not fall to spill her blood. Like the man who wielded it the blade was frozen.

He was frozen until realisation dawned upon him and his fellows and then the screaming started. They called him stupid, they called him 'the ox', they called him monster and then they called him a demon. Daffyd had never minded what his fellows of Harlech had called him but now he minded that they threatened to spill the blood of the one person apart from his mother who had always been kind to him. On twisted legs and with long arms swinging he charged into the throng and threw those who stood before him bodily to the ground. He stamped upon them, beat upon them, roared at them.

In his mind's eye the seconds passed like minutes but pass they did and they were only really seconds. The crowd that had surrounded Rhiannon gave way before his terrible charge and far more of them fled before the mighty Daffyd than were caught in his burnt and twisted hands. Of those he did catch scratches and bruising were the worst that they suffered but none would know of that until the morrow.

With a great hand Daffyd caught up Rhiannon from where she had been dropped to the ground by her persecutors. He righted her and then pushed her behind him as he turned to look for more enemies to fight, protectively putting his great bulk between the frightened woman and those who seemed intent on murdering her.

"THE DEMON!" Gerraint screamed.

Ifor's head snapped up and he unwittingly raised himself up to see all the better the great dark bulk that had now interposed itself between himself and the witch Rhiannon. It was all that Coenred needed. The spearhead shone in the starlight as it flashed forward. The girl's eyes expanded in terror as she saw the polished steel cross the distance between herself and the Saeson in what seemed like a flicker of a serpent's tongue. The passing of the deadly weapon disturbed her long hair but did not so much as kiss the soft cheek on the left-hand side of her young face. Instead she heard a curious gurgling sound and then felt something warm and wet on the side of her neck. She blinked once. The arm that held her fast loosened and began to fall away. The cold and bloodied metal at her throat did likewise. The spearhead appeared again at the side of the face, stained crimson. It went back to its master who now

straightened from his stance and let his shield fall to his side. There was a dull thud behind her and the girl began to turn to see what had happened, her mind too numb to make sense of the evidence already presented to her.

Coenred stepped forward quickly and gathered the girl to him, turning her so that she would not see the corpse of the headman who now lay on the ground. His neck had suffered a deep cut and arterial blood pumped onto the ground beneath him. Ifor's eye's bulged and his mouth open and closed, much like that of a beached fish. His passing was both painful and protracted, but he did indeed die.

Suddenly the tide of the fight had changed yet again. Once more the people of Harlech lost their resolve and began to scatter. The presence of the demon, a figure that inspired genuine dread in every heart, broke them. The night air was filled with the sound of their running feet and their screams as they searched for a place of safety from the nightmarish vision that stood next to Rhiannon.

"The priest!" Sigbert shouted a warning and pointed with his much used spear past Coenred. The huscarl turned but ensured that the girl he had saved could not see the dying man at their feet.

Gerraint had followed Ifor's example and grabbed the fallen leash that was tied to the boy. His deacon had long since abandoned his charge and now resided in the wooden church desperately praying to his god for salvation from this night of horrors. Gerraint also now held a knife to the boy's throat and brought him closer so as to shield himself from the sharp weapons pointed in his direction.

Coenred glanced at Rhiannon and indicated the girl that he still held. She understood his meaning and came quickly to wrap her arms about the frightened child and lead her away but the sister would not abandon her brother. She kept her eyes on the scene now unfolding as the two Saesons closed on the priest and his hostage.

No one saw Daffyd slink into the shadows once more.

For his part Coenred adopted a less war-like pose. He allowed his shield to remain by his side and for the point of his spear to come closer to the earth as he advanced on the clergyman.

"Set free the boy and we'll spare you your life," he spoke in a calmer tone of voice than he actually felt. Sigbert moved to his left and kept both his shield and spear presented to his enemy.

"You will go from this place!" Gerraint insisted.

“We will once the boy is released to us unharmed,” Coenred responded, closing the distance one slow, cautious step at a time.

“No! You will go now. You have tainted this village with your evil. You have stained it for too long. God will have his victory over you.”

“God has nothing to do with this night!” Rhiannon snapped back. Coenred frowned. He understood the woman’s anger, it was justified, but he wanted to try and calm the situation so as to create an opportunity to rescue the boy. He was well aware that the children had lost their parents and that they were now all the family that each of them had. He did not want to see that family reduced once more.

“God has everything to do with this witch! I am doing God’s work.”

“Killing the innocent?” Sigbert snarled with disdain. “I wonder if you really are an ordained priest for I recognise you not and I am a Christian.”

“You are a Saeson and a heathen!”

“I am a heathen,” Coenred admitted, “and I cast no judgement on you, all I want is the boy returned to his sister, hale and hearty.” He moved closer again.

“You want him so that he can bear false witness against me,” Gerraint declared with an energetic nodding of his head.

“We can all bear witness against you for your work here, are you going to kill each and every one of us with your knife?” Coenred was still too far from the priest to use his fighting spear but he considered throwing the weapon now. It was an action that carried a great risk. The long fighting spear was not meant to be thrown, certainly not with any accuracy. Even a warrior as skilled as he was could not vouchsafe the boy’s safety if he moved to this assault.

“Coenred.” It was Sigbert who spoke.

“I know.”

“Things will move very quickly.”

“I know.”

“Of what do you speak?” Gerraint demanded of them.

Coenred could not answer immediately because he was still weighing up the importance of the sound of horsemen approaching. It seemed that Meilyr had finally returned with the king’s men. Many such men by what the warrior heard. He wondered how long it would be, how many precious seconds, before the priest heard the trotting ponies as well and realised that he was now truly trapped. Would he then

kill his hostage out of spite? Could Coenred move fast enough over the remaining distance to stop that fateful blade? He seriously doubted it.

Gerraint did indeed hear the approach of the men on horseback. He half turned, clutching onto the boy and keeping the knife to his throat. Just beyond the clergymen Coenred saw the dark mass of the horsemen begin to take form as they came into the weak light of the village gathering. There were many warriors approaching. Instinctively the Saxon closed the distance between himself and the priest. He knew that something violent was about to happen and still resolved to save the boy if he could.

“You will not stop me carrying out God’s work!” Gerraint insisted almost hysterically. His arm moved, pushing the knife to the furthest extent so that when he drew it back it would cut long and deep into the boy’s neck, severing the artery, the vein, and the windpipe.

The spear and the shield were of little use in such close quarters so Coenred cast them from him as he leapt forward but he was too slow. The time taken to divest himself of the shield alone was too long, accounted for too many precious seconds. So it was that when he reached Gerraint he was not the first to do so. From out of the shadows a guttural snarl erupted and Daffyd emerged. One burnt and twisted hand closed on the man’s right arm and irresistibly drew the hand and the knife it held away from the vulnerable neck. Still moving the larger man dragged the priest away from the boy to ensure that he could do him no harm whatsoever.

Coenred dashed in and lifted the young hostage bodily from the ground, claiming him for safety’s sake. Sigbert had moved in from the other side and came to his friend’s defence in anticipation but there was now no need.

Gerraint was screaming in absolute fear as he faced the monster that he had created. Daffyd lifted him from the floor and brought their faces close together. He stared into the cold eyes of his persecutor. He spoke no words, just searched the face of the man who had destroyed his life, his family, and threatened the one true friend that he had known. Gerraint’s face had turned white with terror. His legs kicked uselessly as he hung from those powerful arms. Utterances escaped from his lips but they made no sense.

In a sudden moment Daffyd made a choice. His muscles flexed and he raised the priest above his head.

“Llofrudd!” He roared in his native tongue, naming the priest ‘murderer’. With that he raised the priest high above his head and then dashed the man down to the earth with terrible force. Bones broke and a pitiful scream was wrenched from Gerraint’s lips but he did not move. His body was broken beyond all repair and his life began a slow count of heartbeats down to the final one.

Dafydd raised both of his misshapen fists into the air above his head as if he were going to beat the shattered but inert body before him. His large hands were suspended for a moment and a look of anger coloured his ruined face. It was a look that suddenly gave way to amazement as the point of a spear burst through his stomach.

“No!” Meilyr shouted too late at his companion as the warrior had thrown the spear. It travelled but a short distance from a strong arm and there was no power on earth that could intercede. Only the body of the giant might arrest the weapon’s flight and that it did with fatal consequences.

Rhiannon screamed for her friend.

The huscarls could only stand as watch as the tormented Dafydd looked down at the strange implement that projected from his abdomen. His great arms fell to his side and he tottered away from the dying priest to crumple to his knees. Rhiannon left the girl and ran to Dafydd. Coenred quickly used his knife to free the boy from his restraints and set him towards his sister. He moved then to the fallen Dafydd on slow legs and was joined there by Meilyr.

“I gave no order to attack,” the other said with an apologetic tone. “This was not my intent. The man thought that he was protecting the priest.” Coenred glanced at him and nodded. He understood how the events had played out. There was no blame to be levelled at anyone other than Ifor and Gerraint. Their union had brought all of this death to Harlech.

Slowly Dafydd fell onto his side as his once prodigious strength deserted him. Rhiannon threw her arms around him and spoke softly as the tears coursed down her cheeks. She told him not to be afraid, that he was going to join his mother and that they would be at peace together once again. He responded with a voice now shockingly weak that he was glad to be leaving a world that had become so cold and cruel to him. He wanted the pain to stop. He wanted the loneliness to end. He had no more anger left in him. But he would miss his new friends, the Saesons who had once fought him and then fought for him. Most of all he would miss the gentle Rhiannon.

She stroked his burnt and bruised skin as his eyes closed one last time. With a great sigh the life left his ruined body and Dafydd of Harlech, once called the demon, knew peace finally.

Author's Notes

'The Demon of Harlech' is entirely a work of fiction on my part. Eorl Aelfgar was indeed exiled to Ireland in 1055 by King Edward of England. He plotted his return and after a short while sailed to Wales where he formed an alliance with King Gruffydd ap Llywelyn. His daughter Eadgyth married and became a Queen of Wales. Together Aelfgar and Llywelyn went on to invade England as allies but that is another story.

I myself spent two happy years living in Harlech as a student at the adult education college that was once based there. It was an institution that did so very much for me. I hope, however, that if any resident or friend of Harlech reads this story that they are not offended by my representation of the place or the people. My intent was simply to entertain and to add a little depth to the background of two of the principal characters of another of my works, 'The Sorrow Song Trilogy'. If you enjoyed this adventure of Coenred and Sigbert then you can find them in something a little more historical in the published novels 'The War Wolf' and 'For Rapture of Ravens', and the soon to be published 'The Blade's Fell Blow'.

Please visit me at <http://petercwhitaker.co.uk/>



A list of Welsh and Saxon Words Used in this Tale

Bara lawr	Welsh bread
Brythoniaid	Old name for the Welsh in their own language.
Cymru	Welsh name for Wales
Eorlдерman	Anglo-Saxon nobleman
Fyrd	Anglo-Saxon army
Iras	Saxon name for the Irish
Llofrudd	Welsh for murderer
Loegyr	Welsh for England
Nithing	Saxon word for a man without honour
Saeson	Welsh name for the Saxons.
Walha	Saxon name for the Welsh
Wyrd	A Saxon concept similar to fate