

The City of York

The evening before the battle was spent inevitably in the hall of High-Theign Aethelwine. The young eorls demanded a feast for the fighting Saxons who were to defend York from the threat of Hardrada and his horde. The beer and wine flowed and meat and bread were consumed in great quantities, most of it from the high-theign's own supply and it would probably go unpaid for. Serving girls wended their way through the ranks of men, some warriors, some dreaming of being such, many fooling themselves that they already were. The men leached and leered, as was their wont at such times, and many a couple would awaken tomorrow with only a dim memory of the drunken pleasure that had passed between them.

Music and song reverberated from the rafters and there was, for once, plenty of light. The hall was decked out far more gloriously than was usual, with plenty of lamps burning bright to reveal the wall hangings, the captured arms of dead enemies, hunting trophies, and the large number of benches that filled the great long hall. The eorls sat at the top table with Aethelwine, Coenred, and their usual favourites. Coenred's station entitled him to sit closer to the eorls but he found himself pushed down to the right by the placing of theigns who enjoyed the patronage of the eoldermen but it did not trouble him greatly. In truth his mind was not turned to the prospect of merrymaking being shadowed by thoughts of the coming battle.

He was not as superstitious as some here tonight but he felt an ominous weight settling on his heart. He ate and drank enough to be sociable but felt removed from the proceedings. Normally he would have happily indulged himself, eating too much and drinking somewhat more, knowing all too well that such moments of plenty, and of entertainment too, were to be relished in this precarious world. His very profession made him all the keener in this perception.

The boards before the top table were occupied by the companions of the eorls, huscarls such as Sigbert, Hereric and Thrydwulf, the richer theigns and the equally prosperous merchants of the City and Vale of York. Lesser ranking individuals occupied the remaining benches or stood behind them. The lowest ranking guests filled what space remained, many with their backs against the wooden walls. There was no complaint as everyone would be catered for eventually and it was good to be in the company of so many again, to see the hall being put to the use for which it was both skilfully made and artistically decorated.

So she was the guest of the high-theign and sat at the top table alongside the eorls?

Wulfhere's own lord had not been granted that particular honour; it made him wonder if mayhap he had indeed set his sights too high? Mildryth looked well suited to her position and it crossed his mind that she might not be quite alone and as vulnerable as he had first believed. He stood towards the back of the hall, amongst the lowest ranks of the guests and present only because his own lord was a favoured theign. Rubbing shoulders with the peasants vexed him but he soothed this complaint by enjoying the free food and drink that was being passed around quite liberally.

He had pushed as far forward as he dare. Although it was not customary in such a gathering he wore his byrnie so that he would be known as a weapons-man and would then be afforded some respect if not fear. Before him were the lowest tables, jealously occupied. To go any further into that social circle would be to invite a public rebuke; no one liked seeing someone else contravene the well understood social rules on such occasions as these. Besides, Wulfhere had no wish to attract any undue attention. He had long since learnt that the man of note was another's target. Better to stay in the background and move amongst the shadows, pouncing like a cat only when the moment was right to strike.

It had occurred to him that tomorrow's battle would create a moment of chaotic excitement in the city. Although he could not escape being in the ranks as a theign's fighting man there would still be time after the conclusion of the battle when people would behave a little wild. The talk was of victory of course, no one ever thought of defeat. To be fair the young eorls did have some experience in combat and they had driven Tostig Godwinson from England previously when he raided Lindsey with his war-band of adventurers. Wulfhere would hedge his bets all the same; even a defeat could prove profitable.

But what to do about this one?

He saw her glance down the table to the man who sat glowering at his board. It seemed that she was trying to catch his attention but he was distracted. Wulfhere did not like that. His eye was practiced enough to recognise a genuine warrior when he saw one and this man must be of an elevated rank to be sat with the eorls. It occurred to him then that Mildryth might have set her sights on the man with a trimmed beard and that did not sit well with Wulfhere's own plans for her. However, if the man was some celebrated warrior then it was to be sure that tomorrow he would be employed on the field of battle and not within the city walls. She may favour him but he would not be around when the battle was at its height. Wulfhere smiled to himself. If the glowering man was her protector then she would be no safer for having his service when all the weapons-men were fighting for their lives against the Vikings. He would just have to steal from the field a little earlier than everyone else but with a fitting reason so as not to anger his own lord.

“‘Tis a grand table to be sitting at,” Thrydwulf declared to his companions.

“The eorls make fine hosts,” Hereric agreed, glancing at the eoldermen and their guests.

“I prefer this table myself,” Sigbert told them.

“Would you not seek the honour of being counted one worthy of sitting with the eorls?”

Aethelmaer asked; his young face already flushed from the drink.

“I have been sat before many such tables young Aethelmaer,” Sigbert replied, “and few have noted how much I’ve eaten or drunk seeing as I was not raised to the sight of everyone else present.”

“Nor have they seen how many times you’ve fallen from your bench all the worse for drink,” Thrydwulf said with a laugh.

“I like a good drink,” his friend agreed, “and that is another good reason not to sit so high; it’s not so far to fall.” Everyone laughed at his remark. “Oh they’ll eat and drink their fill, you can be sure of that, but they are lords and ladies and must always seem so before our eyes. I tell thee, there is more merriment to be had down here in our company than to be had in such a vaulted band as the eorls and the high-theigns.”

A round of hands banging on the boards of the table followed this statement as a hearty sign of agreement.

“At least they are allowed womenfolk as guests,” Thrydwulf observed; he always had an eye for a pretty face.

“This is a battle feast,” Hereric answered, “an occasion such as this is not meet for women. Brother warriors, we renew our death-oaths this night and promise to stand firm beside each other before the points of our enemies’ spears. We will defend our lords with our lives, and if they die so do we. I would bring my fair Eadgyd to any other celebration but I say again, it is not proper for a woman to be here to remind her man of all that he stands to lose when his mind should be concerned with only one thing; killing our enemies.”

Again the sound of fists banging the hard wood of the table broke out, but reverberating much more loudly than before and lasting longer.

The music died and the minstrels were applauded. One of the eorls’ companions made them a gift of a gold ring and a horn of ale, an act that was warmly appreciated by the rest of the guests. As they departed an older man stepped forward before the lords’ table. He wore a bright tunic of summer yellow and trousers of dark red. His face was lined with the passage of well over forty summers but his eyes sparkled with a vitality that a younger man might envy. His hair was greying at the sides, but clean and well kept. A simple braid was tied around his head to keep it out of his eyes. In his left hand he held a much used staff. He walked into the vacant space that the minstrels had recently occupied and stood a moment just looking around the great hall. Aware now that a new entertainer had taken the floor the crowd began to quieten. As he turned back to face the eorls he crouched dramatically and threw out his right

hand, fingers splayed. The hall suddenly became silent and into the void a deep voice boomed from the scop's chest.

*So often does the solitary one
find grace for himself
in the mercy of the Lord.
With a sorry heart he must
for a long time
row by hand
along the waterways,
along the ice cold sea,
and tread the paths of exile.
Events go as they always must!*

He recited a well known poem that all had heard many times before but it was listened to with rapt attention. His voice had all the qualities necessary for the telling of the tale and he was clearly much practised in his art. Coenred appreciated the scop's talent too. 'The Wanderer' might seem to some a poor choice for such a feast as this but it echoed the misgivings in his own heart. He found himself quietly reciting particular verses as the scop spoke them.

*Alone each morning
I spoke of my troubles
Before the dawn.
There is none now living
To whom I can clearly speak
Of my innermost thoughts.
I know it truly,
That it is in all men
A noble custom
That he should keep secret
His own mind,
Guard his thoughts,
Though he thinks as he wishes.
The weary spirit cannot
Withstand fate
Nor does a sorrowful mind*

Prove helpful.

Thus do those eager for glory

Keep secure their dreary thoughts

Housed in their breasts.

Coenred felt as if the scop was at that point talking directly to him but when he looked up he found that the man had his back to the lords' table and was performing to the larger audience.

Those eager for glory!

He glanced down the table to where Eorl Edwin sat, watching with genuine appreciation the scop's recital.

What dreary thoughts does that young man have secured in his breast?

His constant competition with the House of Wessex mayhap?

A young man's need to prove himself to the world, felt all the more keenly due to his high station?

All to what cost?

He who has been given the trial

Knows how cruel

Is sorrow as a companion

To those who have few

Beloved friends.

The path of the exile

Holds him,

And it is not all twisted gold,

It is a frozen spirit,

Not the bounty of the earth.

He remembers well

The hall of warriors,

The giving of treasure.

How in his youth his lord

Accustomed him

to the feasting.

All that joy has died!

Mildryth glanced towards Coenred but saw that she still could not catch his eye. He was staring intently at the table before him. They were separated by several seats, she a guest of

High-Theign Aethelwine, he the captain of the eorl's huscarls, and all other personages of note between them.

How cruel is sorrow as a companion.

She knew only too well the truth of that statement. For some reason, hearing it here tonight, on the eve of the battle, it made her think of him. Not her dead husband Aethelheard, although he had been dear to her, but rather of the living Coenred, who would hazard his very life on the morrow to protect them all. It crossed her mind that she had been foolish indeed in thinking to ally herself in anyway with a warrior, a fighting man, who could be so easily snatched out of this world.

Then the memory of the man called Wulfhere came back to haunt her. She knew what lay behind his eyes and feared the fate that might await her there if he had his way.

What was there in life that was worth having if it was not also worth hazarding?

Sorrow was indeed a cruel companion, but so was regret, especially the regret of not taking the opportunity when it presented itself.

Does Coenred feel nothing for me other than an obligation dictated by his sense of honour?

Could he not form an affection for me that might lead to something that would end my lonely state in this world?

Had her state fallen so low since being made a widow that she was beneath the consideration of such a man as he?

She knew only that the answers would not come to her if she sat passively and waited for wyrd to decide. Life was a gamble to begin with and she believed herself to be unafraid of a little more hurt if that was what wyrd had in store for her.

There was something about the man, however, that had attracted her attention even when the strands of her grief were still clinging to her soul. Her love of life was too strong to surrender all hope so soon. She wondered for a moment if seeking protection had been her only motive in approaching Coenred in such a manner and knew that it had not, she could not have asked such questions of herself if it had been so.

She wanted to live again.

Having manoeuvred into meeting him in the hall she had not been disappointed. He was handsome, proud but not arrogant, well thought of and lacking in vanity. She liked what she had discovered of him and knew, almost instinctively, that she could love this man if wyrd gave them the chance.

Must sorrow be my constant companion for the rest of my life?

I know not why

My spirit

does not darken

*when I ponder upon
the whole life of men
throughout this world.
How suddenly they
Left the bright hall,
Those proud theigns.
So this middle-earth
Decays a bit more
Each day.
A man cannot call
Himself wise
Before he has his share
Of years in this world.
A wise man knows
He must be patient
He must never be too impulsive
Nor too hasty to speak
Nor too weak a warrior
Nor too reckless
Not too fearful
Nor too cheerful
Nor too greedy for treasure
Nor too boastful about his own deeds
Before he can see clearly.
A man must wait
When he speaks his oaths,
Until the proud-hearted
Can see clearly
Which way their heart will turn.
The wise hero will realise
How terrible it will be
When all the wealth of this world
Is lain waste.*

Are you listening proud earls to these words of wisdom? Surely this man was sent here tonight for a reason, to warn you off a vainglorious path?

Coenred glanced again at his young lords.

*The bright halls fall into decay
Their lords lie low
Deprived of all their joy
All of their companions
Have fallen,
The proud ones,
The shield-wall,
Taken by war.*

He speaks of the fate of the Vikings!

Edwin, Eorl of Mercia, gripped his gold cup tightly as the poem worked its magic on his mind. War would indeed take off some and that number would be great in the reckoning. His mind was alive with the images of battle, of great heroes clashing with spears, swords and shields, the fall of one and the victory of another. Fanciful imaginings drawn from the remembrance of poems and tales he had heard at the feet of his father in the great hall of Mercia.

*Where is the horse?
Where the rider?
Where the giver of bright treasure?
Where the seats at the feast?
Where are the revels in the hall?
Alas for the golden cup!
Alas for the mailed warrior!
Alas for the splendour of princes!
All that time has passed away
Under the cover of the dark night
Now, as if it had never been!*

So will it be in hall of the Norwegian King.

Edwin smiled grimly as he thought of what he might achieve tomorrow.

This fabled Viking king. This leader of a plundering mob. This reaver from over the great northern sea. This War Wolf! I will end this wanderer's journey tomorrow at Fulford Gate and it will be as if King Hardrada of Norway had never been. Then will my own glory rise and burn the eyes of the Wyvern of Wessex.

*Those brave warriors
Were taken
By the glory of spears
Weapons greedy for slaughter
The famous turn of events
And do storms thrash
These rocky cliffs
And falling frost
Fetters the earth
The harbinger of winter.
Then does the dark come
The night shadows deepen
From the northern sky
There comes a rough hailstorm
In malice against all men*

I will be that hailstorm from the north!

Edwin nodded his head absently in agreement with his own thoughts. This was indeed the sign that he had been secretly looking for, dispelling those dreary thoughts that the scop's perception revealed.

*All is but trouble
In this kingdom of the earth
The turn of events
In the world under heaven.
Here gold is fleeting,
Here friend is fleeting
Here kinsman is fleeting
Here man is fleeting
Here the foundations of the earth
Turn to waste!*

The audience sat enraptured, hanging on every word spoken by the scop. Lords and ladies at the top table, huscarls, theigns and merchants on the benches, frydmen and ceorls at the back of the hall, and servants standing wherever they could to hear the words of this most gifted of speakers.

*So spake the wise man
In his mind alone,
Sat apart in his own counsel.
Good is he who keeps his faith
And a warrior must never speak
Of his grief too quickly
Unless he already knows the remedy,
A hero must act with courage.
It is better for the one who seeks mercy,
Consolation from our Father in Heaven,
Where for us,
All permanence rests!*

As he spoke the final lines the scop turned and bowed to the eorls in a dramatic fashion. For a moment a silence hung suspended; in that instant no one dared to speak. The scop kept his head low, waiting.

“Yes!” Edwin sat back in his carved seat. “YES!”

He began to beat with his golden cup onto the boards of the table. Quickly his companions followed his example and then the rest of the people in the hall added their thunderous appreciation.

The scop rose and performed a series of similar bows to each part of his audience after which he was furnished with a horn of ale and Eorl Edwin heaped praise upon his head and a circlet of gold promising that, after the battle, he would also give so gifted a poet a grant of land to equal his talent. The assembled people were so moved as to give the young nobleman a resounding cheer of his own. They appreciated the generosity of the lord, the ring-giver of old, who rewarded the achievements of his people. There were many men who held the title of lord but so very few that seemed to acknowledge the old customs that went with the privilege of their station.

Coenred could see the delight in the eorl's young face. He had discovered the power of playing to the crowd. He grinned foolishly at people and became generous with his gifts to one and all. Although by no means a miser Coenred could not help but wonder if Edwin might not regret his generosity in the morning when his head ached and the stale taste of beer was in his mouth and his scribe read the list of endowments that he was recording this night?

If he survived the battle.

If they all survived the battle!

The heat and noise became oppressive, what with so many people crammed into the long hall. Drinking did not alleviate the din of so many talking disparately, nor was their conversation dulled by the musicians whose music had at first been listened to politely but was now largely ignored. After awhile Coenred took advantage of the distraction of a wrestling match to leave the table and make his way unnoticed into the quieter and cooler night outside.

The sky was clear and a myriad silver points shined down upon the city from above. Coenred stopped to marvel at the celestial display as he had often done as a boy on the farm in Holderness. He did not question what the stars were or how they shone or why they seemed to move in the night sky, he simply enjoyed their unrivalled beauty.

“Tis a beautiful night,” a voice out of the dark stirred him.

He turned to see a brother warrior lumbering from the shadows but it was a face he happily recognised.

“Sigbert,” they nodded their greeting to each other, “do you tire of the feast?”

“I have attended and, like you Coenred, I think that I have both drank and eaten my fill,” he returned. He showed no embarrassment as he passed wind noisily as if to prove his point.

“You go home to your wife then?”

“Aye, though some might think me upon a short leash eh?!”

They both laughed good-naturedly.

“Why did you marry?” Coenred asked suddenly. When he realised what he had said he found himself a little embarrassed.

“Why?” Sigbert looked at him as if not understanding what his friend had asked. “Tis man's place to be with a woman of course.”

“True, but you are a huscarl like myself. We fight for our lords, we fight for our pay. We die for our trade.”

“Don't we all.” Sigbert responded. “No man has to be a warrior to die on the point of a spear. The people of Fulford Gate and Water Fulford will be in as much danger as us when the Vikings come whether they take up arms or not.”

“You do not fear for your wife if you should fall?”

“Aye, I do, and for that I make provision. I spend not all the money I have and I work my land holdings beyond the city walls well enough to provide a little extra. Hilda runs her shop too bringing in more coin. I have three sons and two daughters. Should I die tomorrow they will look after each other and use the money we have to buy their own protection if necessary. In time my eldest may even avenge my death. But even if I survive tomorrow death will come and find me someday, though in my sleep I prefer.” He laughed to himself.

“It has always seemed strange to me that ones such as we, who live to kill and be killed, should seek wives,” Coenred stated.

“Why?”

Coenred looked away, wondering if mayhap he had indeed drunk too much. Sigbert mused for a moment.

“Have you not known the magic of a woman? Ah, now when I lay me down and my sweet Hilda rests her head on my shoulder, her silky hair in my face, her arm across my chest and her leg across my thighs, I pull her close in my arms and thank the gods that I am a man.” He laughed to himself again. “Coenred, you have an estate worked by your mother and your brother do you not?”

“Aye, in the Isle of Holderness.”

“Then all you lack is a good wife, believe me,” Sigbert asserted. “Tis talked around the hearth-fire that a woman has her eye on you even now.” He glanced sideways to judge the other’s reaction.

“Much nonsense is talked around the hearth-fire,” Coenred insisted. Despite the cooler night air he felt his face growing warm.

“You have not taken a wife because you fear your trade will leave her alone and widowed; 'tis the same for any man you know, be he a fisher, a hunter, or a king. I am no great thinker Coenred, that you know, but I say this to you, take her to wife if she will have you. Be handfasted, and enjoy your time together. Probably we'll all be dead by this time tomorrow anyway.” He turned and started to walk away from the hall. “I'll see thee on the morrow Coenred my friend and if we die then I'll die the happier having come from the warm embrace of my Hilda instead of a cold and lonely bed like yourself.”

He watched his fellow huscarl totter into the night, full of food and drink and good cheer. Sigbert had served the family of Edwin and Morcar for ten years and here he was alive, well, and to all appearances a happy man.

Mayhap there was some truth in his words after all?

Coenred turned and made his way back into the noisy hall. He was met by what seemed to be a wall of heat and sound, and he had to push his way past bodies as the men were now too far gone in their cups to recognise his rank or give him due respect. He did not mind, they would be fighting for their lives tomorrow and he was not one to demand the constant servility of others.

He made his way towards the main table where the lords and ladies were gathered and there he saw her. She was dressed in fine clothes but demurely. The jewellery that she had chosen to wear tonight was of good quality but sought only to enhance and not to shine. She sat as a guest of High-Theign Aethelwine, which indeed she was, but no one seemed to be taking much notice of her, mayhap because the followers of Edwin and Morcar were very much of a similar age and, therefore, younger than she.

Coenred took a deep breath and then made straight for where Mildryth sat. She saw him coming and smiled gently. He felt his knees go weak and hated himself for the sudden hesitation that came upon him but he continued to her side.

“My Lady, would you take some fresh air with me?” He shouted more than spoke because of the noise.

“Gladly,” she replied, although she mouthed the words in reply. Rising she took the hand that he offered and he was once again amazed at the softness of her skin. “This way.”

Mildryth had to lean into him to talk into his ear and despite the din, despite the press of other people, of the smell of hot food and warm beer, Coenred found his senses overwhelmed by her femininity. She led him towards the back wall and then along it to the side and through a doorway hidden behind a woven cloth.

They were in the kitchens of the great hall and suddenly it was surprisingly quieter. The servants and slaves were still busy working and they chatted happily enough to each other, but there were fewer people in here and a large shutter in the rear wall had been propped open so as to let the night air cool down the workers. Another door to the left took them outside and away from everyone.

Edwin, Coenred's retainer, sat on a stool eating some spare meat and drinking weak beer like many of the other servants in the kitchen area. They knew that their masters were too far into the feast now to be bothered about people of their low station. He watched Coenred leave by the unexpected route with the lady and wondered for a moment if he should follow, but he had been commanded to spend the night here in the hall. He decided that seeing as there was still plenty of food and a little more drink available that that would be the wiser course. He had spent yesternight out under the September sky with nothing in his belly and no coverlet to keep off the morning dew. Here he was now warm, fed, newly clothed and with companionship. Strange how a man's fortunes could change after a chance encounter.

“I had hoped to speak to you before the battle tomorrow,” Mildryth said as the noise of the feast slowly faded behind them.

They continued to walk away from the hall, down a narrow path that curved gently as it went. He felt her grip loosen and her fingers began to slide from his grasp. He regretted it.

“And I meant to speak to you to, My Lady,” he confirmed. “I am the captain of many men and there is much to be done to prepare for tomorrow, but I must have this time with you.” He looked her in the face and she did not avert her eyes. “I have used women as men do, but I have never looked for a wife. I still do not understand why, when a single stroke can end a life on the battlefield, that men such as I should, and yet I find my thoughts ever turning that way.”

“We are just two sides of the same coin, My Lord, only one a man and one a woman, but there is happiness in such unions also.”

“The times, I think, are against us, My Lady. The Vikings return with blood and fire and the Normans cast their greedy eyes upon our lands from across the sea to the south; what chance have we of any happiness?”

“Only that which we choose to make for ourselves.”

“I have made happiness for others; my mother and brother have a good life on the land I own. The tenants are happy too and work the land well. I have taken none of this for myself.”

“I know.”

“And you are widowed once already.”

“But my heart is strong. I had a good life with my husband and my son but it was taken from us by cruel men who come again to take whatever else they can by force. Mayhap this time they will take everything? Mayhap it is wrong and foolish to try and build a little happiness in such times, or mayhap it's right to disdain the fates and take what we can while we can? Mayhap, knowing that they have something to fight for beyond the declarations of eoldermen, good men like yourself will fight a little harder and come back to us all the sooner?” She put her hand to his face and gently stroked the soft, neatly trimmed beard. “I do not think that you fear to lose your life but rather that you fear to fail those who would look to you for their protection. If you fall tomorrow your family will fare as best they might, as will I. If you last the fight then we all will have gained something.”

“If I followed a better leader then I would have more hope.” A shadow of doubt crossed his face, visible even in the starlight.

“Then be your own leader. You are the Captain of the Huscarls of the Eoldermen; lead them the way you know best.”

“You are wise as well a beautiful.” The words surprised him as they passed his lips but he meant the compliment.

“Those words come from another, my husband who taught me to love life and to be thyself. Tomorrow, be the leader the men need, whether in victory or defeat, and show the eorls what it is be a commander of men.”

“I seek counsel from a woman!” He laughed at himself, not at her.

“A wise man takes counsel where he can find it.”

“Then do you have any other wise words for me?”

“Only this.” She leant close and kissed his lips. He remained rigid as if incapable of relaxing even though he realised that he had secretly longed for this moment. “I sought to commission you as my protector Lord Coenred, but I find in you a noble heart that I much admire.”

He remained speechless, his mouth slightly open and a surprised look on his face. She laughed gently.

“Do not be afraid of me,” she chided him playfully.

“I am not. I fear nothing. I...” his voice faltered and he felt stupid.

“Then prove it.”

She looked him in the face and in the starlight it seemed to him that she was glowing. She had seen twenty eight summers and she had been a wife and a mother. He was aware that this lady was no girl but a woman who had lived a life before he had ever met her, and she seemed more beautiful than any girl that he had ever seen. He gave into his passion and pulled her to him and returned her kiss with longing.

When they separated it seemed to him that the world had grown immeasurably smaller, that it was encompassed by this very embrace. Certainly there was nothing of value to him beyond it right now.

“Lord Coenred, see me safely home and then go to do thy duty to those you will lead on the morrow.”

When she spoke to him her voice was a like a caress.

“I will.”

They released each other and she started to walk towards her small house. He moved to walk beside her and found her arm linked in his.

“Mayhap we are fools to make this happiness when the enemy threaten our walls but I would have you know that I do not regret it,” She spoke softly to him.

“I once thought that men who pursued this happiness were indeed fools, but now I feel that it is I who’ve been foolish all along,” he admitted.

“And here we are my brave protector,” she announced.

He looked at the unassuming single-storey house with its thatched roof and lone shuttered window. They could still hear the noise of the feast from where they stood and he turned to look back at the hall as if he did not believe how short a distance they had travelled.

“I would that it were further,” he declared.

She reached up and kissed him again.

“Now go as you promised.”

She released him and went inside without looking back. Coenred stood there for a moment as if one lost. He looked up at the clear night sky again, turning his face to the silver starlight, and a huge grin broke out over his face.