

Math Ap Mathonwy

It's long ago now since we first began to know each other in our various travels as fellow Runners. Young and foolish as we often were, still we had hopes that perhaps we, of all the other Runners, might just be found to be Bards. Obviously, we believed in ourselves, in our ability to sing and perform, our memories and believed we had understood our lessons right well. Yet, how surprised we truly were, when we were taken aside indeed, each by each and told, very quietly and seriously; that we were all Bards. All four of us, all friends and all geared to go out and do most marvelous things. Of course, it didn't quite happen that way, but we did decide to be Wandering Bards, at least at first, to try our oats and see just how we might do our dearest dreams. I suppose we expected that eventually one or more of us would find ourselves called to some Court to function as a Court Bard in some capacity. But, for a while we were content to just move about and learn. Not always together, mind you; it was not so much frowned upon as it was simply considered a bit unwise; so we'd let Nature take whatever course She wished and would enjoy our reunions whenever they might befall us. Only Bardic Council Members had some tendency to stay together, and even then they could well scatter whenever it might be deemed necessary.

Friends, fast friends, we often rather puzzled over that all four would feel that way about each other. Had we known each other before? It was quite possible, I should guess, but when the others began to claim that I had brought each of them into their Gift, I felt a little shy of it. I surely didn't feel above any of them and could rightly not find my Gift to be any greater than their own, though they often claimed it to be so. I do know that they considered me to be the nicest looking of us all, and I must admit that I did not seem to quite have the issue that any of the rest of them had in finding willing playmates. Which, of course, I was sometimes rather chided about. I didn't resent it, they were all my best of friends and I surely did not care if we all were as ugly as the Lady's most tawdry. It truly was as if we were all brothers, no matter our differed temperaments or widely varied opinions. It was always such a joy to sing or trade tales with one another and I remember many the blazing fires in the deepest dark of night as we would look around us to see each other's familiar faces.

But time passed and unique and disturbing days began to befall the lands that we often called Cymru. News of a strange and distant religion began to catch our ears and senses as something deep inside ourselves became disquiet and confused. It was at that time that I also seemed to notice that I was noticed, though I wasn't certain why; yet every time that I might be in the presence of one of the Council, they appeared to seek me out and speak with me awhile. Once, even the Head of Council herself asked that I might join her and talk; and though I was quite delighted by her attention, though somewhat austere, I could not fathom why she could even hold the slightest of interest in me. Not that the Head of Council might not show interest in any of her (or his) Folk of any status; but it all had come to seem more than a little peculiar. I'm afraid at the time this chafed a bit with my friends because they saw this as attention that in some ways they ought be sharing in as well. It was a curious and rather uncomfortable contrast for me in that the others seemed to both hold me above them in some respects, yet also wished that I have nothing more than they as well. In retrospect, it all seems so silly now.

The Head of Council then was a woman named Keiradynn with wonderful dark hair and eyes who looked much younger than I knew she must be. As but a Bard, it was usually rather difficult to know the Head well as the Council would surround the Head so closely. Though ascetic in many senses, she was also known for a bright sense of humor and a caring touch for others when needed. I admired her greatly though she always seemed so far from anyone's grasp; and though she had indeed spoken with me on occasion, I had no pretense of it being anything other than some kind politeness, though I couldn't quite convince the others of that fact.

I remember it being on a fairly bright spring day, having just spent much time on the Western Coast down near the South lands and coming back up where I thought I might catch up with one or two of the others for a week or so; that I was met unexpectedly by one of the Council Members. For a moment she regarded me oddly and said nothing though I greeted her in typical Bardic courtesy. After several moments she addressed me almost darkly, "You are Math?... son of Mathonwy?"

Puzzled, but feeling no reason for alarm I answered, "Yes... Is there something amiss?"

Saying nothing more, she turned her horse and bid that I should follow her on mine. After a long ride in virtual silence, we finally came to a miniature stream where a spring also bubbled up at the edge. Here she stopped and dismounted indicating that I ought do the same. We both tied our horses to a small tree to then advance towards a little dense area surrounded by oaks. In some ways I was not surprised to find that others awaited us, including the Head of Council herself. But, when I got to the edge of the trees, I was blindfolded before brought in amongst them. Baffled by this procedure, I found myself to be a little frightened by it as well as I was shuffled quietly within their ranks. For a moment it felt as if they had all disappeared until I began to hear the low hum and gently building chant. A warm wash

flowed through me as they drew closer and closer, the chant more distinctive and intoxicating. Finally I was enwrapped by them, the power so strong going through me that I almost passed out from the force of it. Yet, suddenly it ended, I was released and the blindfold was removed as I stared into the Head of Council's face. "Welcome..." She said, an amenable smile on her features, "Welcome to the ranks of the Council."

With that, I began shivering uncontrollably "Mother," I gasped, "I do not deserve this."

"You deserve far more than you know. Perhaps in time, things shall become much clearer for you. But, I do not chose wrongly, and I am more than certain in you. You have passed all the tests, my friend, whether you know of it or no. Come, though you may find it sedate, we shall celebrate your new status tonight and then must ride forth on the morrow to the Council Seat where you might be properly introduced to the other Members."

"But, my Brothers, my friends, I was thinking to meet with them... to..." She cocked her head at my words, "I'm sorry... that's my past life now, isn't it?..." I suddenly felt a little more than resigned and almost depressed.

"You worry overmuch... the future is yet to be and there shall be plenty of time to spend with your friends... Come, this is all that matters for now." With that, everyone turned from the circle of my simple unadorned Initiation, each to find their mount so that we might proceed on our way.

It had been years since I had been to the Council's Seat but in passing; the last true interval having been spent there for a couple years as a student. That had been when and where I had met my fellow mates as we would soon come into our term as Runners. It had been such a span of high hopes, and I found myself viewing the wonderful maze of caverns and tunnels with nostalgic fondness.

How intricate the structure the Seat of the Bardic Council was!; the interlocking caves and caverns running deep into the Cymric mountains like threaded secrets from some mysterious and mystical tale. And though it had been many years, I felt quite at home as I seemed to see my face in the bright looks of the newly conferred Runners who took our mounts before we would be shown our temporary quarters.

It took several weeks before I began to truly understand just what had happened to me. I had not had any duration as a Court Bard, so rather felt that something might well be missing from my real understanding of various issues, though I was quite assured that I had a comprehension of it that did not require any further need to spend any interval occupied at a Court. Besides, soon I would begin to learn to tap my past life memories with that quickness and ease that had sometimes made me marvel about the Council Members in the past and thought how lucky they were to have such extraordinary recall. I was to also learn just what price was to be paid for such recall, for though it surely widened one's scope and allowed one to be more ascertained of one's purpose and goals, it was bought with much pain; and many was the time I found myself grieving for memories that I had no way of ever assuaging or joys I could never possess again.

And I came to miss my friends, my brothers, who as I was taught new levels of Mysteries, were finding themselves called to Courts to serve their time as Chiefs. It was a pleasure to know that they all were Chiefs and not Seconds, for it said that they all had brought others into the Bardic Gift in lives past. Yet, I had to watch their respective lives from afar, for it became apparent that I would have to spend time at the Seat, rather protected and nearly cloistered as my very personality was fine tuned like the strings of the newly made harp inlaid with precious metals that was one of the symbols of my recent rank and Standing. Surely, they had some inkling what had happened with me and I found myself hoping they would not quietly and internally be begrudging me. If somehow I could let them know how confusing this all really was for me; how lonely I sometimes felt, how I often remembered now all those little things about our past lives here and there that could hurt so terribly so with no way to reach out, no way to seek comfort, no way to communicate. I did not know I could hate my memory so much, hate the ability to know Mysteries, to uncover secrets in myself and in the rhythms of the universe. Had I really wanted to know so badly? Was it worth the wells of sorrow and anguish I confronted now? After a time it became quite apparent why I was not allowed to venture and I became deeply appreciative of those who helped me through those torpid days.

Three years passed and finally my heart and mind began to settle into some true pattern of acceptance that did not make me flush with unwanted emotions. Perhaps soon I might see my mates again and I would be able to look at them with a steadfast gaze, perchance to even pause with some reflective and understood memory whether they might follow my thought or no. I was even excited at the prospect of seeing my mates again when I was given leave to venture out a little; yet suddenly something eerie entered my heart and I realized what I was about to go out and participate in. I wished so to ask those around me if I was for surely right, only I understood well enough they would not have told me and I ought be trusting my own intuition in it. So with two others, we rode out away from the caverns and into the mainlands of Cymru itself. It seemed as if I had been walled away somewhere and I kept looking about myself in fascination as if I had never seen the landscape before. The other two smiled at me, knowing well how this all was affecting me, and actually being rather encouraging in my enjoyment as if all my senses had been reborn. The Head of the Council had said that she would like as meet us somewhere along the way, though she did not indicate just what and I now knew

enough not to bother to ask.

It was at the Great House of a rather blustery Lord that we finally came to a halt and I was not at all surprised that here was one of my mates as a Court Bard. In past, I had to admit that we had been tighter than I was with the others; though we had also suffered some of the harshest arguments that even then could make me flinch a little. I was a whit concerned about our meeting and just how he might view it, so was greatly gratified at his open warmth when he first recognized my presence. Kai, my dear friend Kai, he can have such an open smile and relaxed measure about him that would always make me forget my own dis-ease or discomfort. And he could be as blustery as the Lord of this Great House himself, so it seemed that the situation was well suited. For several days we just enjoyed each other's company, the other two Council Members rather leaving us to ourselves for the most part. And I remember us singing our hearts out to some silly bawdy tunes we used to croon as young wayward Runners as the rest of the Household looked on us in some surprised consternation. Kai did express, however, some envy at my new harp and how beautifully it played and at the golden torc around my neck that displayed my status; though it was not something easily recognizable to anyone outside Bardic ranks, as most Bards wore torcs of some type. I took it off and let him look at it as well as let him play my harp for as much as he liked. We were dear friends, for all that and I was more than pleased that we could share happiness and love at that interval in our lives. I found he had a child or two running about the Court as well and it was great fun to play with them and meet the lady who had finally caught a lasting fancy from him.

After nearly a week had passed, the other Council Members finally came to me to tell me that they would meet me after dusk outside the walls of the House and that I was to bring Kai with me. I looked at each for a long moment but said nothing, then nodded my head before returning to my friend who was about playing with his children for a space. The rest of the day I watched him in some silence, musing on just what he was about to go through himself, for now I had no question of what was about to be. He looked at me quizzically several times, yet I could only give a smile in return knowing it could not alleviate his concern, but might well keep him from any true apprehension beyond that of puzzlement.

When the time came, I only told him that I must go and that he must follow me. It was one time in my life I was truly glad of my authority as a Council Member, for under other circumstances I could tell by his looks he would have refused and demanded immediate answers. For the most part, not even a Bard questions a Council Member, and though friends, Kai knew not to question me then. I remember that night so well, his flashing bright eyes of hazel and his tasseled rich chestnut hair as he threw on a light cloak for the night was cool and breezy. I loved him more than I had ever loved him, knowing how horribly vulnerable he really was right then and the new future that was his on the open horizon. When we did meet with the two others, I could see the glimmer of cloth in the distance by a cluster of trees and a soft inward smile lit inside as I could just make out the Head of Council amongst them. Of course, Kai could really discern nothing as we soon led him away to his budding fate. When it was over and he, too, found himself in the ranks of the Council, he viewed me with some awe, quickly kissing me and then standing back a little embarrassed, though I grinned and hugged him to let him know I well understood his burst of emotion. Suddenly it dawned on him as it had dawned on me, that his previous life must be left aside and this brought the usual sense of some panic as I've since learned to expect and deal with. The Head of Council then assured him that all would be well, his Lady would be spoken to and that in time he might well return to live here with her or that she might come to travel with him as well as his children. I was relieved to see that this indeed helped him some as we went to get our horses to be on our way to the Bardic Seat.

For his first year, I was allowed to be with and work with Kai, which I believe helped him immensely, and was really rather soul soothing for myself as well for it helped to smooth out any of the raw edges that were still left in my own aura from my time. For me, it felt so good to be able to cry with someone, my sense of loneliness finally dissipated and a wash of healing moving through me like the warmth of the rainbow's glittering lights. Kai, in truth, did not have to suffer the isolation that I had and I was surely glad of it.

After that year, I was drawn away to other things for a space until the time came for me to search out my other two friends and mates, Gavin and Wyndel, to bring them into the Council as well. By this time I realized that they all had spoken truth, I 'had' brought them all into their Bardic Gift, and now was charged with bringing them into the Council, given claim to work with them in each of their first year as some means for orientation. Sometimes I wondered why I had had no such comfort; but this, too, bode no answers, and I surely could not blame my mates for it. Yet, someone had had to have brought me into my Gift as well, and it made me wonder on it. Sometimes, I even thought I dreamed of someone, facing them across the great silvery crystal that they would kindle to open the heart of my soul, that they might literally move their life force within me and open the closed door, rather forcing my Gift to appear. And though I remembered much of the details of that event through my dreams, I could never see the face of my benefactor, nor did I seem able to compel a recall even with all my newfound training. It was quite as if that door were deliberately

being kept closed from me as I could find no real reason that I could not recall it by the usual means.

So, in time, all four of us found ourselves a part of the Bardic Council and for some interval it was indicated it would be for the best that we stay close to the Council Seat, though it surely was not a forced issue, by any means. But as anything the Council Itself advised was usually for the best, we all agreed to that arrangement. Those with spouses and children asked for them to be brought to the Seat as well so that a home base might be established.

Much time was spent learning to listen, to listen to numerous works of variant Bards, Chief Musicians, Chief Singers and watching Dances performed by Sacred Dancers; learning to sift through and choose what was especial above so much wonderful, excellent work and name that work as an inclusion to be learned and performed by the rest of the Bardic Folk. It was with sublime pleasure that I found that there were works that I and my friends had created now being taught to new students training to be Runners, works they would also carry out to be heard and learned throughout the Cymric lands. We also began to teach, which felt a bit strange at first as Bards tend not to think in that vein, though I surely knew that it was one of the prime tasks of the Council. However, it was not as difficult as I had thought it might be, and soon came to rather enjoy myself in it. Of course, there were other things that concerned us and I found that Bardic Law was quite a bit more complex than I had understood; albeit as Court Bards, my friends had already had some taste of that, though not nearly so deep. Yet, I caught on quickly enough and found I could well argue with the best of them before long at all, which made many of the other Council Members smile as if in some private understanding that I was not quite privy to as yet. And last, but hardly least, we began to learn to write the hidden works, the inner Mysteries which generally consisted of us setting things down in verse and song those experiences that now became such an intricate part of our being and world view. Not that we were prevented from writing anything else that we might wish, and many was the hour that I and my mates would play and sing now just in pure enjoyment.

It was a good time, it was a good time for all of us, and I don't think there was any other interval I might remember with more satisfaction of who and what I was. Time went by, and we knew our place and our duties right well as we found ourselves becoming ever more companions who, whereas not always together, looked to each other for thoughts and morale support in whatever venture we might be a part of. And whereas the rest of them in time had found themselves a domestic mate that they were comfortable with who was willing to put up with such an uncertain and mobile life, I could not find myself in such a pleasant state. Or rather, I tend to believe, I didn't want to. I seemed to think I needed to leave that door open; still, I couldn't have honestly been able to answer a person why. I well knew I would have enjoyed it, as I watched my friends having children, who though they did not live directly in the caverns, were close by in an especial village for that purpose of Council Member home life. I remember going to that village often enough, and finding myself in viable envy of what I did not partake of. If I had been more certain of myself, I might have asked to foster one of the children; but I never thought it something within my scope. I seemed satisfied to play the uncle, or rather, felt I needed to be satisfied with it and would not ever voice that my emotions had any other inclinations. Sometimes I 'do' think my friends felt a little sorry for me and I can surely recall more than one occasion where I was being introduced to some likely candidate. Goodness, not that I couldn't find people; and sometimes I would get exasperated, for my friends knew that. But, somehow, they'd decide they had found 'just the one', and would be so very disappointed when it just wouldn't work out.

Then one day I got news from some Runners that the Village I had been born and reared as a small boy had been burned to the ground by sea raiders. Some of my family had survived, it was believed, and I decided I would like to go and help them resettle in whatever way I might; if only in hard work and some few chosen words of comfort. The Head of Council regarded me a long while, some streaks of grey finally showing in her long and shiny hair. I thought perhaps I saw a hint of mist in her eye, but she gave no indication, "It's a long journey." She said at last, "It is the far Southern Coast...Your People call it Dumnonia...?"

I smiled and shrugged, "I have been in Cymru so long; Am I not Cymric, anymore?... but, these are my People... let me help them resettle, and I shall be satisfied and return."

"You 'must' return." Keiradynn voiced in some peculiar feel of authority that almost made me start. I looked about to find that my comrades were there as well, and they, too, had that semblance about them.

"Mother, my Lady, I give my solemn word." I said quietly as I reflected briefly on the reaction I was getting. I did realize that I was asking leave a little early in some ways, it would still have been best to attend close to the Council Seat; but, it was not an absolute, and I had excellent reason to venture farther out. Another Council Member indicated that she would at least accompany me part of the way, and there would be Runners from time to time. I packed myself up quickly, though my friends did hang about as I did so, asking questions about my People in a quasi curious manner, though they had rarely asked about them before. I suppose it was because, it never had any sort of baring on anything before. Now it was done simply to find a little time to be with me before I left. There seemed to me to be far more apprehension for all this than was truly warranted and I was greatly surprised to find more than one eye a bit blurry as I

finally took up my horse with those I would be traveling on my journey.

Though it indeed was far, we rode our mounts swiftly and did not pause much but for needed rest. Something inside of me seemed as if to tell me that what my friends felt was only too true and that I ought return as soon as possible. When I did finally reunite with my People, it was difficult and I found many of my emotions almost devastating as I realized every memory of my childhood was laid into the burned dust of the ground. Even much forest had been razed over the rolling hills and at one point I finally wept as if cleansing the pain in my soul. I had not known my parents well as I had been fostered to my cousins, but now only a scattered relative or two remained, and they not truly anyone that I could easily recall. For me, it was suddenly all gone and those I helped were but mere shadows of what was once my heritage. Yet, I bent and worked and did as I could to help them rebuild at least a simple beginning. Fortunately for all, Spring was just commencing so that planting might be done and food could be gathered from surrounding areas as well as hunted and fished. I'd have to say, that in many ways, it was actually quite good for me, to be able to work with my hands and body and rightly not think that much beyond the day to day. To some real degree I should have liked to stay on a while, to have seen the crops up and helped make certain all would be well and tight for the coming on of Winter. However, once I knew the People were now reasonably settled and would once again begin a slow, though steady comeback, it was a signal as my time for departure. Before I left, I spent a long while on the beaches of my childhood, just gazing off over the waters and thinking of nothing. There really was naught left there for me, the past of it was so long ago and almost silent now, the tears I had shed having left a clean and voiceless emptiness in my heart. Only the future remained for me now so that when I conclusively did leave the shadows of my early youth, I was quiet as all those waters now were stilled. As if they knew without my calling, Runners appeared in the new Village within a day or so later as I packed once more for my journey to the Council Seat. It had not been near as long as I had feared and I began to think on my fiends and mates with pleasant anticipation of our renewed reunion.

It was but three days from the Council Seat that I was suddenly separated from those that I was traveling with. A deep fog had settled about us as night fell and I found myself wandering through the depths of a wondrous cascade of forest. I surely should have known the area well enough, but I could see neither the sky and stars nor much beyond a few feet in front of my face as I rode. I remember calling out several times to my companions, but receiving no answer as I finally slipped off my horse to lead her as I slowly walked in the gloomy darkness. Knowing I would ascertain myself well enough once it returned to day, I eventually decided I simply ought find myself somewhere that I could bed down and sleep. I was growing terribly weary by this time, so was only more than glad when I found a small cave overgrown by some massive tree whose roots gnarled up and around the cave like bizarre and wonderful ornamentation.

I felt almost as if I were stepping into some curious doorway as I carefully led my mount inside behind me. Having loosely tied her to some of the roots near a small patch of grass that she might nibble on, I managed to make a small expedient fire before pulling my sleeping gear from my horse's back to carefully put onto the dusky floor of the cave. I seemed too tired to even try to eat as I found myself crawling into my bedding barely before my eyes began to close. For a little while my eyes swam, drifting as I watched the flames gradually die out and the darkness completely enfold me, with only an occasional sound of some irritation emitting from my horse.

When I awoke, it was to the blaze of some strange muted blue/white light that lit up the small cave in a diffuse of eerie shadow making the gnarled roots of the tree seem to climb on through the cave and into its bowels that before then I had not seen. Far away within I could see a remote brightness and I was filled with a fascination for it as if I were impulsively being drawn to it, into it, my mind erased of any thought but to move towards it. It occurred to me that this was hardly waking reality; yet, it was not dream either as I began to automatically prepare myself in the manner I had been trained so that I might move within this alternative realm with some dexterity. As I moved, it was as if I were crawling within this snarl of cave and tree, though it was also an effortless sort of motion as well with no sensation of any sort of struggle. However, I went on for what seemed an undying amount of time going deeper and deeper within. Sensations came and went within me like the colors of a great web that worked inwards to my very core of being; smells and tastes and sounds, all vibrating as if playing me the way I played my harp. And perhaps that is what this was, perhaps the Lady sought to play my very life force and extract the essence of my nature for Her own designs. So, I moved ever onward, trying to let the sensations sink deeply within me, knowing this sort of experience never happened to one by chance.

Finally, after what seemed eons to me, I stepped into the brightness I had seen. It was a massive cavern of brightly colored stones that illuminated every corner, every niche that I could discern about me. I began to have a terrible sense of being watched as I reviewed my surroundings slowly and carefully. Suddenly, I noticed a beautiful wooden cabinet just a little ways from me, so I went over to investigate. It was locked at my attempts to open it, so I sat on a large outcrop of stone that looked curiously like a roughly made chair as I found myself thinking about what to do about the cabinet.

Rubbing the back of my neck in consternation, I realized that a heavy chain existed in place of my torc. I looked

at it and was not surprised that a key hung from it and knew it was sure to open the cabinet I had just examined. When I opened the cabinet, I initially jumped back in surprise for there was a peculiarly ugly creature that looked like some jeweled lizard with wide, blue colored eyes that stared at me for a long and unnerving moment.

Though I could ascertain that it was alive, for it moved slowly back and forth, it made no move towards me, so that after a bit, I began to relax my fear a little. By it was an embroidered red bag that I found myself having a dear desire to obtain. Quietly, slowly, I moved towards the cabinet ever watchful of the creature, moving my hand to the lovely bag and what seemed to be some mysterious contents within it. When I slid my hand to encircle the bag, the creature only eyed me knowingly and backed away so that I might gather it to myself. As I removed myself, the cabinet gently closed as I sat back upon the chair-like stone. When I opened the bag, I found a set of crystals with Ogam symbols set upon them that sparkled in diverse colors much as the room itself did. The patterns danced as I looked at them in my hands and could feel impressions being received within my body and my mind like signals that were opening doors within. After a time, it occurred to me again that I felt as if I were being watched, and a sense of some patient amusement at me filtered through my thoughts. Somehow, that made me smile, though I wasn't especially amused myself as I looked about trying to discover the source of my suspicions. All I noted was the massive roots that climbed the colored walls in some peculiar twisted maze all about me. The sense of presence began to nearly overwhelm me as I stood to finally question, though the question itself surprised me. "What is the Well of your Inspiration?" I asked, when I really felt like asking, "Who are you?"

But, as the last syllable left my mouth, the very aires around me began to stir and everything had a misty white/blue haze about it. Nearly in front of me as if to about knock me over, appeared a shimmering well made of great stones in the same dazzling colored lights causing me to step back a moment blinking. Leaning over the well, it seemed to have nothing within but a mirror at it's bottom, though I could see no clear image in it. Stepping back, I saw a plain, though serviceable cup and I impulsively grasped it up to dip it in the well and drink what I found to be a cool silvery liquid like the mirror that flashed from it's depths. For a moment my thoughts wondered if I trespassed as the flutter of wings descended next to me.

Briefly, a line of cool sweat moved across my brow as I looked up to see a harpy who appeared about to attack me. Yet, just as the giant creature raised a horrible claw up above me, the crystals in the red pouch cried out to me and I opened the bag to let the crystals fall out into my other hand. Choosing one, I quickly threw it at the harpy who immediately shrieked in it's own terror and promptly moved away from me to cringe as I raised up another of the crystals, though this time I did not throw as I saw the threat was clearly enough.

It was a curious feeling to suddenly hear a ring of applause about me out of the empty space of the cavern as figures slowly appeared as if out of mist. Elves, all of them Elves, beautiful and strange, looking at me with large, liquid eyes, smiling and apparently welcoming. To me, it seemed that for the most part, they were feminine, or at least that was the semblance that they had decided to illuminate to me. One female Elf did approach me with a staff and a cloak that she bid for me to take as she then took my hand and guided me down into another passageway that I realized began to spiral upwards. Along the walls of this passageway were scrolls and books that I occasionally would pause at and she encouraged rather than discouraged this. I would flip through the pages quickly and knew that I was ingesting pages of various past lives both in the realm of the Wheel as well as that of variant other realms. I slowly felt a shifting in my mind that I was rather uncertain just how to react to, though my beautiful guide simply smiled at my confusion and indicated the way before us.

When we finally emerged out of the caverns and the passages, I was not surprised to come out on an incredibly stunning landscape, though it shifted as one looked upon it and I understood at once that I had just crossed over into the Realm of Light. Startled, I looked at my Elven guide to ask, "What is this? Shall I not return? Surely, this is a splendid Realm, but it is not my home... I do not belong here."

"Do you not?" She asked cryptically, "But, we shall not press you... Stay but a while, and when you become sick for your own land, take our Gifts and they shall show the way to return. Math, they call you Math." She smiled brightly, "Stay with me, and I shall teach you wonders."

How could I resist? So I stayed on a while, midst the bright lands, with neither sun nor moon to tell me time or direction, though from my hostess I learned many strange and curious things. And for a space I was content, and I thought, even happy as I enjoyed all that the Eldritch might enjoin to me. My awareness of time became something other for nothing divided what was now and what might be later, or even what had been. Even now, my thoughts have been some altered by this awareness and I hear their ethereal music oftentimes over the dark and lonely hills.

After a space of time, though I have no source to give any true sense of when, I found some curiosity for the crystals I had with the Ogam symbols, somehow finding them so that I might toy with them awhile. As they glinted in my hands while I turned them over several times, I espied a wondrous, flat sphere of crystal atop a small mound that shone almost like mountain waters glinting in the sun. I took my Ogam crystals to this sphere and felt an inclination to

spin them on top of the sphere. Strands of color emitted from my peculiar spinning tops and it was as if a deep voice spoke within me as the sphere cleared and pictures began to form inside the mound through the crystal. Momentarily startled, I backed away, then cautiously returned to peer into its depths.

What I saw, I remembered, a travel into my inner dreams I had had long ago when I had just barely been informed that I was indeed a Bard. My hair looked so dark to me, shiny and much blacker than I knew it was in my waking consciousness; my eyes a bright grey, but with a slightly greenish cast that reminded me of what people often referred to as an Eldritch grey. I wasn't totally certain that I felt at ease with my own image as I watched myself walk to a small stream near a wooded gap where I waded into the stream by a bubbling spring. I cupped my hands and drank from the spring almost greedily as it turned from clear to an obvious color of blood red. As my former self turned from the drink to see a line of folk upon the shore who held out their hands for a drink of the liquid as well, I remembered. For a little while I had complied and brought over the liquid in my own cupped hands to put into theirs, but soon tired of it and was about to pull one or two of them into the stream beside me. I cried out, "No!" to myself, causing a pause in my occupation, "I know it seems easier, but it is dangerous. Each person knows their own time... do not seek to enforce that time upon them." I seemed to understand, as I knew I would, and so I watched myself as I turned once again to go back to the spring to resume as I had started. And with that, the images faded in the crystal as I looked into my own face, my eyes that Eldritch grey. I had never noticed that before; or perhaps, it had never been there before; with my hair as dark as a black bird's wing. I had never seen myself so clearly, the polished metals did not ring true, and even a passing stream could be difficult at best.

"You have Eldritch eyes," said a voice behind me and I turned to find my hostess whose own eyes echoed a sadness that I, too, suddenly felt. "But, your heart has human pangs... and your World calls you."

Yes, she was so right, as I felt a longing sickness ripple across my entire being, "It's time I went home now... I'm sorry, I love you... I love the Realm of Light."

"But, you also love the Realm of the Wheel... and it is your home..." She held out the staff and cloak that she had given me at the well as I gathered my crystals and put them in their pouch. I hugged her one last time and kissed her long as the wonderful shift and movement of the landscape slipped all about us in its curious myriad colors and sounds. I would miss it terribly and knew that even my trained dreaming could not compensate for the experience I must now forsake. "Your world, too, is home to marvels... and think not that we shall forget you or abandon you. Remember us... and we shall be there."

I smiled; sadly, gently, as I took my new belongings and turned to leave listening to the affectionate sounds of goodbye from the airs all about me, the Elves singing in their strange and marvelous tones. Once I looked back to my hostess, but she had gone midst the fluctuating colors though I heard the sound of her voice among the rest. It comforted me as I walked a path the staff seemed to lead me. Shortly, I came to an entrance in a hillside and was not surprised to find it the passageway with its lined walls of books. Not that I hadn't come here before at times, but now, I would walk back through it. Back through the great cavern of the well and into another passage that by its very smells told me it was towards the Realm of the Wheel. It had the smell of Earth, the smell of growing things, governed by the moon and the sun. Finally, I came to where I had left, noting my body slumbering upon the floor of the cave as if in some deep coma.

Someone attended me, though I could not make them out, I thought it likely a Runner who had found me after the separation that had led me to this cave. How long had it been, I wondered, for I knew in the Eldritch that would be impossible to tell. My form had some semblance of a beard, which alarmed me some, telling me time in the Wheel had passed, indeed. I would be very weak and very thirsty though I felt my benefactor had at least managed some liquid for a flask set nearby. Their form shifted about near a small fire, not allowing any glimpse of their face or true form. I might have tried to assimilate more of the situation, but soon those pangs of hunger and thirst drew me into my physical self as the beat of my heart and my breath became stronger and began to quicken. I moaned a deep and extended cry that startled my companion who got up hurriedly and came to my side. For a moment she looked into my face as I opened my eyes and I thought dreamily that I saw my hostess once again. A Runner, a sweet and affectionate girl that at times had been more than companion on our journey stared into my eyes, then got up and backed away as if she suddenly needed to get as far from me as possible. "Eldritch..." she whispered, as if horribly afraid, "It hangs like dust about you... There is food, there is water... I must leave. This magick is more than I can brave. I'm sorry, Math... I'm truly sorry." With that, she actually ran from the cave and I heard her mount her horse and ride away.

For a long while I lay, letting my strength build slowly and finally taking some water from the flask as the fires had nearly subsided. The whiny of my horse at least told me that she was still here and I was greatly thankful for that. In time, I was able to partake of the foodstuffs the Runner had left me and I took my course as I relaxed back into the world of sun and moon.

Some branches lay near the smolder of fire and I soon had it relit as the edge of the evening began to fall all about. I rested, I slept a bit, though I did not return to any sort of dreaming state. By morning I judged myself able

enough to walk a little outside and participate in the marvels this World had to offer me. My perception had altered, I saw the dance of other Realms behind my thoughts and a peculiar stir filtered within the air. Even my horse regarded me a bit strangely, though she did not refuse my company as the Runner surely had. For that, she even followed me as I gradually walked down towards a small stream that I could hear from the cave's entrance, where I cleansed myself as best I could thinking that later I might find time to shave somewhat. The air felt wonderful to me, richly full of scent as I drew it through my lungs with new relish.

After a few days where I felt thankful to the timid Runner for having left me enough food to gain my strength, I knew it time to travel back towards the Council's Seat. I found myself missing my friends with a fervency that surprised me in its intensity, as I fully wished that I could be in their company immediately. I now rode with as much speed and determination as my physical self would allow me without its exhaustion as well. Unfortunately, this meant stopping far more often than I wished and I felt a grueling impatience about it.

When I saw the entrances to the Caverns at last, my heart raced with anticipation as I saw Runners come towards me to take my horse. But after a moment, they all stopped and quickly withdrew as I dismounted. "What is this?" I nearly moaned seeing their almost frightened faces, "Shall no-one take my mount? I've traveled very far and look for comfort and happy greeting."

At that, one of the Council Members came out from the Caverns in curiosity to regard both the Runners and myself in some confusion for a moment. "Oh..." he said after an instant, then he shushed the Runners away to other duties as he approached me and kindly took my horse by the reins, though he avoided looking at me directly, "Brother..." he said softly, "Stay a moment while I give this over to one of the Runners at the stables... then I shall take you somewhere where you might stay." With even more quiet, he said, "I also ask that you do not touch me, or anyone, for that matter... The Head of Council is here; I shall inform her and she shall see to you..." With that he did as he had said, leading my mount away to shortly return and escort me into the Caverns to a small, but comfortable chamber. "I'll send food... it might be well if you rested." When he had left, I unpacked the few items I had had with me, then sat upon the bed wondering why the reaction to my reappearance was being so overwhelming for everyone. Soon a knock came upon the heavy wooden door and I could smell the food in its pungent radiance before the door was even opened. It was Kai who brought it to me, peering about the door before entering, seeming quite uncertain just how to venture. I smiled widely at seeing him, but he, too, averted his eyes as he laid the food upon a low table near the bed.

"I wished to just see you so badly," he confessed, "but Kerr was right, it's as if the dust hangs on you. I don't quite understand, but Kerr says the Mother anticipated and shall know how to deal with it. We missed you, Math... we 'are' happy to see your return. Don't leave us again." With that, he shuffled out of the room, glancing at me directly once before he was gone.

I decided to lay down after eating some of the delicious fare, my spirits confused, but sensing that all was being taken care of and those around me had only my best interests at heart. It wasn't long before I slept long and hard, never hearing the door opening once again. I woke up abruptly from the movement of someone laying next to me on the bed and was greatly surprised to see it was Keiradynn herself. She, too, woke and turned to regard me. She was hardly young, but she was still incredibly beautiful and her magnificent long dark hair had but few streaks of grey. She was as fit as any warrior, and there was great strength in her lean form. Smiling at me, she bid me into her arms, and though a little shy of it, I slowly complied. "What shall we do with you." She whispered, "They intended this, you know. Now, I must weave this 'Elven dust' between us so you may again function within the world of humans. I had not intended this relationship between us... but, I suppose, 'they' had other plans." With that, she kissed me as we began to make love as I had never made it before in this Realm. I felt woven together with her; I felt her weaving me, weaving her like some intricate tapestry within the fabric of the universe. I felt my senses settle, I felt a peace pervading upon me, and I suddenly knew I was finally in love. For long moments I regarded her and said nothing, my mind floating and drifting in and out of a light doze. All my memories of past lives and past realities, of secrets great and small cascaded through me in some endless wave that I felt ought to have startled me, yet I regarded in quiet tranquility. She smiled off and on, allowing the energies to move about me and settle. "You look so young." She said at last.

Impulsively I felt a strain sweep through my heart, "What did you mean, that you had not intended this relationship between us? I now know how long I've been waiting for you... That 'you' took me into my Gift... do you have reservations about our love?" I was struck with a hearty sense of sadness I knew swelled partially from my rather precarious condition.

She kissed me lightly on my brow, "I have loved you long and long... and watched you grow in powers and strength... and I knew it was not my place to do other than observe. Others indicated your time, and I gave my blessings, welcoming each step you took with great joy... You are very powerful, my love." Seeing some startlement in my eyes, she went on, "It is hardly wrong to know that you are powerful, Math, it is only wrong to abuse power... Oh, what I would have given to be lovers before now... and even now, I question its wisdom... my Beloved, my Chosen."

Her words struck me heavily as my mouth obviously dropped open and tears welled in my eyes, "No..." I whispered, "You can not mean that... Not now... Not me..."

She looked away from the pain in my face, "You are a joy; even now you struggle with the thoughts of power, though you've exercised them all your life..."

"But, I've only now found your love... and you tell me time grows short... I want to be your lover... not your Successor."

"You shall be both... you 'must' be both... You 'shall' be Head of Council after me... and, yes... my time grows upon me, and there is much for you to learn... But, it shall not be without happiness... Must I remind you of your training? That each day ought be lived as one's last? You who now know the Faery Realms with intimacy... You 'know' that. And you know, that we shall never be truly sundered. Though my body shall surely die, I shall remain with you. What do you think the Bonding is?" I felt myself wanting to cry, but I was rather uncertain if it was from anguish or an overwhelming sense of bliss. From that moment until her passing, I would hardly leave her side; like dark twins from the ether, we wove our way through my final training.

Not that this meant that I forgot my friends, my mates that I had traversed so much of my life with; but, there was an eeriness to our relationships now, they knew things were not the same, though a patience and tenderness had increased between the four of us. And a certain amount of awe, which surely made me feel uncomfortable at times. I found myself wanting to reach out, somehow, to draw them in with me and share; still, I seemed a bit duped as to how. Ultimately, I did voice these thoughts to Keiradynn as we sat in contemplation of the embers after a long and stressing day. For a time she simply listened, perhaps weighing in her mind the aspects of my thoughts. Then we moved into a silence, comforting and warm as I felt her life force surrounding me like a delicately woven cloak causing me to finally sigh into the greying darkness. She turned to look fully into my face and smile, "When you sing... when you tell your tales, you open pathways and guide the traveler inside your tales to show them the vistas within the fabric of the Wheel...Umm?... you point the way, you give them keys to experience, sometimes you even turn those keys with a gentle push... So, you want your mates to know what you have experienced... to become part of what you are...? Is that what you ask?"

After a moment it dawned on me and my eyes got round with the realization, "Perhaps... Perhaps... is it wrong?"

"No..." she said, as she looked back into the darkness, "But, one does need to grasp the full depth of what is involved. They must understand it, you must understand it. They are surely linked to you already, as we were through the passing of Power... But... this shall make them 'part' of you, it shall be as if they, too, had gone to the Realm of Light and spoken with the Elven Lady. And if you should do this, you must weave your magick well so that they shall be as you are now when they return, settled and not strung with the glamour that I had to weave within you. The Lady meant that for you alone, and you must honor that... It is, in truth, a great Gift you may give them... but, you 'must' understand the depth of that Gift... you shall all be heavily linked and you shall see each other through new eyes: your very souls shall become as open doors to one another."

Quietly, reflectively, I shook my head 'yes' and found a great desire to enfold her in my arms. She, too, moved to me and I felt a gentle peace between us as I whispered, "Perhaps that is indeed what I ask... But, I shall reflect and present the idea to them gently. Besides, this tale must be sung with great power and that weaving shall not be easy to thread upon the loom."

"I, too, have never been so in love... Our Bonding shall be one remembered in the Bardic annals with great joy." With that, our thoughts returned fully to one another and though exhausted, we drifted into our mutual warmth like the ebb and flow on a gentle sea.

I was dearly surprised to find my mates almost too eager at my thoughts, making me realize they were feeling more distance than I had even supposed. So, I worked on my tale in the silence of the farthest caverns, deliberately seeking darkness that my thoughts might appear in vivid imagery about me. As I sang, I induced myself to see, to feel, to hear, to taste, to smell, to know every nuance of my journey, to recreate what had been by the strength of my words and the vision I instilled within them. It was when the face of the Elven Lady gazed back into my eyes, her sunlit smile bright with knowing, that I knew I had reached my pitch, the pattern on the loom shining and set, and I recognized its readiness but for one last thread. At that point, I finished the tale, pulling in a settling, asking for the Lady's grace that my mates, my friends would walk back without the nearly unmanageable glamouring the Head of Council had been forced to settle within me. When that, too, was set, I saw her face one last time, nodding in approval and I knew I truly did have her blessing.

For a time, the moon and stars did not bode things for us correctly, and I knew the Gods had seen to this that we might still be forced to take the interval in preparation. My mates were sore excited by the prospect and we fashioned our time towards the event almost like silly Runners on our first course upon the roads. I enjoyed it so, for they were bright and happy, listening to every detail I gave them, trying to make certain everything would be just right. For a few

days beforehand, we did almost everything together; meditating, eating, opening our auras to one another, singing and laughing; and somehow, I really had forgotten just how close we truly were. Then, at last, the time came upon us; and with it, a quietness descended, a seriousness and gentleness. The deep set small cavern was prepared with a wonderful fire in its center, as blankets and pillows were gathered about in a comfortable circle all around. My favorite harp was put carefully where I would sit and only flasks of water were strewn about as we would prepare our journey's way. Before we ventured in, I hugged them all in turn, a long soul-felt embrace as if to breath in their life force. "I love you," I said to each as they pulled away and moved to take their place about the fire. When I entered after them and seated myself, I threw a bit of herbal incense on the flame and waited for the room to fill with its scent before I would begin. For awhile I just 'played' my harp, something soothing, something calming, watching my friends begin to drift a little and sink into the pillows and blankets provided. When I looked at each in the glowing firelight, they smiled a nervous smile as I played on, soothing, soothing, slowly getting them to relax, to let go. Each in their own way was strong, and it was long and long before I knew I could truly begin.

Finally from each quarter of our small enclosed cavern, I felt the Doorways of the Spirit open as a gentle rush of energy came from each Direction to bless and join us, Guardians of the Elements and Guardians of our hearts. It was then that I knew it time to softly begin with loving footholds upon the Path I now would set for them. As I sang, the aires began to shimmer as I, too, found myself becoming woven into my own spell. Soon, the fire left my sight, and I was back in the Realm of Faery, each action replaying before me; only this time, as I looked, I saw each of my friends step inside my place experiencing as I had experienced, knowing what I had come to know. Like a whirlwind, it moved through me as my voice carried on almost of its own accord, my fingers dancing across the strings effortlessly.

It was difficult to come to the end, so beautiful were my own memories, so lit with the dusted glamour only the Elves could intertwine that I began to hesitate the ending. Yet, I knew that, too, must be done and I set to thread the final strands that would settle them and bring us back to our home. It was afterwards that the oddest thing occurred as my mates settled back and moved within their private thoughts a time. Instead of doing the same and reaching out to greet them, I slipped into some new vision of my own. A great sea of faces appeared before me, so many I could not even know how to begin the counting as strangely illuminated lights came from every direction, flashing off and on to nearly blind me. And I was singing in a language I had never heard, playing on a stringed instrument I had never seen before. Startled, I looked about myself quickly, to see others with equally peculiar instruments that they played, and though the shapes had changed, I knew the souls of my mates within the forms. Though pleasant to me, the music was so foreign I became nearly frightened and almost gasped as everything suddenly went blank. When I came around again, the pressure of a cool, water soaked cloth was pressed upon my forehead and I opened my eyes to look directly into Kai's. He quietly smiled, "Where did you go, brother?"

A look of pure joy lit the features of his face, and as I looked around I saw the same expression in the other's as well. "I'm not sure." I said gingerly, "But, I believe it might well be the future... though assuredly, not of this incarnation... unless we now can change our skins and the very fibers of our makings."

Wyndel, the eldest of us all shook his head reflectively and smiled an inner sort of smile, "I think we just may be stuck with each other for a long, long time... do you think the Universe is ready for that?"

I shrugged and opened my palms wide, "I guess one simply gets what one pays for." To that, we all laughed a little, passed some of the water around between us as we laid back into the blankets and pillows to drift off into sleep. And as I slept, I kept dreaming of the brilliant lights, the sea of faces, and the beautiful foreign music I couldn't quite manage to comprehend, wondering within me just what future had now potentially been set.

It seemed far too soon that the Bonding between myself and Keiradynn took place, that dynamic Initiatory ritual that not only bound the both of us forever, but also to the Inner Sanctum of all the Bardic Heads before us in some fine and delicate thread that seemed to continue forever within the annals of the Wyrd before and after. It's fragile and powerful beauty could not sooth the pain within my heart though I knew that it must be, even notwithstanding, that there was still a period of training until a final transition took place. It was an eerie thing, Keiradynn would often seem only slightly present, her spirit seeming to travel far and wide in Realms remote and alien from my understanding. Only when we made love was she still completely within my circle and I mourned deeply for a protracted time before and after her leaving. It was not often that this Power had been passed between lovers with such extensive karmatic ties and a shadow would always stand beside me the rest of my days. The final passing of a Head of Council is a quiet thing, she said goodbye to me before we went to sleep in the warm comfort of each other's arms. Though a little disturbed, I kept her inside my embrace that night, knowing full well she would not awake with me on the marrow. Yet, I heard the tinkling of her wonderful laughter within me as I finally moved away, her spirit gone and my place of succession lastly achieved. How had I gained this place? Did I ever really want it? Did anyone who was ever Head of this Council honestly feel they had a true right to it? I would have gladly traded the years that I might have spent them with my love under simpler circumstances.

A modest ritual and quiet burial were rather too quickly done for me, though I surely realized that the best procedure was for me to assume my role immediately. There was no doubt that my mates would now become included in the circle of my Advisors; and it wasn't much longer that Kai became my Chief Advisor as well. But not my Chosen. One's Chosen is a curious thing, and totally unpredictable for it comes like some unbidden storm from deep within your heart when suddenly you look up, and you 'know'.

Time passed, and though my love for Keiradynn would always remain a tranquil flame in my soul I finally recognized that there was no real wisdom in a solitary home or life. Danu was a fairly young Member of the Council who looked rather Nordic in heritage, hair nearly white and eyes that sparkled the color of the sea. For me, this would never be the intensity I shared with Keiradynn, yet Danu came to fill my days with a gentle satisfaction and appreciation of a keen wisdom that she uniquely possessed. She was still young enough that she bore us one girl child, but it soon became apparent that it would be best to foster her for as Head I traveled wide and as my espoused mate, Danu traveled with me. I knew then that the woven glamour I possessed had opened the door for some especial lineage; yet, somehow I also knew that those souls must weave their own pattern and my release of them was expected as well. Not that we didn't inquire of her, not that we didn't love, but rather, that we both knew we'd greatly interfere with her purpose given half the chance. It was not long after the birth of our child that I realized Danu should come to succeed me and I was happy for I also knew my time would still be long in coming and our love could be enjoyed and doted on.

But, now the days grow thinner and I know soon I shall have to tell her and let that process begin as I, too, make preparations for my final Initiation in this life. I can sense a change in the wind as news again filters through; a new religion, a new force with a shadowy manner I find more disturbing than I truly like to admit. Kai senses it, too, and sometimes the four of us sit and ponder its significance though the only suggestion any of us seems to have is watchfulness and alertness. Danu is clearly frightened by it, though I know eventually she shall be steadfast in everything that she shall do. The future begins to press on us, and it shall take her wonderful mental strength and forthright heart to see all our People through.

And I ramble on. I note there's now more grey than black hairs upon my head and face, the lines around my eyes and mouth the marks of the blackbird's feet, though he once crowned my head with his winged color. Shall I gently drift asleep in my lover's arms as I quietly slip from the Mother's Wheel? It would be my fondest dream, for death, too, is but a drifting passage within the stream and I know wonders still await me as I journey from life to life. And the bonds I've forged I've woven within the Wyrld of Forever, and it is peace I feel. Peace, that I have done my purpose well and that the future stands wide and welcoming before me.