

A Simple Night's Shelter

By Donna Lyon Rhose

The long, winded road lay in heavy folds of mist and only the tops of the great mountains of Gwynedd in Cymru were truly visible in the evening light. For a ponderous interval Madrod sat his big-shouldered horse as he meditated the haunting landscape. Behind him, Cyril sat his own horse, though he did not share Madrod's study of the scene before them. Cyril had learned not to question Madrod too closely, for though lovers, they did not share beliefs. Rather, they shared the simple love and passion for each other's person, learning to remain satisfied with that fact.

Now Madrod searched for something in the gaining mist of twilight. Finally sighing, Madrod turned to Cyril a bit resigned, "We must stop and find shelter of some kind... I know this path traces back to a small cavern. I could do with a warm fire and a bit of food." Cyril smiled his reply and turned his horse about, as did Madrod.

What was it about Madrod that elicited such a sense of bonding, thought Cyril. Madrod was not beautiful, such as they said his father was, nor exotic and ethereal, such as was said of his mother. Certainly he was handsome enough, his long, loosely braided dark hair and piercing brown eyes encasing a semblance of mystery. Though fairly tall with limber strength, there was a lankiness to him that made him seem almost frail. This had proven to be quite advantageous, for Madrod had been well trained to the sword and bow, proving himself far more than a match for any would-be assailant or vandal. Perhaps to Cyril the most attractive thing about Madrod was his voice. Rich and dark; the wonderful, shifting tonal patterns of Madrod's golden voice had been the first thing Cyril had noticed about this enigmatic man. And quite probably the first thing about Madrod that Cyril had fallen in love with.

Others called Cyril the beautiful one, as did Madrod himself. Chestnut hair fell loosely about his sculptured features, his eyes large and brightly green. He, too, was strong, though he had lived the village life whereas Madrod was most certainly reared at court. As Cyril was a wonderful artisan, Madrod claimed he had fallen love with Cyril because he made beautiful things in metal and leather. Even now, a great and intricate buckle of silver that Cyril had fashioned held tightly about Madrod's waist.

"Cyril, here! Stop!" spoke Madrod loudly, halting his horse to quickly dismount. Cyril did the same as they walked their horses a few paces to the cavern Madrod had spoken of. Madrod smiled warmly, kissing Cyril's cheek before taking his arm. To Cyril, Madrod's allusive dark eyes and mystical carriage seemed to bespeak him as every bit the mysterious magus that many claimed him to be.

Having tethered the horses and set a fire to blaze, they sat to a sparse meal of dried meat, crusted bread and mead. Afterwards Madrod asked simply, "Shall I sing?" Cyril smiled approval and willingly went to get the small well used lap harp Madrod always brought with him from their bags. The harp had been something his foster-mother, Arionrhod, had given him when a young man, saying it had once belonged to his mother. As Cyril nestled as best he could into his warm wraps of clothing, Madrod tested the harp gently before he sang. A gentle whistling of wind stirred about outside and Madrod smiled guessing it likely a light snow would fall into the night. Satisfied with the harp's sound, Madrod began to sing, his clear tenor voice filling the small cavern with its

color and warmth. Listening, Cyril soon became sleepy, drifting back and forth a time until he finally moved into the shadows of his own dreams. Setting the harp down and gently wrapping it, Madrod went and laid down close by his lover as the fire subtly settled into warm embers.

Late in the night, Madrod woke up suddenly, thinking he had heard his name called. Not the name he was called, even by Cyril; but rather, the name given him by the Wise Women and foster-mother Arionrhod as he was trained in the Mysteries of the Earth and Stars. "Arial," the whisper was unmistakable now as he quietly sat being careful not to disturb Cyril as he got up. Peering into the darkness outside the embers, Madrod felt he could see a ruffle of movement, then the vague darker shadows of a form. "Arial," came the whisper again and cautiously Madrod moved towards the outer darkness. The outline slowly became clearer, finally showing him an older man with a beard and sparkling eyes.

The man beckoned, but Madrod held back uncertain, "Who are you?"

"My earthly name no longer holds meaning for me... I am Guardian to the Eastern door of this Temple... No-one passes through my Keeping uninvited."

"Am I invited?" Madrod's voice echoed both curiosity and hope, though still uncertain.

"Where is the key of Arionrhod?" Said the figure in grave seriousness.

For a moment Madrod was taken aback as he almost exclaimed 'What key?' before remembering. Remembering the crystal she had given him, symbol and fact of the power she had passed on to him. And the key he had taken with him specifically per Arionrhod's instruction to open the doors of Knowledge. And his own mother had given this key to Arionrhod. It gave Madrod cause to pause; dared he to hope he had found what he had entered these cold enshrouded mountains to obtain in this simple night's shelter? He had not thought the cavern deep enough, nor even close enough to the true mountains to explore. The figure seemed to wait patiently, barely stirring, an aura of gentleness upon his lightly lined face. Drawing a hand to a pouch on a leather thong about his neck, Madrod was startled to find the object inside felt alive and nearly hot. With that, Madrod's decision was made and he carefully withdrew the crystal from its protective place. The figure smiled warmly, withdrawing a crystal from his own clothes. As they both held out their crystals, a glow emanated in rainbows from the stones, filling the depths of the cavern. Of a sudden, the form of the man had altered, the crystals gone, as before Madrod pranced a unicorn of silver and gold. 'Come, Arial.' were the whispers inside his head, and the unicorn turned as it continued to playfully prance its way down an inner corridor Madrod had not seen before.

Sprinkled lights seemed to glimmer from the rocks of the walls as Madrod made his way after the unicorn carefully. A scent of wildflowers wafted faintly from before him as he heard a sound like running water beneath his feet. He looked down once, startled to see the path showed of clear crystal and that indeed, some stream flowed in a quick rush under him. For a moment his startled form halted until the unicorn pranced back to playfully pull on Madrod's clothing with its teeth until Madrod proceeded once more. At last they came to a large inner chamber, its ceiling reaching high into the darkness. A rush like rustling wings pushed up and through him as he gingerly stepped into the room. Inner incandescence from three other entryways caused him to look about. To his left, a man seemed to stand in the entrance, a great sleek dog of white at his side

with eyes that fired of amber. Across was a woman with a small fountain springing in front of her where spotted fish jumped and played. At his right was another woman, a large basket of grain in her arms that she poured forth in some endless stream upon the ground. After a moment of contemplation, Madrod's attention refocused on the dancing unicorn who had entered the chamber and moved to stand in the center. A dazzling array of lights sprang forth as the chamber itself went black. Looking up, Madrod gasped to see slender lines of colored lights crisscrossing the entire chamber like the weave of some wonderful spider's web. Lines flashed and darted as if something moved along the lines, and many of the lights twinkled like multicolored stars. Looking down then, Madrod realized that the weave proceeded below him as well.

Gold and silver mist gently played in the center of the chamber as two forms slowly took shape. As if from some inner fire, the forms stood with their own light, a woman and a man. Exotic and ethereal, her skin almost bronze and her hair like wheat, the woman opened her arms wide in welcome. Behind her, the tall, dark haired man stood, his form and face beautiful and young, though his great blue eyes bespoke elder wisdom.

"Arial..." spoke the woman in tones like living Nature, "Madrod... son of the Earth and the Stars... my son. Son of my body as well as my heart."

Startled by this declaration, Madrod responded as he looked from one to the other, "Rhiannon, my mother?... Taliesin, my father?"

Like the sound of soft flowing breezes, the man said in a near whisper, "This is the Temple of the Inner Bardic Council." Thoughts flashed through Madrod's mind in lightning sparkles. Both his parents had at some point held the highest seat of the Bardic Council, a Council of diplomacy, law, history and the arts as well as religion. A Council still strong in the Island of the Mighty; yet, clearly dying. Rhiannon had given Madrod in fosterage to Arionrhod that he might be taught Mysteries, for Arionrhod was a Priestess of great knowledge in her own right, of her own people. Yet, Madrod had also been given into Arionrhod's keeping that he might be kept safe from those who would have surely sought his death were his birthright known. Madrod had thought himself but the son of some village woman given because he had shown signs of promise at an early age. He had only come to know of his true parentage himself long after his manhood had been fully declared. Yet, for the first time, he felt himself in true and sudden awe of his own blood as again he heard the rush of water below. "That is the Living Waters of the Mother which She bids of us to drink. Clearly... you could have been a Bard."

"No... not this life, my mother." He said in quiet tones, knowing she was very right, "There is other wisdom that I must seek to pass."

Nodding, she bid that he come to her where she wrapped him in her arms as if he were but a boy. The man behind her smiled, putting a hand on Madrod's shoulder, a calmness and strength flowing from him through Madrod like a warm, loving wash. Madrod had hardly expected their solidity, greeting it with deep joy. When the woman pointed up into the wonderful web, Madrod's eyes followed as she spoke in his ear, "The Web of the Universe, the living fabric of all life above and below. Here weaves the past, the present and the future. Remember this vision, for your crystal shall help you to weave the fabric of the future. And in it, the unicorn shall help you know where to weave." After saying this, she stepped back from him declaring, "Behold the Treasures of the Council."

The vision of the star-lit chamber disappeared and so, too, his parents as Madrod found himself in a great room of books and sacred implements. His father's voice echoed round about and through him, "Enjoy these Treasures, my beloved son, and know their access is open to you at any time. For though physical place can be of some importance in obtaining this knowledge, for you it no longer matters. You have achieved your quest... Honor your foster-mother Arionrhod, for what you seek to pass on is access to the Gates of the Mother's wisdom... And so you shall."

For a long while Madrod investigated and enjoyed the books as well as studying the variant sacred implements with respect and silent awe. In time, he realized it was enough and he was not surprised to find the unicorn looking directly into his eyes as he himself looked up. A burst of brilliant light and color filled his mind blanking out all sense of momentary reality.

The smell of hotly brewed tea and heated strips of meat along with the clatter and rustle of movement caused Madrod to stir from the place where he and Cyril had slept. When he turned and slowly opened his eyes, Cyril saw, smiling widely, "You were more wearied than you knew. You've slept long and hard this morning. A little snow dots the landscape, but the mist has lifted and the way is clear enough."

Drowsily pulling himself up to a seated position, Madrod felt for the leather pouch about his neck. The crystal was warm within and for a moment he pulled it out to look at. A soft, glittery glow echoed through it and he put it back before Cyril truly noticed. Smiling at Cyril, he slowly got up to wander about the cavern, not at all surprised to note that an inner passageway no longer existed. Nodding to himself, he turned back to Cyril declaring, "We may go back now... This journey is ended."

"What do you mean?" Cyril was a bit incredulous, "The old man at the last village truly believed that the underground caverns of the old Bardic Council were up in these mountains."

"So they were," spoke Madrod mysteriously, "So they were... But, I know now that it is not my place to continue. We shall turn back now." He went over and hugged Cyril with strength and love.

Cyril shrugged, "It is your decision, my love... Though I would wander with you aimlessly the rest of my life, this is no affair that rests with a Christian."

"Let us go, then..." remarked Madrod, "for snow is like to fall again soon enough and I am for a soft, warm bed and good, hot food." With that, they ate their simple breakfast of the meat and tea before dowsing the fire and making ready to leave back out the mountains the way they had come.