

## **Rhiannon – Child of Twilight**

### **Chapter 11**

#### *The New Court*

Most of the time Mali and Dori wore their homespun clothing of undyed hue with a touch of wode green woven into their belts or shawls of a tartan pattern that indicated their Healer function. It made sense, for their daily routine did not allow the maintenance of better, or really, finer, clothes; and their usual dress was fairly stained from its daily service. Sometimes their clothes could become near tatters before the decision was made to be rid of them, having been washed and scrubbed to an unusable threadbare state. Yet, on this day, they wore the best they had, the Healer robes reserved for especial functions at Court or for Healer rituals of import. For today they would go down to the area of wood where the Retinue of Rhiannon stayed, where an area had been created that those present of the Bardic Council might hold its first Court with Rhiannon and Taliesin.

Dori looked in a piece of polished metal, trying to straighten the curls of her dark, brown hair about the beautifully bright tartan pattern of her shawl. Her robes were as white and lightly woven as could be done as it was still high Summer and the day seemed it would prove itself fairly warm. Mali watched her young apprentice fuss with some humor, though her own heart fretted some itself. “You will be fine, young one. We will walk up to Rhiannon and Taliesin when told we may. A Healer’s greeting when you’re presented will be fine. Besides, Maerdyinn is our friend, Second of the Bardic Council or no. He’ll always be our friend.

A young puppy toddled in, one of the favorite Shepard dogs having given birth to some pups of late, and Dori happy to receive one as a gift. It was a pretty little boy with a coat of mostly dark, brown fur who already showed great attachment to its new human. “Oh, Bali, there you are. Where have you been, naughty boy?” Dori scolded playfully.

Dori began to reach down to impulsively play with the pup when Mali interrupted, “Now, Dori. You fuss about your locks and dress, then think you’re going to play with your pup and mess everything up.” Shaking her head, Mali went to the door. “Saeth. Would you come in here and get this puppy, please. Feed him and play with him, would you?”

A household servant that often helped the Healers came in from a second room where she had been mending some of their clothes. She grinned a little when she saw the puppy playfully pulling a bit of Dori’s robes. “You are a naughty little boy!” She laughed and picked him up before he could do any real damage. “Come now. Let’s see what Saeth can find for you.”

Leaving with the gregarious little animal squiggling in the servant’s arms, Dori watched them go with a look that told Mali that her apprentice longed to play with her little friend. Mali sighed and shook her head once more. “I do try to realize how young you still are.” Coming up to Dori and straightening the robes and a strand or two of the young woman’s hair, Mali looked in Dori’s eyes with seriousness. “Now after the presentation to the Bardic Court we will repair to meet with the Healers of Rhiannon’s Retinue. We’ve all met before, but this will be another formal presentation to their Leader. Afterwards I will ask you to return to the Greathouse. There are tasks that need seeing to. Actually, I would like you to look in on the Lord and Lady’s son Darren, if you

would. That ankle he twisted a couple days back ought be looked at and the herbal pack changed again. I know Lady Creirwy would prefer we did not involve ourselves, but Lord Sean knows better. Don't let Creirwy try to intimidate you if she's there. Anyway, I'll be back soon enough, so don't fret overmuch, in any case. I'd just like to see that done, if at all possible."

"Won't Lord Sean and Lady Creirwy be there today? I thought they, as well as the Bards, Jenna and Dylan are meant to be present to this." Dori walked about the room a moment, then sat on her bed. The Healer's quarters included two rooms; a small room with two beds for Mali and her apprentice, and a fairly large, open room where variant powders, herbs and other tools meant for Healer use scattered themselves in an orderly, chaotic fashion. There was a long, narrow window in their workroom that went from floor to ceiling, though none in the bedroom, so that the door was left open to that room as much as possible, especially on the warmer days. At least the window was situated so that a good bit of daylight filtered in well and on a bright day there was no need to light any candles. As sunlight might well be damaging to herbs and powders, the window actually sat close to the bedroom door away from where herbs and powders were kept. The Healer rooms sat some East and South in the Greathouse, catching both warmth and sunlight in a fashion Mali preferred.

"Lord Sean will be there. The Lady Creirwy has refused the honor. There are rumors that she has sent word to her paternal Uncle Howell, who has also been at sore odds with his kinfolk over his own allegiance to this Eastern Religion. He has even fought our Lord here over boundaries to our West and South." Mali sighed. "And is near enough Briton's borders to Cymru to give cause to fear some real threat. I think the Lady may be making plans to leave her husband's House and repair to her Uncle's."

"How awful!" Exclaimed Dori, a frown drifting across her young, freshly scrubbed face.

Mali sat her own bed a moment and looked over. "Indeed. Her parents will be aggrieved. They are staunch supporters of their son-in-law, and though they love their daughter, have never shown the slightest interest in her current beliefs. I am sorry of it. Sorry for Lord Sean. He loves her still. But, I don't think she ever loved him. He had Estate. He had pleasant looks and manner." Mali shrugged. "Perhaps pressure we are not aware of. The Warrior Class often marries for position and wealth. We must be thankful that is not true for us... Or the Bards. To be worth something for what we are and can give. What we do. We are free to love whom we choose. When we choose. Oftentimes even Villagers and Townsfolk play the game of position, wealth. I don't like seeing it, but we are not here to control such things. We are here to heal." Mali shrugged a bit more before standing again, "Life shall proceed as it does. And if we are both ready, I suppose we ought make our way to the Bardic Council. It's a bit of a walk, but Dylan and Jenna will be with us. Besides, it's a pleasant day and it will provide us some much needed commune with the landscape."

Walking quietly next to her teacher and Mentor on a fair, bright day along a path outside Sean's Greathouse, Dori watched all with wondering eyes. The people walking from the House were all attired in their Summer best, with colored banners and a Warrior Escort. First of this entourage were any Bardic Council that had been staying at the House, followed closely by Jenna and Dylan and Taliesin's son, Korwyn. Jesse had been

left with her nurse that day, though Jenna had been tempted. It was Mali that had stopped her saying the child was just too young, Jenna deferring to the other woman's knowledge and common sense. It would be enough to bring the son that day. Then came Mali with Dori for Healers were highly regarded by the Bards above the Countryside's Nobility; even above the Sacred Musicians, Singers and Dancers or some of Its own Bardic People.

Lord Sean and some of his People came behind in courtesy, followed after by a more mishmash of Bardic and Household Folk. No one rode on horseback, the walk being short and ceremonial in nature. A certain quietness pervaded all as they moved along, a thankful breeze passing through. The verdant trees seemed to regard them with peaceful stoicness and Dori could feel a warm glow emanate from them as the Party passed. Here and there birds shot through, making their variant calls within the leaves.

Because Rhiannon's Retinue was in the woodland, she had set up her Bardic Court there so that soon the walking Household was surrounded by the trees, a canopy of green above them so thick the sky but peeked here and there. Bright, though mottled sunlight filtered through as they continued. Occasionally Dylan looked back at Mali and Dori to smile. He seemed to sense Dori's nervousness and wonderment, his empathic attention seeping back into the young girl, helping to settle her some. Mali also would squeeze her hand from time to time in comfort to her.

The Court was set in a circle, coming up almost suddenly in the trees and opening out as if they were moving through a tunnel and out into it. Dori found it a peculiar effect, conjecturing if it was meant to be sensed as womblike. Mali had often told her Bards did that sort of thing; created effects with sound, movement and visual implementation and cues. And sometimes creating a true sense of awe in one as the scene surely had created within her this day.

As they entered this enclosure, Dori could see Rhiannon and Taliesin seated across from them, facing them; Taliesin on Rhiannon's right. Rhiannon wore beautiful regalia, a cloak riotous of many colors and animals set about her shoulders. She held a staff with crow's feathers here and there as there were also feathers dotted in her mass of hair. Jewelry set on her ears, throat and belt of silver and red colored stones, moon and sun symbolized in the patterns. She looked a woodland Goddess seated there, or perhaps an Elven queen as some fear crept within Dori knowing that her impression was not falsely felt. Taliesin wore his Summer's best, but other than crow feathers strewn and woven into his hair, there was no especial apparel beyond what he might wear as Chief Bard at Sean's court. Behind them both the Banner of the Bardic Council was set on two poles so that it might open out above the couple. A white unicorn and dragon both faced argent and inward on a field of green, a harp of silver and gold between the creatures; the unicorn above Taliesin and the dragon above Rhiannon in their seats.

As everyone entered, they went up to this regal and rather ethereal couple to briefly greet and be acknowledged before going to sit on the ground and grass of the created circle. Only Rhiannon and Taliesin sat upon short stools in their formality. Everyone seemed to know where to sit, though Dori had to rely on Mali to give her understanding of what was proper. When Dori and Mali came up to the Bardic couple, Dori felt a wave of warmth from both which took her some by surprise. A soft, benign smile played on Rhiannon's lips and a twinkle dotted Taliesin's eyes. Dori had not known how tense she was feeling until she was given this release. As she followed Mali to their designated place beside a group of other Healers who had already been present

from Rhiannon's Retinue, Dori was tempted to look all around, but did not. Once seated there would be plenty of opportunity to do just that.

In honesty, Dori had seen most of these Household folk before, even sitting some with Mali in the formal dining area of the Greathouse with the Lord's family and Court Bards from time to time. There had also been times when Mali was present at Court proceedings, as were the Bards, and she had requested and gotten Dori's presence. And so, Dori was used to a certain amount of formality in various settings. However, this was Bardic Court, Bardic proceedings; almost never attended by other than Bardic Folk. There was a certain somberness, though it seemed more a politeness than dictation, for there were smiles everywhere one looked. Smiles and warmth. Mali had taken Dori to sit back to a place not quite across from Rhiannon and Taliesin, yet allowing a near excellent view of all.

Everyone made themselves comfortable as they sat upon the grass and soon Runners came up to all and offered bits of bread, cheese, water and mead before any real proceedings began. Dori took a little of these offering though she really was too excited to eat. Watching all with wide, brown and hazel eyes, her young memory keen and alert, Dori knew she would remember this day the rest of her life with fond clarity.

Looking across, Dori noted that the Court Bards Jenna and Dylan, along with Korwyn, sat next Taliesin, Jenna at his near right. This was followed by Lord Sean and the Nobles of the Lord's Estate. To Rhiannon's left sat Mab, then Kyle, the two Council Members Dori could now recognize. After that on Rhiannon's left were the other Council Members, some faces somewhat familiar, others not so much. The other Healers in this circle present from Rhiannon's Train were also in this Circle, dressed in as white a garments as they might have. A sense of peace radiated from this group as they sat, a peace Dori always enjoyed, and they seemed to lend their peace to the entire gathering of people present.

In time all was quiet and watchful, everyone seated and all the Runners having receded from their brief ministrations. Then all eyes and focus moved to the newly Bonded couple. When all attention seemed locked upon them, Rhiannon took her staff that she held in her left hand and pounded three times in formal greeting upon the ground as she called for everyone's attention. "Blessings all." Said Mab once the mental link between she and Rhiannon was established and the Bards all replied, "Blessings to you."

Mab closed her eyes as she continued, "We are here today to formally welcome my Chosen, Taliesin of Powys to the Bardic Council and Court. May he live long." For a moment Mab paused before continuing with, "But, also, to let you all know that he is to be my Second." There were some murmurs of question to this and Rhiannon raised her right hand. "Yes. My Second. As a Second is to a Chief Bard at a Court. Which means many things. To be both understood by this Council and discussed. My Second and I will both lead, we will both maintain Advisors. But, my Lord Taliesin will remain here, in Powys, and I will go into the Cymric lands in the Spring. For there will be a new Bardic Seat in the mountains here, behind the lands of this Greathouse. It is a place of power well connected to Earth and Sky and the interconnected network of the Trees. And by creating this new Seat, we draw attention away from the Power source we left and its artifacts, yet be able to continue to tap its resource. It is hoped that in time, only the Bardic Council will remember the physical location and only Bards able to tap into its power. By this deliberate sharing of power between my Second and I, we also confuse

the outside as I go in search. In search of other points of power, for in time I hope to find two other places where we may build, call Council Members to teach, students to learn. But, not only do I search for this. I also shall go in search of a Leader. A Leader for Cymru. A Battle Lord. For the landscape changes and the people of Cymru must be prepared.”

Though most of this had been discussed in private Councils, it all was the first that either the Lord Sean and his Council or the Healers had been told. Having the Bardic Seat built in the mountains did not really surprise anyone, but talk of a Cymric Leader did. “Mother.” Blurted Sean, “Do you mean a Ricon? Over all Cymru?”

Rhiannon gazed at the man with dark hair just beginning to gray at the temples, whose handsome features were also some grizzled by battle and sun. Her eyes pierced sharply, like dark pools of well water deep in the Earth as Mab answered, “A Ricon, yes. For the King of the Britons begins to turn his sight our way, hoping the small factions of Christian Holdings might chisel our resolve. Weaken us; make us ready for his future moves. We needs begin to take this threat seriously. Yes.” Many questions reflected in the eyes of all before her, but Rhiannon chose to move in another direction for now. “Friends.” Said Mab, “These are thoughts for other Meetings. And there shall be many and plenty of these before I leave. Today Council is opened, but is really meant to present my Chosen and Second. To allow those who will to also be presented to him. To recognize his authority as on a par with my own. To give some small indication of what will be and what in the near future must be discussed. It is well. Please. It is time to present yourselves to him before you retire for the day.”

At this signal each person or small group of people took turns stepping up and briefly presented themselves to Rhiannon and Taliesin once more. But this time it was also to formally recognize Taliesin in the capacity that Rhiannon had indicated. As her Second and as a Bardic Leader in fact as well as form. Not much was said by anyone other than to incline one’s head and possibly smile. The only true difference was when Jenna stepped up, Dylan and Korwyn at her sides. To these Taliesin took Jenna’s hands and kissed her cheek, then to take one of Dylan’s and Korwyn’s hands to squeeze as he smiled and nodded. “My family.” He whispered softly, yet the words seemed to carry on the breeze for all became aware of what he had said.

When it came time for Dori and Mali, Dori felt so young and clumsy walking across the green of the grasses, wondering if the white of their outfits might get stained. She tried to do as her Teacher and Mentor did, as she saw others do; yet, coming up to the seated pair she almost tripped on her outfit. At this she felt as if a gentle hand steadied her and though he had made no move from his spot, Dori knew it had been Taliesin who helped her. He smiled warmly at her, as did Rhiannon, smiles of friendship and understanding. Rhiannon’s smile startled Dori some and it made the Head of the Bardic Council smile even more, a glint of humor dotting her eyes. It was a look Dori would always remember for it eased her and let her know that all were friends here, and always would be.

After all were presented, the Court was broken after Rhiannon, through her Speaker, Mab, said a few parting words. Yet, in this break-up, neither Rhiannon nor Taliesin actually left; people simply got up if they choose, to go elsewhere, or sat and talked among themselves. A couple Council Members had gathered by Rhiannon in obvious discussion and Dori noted Jenna and Dylan going to Taliesin. Mali looked at her

apprentice after several moments, “Alright, young one. The Healers are meeting a little ways down by a stream. They would meet us for further discussion. You’ve not met any of these folk properly.” With that, Mali rose, as did other Healers with them, signaling Dori to do the same.

The Healers who had been at this Bardic Council besides Mali and Dori - who were the Court Healers; were the Head ones in Rhiannon’s Train. However, there were several others who had also come with the Bardic Head, enough to hold a Council of their own. And it seemed as if that’s exactly what they intended now. Mali led her apprentice down a riverbed, the crickets and frogs announcing themselves noisily. Flying bugs buzzed as the air created the sleepy warmth of the afternoon’s usual Midsummer fare. Several people in less formal Healer gear gathered at the water’s edge, seated on the ground and casually speaking. As those who had attended the Bardic Council approached, the rest got up and stood for a moment to greet their companions. Yet, after that, they all seated again as some refreshments of nuts and fruit were handed out.

For a few moments some of the Healers who had been at the Bardic Council spoke of it briefly. There was not much to comment on, though of course, all found the idea of Taliesin being Rhiannon’s Second to be bit of a surprise. Though most had grasped by this time that this local Chief Bard had somehow been declared and made Rhiannon’s Chosen, it had only been supposed that this Council Meeting was but a presentation of such. Not much beyond that had been expected or anticipated. In general, it did not truly concern the Healers, albeit, they knew this decision to be highly unusual. Yet, they did not see this as of any real impact to themselves at this time. What did create any impact was the finalizing news that a new Council Seat was to begin progress in these mountains. That would therefore mean that the Healers could now set their own focus on this area, to explore its healing attributes more closely and in depth. This was good news and all welcomed it with open smiles and hearts. Journey’s end, a time of settling and exploring now at hand. Even the idea that Rhiannon would go out seeking for a Ricon did not overly concern anyone. Not yet, anyway. That was in a future that had not come, and Healers were not ones to speculate much of the future, it was the present that they tended to set their sights to.

For some time discussion remained within speculation of the new Bardic Seat. Thoughts were even brought forward that some ought be going into the mountains to truly investigate in more depth. There were known to be some hermits living here and there, Wise Ones who might be contacted and hopefully consulted. This all created interest and excitement as Dori sat with eyes wide, listening to all the buzz about her.

Finally Mali interrupted these discussions by addressing a Healer that Dori realized had authority in Rhiannon’s Train. “Embrill. Please bear your ear a moment. I know there is much to discuss and I hope I can be of assistance for I know many of these Wise Ones in this area. But, I also have an apprentice here I needs attendance for.”

“Ah, yes.” Said the woman Mali had addressed. “I see.” She spoke looking directly at Dori who started from the woman’s sudden and fairly intense gaze. The Healer’s eyes were dark and soft, with a Healer’s glow though it disconcerted Dori some as well for she could also feel an exploratory touch within. “Soon she will be ready for the Holy Isle. Yes, I see that now. And you shall need a new apprentice. Perhaps more. And that, too, we have for you.” With that, the woman Embrill touched Dori on the forehead. “Yes, one. I see the Fires in you. Let the wheel have but a couple more turns.

Then, we shall see. But, for now, it is best to stay. Much is happening, I think. We settle here and needs understand that settling. I also suspect your Teacher would have you spend more time with us, with other Healers. That ,too, is well, if that be so. But, there will be some others sent to help at Sean’s Court, as well. Healers, apprentices. There will be a natural expansion here and it will be to your calling and need, Mali. We will attend it, Mali. You can be sure of that.”

“Thank-you.” Spoke Mali plainly, relief playing in her eyes as the conversation turned to other things. Before long Mali whispered in Dori’s ear, “Alright, my friend. Return to the Greathouse and attend. There are things that need seeing to and one of us ought be there. Run along.” With that, Dori realized her dismissal and without ceremony, got up and left the group.

Fortunately, there was not much a Healer needed attend that day besides preparations in the workroom. Fortunate, as it was late in the day before Dori’s Teacher, Mentor and friend returned, though it had also been a difficult day to await as much had happened, anyway. The only fuss the girl had met was in seeking to see the son of Lord Sean and Lady Creirwy as the Lady was present and did try to bar Dori’s attention. Dori did do as she could to ignore the woman’s protests, explaining that the Lord would expect some report. And though in enough situations Creirwy did not necessarily care or obey such considerations, she knew that in the case of their son, it was hardly wise to cross her husband too much. At least it seemed the ankle was mending well enough and Dori able to make the encounter brief.

However, the discomfort of the situation did not prevent Dori from noticing that things about the area were some amiss. The Lady’s attendants were obviously pulling out some of Creirwy’s things and clothing to put in variant trunks meant more for travel than storage. Dori made no remark as she noted the activity, yet she was also aware that the Lady had seen the notation, giving Dori a rather glinted and satisfied look before Dori left again. It was something Dori would express to Mali, even if were something no one could really do much about. It was as like the Bards themselves already were quite aware and whatever move they felt they needed to make was already well in place.

Dori also spent a little time with Taliesin’s youngest, Jesse, before going back to the Healer’s workroom, if for no other reason than to have a moment of enjoyment. The nurse, Erin, was more than happy to see the young apprentice, for much of the Bardic staff had gone for the day in their Ceremony and functions. She let Dori hold the pretty red-haired baby to play with some and Dori beamed at this occupation. For whatever reason, Dori also noted an energy emit from the child she had not felt before and it surprised her for she also understood it. “Healer child.” She whispered, and then looked up at the nurse with wide, delighted eyes.

“Ah, truly. Do you think?” asked Erin, curious in an answer to this statement.

Continuing to hold and play with the baby, Dori looked some away. “Well. I am but an apprentice. It is only what I feel. Mali might know for certain. And it is hard to say what my Lord, Taliesin, would feel of it.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’d want to hear Mali’s thoughts on it. There’s a time, when I was but a young one, when the Bard, Taliesin, thought his issue could naught else be but Bards. He has grown some reason since, I think. Healers are good fare. He’d be right proud, I suspect. Proud, indeed.”

“Well, I will mention this to Mali, then. Perhaps she may come later and see about it. But, of course, Jesse’s just a baby, too.”

“Plenty o’ time, yes. And surrounded by Bards and Healers. She will be as she is meant, I expect.” The nurse smiled.

Yet, getting back to the workroom, it was difficult to really settle with the usual tasks for now Dori had news she wished to share with her Mentor as soon as she was able. Both about the Lady Creirwy and Taliesin’s child.

Megan ate slowly the sparse fare of mutton broth and bread offered by the village Priest to she and Lucius in their travels. They sat in the dining area of the Priest’s quarters and though hardly luxurious, was a far cry to anything else built in this village that they had currently come to. There was a low square table where they sat on homespun pillows stuffed with wool. The walls were stone and wattle with little aught to cover them. There was a barren feel that was not much to Megan’s liking, yet it didn’t really matter much to her, either. She was more surprised that this Priest would have news of any kind and so focused her attention on him as they ate.

There had been soldiers through this area of late who had taken a rest at this village. Even a couple staying with the Priest. News of any kind being welcome commodity, the Priest hardly minded giving these men the best stores he could provide. These men had spoken long of the King Balin and that he had become restless lately. Restless by the movement he sensed going on in his neighbor, Cymru.

Megan was pleased to realize that the whispers once placed in other Priests’ ears about Rhiannon, about a white haired ‘Witch Queen’ had finally gained some of this King’s attention and imagination. Now this Priest echoed something such. A dark force in the West, moving and possibly gathering. Perhaps even gathering near Briton’s borders.

Cymru had long not been truly considered a threat of any kind. Perhaps one day Briton would turn her eyes in that direction, but there were other more pressing foes that came out of the East and North who had intentions of conquering of their own and therefore must needs be dwelt with. Cymru was scattered and unfixed, with a certain amount of Christian Greathouses that Briton hoped she might count on when the time did finally come. Yet, now something new and strange had begun. The Bards had begun moving in some sort of flux that Briton could not quite understand. Perhaps it meant nothing, yet there was awareness that it was also in response to pressure given by Christian Holdings in that land.

If there was any communal voice in Cymru, it came from the Bards, and Balin well knew such. It was rare for Briton to deal with them at all these days, but there had been some parties in the past sent to convey messages of peace and disinterest in Cymru’s rule. The Bards had accepted these messages, voicing agreement and a willingness to leave well enough alone, convincing the Lords and Ladies of Cymru’s Warrior Class to leave Briton to its own.

It wasn’t so much that the Bards or Cymru had made any especial moves of late that might bode Briton ill. It was simply that there seemed to be particular movement and change. Change in manner and focus that could not truly be determined in nature and kind.

“I expect the King may at least send representatives before long.” Shrugged the grizzly man of a Priest and host, looking over at Megan and Lucius in some question. The one curiously charismatic and dark, the other a bit pale and likely some sickly, with brown patchy freckles that stood out too starkly over his face and hands. “The soldiers say the King may well fortify Briton’s borders some near Cymru, too, if he can. The movement in Cymru had made his Highness wary, though it is not easy to spare anyone, from what I understand. Those Northern Invaders are a constant threat along the sea borders and keep many a soldier away from home and family. And, really, all our borders have some concern for Balin. It is not easy to keep a Kingdom whole or for our Lord. Our enemies would love to plunge us into darkness once more given the chance.”

“Ah, yes.” Spoke Megan darkly, allowing a tempered richness to pervade the timber of her voice. “And I fear Cymru may well seek the same. It’s current Head of the Bardic Council had greed seated deep in her evil soul.”

“You think so?” Asked their host, a little unsure of his guest, though he knew he ought not be so suspicious of a fellow Priest. “No one seems to truly understand her movements. Or why. Though there is the speculation that there is gathering in Powys fair near the borders, as I said.” As they continued to eat, it was as if some howling could be heard without in the darkness of the night causing everyone to look up. The pale Priest seemed to shake a little, his eyes widening as he drew in his breath. The small, dark Priest seemed to only frown a little, his eyes moving inward in thought. “Strange.” Said the host, honestly baffled. “I can’t imagine what that might be. Perhaps a wolf, though it sounds rather too weird and twisted for it.”

Megan shook her head, “We have seen and heard many curious and evil things in our travels. Who knows? The Devil is abroad more than any of us truly realizes. But, I know. I’ve seen.”

The host looked up at his guest and though unsure found himself curious what the other might know and say. Perhaps something juicy that might instill the right element of fear in his parishioners and personal flock. “It is a malformed cry. I certainly admit that. Have you heard such before, then, Brother Brac?”

“Lately, yes. Have we not, Brother Lucius?” Megan nearly smiled, looking at her partner, watching him quake at the words. But, she stayed herself, knowing their host observed her closely. “Something feeds on doubt, they say. Lives are taken. Evil lives. In the night when those who favor the Devil’s work move about. I’ve seen the bloodless corpses. Haven’t we? It were best good Christian folk go inside when the sun is down. Bar the doors, stay within.”

“Faery folk, you think?” Asked the host, suddenly eager, taking a peculiar pleasure at such news.

“Perhaps. Perhaps the Bards send it. Yet, they are enjoined in Faery matters themselves. It is rumored that many have Elven souls, if such even can have souls. But, it is something said. As you may have heard, once I lived among the Bards. If you had not known that before, perhaps it may now bare weight to my words. The evil of the Bards bleeds and seeps into our lands. And I pray the King does not realize this too late. We are of a country but barely won to the true god. It grieves me that it could someday be lost due to neglect. I realize there is pressure abroad to defend our borders. But we must be careful or we may rot from within.”

“Your words are so dire, Brother. And now I remember being told of you, yes. You are the Pict, then, are you? And you have seen evil up close, they say. Do you really think these howls in the darkness are more than the usual wild in the night?” The host said almost hopefully.

Megan drew in her breath and slit her eyes as she pointed at Lucius. “You see my companion, here? They make it hard for him, I know. His spirit is cleaner than mine, so he suffers more. But... We both know.” Seeing her host shiver some at her words gave Megan a warmth of pleasure as more howls without were heard almost in sync to her expressions. She knew it to be Corryn and his new companions. They had taken to this tactic at times after a feed. It was the energy of fear it aroused that pleased them to excite once satisfied in their hunt. Bodies were like to be found in the morning’s light; bloodless and sometimes rent apart. But, no one would know what evil, or wild creature might have performed it, as a sense of communal fear would settle on the area. It didn’t matter to Corryn and his mates, they were becoming good at filtering in at twilight here and there where strangers gathered or lone farmsteads still might open a door to such as they. And it pleased Megan. Corryn had been a good choice, a wise choice. He was smart, thoughtful; moving the darkness about them slowly in a subtle blanket that created an uncertain, menacingly garnered fear.

After these words from Megan, their host fell silent as they finished their scant meal. Yet, Megan knew she had done as she hoped to awaken this Priest’s darker imagination. He would preach ill of the Bards from now on with new vehemence, and was like to spread whatever sinister rumors he could. Especially now. She also looked over at Lucius some; noting his sickliness, considering just how much longer it was wise to continue with him. However, her only real option would be to graft herself on one or more others and the time it might take to do so could be rather limiting. She just began to suspect that he might die in the night on her before long if she did not take care on it. It was an important fact to consider, so it was a fact she had begun to pause on.

Part of Rhiannon’s stay until the next Spring was not only to spend real time with her Chosen, but to travel some through the nearby forest and mountains themselves as the new Seat of the Bards began to be built. Not just in the caverns, caves, propositions and speculations for this new Seat, but also to see the terrain. To commune and converse with Nature, yet, also to meet with any people who might be there. Lord Sean’s boundaries were wide and had sentries posted deep into the range and it had been through that Lord’s compliance and agreement that the Bards had begun their prospect of a new home. Not that he might be like to protest; having the Bards settle there was like gaining a serious new found wealth and status unlooked for. And beyond Lord Sean’s borders in the mountains were his kin who were now also being contacted with nothing but positive reactions.

It was to the South and East that held some concern for the Lord. These Households were some of the Lady Creirwy’s kin and though most were staunch supporters, giving little trouble or concern, there was one Household and area near Briton’s borders that Sean kept a wary eye on. As Summer moved and melted into the first glimmering of Fall, much of Powys would know what the Bards proposed and began to build. Which could mean renewed difficulty in such areas that occupied some of

Sean's concerns. Because of such, he already was sending a certain amount of increased fortification where he thought it might be wise as quietly as he could.

In the meantime, Rhiannon would take a few days at a time to wander the rugged landscape with one or two Advisors, Mab and sometimes Taliesin. It was always clear when Taliesin went with her that it made Jenna rather nervous, so Rhiannon began to make some point of spending time with Taliesin and Jenna together with Mab as two couples. Sometime this was as simple as eating some meals together. And sometimes Jenna and Taliesin liked to ride the nearby countryside; even staying at a village or town overnight, so Rhiannon and Mab might accompany them and do the same. Rhiannon also realized that this foursome pairing did much to ease herself and Mab as well. It even became obvious that Mab and Jenna were becoming friends despite what might well put them at odds. And Rhiannon was getting to know Taliesin under less stressful and simpler conditions.

What was Rhiannon's greatest surprise was that Jenna and Taliesin could make Rhiannon laugh. Laugh and enjoy herself in a way she wasn't too certain she ever had. She hadn't really ever had much of a childhood of any kind and though Mab had often tried to elicit some playfulness in her mate, Rhiannon was simply not much wont to such. Yet, Jenna and Taliesin often tended to cut up between themselves, happy and very at ease with each other. Perhaps it was more that Rhiannon had not really been much privy to that sort of behavior in others around her. She found it attractive and something she began to emulate with Mab on occasion, much to Mab's delight.

And there were oftentimes when Rhiannon choose to ride out with Taliesin alone for a few days. These were not easy decisions to make as she always noted the tension that glazed Mab's eyes for several moments no matter what Rhiannon might say or do. Yet it was important to spend these times with her Chosen. It was as if the trees could be heard to murmur as she and Taliesin rode, a whisper within the breezes, allowing them to feel out the landscape, noting its colors of power. What neither Mab nor Jenna understood was that for Rhiannon and Taliesin, to spend too much time together could become too strong, nearly overwhelming. It was the parameters of others that kept them within a certain safety of perspective, allowing them to navigate more easily. Rhiannon chose the times she and Taliesin rode off entirely alone with great care, giving Advisors instructions for rendezvous points to meet them after a couple days.

On some of their brief excursions, Rhiannon also noted that when she awoke in the early hours of twilight, it seemed others stood over them. Female presence, familiar somehow, watching them in some curiosity, yet also in protectiveness. Sometimes Taliesin would awaken, too, and she could see in his face and sense in his energy that he felt the same presence.

What was good was that on a surface level, Taliesin knew these woods and mountains well. Though he had been Chief Bard at Lord Sean's Court, before then he had been a Wandering Bard many years and he had always preferred the Northern Powys terrain. It was obvious to Rhiannon that he already naturally drew much of his power in the Nature where they traveled, producing an ease and comfort in him that also made it some concern as it made it also easier to blur between them.

It was a curious problem, one Rhiannon had never experienced with either Mab nor even Danu and she wondered of it. The first time she and Taliesin rode out alone it had taken all her reserve to get them back though they had not even gone all that far a

field. And it was the trees that seemed to tell her, to even guide them back to a place where a Bard and Runners were crossing their path. It startled both she and Taliesin back into normal human reality and she was glad of the intrusion. She and Taliesin discussed this occurrence at great length with Kyle on their return, making some of the guidelines that would need to be in place thereafter. Kyle had even made the suggestion that the two never ride alone, yet Rhiannon disagreed. It was important to learn to control it, to find the borders and limits. It seemed it might well be unique to them and indicated a power that they might need to use. Technically they could share mind, but were careful in that arena for somehow it felt too intrusive and some like unfamiliar territory that needed careful study before attempting too liberally. It wasn't that they couldn't or didn't share mind with others; especially Rhiannon with Mab; it was that somehow this was far headier than others and given too much time at any one space, might lead to an inseparable state. Perhaps even irreparable. Yet, Rhiannon knew they needed to explore all the possibilities they might and that it also required the exclusion of anyone else.

So, they agreed on briefness and the need to meet up with Advisors after two or three days had passed. And that Mab would not be one of those meeting them. The exclusion hurt Rhiannon some to pronounce such, yet she knew it to be best, as she would simply need the buffer it would present before actively returning to her mate. For the excursions also created a rawness in Rhiannon and Taliesin that even necessitated some healing work with them in their return.

Before long they began to sense each other from afar, to pick up stray thoughts and feelings, knowing that in time, this too, would grow much stronger and become a more skilled ability. Even occasional dreams seeped one into the other that were not of the Between State, but rather the personal unconscious imagery of normal retreat. More the drift into each other's private worlds beyond the waking world. At times this made a certain discomfort with each other and this, too, needed to be worked through.

The pleasant time of love and warmth Rhiannon had experienced being Danu's chosen were not those with Taliesin. She knew she felt love for him, but it was a love that seemed as if tethered to the reigns of a wild horse made of fire and lightning. It wasn't just that she didn't have a natural physical attraction; it was also all the psychic uncertainties that no one seemed to have any knowledge of. She even guessed that not even she and Taliesin's Eldritch background and heritage would give them any real clues. Fortunately, there did seem to be some tenuous hold over all, even so, as long as they kept the reigns fairly tight and kept their alone time fairly brief. Eventually, the Council's own natural abilities to sense their Head came into play as well and they, too, were able to mitigate with surety and immediate awareness.

The whole situation created an air of far more technical work than any had ever experienced. Work beyond the rituals and spiritual understanding normally developed between the Head and their Chosen. And the simpler loves each had with their mates became more looked for, more needed, more solid. It was so difficult to explain to their personal loves, yet each hoped that it would be felt. There was a joy now that Rhiannon took with Mab and Rhiannon hoped Mab would truly sense that joy in return. She could see, sense, that Taliesin and Jenna did and this made her glad, though she sensed some uncertainty from her own mate however she tried hard to dispel it.

Yet, the fevers Taliesin occasionally might have were difficult for Rhiannon to touch into despite the bond forged between them. It puzzled and even distressed her,

though the herbs she had given him to utilize had greatly decreased their occurrence and intensity. It pained her for she had never felt this sort of distress herself, yet could at least sense his confusion and anguish over his. She did know that the Healers had some record of Bards having fevers and that was how Mali had known to give Taliesin the tea, though the herbs Rhiannon took seemed to be a more secreted source that had been forgotten over time. Perhaps the tea was usually enough. Rhiannon also knew the Eldritch could be very close about just how much information they might divulge. It could also mean the herb had other uses or was too potent under most cases. She knew most should not even handle the plant, so perhaps it was ill advised for most to see it in any other sense.

She also knew that this herb was making it slowly easier to touch into other realities. A slight haze would sometimes linger in her waking state causing some awareness of other energies that could seem to nearly dance some at the edges of her vision. It could cause some disconcertion at times, though she knew what it was and allowed herself of it. In some senses, she realized she might not even really still need the herbs, but decided that this effect was important, too. It was altering her body, altering her abilities in this body as much as it was altering her spirit and soul. Somehow she understood that this was something the Eldritch had done in the past when they had crossed over to human reality in numbers. A way to both ease them and yet maintain some connection, perhaps. She wondered, yet knew not to push too hard. Not yet. If not for her own sake, certainly for Taliesin who as yet was far more vulnerable. She was uncertain if Mab was experiencing quite as much a shift as well, and this caused her to wonder, too.

She knew that she and Mab were such strong and newly crossing Elven spirits that their technically human bodies required the help the herbs provided them. She was also aware that Taliesin's body was entirely Elven, like those of the actual Crossover and that his soul was strong and old Eldritch like her own. Yet, his was newly crossed in like to hers. Did those early Elven have fever as Taliesin did? Yes, some, but she felt not like, too. Not nearly so intense, or persistent. It almost seemed to Rhiannon as if someone might be facilitating these bouts and she began to wonder if there might be some way of finding out just who or why this was so. And if there might be a way of stopping it.

Time passed over Powys and the first snows began to drift all across the countryside of Cymru as the People made their final preparations to settle in for the Season. Foods were stored and livestock gathered in from hill, mountain and Summer fields, some livestock being slaughtered to smoke or dry.

The Lady Creirwy had finally left her home and husband to take refuge with her uncle in his Greathouse who was South and some East of Sean's lands near Briton's borderings. And with her went the Eastern Priests and any retinue they had retained. For the Lord Sean it was good opportunity to expunge any final vestige of the foreign religion from his Holdings, though he was deeply hurt at his Lady's decision and move. He still loved her sorely and had done all he could to maintain her as she wished without unduly upsetting the People under his protection. But now that Creirwy was gone, the religion she had played to was stripped of any say or power as the Bardic Seat continued to be scouted and the first areas worked on.

A name was finally given the Seat by the Council of Wynseren, a bright and fair star in the Cymric lands. It gave all a sense of hope after the charged and sudden move

the Bards had made from their old Seat of Power. A new day, a new time and all hoped it would be to the good.

“There are some new tunnels found.” Remarked Rhiannon to Taliesin as they prepared to ride out, a light dusting of new snow across tree and land that sparkled in the morning light. Not being truly cold yet, the powder was like to disappear by afternoon. But for now, it made everything look pristine and faery-like to all. “I thought perhaps that that might be something we could investigate.” Only a select few were seeing them off for Rhiannon and Taliesin’s temporal excursion so that Rhiannon felt at ease enough to speak aloud to all. Neither Mab nor Jenna was present at such leavings, either, as the couple geared their horses, finally mounting to go.

Taliesin smiled at her and nodded, “There will be an early Season storm. It will not block any passages, so we will be warm and dry. It is like to prove an enjoyable journey, I think.”

Rhiannon smiled back openly, she had felt the likelihood of a storm as well in the rumors of the breezes that moved in the trees. “Even so.” She said as they finally rode out, Kyle and a couple others of the Council watching them as they left. Kyle already instructed where to meet them after a couple days time. Despite his advancing age, he still rode well, being more fit than many men far younger.

It took the whole of the day to finally get to the mountains themselves and the place Rhiannon intended they would investigate. Though Winter was just begun, work went on to carve out areas for Rhiannon, and now Taliesin, Retinue’s new home and Seat. There was even some livestock in pens and grain in store, some homes and huts built near work areas of cavern, tunnel and cave. Rhiannon and Taliesin were greeted pleasantly as they rode up where an evening meal was being prepared of biscuits and stew. Runners had preceded the couple, so the crew was well prepared, though neither Rhiannon nor Taliesin really elicited undo favoritism. They were more happy to find a hot meal and decent place to sleep than anything. Though Rhiannon now did not speak, Taliesin had no problem being able to indicate what both of them might want or need for their nightly stay.

Lying down by each other’s side at an entrance to one of the many caves, Rhiannon heard the light fall of snow just beyond a fire being maintained through the night by alternating Runners. Tomorrow she and Taliesin would pack enough foods to sustain them a couple days, along with ropes, lamps and means to make small fires. They intended some investigation, yet nothing too far removed or dangerous as that was hardly the point. They really hoped they might find one or two good niches for meditation work or even something to do personal ritual within.

It wasn’t easy to fall asleep next to this man, even though her feelings had settled greatly. It was that she knew their energies would begin to mesh and slightly blur as they both moved into a twilight state and by morning there would be a slight edge of uncertainty to everything. For a moment he rolled on his side and looked at her, smiling gently, the waft of understanding in his eyes. She smiled back, reached up and touched the contour of his face as she watched his eyes. Then they kissed lightly and she let him enfold her in his arms as they drifted into sleep. A wind blew up outside, but it seemed more lulling than distractive, causing an even deeper press as they moved into dreaming.

In the morning, both Rhiannon and Taliesin had a strong sense of the tunnels they would roam and how they followed within the mountains. This pleased the couple for it gave them a sense of surety as they made final preparations before leaving everyone else around them. They promised to take no undue chances, using colored chalk and stones to mark various points as they went. Some of this area had already been investigated and moved through by others, yet some had not. Rhiannon had lived in a cavern environment and world for a goodly time, so always felt fairly comfortable in any journey within the Earth. For Taliesin it had been many years since he had made much of this sort of sojourn, though as a child he had lived a long time at Waljanargel. Yet, not many truly knew how long ago that might actually be, and Taliesin did not seem to want to come forth with any said information. It was also something Rhiannon did not try to peer into or even really guess, sensing that this was somehow somewhat of a sore spot with him. Perhaps he himself wasn't totally certain, and what did make Rhiannon wonder, was just how an Elf would honestly handle the aging and death of what they must perceive as the comparatively short lives of his human companions and friends.

For some time they said little to each other as the couple went into the tunnels having eaten a good breakfast of chicken's eggs and flatbread, a treat provided by the hosting Bards. Before long the blur began to drift at the edges of their movements, making Rhiannon realize it better to anchor her thoughts in sound. "I believe there is a nitch not far ahead we might test. Take a moment to intone and sense the vibrations." Having walked ahead of him, she looked back to see his face lighten in a lamp's flame that he carried.

He smiled a bit as he looked at her and nodded his head, then answered, also recognizing that speech was a good idea right then, "Yes. I feel it, too. Not far. Just a little ways, up on the left. A rather unusual rock formation by it, I believe."

"Alright." She replied and then resumed her walk, a loose rope tied between them. The tunnel was fair sized, the air clean and seemed likely had venting from various spots. Bits of crystal dotted the walls, giving off glints in the lamplights as they moved. It was hoped by all that much of this area might be left unaltered, at least the tunnels themselves, for the crystals gave off a delightful and healing energy that was advantageous to anyone moving through. The two took their time as they walked, as there was certainly no hurry to any of this. The intent was simply to stay overnight at some point along the way, then more than likely return back out the next day. Council Members would probably meet up with them on their way as they returned to the Greathouse, perhaps even at the cavern they had entered through.

Rhiannon knew that in some ways this little excursion could be some risky. Being within the Earth with only their small lamps for light created an ethereal energy, hazing the borders of physical reality with the uncertain dance of color and light that flickered about them. Often and deliberately, they would stop to examine interesting rocks and formations about them to discuss. Some of that related to what they might suggest to those who would work and expand these areas, some simply to enjoy and expand on each other's company.

It wasn't long before they came upon the nitch that Rhiannon had first mentioned where they might stop. "It's fair cold out." She remarked. "It's pleasant enough in here, but I feel the nip at the edges of the air that comes in here, too."

“Um, yes.” Replied Taliesin, looking some at the nitch with his small, clay lamp and frowning. “It will be a deep Winter this year, I think. But, the fields will be very fertile come Spring. A good Spring. Some early, too, I believe.”

Raising her brows and giving a wry smile, Rhiannon asked, “You think? Are you always such a boon to farmers and husbandry, to give them such long range weather knowledge with your sight?”

Shaking his head ‘no’ and giving a slight laugh, he turned to her and smiled wide. “No. Sometimes I just know things like we all are wont to do. But, I think my talent is far more rooted in other devours than weather. Yet. The wind speaks strongly to me today. Perhaps it is something I do need to convey once we return.”

“I expect so.” She agreed as she found a place she could sit indicating that Taliesin ought do so as well. Facing each other and having set their lamps beside them, they also extinguished them to relight later. The darkness became total as they took each other’s hands. For several moments they just sat in the silence, listening to each other’s low breath and feeling the pulse of their heartbeats. Finally, Rhiannon began a low, studied sort of wordless toning that was soon followed by Taliesin. By doing this they felt and explored the energies about them. After a time, they even conjoined the energies as their voices danced about in a singing manner. Both of them found great pleasure in this exercise and near difficult to stop. Several moments went by before their toning began to truly ebb, slow and stop. When they had stopped, again they stayed in place for some time, becoming part and parcel of that about them.

“You are right.” Rhiannon whispered at last in the dark. “The Winter will be very deep, indeed. It is well advised. I will make certain all the people that are here with me prepare themselves well.”

“Yes. And the Greathouse of my Lord Sean and those he serves will help see to it.” At that, they relit their lamps with a bit of flint so that they might continue their walk.

They had held themselves fairly steady in their little stop and intone so that Rhiannon was pleased and a bit surprised. “We did well with that.” She said as they stood again. Saying nothing in reply, Taliesin simply inclined his head in agreement, a small reflective smile drawn across his face.

A certain energy from their intoning remained in the tunnels and area where they continued their walk. This caused them to become silent and concentrate on the vibrations all about them that echoed back from their efforts. It also gave a sense that the area felt massaged and rather a pleasure from what had been done and were pleased by the presence of the magickal couple. This, too, was felt by the couple as they continued, a reverberation that penetrated deep within their collective core.

When they finally stopped to eat and sleep for a time, knowing it likely full night outside, they also allowed the passion now built within to overtake them. It was what the mountains now seemed to demand they fulfill, a power they created, a power demanded by the Earth Herself. It was a power that the Gods drew from them and used, used to feed and invigorate the Earth. It wasn’t soulless; on the contrary, it was as if they partook of Soul on a larger scale beyond themselves in a timelessness. It was that it was not personal passion, personal love and they understood that, accepted that. And loved each other for it. It was also very different from what had ever been demanded of the Head and their Chosen before. Not that the Head and their Chosen weren’t a magickal couple and

couldn't be physically involved, whether magickally or personally. But this still was different, deeper, far more encompassed as if they became a focal point for other realms.

The blur of reality concerned Rhiannon some in they return, yet it did not seem too frayed, as she might fear. Perhaps the mountains, the Earth, understood this and created certain buffers for them. In fact, this was exactly so, and it caused Rhiannon to sigh in pleasant relief.

"What?" Asked Taliesin, slightly lulled, his arms lightly holding her, his own breath low and measured.

"Nothing, my friend. The Earth cradles us, is all. We are graced, protected. Sleep. Our heads will be clear on awakening." With that, she found herself snuggling to him despite the strangeness she felt. Having snuffed their lamps, all was such total blackness; everything about each other was encased in the other senses to exclude sight. Not even the small fire they had lit remained, the embers having died long before. The vague smell of wild flowers and fresh dirt touched her as she breathed, surprising Rhiannon some. It was a smell she had come to associate with Taliesin's impending fevers, yet she knew this was not so now. She realized suddenly that it was actually his native smell, the fevers simply made it pronounced and noticeable. And in reality, she, too, had some similar physical odor herself.

They had taken little gear with them; flint rocks, a bit of kindling in hopes of finding enough material for a small fire, a bit of food, rope, small lamps and one blanket besides a couple utensils. Wrapping the blanket about them tightly, the communal warmth was pleasurable for the space they had found was pleasantly enclosed.

For some time Rhiannon lay, thinking on the darkness, allowing her senses to become encased in Taliesin's warmth and smell, his heartbeat and breath, knowing he was doing something the like himself. In time, she felt as if she were walking midst the trees and forest, guided by dancing, softly colored lights and sound. The sound of tiny bells drifting on the breeze full of the perfumed scent of rain. Verdant grasses brushed her feet and leaves touched upon her hands as if the forest itself wished its own personal contact with her.

Finally waking again in the darkness, Rhiannon moved from the covers to find gear nearby where she lit one of the lamps. She knew Taliesin was also waking as she did this. "There is a passage from here." She said once the lamp was lit and she turned to regard her companion as he sat up. "It leads out to the forest. A place not found yet. We are waited there. There are those who wish to speak with us."

He smiled a little at her seriousness as she sat beside him in the cave's curious patterns of shadow from the lamp's light. She watched his eyes a moment as he reached up to touch her face, his fingers long and graceful, yet so much larger than her own or Mab's. It was some disconcerting even though his touch was light and gently done. She knew his intention was to lighten things, their relationship being fairly formal in so many ways. Returning his smile, she also realized he needed her leadership, that there was great uncertainty in him for what they did or should do. Taking his hand then, she squeezed it as he remarked, "We walked in the forest in the night. I remember now. Our kindred, aren't they?"

"Umm." She returned, nodding her head as they now both got up and quickly put their things together.

It was not long before they found the passage that led them out to the forest to find the ground covered in a thick layer of white, new snow. It sparkled in the early light, the air having become still and crisp. They had left their heavier clothing back where they had entered on this excursion, yet the air was fairly comfortable despite it. They determined to walk out a little ways, keeping an easy distance for their return.

It wasn't long before they found themselves encircled by a grove of oaks, that despite their barren limbs, seemed to canopy the sky. As the couple looked about themselves in this little enclave, Rhiannon felt Taliesin reach and clasp her hand tightly as she felt the wave of uncertainty filter through him. She squeezed back, then took her arm to move it about his waist. The real difference in their heights took her aback a moment as it dawned on her that the top of her head did not even quite reach his shoulders. "You are taller than I grasped." She said, trying to ease them both. "Or, I am shorter."

"You are not a big woman, no." He replied, chuckling. "I might be considered some tall, but not so much. But, you are small, my Lady, yes. Yet, very powerful. Indeed."

"You are a bit incongruous looking, I must admit." Said a voice behind them causing them to startle as they turned to find the source. "But, the Power you create together is unmistakable. The Earth listens, the rocks themselves sing and the trees whisper. Nature Herself responds. And so do we."

The air itself shimmered as the couple looked to see three women watching them. Three women with variant shades of red hair, and eyes that glistened in forest hues. It looked almost like they wore raiment of leaf and branch, a striking patch of bloom upon the snow-covered ground. Though Rhiannon and Taliesin both wore the greens and gold of Bards interspersed upon the natural weave of their garments, they appeared rather drab next the gathered three. It was obvious these women were part and parcel of the woods themselves, perhaps not even easily seen had this been some other time of the year.

"I am Cordelia." Spoke one. "And we are your brethren. Or should I say, Sisters?" She smiled. It was difficult to tell whom from whom in this group, especially in that they stood so close together as if almost one. Only the variant shades of their hair truly distinguished them. "We wished to see you. Let you see us. And let you know you are not what the others are. Bards, yes. But, you are not part of 'their' realm. You are part of ours. Though we will not dissuade you or try to change your minds in you decision to be in this human reality. Either of you... Though others might."

"You will help us?" Asked Taliesin.

"Yes. Though we are not entirely certain just what that means." Spoke one with deep burnished hair of red and gold, like the heart of a flame. "This is 'my' Wood. My land. I am Daerwydd. The trees speak to me. And the Bards are welcome here." Rhiannon inclined her head in thanks to Daerwydd's pronouncement. It was verification to Rhiannon's decisions, pleasing her to know this. Yet, she could also feel some stirring from the man beside her.

"What are my fevers, then?" Blurted Taliesin hearing this declaration of welcome and help. "Why their intensity? How do I defeat them?"

Though this seemed some abrupt, it also did not truly surprise the three to hear him. "We admit that your struggle is far more than any who've crossed barriers before. And other than helping you with your initial crossing, your parents do not visit the

boundaries' edge." Responded Daerwydd rather concerned now that the question was asked.

"My parents?" Whispered Taliesin, surprised to feel a sense of desertion and hurt by this statement.

The three women looked some at each other; almost surprised at Taliesin's response and feeling deep concern. "Your parents, though kin, are some removed from us. But powerful. Sorcerers of our kind, their number is small. Perhaps it is time we spoke with them." Said the one who named herself Cordelia with a glint of sadness in her eyes. "Please realize that your parents had no ill intent. It was for love of you that they brought you to the human realm. For you are the one who asked to be part of this realm. The Realm of the Wheel."

"The weave is begun." Said Daerwydd, "The woods, the mountains, the Eldritch itself, welcomes, embraces and weaves their future with the Bardic who shall call this area home. Those who oversaw the Bardic Seat you have left continue to protect that Power. Yet, they cede to us here what they must so that we may offer our help."

"I am Gwyniffar." Spoke the one with hair of flame, brighter than the other two. "I am Lady of the Holy Isle, the Healer's Isle. I traverse far at this time for it is important that you know the Isle will always lend its support no matter where the Bards call home. And my dear brother, Lord Maerdydd. We will make it a priority to help you in your struggle."

Hearing the Elven woman address Taliesin as Maerdydd, Rhiannon frowned and looked up at him thoughtfully. Suddenly the sound of horns far away in the West caught all their ears and they all looked in the direction that it came from.

"We must leave now." Said Daerwydd. "Our own duties call and we have stayed near overlong as it is. Remember... we love you. We support you. And Rhiannon... the Ricon of Cymru awaits you."

"You know whom I am to choose?" Rhiannon asked, hoping to glean more, yet by the time the words left her mouth, the three women had faded from their view. For several moments Rhiannon and Taliesin stood looking at the space where the Elven Ladies had been. Then Rhiannon sighed, "So, they, too, call you Maerdydd."

This broke Taliesin's reverie where he had remained some distressed. Rhiannon could feel him relax a bit as he sighed as well. "I guess they do."

"I'll think about it." She responded as she drew him away that they might re-enter the mountains and return from their journey. There would be much to ponder this time and it would be important to get the countryside ready for the Winter on hand.

The Winter turned especially deep the year Rhiannon stayed within the countryside of Powys and Lord Sean's Greathouse. And though the snow created stillness upon the land, the human element continued a certain bustle of spirit and limb. Work continued in the caverns with hopes enough might be ready come Spring that some classes could be held within, some rituals and meditations. Perhaps even some small quarters for people to stay would be begun. Movement to and from the Greathouse and mountains remained fairly continuous despite weather and snow. It was a year wherein Taliesin gained a certain weather sense, able to give reasonably accurate forecasts several days in advance. He assumed it was a gift the Ladies must have bestowed, or perhaps the

forest itself. An advantage that helped all to proceed far more quickly and surely than it would have otherwise.

It was also time that Mali was given several young students to 'try'. From these she was asked that she choose one or two by Spring to be her new apprentices so that in time Dori might leave in an easy transition for her final studies and tests at the Holy Isle where the Healers went for their final training. At least for her Mentor. Technically, this created a rather crowded situation for the Healer's area as the students bedded on the floors of the Work area, though Mali and Dori maintained some privacy in their own room. At least the extra bodies kept the rooms warmer on the cold nights. And sometimes days as well. Mali wasn't really used to so many youngsters, being eight in all, and three not even being ten years yet. Dori being only in her early teens herself suddenly found herself in a sort of elder role as Mali expected her help in this new situation. Surprisingly, Dori also took to this role quite well fairly quickly, allowing her teacher some thankful breathing room.

Dori's puppy, Bali, grew rapidly, becoming a sort of mascot and sometimes glue for the Healer students in their tasks and lessons. Though he always slept next Dori at night, he was more than happy for the attention and play of the other young bodies and hearts around him. A surprisingly good dog for all his puppyhood, the reservations Mali had had concerning his presence at first soon melted as she observed his daily interactions. He was also welcome body heat in what was turning out to be a fairly cold and brutal Winter.

It wasn't an easy task to try to teach as well as judge these new charges. At least they had some basics and were not totally clueless or they might have been more in the way than any sort of help. There was enough sorting, powdering and preparation to do to give everyone fairly simple jobs throughout the Winter months. At least that. And Dori showed herself fairly good at instruction, which allowed Mali space for better observation at times.

She initially considered she would only choose one from this group, but something inside Mali told her it much wiser to decide on two. The speech Rhiannon had made at the first Bardic Council with Taliesin about looking for a Ricon may well be why. It hadn't been voiced, but because the Bardic Seat would now be in these mountains, Mali supposed the Ricon might well come to be centered here, too. Yet, since that formal Council Meeting, the Bards had become some secreted again, so it was difficult to know such plans for certain.

Perhaps one fair young and one nearer Dori's own age would make the most sense when it came time for Mali to actively choose. There was a boy about eleven years, maybe twelve; that Mali began to think might do well. He was strong, a bit strong minded, too, but plenty smart and did not argue when it truly mattered. He had the good, simple, but strong name of Drew and he had the burly look that some of the Picketish folk could be known for, along with his dark hair and eyes. It would be good to have such a charge, and as the time passed, Mali felt he was like to be one she'd settle on.

Not that all the students sent her weren't good choices. This, too, made Mali feel something more might be astir, though even the Head Healers in Rhiannon's Retinue were not necessarily privy to the Bardic Council's considerations. Nor did the Council tell the Healers what they might or might not do. Still, the main Healer was also a very strong empath and Mali knew every move the woman made was with keen, exacting

purpose. So, Mali had been sent the most fitting for the situation of Court and what was anticipated might be the best of their understanding. And it was up to Mali to make final decisions in the understanding that she had of her own situation and needs.

Yet, it wasn't until Imbolq was being prepared that Mali finally was given strong indication of choice. It was on one of these unusual occasions now when Taliesin might stop by the Healer's Workroom. In the past it was a place he often enjoyed at least peaking in at when he could. Especially when the herbal gardens were in bloom and he might entice Mali, or even Dori, to show him how the plants were doing. Like all Bards, Taliesin had a good, basic understanding of herbs, especially in a first aid sense. Yet, Taliesin did seem to have a real interest in the Art and when he and Mali found a bit of time, would let Mali explain things to whatever extent she might desire. Now Taliesin was so busy, Mali rarely even saw him but in glimpses as he seemed near surrounded by Council Members in private discourse. At least she had been able to inform him that his own baby daughter was like to be Healer Gifted and this had been a source of great joy for all. And Taliesin had made promise that Mali would have some actual say now in Jessee's rearing. An unexpected pleasure for Mali that she both basked in and yet recognized the responsibility this represented. She also fancied that this might make for new and important ties between Healers and Bards in the future.

It had snowed long in the night and had been very still, the next day revealing a sense of newness from the fresh layer as the sun decided to shine in crisp brightness. Some would surely melt, but the new blanket was heavy and the temperature low enough that that aspect would be little matter of it. For a time Mali had had to attend a colicky baby in the earliest hours, so had left Dori to start the students when they first got up. By the time Mali returned mid morning, she found, much to her astonishment, that Taliesin was also there midst them all. He was conversing and asking questions, and laughing some, too. It surprised Mali, too, because he was apparently alone, and she raised her brows when he turned to see she had entered the room.

Dori had obviously gotten them all to be sorting through dried herbs to grind or generally put away in labeled jars in some especial fashion. And Taliesin sat on the floor with them doing the same, obviously enjoying it. Seeing Mali come in he smiled, carefully replaced the herbs from his hands and got up to greet her. "I managed to sneak away." He said as everyone's attention now veered to Mali's standing form. "Don't tell anyone, alright? They'll be looking soon enough, believe me... Besides. I am surrounded by Healers. It's the best place I could possibly be hiding." He had come up to her to gently take her shoulders and kiss her cheek. Then he whispered in her ear, "Might we talk privately?"

At this, Mali nodded slightly and looked over at Dori. "All right, now. Everyone return to your tasks. I have some things I need to show my Lord here, but I'll be back momentarily." With that, Mali escorted Taliesin to her private room and softly closed the door after lighting a candle on a low table near the beds.

Being basically but the two low beds to sit on, each sat one as they settled down to speak. "It isn't anything of me." Taliesin smiled trying to immediately disarm any of Mali's concern. "I really did come here to sort of 'escape' for a few moments. I suspect Rhiannon knows where I've gone off to, but I hope she leaves it be for a little while. It is refreshing, indeed, to sit midst all the healing light."

“Yes. They are good students. All of them are. But, I will need to choose but one or two by Spring. I expect the rest may get fanned out, you know. There are Healers in some of the villages and towns who could really do with an apprentice themselves. They may well be here for a spell to get more acquainted with this area in some general communal sense. What might be expected of them, what the people themselves are like. And, of course, there will be the new Bardic Seat. To have some here for a spell will help in that, too, I expect.”

“Well. I will not tell you whom to choose. They’re all suited, really. However. There’s one I think you might notice. She has an interesting touch. And voice. Maybe it’s something a Bard would pick up quickest? But soothing. She’s very soothing. When she speaks. When she touches. Actually aligns my energy some. Not sure why that. She has ash colored hair. She’s a little spindly, really. And very young. ‘Course they all are.”

“Well. Youngest is Kaersten. Light hair with freckles. A bit tall for her age. Spindly? Maybe so... Perhaps it’s her?” With that, Mali got up and carefully opened the door so they might peer out to the other room without disturbing its occupants.

Able to look over Mali, Taliesin whispered to her as they observed, “The girl sits next Dori now. See. Her hands slightly glow as she works. She puts something into the herbs of herself. It’s unconscious, but I can see it. I can feel it.”

“Yes. Kaersten.” Mali remarked as they drew away again to shut the door once more. “Umm. Well, good. I made a first choice. Now I’ve my two. That settles that. And I thank you.”

“Well. I really wasn’t finished ‘hiding’ from Bardic Council, you know. Might I have your permission to return to that?”

Laughing a bit, Mali opened the door so that they both might return into the Workroom. “But, of course, Sir Bard. We could always do with an extra pair of hands.” With that, Taliesin sat back down amidst the students, Mali noting him sitting next to the girl he had pointed out to her. Perhaps to make certain Mali knew exactly of whom he was speaking. And she did. And he was right. Now she could just see the subtle glow he spoke of. Something a Bard would see much easier than others and she internally thanked him once again for pointing it out. It was a good feeling to know, to be certain. The Spring would come easily now for Mali and she looked forward to being able to be more concentrated and focused in her work.