

## **Talibah – The Egyptian**

### **Chapter 14**

#### ***Promise Made***

It had been a cold, brittle day with a wind so fierce it could contend with the howling of a whole company of wolves in the mountains calling in an endless night. And it had been a hard, arduous ride into those mountains, the mountains that stood like a great and giant protector watching over Gwydion's Greathouse, over the countryside and over all Cymru. Snow had fallen the night before creating deep drifts and Jenna, with a small party of Bard and Runners and a warrior or two from Gwydion's Court, navigated with care as they picked their way through. Taliesin had had to spend some time at the Council Seat of Wynseren in especial dialogue and preparation with his Council as Gwydion made battle plans that the Bardic Council would need respond to and discuss. Being that Jenna had remained at Gwydion's Court, for though one of Taliesin's Advisor's she was also the Senior Chief Bard at Gwydion's, Taliesin at length asked Jenna to head on out to Wynseren when she had a firm grasp of Gwydion's plans and could report such to the Council.

Being both one of Taliesin's Advisors and the Senior Chief Bard of a Court wherein she oversaw three other Court Bards, Jenna had found it all rather daunting in her first days as such. For one who had envisioned her life to be that of wandering and some adventure in the greater countryside of Cymru with responsibility only to herself and any immediate Runners, Jenna sometimes found herself in some angst from time to time. Yet, having Taliesin and Dylan's help and companionship made the whole of the situation less stressful, if not less complicated. In that Dylan had been made one of the Chief Bards she was Senior to, Jenna could at least look to him for her greatest support at Court and he duly did so. And Taliesin was always encouraging and helpful even though his own responsibilities were densely complex. And even with Wynseren but a day's ride away, it was never easy when Taliesin had to be there for any length of time. He remained at Gwydion's as much as possible, meeting as he could with Council Members, even leaving certain stratagems and decisions to his Chief Advisor, Gwen; but not everything could be resolved or seen to in such manner.

If it had not been so windy and rather brutally cold that day, Jenna would have rather enjoyed the ride into the mountains. It was so seldom now that she ventured much further than the outlying villages around the Greathouse. So much to do, to attend, no less her own children and various students under her care. Yet just thinking on the children always caused Jenna to smile with warmth and happiness. Of anything, they and Taliesin made her busy life worth whatever challenge she might face. A caretaker, gentle and loving enough, helped to see to the children, although Dylan always watched out after them as much if not more so. He acted as if he was almost a third parent to them and perhaps he was. His sense of such things was almost surprisingly keen and Jenna sometimes found herself almost counting on it. Of course, no matter, Jenna worried some, she never liked to be away from the children very long, but she at least knew they were in the best of care.

And those said children were growing, too. Soon they'd be in full training, ever removing themselves from their parents' immediate circle and hold. In fact, Jesse, the

elder of the two, now did train with the Chief Healer at Court and there was some talk of sending her to the Holy Isle for full Initiation in a couple years or so. It mattered not that such a day was removed yet, it still made Jenna's heart skip every time she even thought about it as the Holy Isle was off the Northern Coast in Gwynedd and as far West as any place in Cymru. She knew it bestirred Taliesin greatly, too, and though Jesse was not Jenna's own child by blood, she surely was by spirit, and such distance between them would make for difficult partings on all sides. Hopefully Lleu would not be as much such a parting. He was now studying with the Sacred Musicians at Court, showing wonderful talent and ability. But at least he was far more like to stay in the area for much time to come, perhaps to even study at Wynseren before he found a troupe or court to become attached to. Perhaps he might even find a place at Gwydion's Court, it would certainly please both his parents and Jenna clutched at some hope of that.

As the day closed into afternoon, Taliesin grew restless at the Bardic Seat, for as he stood at the entrance to the latticework of caverns he could see the drifting snow and feel the updraft of wind with its icy cast. Certainly he had great confidence in the abilities of his lady and her attendants, yet he also sensed the weather might well turn for the worse and he knew that what should be a normal day's ride may be fraught with cumbersome delay. At least he knew there were good and sturdy places to shelter along the way should there be a need. But, as usual, he was impatient to be with his love for it had been near a week now since they'd been together. Of course, there had been times in the past when months had separated them. But, those had been dark and evil times that Taliesin preferred to push to the very back edges of his memories. Dark times, dark times that had changed him forever both good and bad and though it could sometimes cloud his normally amiable disposition, he did his best to mitigate such things.

For several moments he stood watching the drifting snow and noting the clouds as they seemed to race by in some unspoken hurry as if on an urgent mission they could not divulge. After a time he closed his eyes as he reached out seeking. Seeking out Jenna's energy and what he might be able to deem from it. For whatever reason, the wind itself kept Taliesin from being able to perceive even a trace of her energy or of any around her for a good while. Yet, in time, he did touch upon her awareness and it brought a smile to his lips. It pleased him greatly for he also knew he might continue especial preparations he intended for her that night.

Feeling the gentle pressure of a hand on his arm, Taliesin opened his eyes once more to turn and see his Chief Advisor standing next to him. Her nearly white, blond hair always surprised him a little, being so rare in Cymric peoples, and her gray eyes betokened her bloodline to be far more Northerly than most. In that, she reminded him some of Pwyll, once Rhiannon's Chief Advisor and still one his own Advisors. Perhaps it ought not be of much surprise that Taliesin was aware of their fondness for each other. If not lovers yet, Taliesin had come to assume that they would be however that they might display some shyness and slowness in such matters. Pwyll especially tended to show some concern that he never be taking advantage of others and Taliesin suspected that that somehow had to do with Rhiannon, though Pwyll had never relayed much of their particular relationship.

"Father?" Spoke Gwen softly as Taliesin opened his eyes to her. Seeing a smile on his face, she returned his gaze quizzically.

“They’re fine. Jenna and the others.” He said to answer her, evoking a reaction of relief in her. “They are like to be here by the edge of evening, I think. It’s slow. But they make good progress despite it.” He smiled wider. “But. They will be cold. And will want a good hot meal and warm bed.”

“I’ll make sure of it.” Replied Gwen pleasantly.

Something in Gwen’s voice made Taliesin pause a moment and cause him to cock his head and frown slightly. Yet, before she could react to this gesture he recovered himself to say, “Yet, I would some real private time with Jenna this evening, tonight. No disturbance.” And at this he raised his brows slightly. “Of any kind.”

“Yes. Of course, Father.” She responded, rather too quickly.

“I do mean it, my friend. I hope for some personal ritual work, if she permits. And it’s really rather important if she agrees to it that we have no disruption whatever. Energy could be upset in some very negative ways.” With that he looked at her closely to be certain what he said was registering with her and caught some curious strains of fluctuating feelings he was uncertain how to react to.

“Are you all right, Maerdyinn?” Gwen said, suddenly concerned by an almost defocused glaze that passed through his eyes and getting a sense that resembled a singed twinge pass through her.

“Yes, yes.” He responded, coming back almost immediately so that Gwen was even a little unsure anything had really taken place. “I’m all right. I promise.” He said, looking into her eyes both seriously and understandingly. “Nothing to be concerned over. A feeling. A flash.” Shrugging, he shook his head some. “Not sure, really. But, not serious. A premonition, I think.” He shrugged again, almost apologetic, then placed his hand on her shoulder. “Besides. The fevers are long ago. And very much over. You ‘know’ that. But, I know that’s what went on through your mind, eh?” Kissing the top of her head, he put his arm about her and roundly hugged. “And you did hear me before, uh? No disturbances. No interruptions. Of any kind. It is important you understand that and make sure it is adhered to by all. I’m counting on you, Gwen.”

“Yes, Father.” She said slowly and deliberately so that he both heard and knew she was totally attentive to his wishes. “I ‘do’ understand, Maerdyinn. We would not disturb you in any case when you ask for private time with your wife. You know that, too, my friend.”

“Surely. But I just want it understood. The gravity of this privacy. Until one or both of us quits our chambers.” He hugged Gwen tighter and sighed as she shook her head ‘yes’. “Ah, I’m overstating myself. As if I am dealing with Runners. I’m sorry, dear friend... Sometimes I see everyone so young. So young.”

He turned and left back into the caverns as the winds blew a strong gust across the trees. Gwen shook her head a bit again and smiled. “I’m sure you do, Father.”

When the small party did arrive at last at the first twinkling of the evening stars and everyone was able to move into a state of relief and then enjoyment, Taliesin rather quickly saw to Jenna by whisking her away into the Head of Council’s personal chambers. These chambers were quite large in comparison to any others, but they were also used in meetings with other Council Members at times as much as personal space for its Head. Several rooms were connected to each other with even a small kitchen area and a bath with a tub carved from stone found within. Taking Jenna into the bedroom of rugs and pillows and its fireplace alit, Taliesin was pleased to see that food had been set down

for them as much as the fire having been well attended. "I am hopeful a bath full of hot water has been done up for you as well. Sit a moment and I shall have a look." Before he could move off to do that, Jenna grabbed him that he might turn around and regard her. "What?" He said, a bit startled by her gesture and sudden movement.

"Goodness, Love. You rush. And it's been a week." She hugged him warmly and closely as he returned the same. "It was a rough ride, you know. I am glad to be safe. In your arms."

"Umm. I know." He returned, then kissed her with affection before releasing her some. "But, I want to see to your comfort as well." He peered into the little room that contained the tub of stone with a lip in the floor's entrance so that water would not escape into other areas when someone splashed. Seeing steam rising he smiled. "Your bath is ready, my lady." Well-placed air holes kept ventilation fresh and clear as the steam rose to follow such escapes. Candles were lit in several nooks and though they provided enough light along with the fireplace, also managed to lend a rather mystical air to all via their particular placements.

For a moment Jenna looked up at him and saw that his eyes were almost avoiding hers. Then she noted his hands to realize they had a slight tremor that made her frown before looking back up to him. "You're nervous... Why?"

"Nervous?" He snapped back from his thoughts with a quick intake of breath. "Me?" With that he drew across a great smile as he pulled at her clothes. "You must be chilled. And the water will not stay hot long."

"All right." She relented and allowed him to continue his self-appointed task. Climbing into the deliciousness of the heated water, Jenna looked at her mate playfully. "And you will not join me? The temperature is perfect. Divine."

For a moment the look reflecting in his eyes told her that he considered it, then he shook his head almost distractedly. "No. Not now... Lie back. Relax." As she did as he requested, he took some cloths near the tub that he might fill with the water and sluice some about her. From that she relaxed and sighed, closing her eyes as he ran water over her face and neck. He sat on a small wooden stool at the side of the tub where he might easily incline to her, enjoying the filter of pleasure as it emanated from her.

Yet again Jenna detected a trembling in his fingertips causing her to reach up to his hand and stop his ministrations. "My Goddess, what is it? You are so rarely unnerved, my Love." Her brown eyes opened up to his blue to see emotions cast through them she didn't comprehend.

"I..." He ventured, then gave a slight nervous laugh as he tried to lighten his reaction. "Am not doing this as well as I hoped."

"Is something wrong? Are you displeased with me?" She spoke worriedly.

"Oh, Jenna, no. Not at all." He replied, a bit surprised she'd even relate that sort of thing. "No, no, never... I just... Need to ask you something. And hope. Hope you'll say 'yes.'" The sigh that he emitted was so long and strong it bespoke the severity of his thoughts and feelings far more than any words might.

"You may ask me anything, my own. Anything." Jenna said sympathetically as she sat up some in the tub and took his hands in her own. Steam rose between them as the warm wetness of her hands calmed the tremors of his own.

Taliesin sighed a bit again. "I would like us to do a ritual. I desire it with all my heart... But... You must understand it. Accept it. Agree to it."

They regarded each other a long while in silence as steam enveloped them and the soft sound of water dripping echoed in the small chamber room. “What kind of ritual? You are so serious.” She said almost fearfully.

Looking off, Taliesin withdrew his hands to sit back on the stool. “In the Bonding Ritual... Between the Head and their Chosen I recognized certain elements. Eldritch elements.” He swallowed a bit, then looked back at Jenna to smile tentatively, almost shyly. “I know that that ritual is not something I might discuss normally. It is a private thing. But, so is this.” Here he reached out and stroked Jenna’s cheek. “The ritual slowly caused memories in me. Of who I was. What I had been. What I had once been part of and partook of... In the Bonding the Eldritch part is meant to seal one’s soul. To make your very being, your energy, part of the Bardic lineage. Forever... And so it is. The power of the Bards, the knowledge, the strength; access to that resides in my being, my very soul, and may be tapped. It is the Eldritch part of the ritual that makes it so. Makes it possible. Makes it real. And makes the Head of Council who and what they are. To a degree you know this as all my Advisors do. But now you know why... It is Elven magick.” With that information he settled back a bit, watching her face, seeing puzzlement and wonder gathering there. “It is powerful. Very powerful.” He whispered so softly Jenna wasn’t truly certain she had heard.

“But... What has that to do with us, then?”

Taliesin reached over to kiss her on the forehead. “An Eldritch ritual. It’s the ritual I remembered.” He drew in another slow breath. “A ritual between lovers. A ritual rarely done in the Eldritch because of its power. Because of what it may well do. In time... Here. In this realm people Handfast. They declare themselves part of each other. And in time their energy does mingle - if they remain together. They do become a part of each other. Yet, they are separate, too... This is different. This ritual... this ritual will make us part of each other. Our energies, our beings, our souls. Forever. And if we were both Eldritch... Someday we would become one being, one entity. No longer separate. In Eldritch legend it is believed that there have been those who’ve done such ritual with several others and the Gods were born of such activity. I don’t know... I know you are not Eldritch. I don’t believe you’re human, either, but... I don’t know if...”

“We would become one being in time?” She ventured, sitting up in the bath. “But our souls would be joined?”

“Oh, yes. That I am sure of. It has been done by others before. By Elf and human. And others. There are just no records, no understanding beyond such. But it is possible.”

“And you desire this? That in time...”

“We might be one soul, one being. Yes. With my whole heart. My whole soul. I have thought long and long on this, my Love. And... I am being terribly unfair. I just ask it of you.” He said, reproaching himself. “If you need time to consider. I do understand. It is not a light request. But I have never known the love we share. Never. And I would keep it. Forever.”

“You are Head of Council. I am not...”

“Doesn’t matter. Not to me. Yes, you will become part of that, too. Not the Chosen, but part of it.” He shrugged almost nonchalantly. “You, too, have great power. You would but grace the Bard’s lineage. I know.”

“Your memory. Is long. And you say you’ve never known love like ours?” she hazarded, surprised by the declaration.

“Never. I vow it. And yes, I remember much. Even of prior lives in the Eldritch. Not everything, but of love. Yes. That I am certain of... And incarnations can separate people long and long. I would not have that. I would guarantee our connection. To always find you. And as an Elf, I’d be able to easily.”

“You ask much.” She agreed, seeking to touch his fingers that were now toying with the tub’s rim. He felt the delicateness of her hands upon his, causing him to look again into her eyes. Seeing this she leaned back into the tub allowing her body to relax within the water as she closed her eyes fully to reflect on his words. The warm water clung her as she lay and the drops freckled whatever was exposed. Her hair was so dark upon her light and creamy shades of skin and the desire to touch it was hard for Taliesin to withhold; yet he did. “You have told me.” She began carefully, her eyes remaining closed. “That you ingested a darkness. You swallowed the essence of your brother and that you and he are now one. One person.”

It was a fair question. Only she and certain Healers knew anything of especial transformations that had taken place with him. The Council Itself only knew that the fevers no longer haunted him, that particular abilities had grown strong in him and that his Elven nature now ran firm and true. To his Advisors he was human no longer and though no one feared such facts nor treated him with any strangeness, there was a mental shift in them in such recognition.

“Yet, I am not my brother.” He whispered. Then shook himself a little as he sighed. “It is not easy to explain... Something happened long ago. A part of me was severed. By Eldritch envy, jealousy and hatred. Elves can be very dark. Angry and spiteful. And some of them can do things not well understood in the Realm of the Wheel. It has taken me long to remember this, too. It was my shadow they took and fashioned. In hopes it would destroy me. Destroy my family. But it ran afoul of them and escaped them. Escaped them into this Realm. The human Realm. So, you see, it was never truly separate of me. My brother was me. And so now it is again my shadow and though it is something I may seek to understand in myself, it is part of me and always was... Do you understand?”

“Not entirely.” She said honestly. “But, it is not the same, then?”

“No. Not at all. I am me. As I was, as I shall be. And we all have our darkness. Only now I am far more aware of it than others. Even other Elves... Actually, it is some advantage to me to be so. For the dark in us is not truly a bad thing. It depends on our use of it. How we handle it. Darkness does not equate as evil. As Bards we know this. And as a Bard I might utilize it.” With this Taliesin became silent for a while allowing Jenna some space as he gazed upon her in fondness. Finally he took up the cloths again to run water on top of her as he leaned over to deliberately and delicately kiss her eyelids in quiet tenderness before kissing her mouth. For a moment she hesitated the kiss, then drew him to her in some passion.

Pulling back, Jenna breathed, “I do love you. All of you. You have walked between Worlds to save Cymru. And faced your own darkness to do so. Yes. I would be part of you. Truly part. And if in time our beings conjoin to form but one creature, I am awed and amazed. It is still a wonder to me. That your choice should lie with me. But, I do not refuse it, nor hide from it. May we become one being someday. Forever.”

The happiness that flowed through Taliesin was keen and sharp as tears glinted his eyes. “Ah, my own. My Jenna.” He emitted softly as they continued to kiss and hug as water splashed about them, Taliesin unmindful that his clothes were getting soaked.

It was here that the dream of memory fell apart and Taliesin awoke in the halls of Wynseren, in a chamber outside the Head of Council where Gwen and Pwyll had now come to occupy. Great tears lined his face in the darkness as he remembered where he now was, when he was. The lost time, the finding of Talibah, the return to the Council Seat. “How can we have performed that ritual, my Love, and yet I can not find you? Jenna. You are part of me. Truly. I feel it, I know it. Yet. I reach for you and I cannot find you. Why? Gods, why? I just don’t understand.” He moaned as he sat up in the darkness. “Please, my Gods, help me. It is ‘so’ important. Then it was for love. Now it is for the survival of Cymru. How ‘could’ this have happened?” Knowing how distraught his energy had become, and that those waves could likely leech out and disturb others if he did not find some control despite efforts of Council and Healers to maintain balance and protection, he did as he could to calm himself, but it was to no avail. After several moments of struggle with his emotions and fearing he would not be able to control even minimally for very long as tears continued to streak down his cheeks, he was not surprised to hear a gentle knock on the door to his rooms. He did his best to say, “Come in.” And though he knew it could only have been but a whisper, the door was opened to a Healer and old friend.

Softly closing the door behind her and setting a taper on a low table by the door for a little light in the near total darkness of the room, she made haste to Taliesin’s beside. “Maerdynn.” She spoke with familiarity, her Healer’s energies seeking to enwrap him before her presence could. Sitting on the bed she took his hands and looked on his tear stained face whispering, “Can you lie back? What is wrong, friend?”

“Kaersten.” He gulped, some surprised “You are here? I’d not seen you before.” His breathing was halting as he tried to give a bit of a smile to her through his emotional mist.

Smiling some back, Kaersten felt his forehead. “Um, you’re quite warm. You’ve a touch of fever, Father. Would you have me send for some music?”

Knowing her energy was calming him, feeling a balm enwrapping him and lulling him, Taliesin lay back into his bedding some soothed. “Music.” He said in a languorous, nearly drugged sounding voice. “Yes... Bardic music. But return. Do not leave me awhile. This lack of temperance in me, so suddenly, distresses me.” With that he closed his eyes, allowing the healing to penetrate his aura deeply into his being. After several moments Kaersten knew it would be safe enough to leave him as she fetched a Bard for the type of healing she knew would be far more reaching for the types of ill she realized her friend suffered.

As Taliesin was finally able to allow his spirit to be mitigated by both Kaersten and the lilting tones of one of the more talented healer Bards, he knew he would be able to face his questions more clearly. Not since Jenna’s death and her soul’s subsequent and seemly total disappearance had Taliesin felt the full brunt of his tortured emotions for what he assumed would be impossible. The enormity, the importance of Jenna’s very being had caused a near insanity in Taliesin’s bereft state and he could feel the creeping of such trying to invade him again as he contemplated the numbing enigma. ‘But this

time I will let others take their place and support me. Yes.’ He thought, satisfied that he felt the stabilization the healing sought to provide.

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Having broached the countryside in the early morning where a small village just inside the borders between Briton and Cymru lay, Oswald was amazed to see a mist begin to gather and grow strong. The near total darkness of a moonless night had allowed his men to pass around any sentry Cymru had devised to reach this place and Oswald understood that this morning mist was part of the help promised him. Still, something about it caused the hairs on his arms and head to rise as he watched and his company advanced. There were those of his men who were skeptical of his current decision and move to overtake anything across the borders, yet also realized it unwise to ever counter their lord. He had great determination, no matter their own doubts or fears, and did not suffer their misgivings at any time. And those he kept closest to him served him well in maintaining his command. Yet even he could admit an eeriness to what he watched before them, for the mist seemed to gather not only with purpose, but with a sense of malignancy as much as determination.

It seemed as if barely a soul had roused before the mist had crept in everywhere, a sickly sort of green and yellow at its edges. As it rose above the thatching of the small stone and wattle homes, Oswald felt he saw figures formed in this mist, beings more feral than that of humans, though they appeared to walk some as men might. Red eyes gleamed here and there as Oswald also felt he caught the glint of near canine teeth in angry mouths. Suddenly people did begin to run from their homes; though some obviously about to go about the chores of the day; yet others still in night clothes in a fearful and dazed startlement that had awoken them. Children ran as well, but more than a few men and women had had enough presence to gather swords and knives to their sides to face whatever threat had so invaded them.

It was to these that Oswald gave his men the charge so that battle might be engaged in truth. And though some fear gripped their hearts, they feared their lord more so that they quickly obeyed. The medallion on Oswald’s chest began to glow then, sending a feeling of warmth and pleasure through him that surprised yet pleased him. As the first of the villagers was slaughtered by the confusion wrought by the mist, Oswald noted that nothing of that mist directly killed. It was when someone fell that strange creatures within began to feed, drawing upon death and blood like savage beasts, rabid with lust. What they did appear to do was to drive the villagers out and toward the warriors of Oswald, eliciting panic and bewilderment in them so that they were more amenable to the kill. It was all Oswald could have possibly hoped for and it made him smile in wolfish glee.

Yet as the village seemed nearly spent in slaughter and blood, Oswald observed a young woman in yellows and greens with enough presence to run to a horse without regard to the misted creatures or warriors who advanced. Even the horse she approached seemed nonplussed by the event as much of the animals ran and scattered from the sense of terror all about them, and the woman jumped upon it to ride out and away from the scene. “A Bard!” Oswald cried. But before he could command someone to chase after her, a voice came into him. ‘Do not pursue after her. She will alert the Greathouse of the

area, yes. But this is good. By nightfall troupes shall come. And the feast shall continue. You shall lie in wait. The mist shall overcome them and then the feasting will renew. Only after they, too, are all dead, all consumed, will you ride back into Briton and wait. And let fear spread. The Bard did not see your banners, I made certain of that. They were hidden by haze, you were hidden by haze and the medallion. She does not know where this force strikes from, whether even man or something other. And the terror will soften them. Cripple them. You will see.'

From this Oswald held his tongue as he watched the horse and rider make their way beyond them into the hills towards the Greathouse well beyond. The village was a goodly ways from the rest, it was likely what the voice said was true; it would be nightfall before any force had been gathered and could return. One of his men looked at him in wonder that he had let the Bard continue her escape. "My Lord." He said, "Should we not pursue her?"

"No. Let her report. Let help come. We are waiting. This is a good day. Our God wins today." Oswald smiled at his warrior almost ruefully.

And when evening came, the mist gathered again, masking Oswald's force, allowing them the upper hand as the Lord of the Cymric Greathouse and his men were also slaughtered by fear and confusion as much as Oswald's power and command. And this time, even the Bard sent in observance did not survive.

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Sitting with Modlen, Dylan's Second, in a room with walls of mortar and stone used for Bardic practice of more private or ritual nature, Rhys watched some of the Players work through the finer points of a play meant for the more ritual and healing aspects for the Fall Season. A couple of the Players were fairly new, but very gifted, as Rhys regarded their particular work with keenness. Modlen had actually written a bit of the work they considered that morning, even ascribing certain gestures and tones. She was a good Bard with subtle insight who generally maintained a calm demeanor no matter what might take place about her. There was a softness to her, an almost faded appearance; her hair a light brown about a pleasant oval face and gray eyes, a body almost too slender so that she seemed ethereal to many. And quiet most of the time, though her voice was more than beautiful, containing a curious lilting power that impressed. Dylan liked her, liked her quiet strength and resolve, and counted on her with sureness when needed. Rhys liked to tease that she had no humor when in truth it was more her soft-spoken essence he inferred. She puzzled him some; she had a way of moving that was more like floating than anyone he'd ever seen. Sometimes she could be enticed to dance in one of the plays here and there and it always lent a real sparkle to the overall performance.

Being that Rhys lived with Dylan and Cerirhosyn in Dylan's appointed apartments as a Chief Bard, Modlen had been given Rhys' couple rooms as befit his status of Lead Player. It was a comfortable arrangement. Modlen enjoyed the real privacy it afforded her and let her be close on hand to the Players in general, which she assuredly enjoyed. Though she was a fine Second to a Chief Bard in the true sense, it was obvious she would have made an excellent Player had not her abilities been so apparent. Dylan had been more than pleased to receive her a couple years before when his then current

Second finally became Chief Bard status himself and therefore moved on to another Court that needed him. Having gotten on well enough with his previous Second; still, Modlen's real love of the work the Players did from her non-Player position was only exceeded by Dylan himself and it meant for many pleasant hours as they went about their tasks. She and Dylan had become fast friends even if Rhys found the woman a bit puzzling at times.

Inflection, gesture and stance were as important to Rhys as much as tone in these especial types of performance, so that they were going over each aspect fairly slowly and reflectively. This hardly bothered Modlen, she took pleasure in the studied pace; yet, it was also obvious a couple of the younger members were a bit restless as the time moved on. The newest showed more curiosity, maintaining great pride that they had recently been asked to be part of the Court of the Ricon.

At one point Rhys went over to both explain and demonstrate what he wanted done, and as he was doing so, he felt more than saw a couple new people quietly enter the room. Initially Rhys looked up, a flash of anger lighting his own dark gray eyes for the Court in general knew that the area was off limits to any but Bardic folk. Yet he was startled when he recognized it to be the Lady Arionrhod in her veiled stance, her student Madrod at her side. "I do not mean you discourtesy." Arionrhod said seeing that Rhys was not especially pleased at the presence despite her Priestess status. "My student, Madrod, was curious and drawn to this room. Of course, we have Bards at our own home, but nothing so varied and intricate as here. And he, too, has a lovely voice, though he does not use it in performance. Only for our Healers and their work. Yet, I thought perhaps you might well like to hear him."

Taken aback by her manner, Rhys looked at the youth at her side. Boyish and gangly still, he also seemed to have something peculiarly familiar about him that Rhys couldn't quite place and it almost disturbed him. The eyes were especially impressive, brown and intense, causing Rhys to feel some discomfort. "Well." Spoke Rhys, a measured cast to his voice. "I suppose a break is due. We are not accustomed to outside presence in this chamber. However, we will make an exception in this case. As long as Modlen does not object and agrees to it." Rhys looked over at Modlen to give a pensive smile. She smiled back and nodded, pleased that Rhys had given her a Chief Bard's due in respect for Dylan's absence. "All right, then." Said Rhys after Modlen had given assent. "Would you have someone play a harp to accompany you?"

A bit embarrassed now that the attention was turned on him, Madrod flushed some, shaking his head 'no' as he as he walked up to Rhys who was indicating for him to do so. Though still some disquieted by this unexpected intrusion, Rhys gave the youngster a warm smile, offering him a stool if wished. Instead, Madrod chose to stand as the Players moved away to be by Dylan's Second, Rhys noting that Arionrhod remained as she was.

Arionrhod cut a mysterious figure in forest colors of russet and green with a veil that showed nothing but her striking green eyes and Rhys could only assume she had chosen the veil today because she had already intended to enter the area she now stood in. It was effectively a statement that she had come as a visiting spiritual leader and expected to be treated as such. Being that it was as discourteous to ever do much more than glance at this Priestess, Rhys had regarded her as quickly as he could, frowning in his thoughts about her. He just wasn't certain if he liked her much at all, though he realized the Bards

in general viewed her with great respect and honor. He understood from what Dylan intimated that she had even once been the lover of Rhiannon before Rhiannon's untimely death and that Taliesin himself showed great deference to her, or at least Dylan had said as much.

Recalling such discussion of her with Dylan when she had first arrived with her two students in this 'visit' with her brother made Rhys think on Dylan again as he so often did in his mate's absence. For an unnumbered account he thought perhaps he had made a mistake in not accompanying Dylan to Wynseren. Of course, he truly did have a lot to do at Court, it had been no idle remark about his workload and responsibilities; yet, he, too, had those that could have filled in for him for a short interim. He had felt it best for Dylan to face Taliesin's renewed appearance on his own no matter the consequence Rhys himself half feared could take place, yet now Rhys also felt himself to have shown some cowardice in the decision as well. Perhaps he might just change his mind after all, pack his bags and set out for Wynseren. The apartment rooms were getting terribly lonely so quickly and there were always Runners going to and from Wynseren every day that might accompany him.

Having gotten some lost in his reverie, Rhys was startled by the tonal qualities of the voice that had begun to sing. It was a simple song, probably a Healer's tune from its phraseology and notation, though it was as likely something more of Arionrhod's particular system. And yet, perhaps being so near the Holy Isle had influenced its creation. However, the voice that seemed to nearly play with the notes and tones had incredible quality with a certain rareness that made Rhys' insides gently quiver. His eyes looked up to see the face that framed the voice and was moved by the warmth that radiated rather sun-like in rays everywhere. Again Rhys felt reminded of something as if he had heard this voice before as he also became aware this child was a Bard. Not probably, not likely, but was. He needed no Council of its Members to say so, there just was no mistaking it, the quality was so keen. Modlen glanced at Rhys and he could tell she was thinking the same.

When the boy was finished silence pervaded the area as all eyes looked at Madrod in studied wonder. Then Rhys initiated clapping and sounds of appreciation when he realized the youth did not understand the response he'd just been given. As everyone followed Rhys' lead, he got up and came over to Arionrhod to quietly address her as the rest went over to Madrod to engage him in delighted conversation. "Who's child is this, my Lady? And why did you bring him here?"

Arionrhod's eyes darted from him a moment to quickly regard Madrod before choosing to speak. "He is the son of a village couple near my House. His parents died when he was barely a year old. I saw promise in him. So I chose to raise him and to be a Priest to my Gods."

"He's a Bard." Said Rhys flatly. "And a powerful one."

As the rest of the Players had gone up to Madrod to ask him questions and get to know him in general, Rhys and Arionrhod continued to converse. "Perhaps. But he is also my student and shall make a wonderful Priest of my People some day." Here Arionrhod fully gazed over at Madrod, a softness filtering through her eyes that Rhys noted, recognizing that she was obviously fond of her charge. Modlen had also finally chosen to come up to them by this time, curious about the exchange and not surprised that Rhys was giving Arionrhod some challenge.

“So. You would deny this young man his birthright?” Rhys continued lowly, a thin veneer of heat in his tones as he narrowed his eyes.

“I think he deserves a choice.” She said firmly. “You have no idea how gifted he is. His abilities. What he means to my People. My ways.”

“Then I ask again, my Lady. ‘Why’ did you bring him here? And let him sing?” Seeing the frustration in Rhys’ demeanor, Modlen gently touched his sleeve knowing he was nearing an inability to continue control, training or no. Feeling her contact Rhys almost immediately calmed some. It was something Bards could at times do for each other and Rhys was deeply grateful Modlen could and had.

“Perhaps...” Arionrhod returned as her eyes looked back into his with firmness. “I wished to know for certain. I felt it time to know. And now I do. Sir Bard... I will not forget. But, he will continue his training with me. Yet, if he desires congress with Bardic folk, I shall not deny that, either. He needs friends. He is far from home. My other student seems content to be with me and the Wise Women and Men of the area. But, Madrod needs other venues and I realize that, too... I am not cruel, sir.” With this Arionrhod looked over at Madrod again noting that he was smiling and talking amiably with the others, quite oblivious of Arionrhod’s exchange with Rhys. “But Madrod has many gifts. More than I am honestly open to discuss. The only thing I do ask of you is that at this time you do not be saying anything of this to Wynseren. I promise I will discuss the matter. And I do believe your Council will leave it in my hands... Can you do this for me? For Madrod?” Arionrhod looked into Rhys’ eyes and this time there was a softness in hers, giving Rhys the impression that she was smiling in some plea for openness. “I promise... You ‘do’ believe me. I am a Priestess. And I give my word to you. Priestess to Priest.”

“All right.” Sighed Rhys. “I am not a Council Member and have no right to actually declare his Bardic status. And I will make certain none of the Players present or Modlen, if she will, will report. However, I cannot vouchsafe what will happen should someone else hear him as we did today. And I am surprised, in all honesty. Has no Bardic heard him before?”

“Umm. I’ve been careful. Yes. And he has had naught else but Wise Women, Men, Healers and others of mine own Tradition much around him when he sings. I did not wish to know before. I did not wish to find it in him. I wanted him trained. With me. Though I have suspected it for some time. Yet now. Now I feel it time to know. I needed to know. And as I have said, he has many gifts. But be assured, I intend to go to Wynseren myself soon. There are things I must discuss with your Council, at any rate. Even with Taliesin himself. Now that he has returned.”

Rhys raised his brows some for Arionrhod’s declarations seemed some contradictory and confusing. Yet before he could venture more, Madrod had left his new companions to come over to them. “Teacher.” He said happily. “They have asked me if I would be in a play with them! Do you think I may?”

“We’ll see... A small part. Perhaps.” She crinkled her eyes in an evident smile showing real fondness for her student whom Rhys now realized she obviously also saw as her son. “But we must go now. There are rituals that must be attended. Later, perchance.” With that, Arionrhod turned and left expecting Madrod to do the same, which he did, waving goodbye to his new companions before they left.

When they were gone, Modlen looked at Rhys as she frowned in some bewilderment. “So, what was that, do you suppose?”

“I am not sure.” Replied Rhys, rubbing his chin in consideration. “Though for now I’d leave it. I think we ought give Arionrhod the chance to do as she promises. And let the boy join us however much she is willing to allow us. She is right, you know. He does have the right to choose his path. However, he also has the right to know just what his choices are. And that is all I will ask her. And will hold her to.” After seeing Modlen nod in agreement, Rhys shrugged as he looked back over to the rest who clearly were dissembling at that point. “And I think that’s about it for the day, I guess.” He said loud enough so that the others could hear, shaking his head in dismissal as the Players began to break up nearly the moment he indicated that they might do so. “However, I expect everyone back here tomorrow. And ready to work. And... Listen to me, all. You are not at liberty to discuss our guest singer to others as of yet. Is that understood?” Though the sternness he meant to place in his voice fell a bit short of his intention, he was gratified that he heard assents to his instructions all round. Watching the others leave, his mind wandered back to Madrod and Arionrhod with renewed questing concerning the peculiar interlude the two had presented him.

“Let it rest.” Spoke Modlen so close to his ear he nearly jumped. “Besides. I think you ought reconsider going on to Wynseren yourself. Don’t you think?” She said as she left the space as well for other duties of her own. In a moment Rhys was by himself in the room and soon an empty quiet would pervade it as much as the empty quiet that would face him when he went back to the apartments he shared with Dylan and Cerirhosyn, causing him to fully realize how right Modlen’s parting words really were.