

Heart of the Flame

By Donna Lyon Rhose

For a long while Dori stared at the large gaping Cavern. No-one hurried her, no-one would, everything must be done as the individual found himself or herself ready. She had worked long and hard to be where she stood now. Yet, she had been so comfortable once as an apprentice, which had meant a certain amount of carefree sensibilities and few true responsibilities. When had that tide turned? Oh, yes; someone had realized, someone had seen that the time had come to her at last. The time to leave friends and family and a wonderful Mentor whose love and guidance she would never forget. To travel to the Holy Isle for the final studies, to begin to understand responsibility as all Healers must. To finally come to the point where she would walk through the Cavern of Fire, wherein was contained the Healer's Flame. They said it wasn't a real fire; but rather, that crystal flame that burns through all Healers, burning away all impurities that they may be a true channel for healing without distortion. All those she had ever known who had carried the title of Healer had this wonderful crystal-like force. Could she really deign to see that force within herself? But, oh, she had come to desire so. So, the carefree apprentice began to study in earnest, to ready her heart and mind for that decisive moment. Even then, one could not be certain that one's request to walk through the Fire should be granted. Even that approval had given her great joy, though fear surely stood at its side, for the Healers who had taught her could never be totally certain she would survive the ultimate test before her. For this, prayers and fasting were in order as the Healers wrapped their energies around the Sacred Site. Her white robes felt almost heavy upon her as she realized a line of sweat dappled upon her forehead and she sensed her dark, draping curls were becoming damp. Sighing, she closed her eyes as the rest of the Healers stood with her; waiting, supporting, her somewhat tall and supple form near motionless in the cooling breezes. After several moments she opened her intense hazel/green eyes with resolve and readiness. And as she walked within the Cavern, the others would await her for when she would return. What had she actually anticipated from this Initiation of Initiations? Did she expect pain, terror; did she think every ounce of herself, her personality might burn away? She wandered deep within the darkness, carefully, slowly as she could see less and less. It had been a full moon in the night and for a while the brightness had allowed her to move gracefully away from the sight of the others.

How long should she wander, when would she really know, she thought as she began to stumble a little, fearing her clothes might catch and rip or that she could well hurt herself if she was not quite careful. Suddenly something filled her and caught her breath in midstream. A great swell of light filled the Cavern like icy fire as she realized that she stood in the very midst of It. Emotions passed through her like lightening as she found herself crying and laughing, her spirit pulled in myriad directions at once. Still, instead of finding it frightening, Dori embraced it as wonderful and exhilarating as she watched the flames feed and spiral ever upwards in brilliant colors. Her very spirit seemed to be being altered as the flames continued to feed. As if somehow, she were being rearranged into some fantastic shard of crystal; strong, healthy, able to magnify and intensify by her will alone. Her experience became so beautiful, that she didn't know if she really wanted to leave it.

Then something odd happened, something not even vaguely mentioned by her teachers. Within the Flame, first the face and then the form of a man appeared. With nearly white, silvery colored hair and large, dark eyes, he stood simply regarding her. It seemed as if a slow, deliberate passion was building inside of her and she wondered if this, too, were some kind of test. Nevertheless, when he drew near her, she could only find herself yielding as she also found she didn't care if the Fire might burn the rest of her soul away.

After what she thought was a total consummation of the Fire's consumption of her, everything turned black once more as she lay in the cool, moist ground of the Cavern. She was alive, she had passed; however, her heart suddenly hurt her for something, something was not right. Somehow she 'knew' that the man was not part of her Initiation. There was deep sorrow in his splendid eyes, and as his image had faded from their passionate embrace, he had whispered, "Help me."

She pulled her robes comfortably about her, there was no hurry; when she reemerged they would all know she had passed and there would be joy and feasting, new robes and gifts. She wanted to burst with how extraordinary it had been; yet the shadow of the man's face would not leave her inner eye. When she did emerge, drums beat and music played as her instructors stepped forward to hug and greet her. Nonetheless, they found themselves holding back a little, for this one, this new Healer glowed; the incredible transformation of energies having produced a star of shimmering crystal that seemed to light up in the early dawn. Then, the impression faded as Dori stood before them once more, ready and radiant, but no more than any other Healer among them. However, they had seen and they knew someone special had come back to them.

All day and all the next night the feasting and music would continue as Dori was encouraged to enjoy and revel in her new status. New robes covered her and brilliantly colored feathers had been woven in her hair. Everyone sought to embrace, to touch, to speak with her, the blessed and marvelous newness of the Fire having gone through her was more than any could truly resist. And somehow, especially with her.

As the feasting came to a slow and peaceful end, it would be time for Dori to sit with the Eldest of the Healers. To sit and relate her experiences so that it might be made known what direction Dori was now to take. Would she remain, would she instruct, or would she go back out to the people to heal much as her Mentor had? The Elder Healer bade her a warm welcome as he sat her next the hearth of his diminutive, but comfortable dwelling. Tea and tiny cakes were provided as they settled by the small, but friendly fire. Patiently, he let her speak as long and as detailed as she wished, really rather enjoying her rendition. Never had he heard anyone speak with such joy and wonder at what had taken place to them. He had to admit, however, that the man was indeed 'not' part of the Initiation and he found himself rather perplexed. Could this be part of Dori's specialness? A Guardian Spirit, perhaps, that no-one had met before; still, somehow, surely the legends would have said something. When Dori asked his thoughts on it, he suggested the possibility of a Guardian, although Dori also expected there would be 'some' legend and the plea for help did not make sense. "Perhaps that it may be that your male side came forward seeking admittance and expression on a more equal footing."

For a moment Dori thought on that, then nodded her head, it seemed the most likely and sensible explanation. "Yet, may I ask something?... If the archives might not be

looked through: if there might not be some other connection?... Then, if there is nothing, I can be satisfied and seek to work with this image in myself."

"I see no problem granting that, my starry child." He smiled, "If I may ask something of you... though we often discuss and try to settle what a new Healer shall do, it is up to the Healer themselves to truly decide their fate. We make no demands, the road that has led you here has given you the ability and the right to declare your own decisions... Yet... you are a special star..." Dori's eyes opened wide for she did not comprehend why he should say so, "The total joy and merging you had with the Flame has given you a lightness few shall ever know. Even we who call ourselves Healers... I ask that you remain with us... I ask that you train and come to receive the title of Librarian and Keeper of our Knowledge and Archives."

Tears formed at the edges of her eyes for this was such a rare honor, especially of someone so new to the Healer rank. "How can I be worthy?" Was her demure expression as her face flushed and her hands trembled.

The Elder Healer smiled and sighed, "What does any of us know of the Mysteries in the Stars... what makes you worthy?" He shrugged and shook his head, "The Flame 'chose' you, Dori. And somehow your worthiness was laid bare by that Flame for all to witness." Dori covered her eyes and wept causing the Healer to go over to her and enfold her. "There, there... These best be tears of joy, young one," he smiled warmly, though she could not see, "and I take it, you shall accept my proposal?"

After a moment a quiet chuckle came from her as she pulled away and wiped her eyes with her hands, "Oh, yes... I am just so... so... overwhelmed."

"Well," he said with some amused satisfaction, "if you think your studies were hard before, you shall now learn what it 'really' means to study."

With that, her eyes grew great with lively sparkling pleasure as she bent to kiss his hands before excusing herself so that she might rest a day or so before resuming her course. "I am more than filled with delight!" His only response was to laugh happily back and kiss her cheek before she bounded out of his home.

After a little over a month where Dori had taken on her studies with joy and true enthusiasm rarely seen in anyone before, she suddenly realized something was no longer right. The phase of moon that she associated as 'her' moon had come and gone and no passage of blood befell her. For a while she pondered, 'I have been with no-one for several moons and even then no child has come to me... Perhaps, I am but late. It would not be the first time; even so, my body usually likes the last of the waxing light and now it is past full and time to wane again...' She only pondered it a moment longer before returning to her studies once more.

But when she came upon a Healer there most noted for her empathic abilities, the woman stopped Dori and smiled, "You are bright today, lady. A glimmer of new life descends upon you."

For a moment Dori stared, "But that's not possible!" She exclaimed, "There's been no-one ..." As knowledge struck home, she said, "Are you sure?"

The woman shrugged, "I am rarely wrong, my child... and in you, I am certain. You indeed are going to have a child."

"My Gods..." she whispered, "He's real..." And tremors overtook her for a moment, "I must speak to the Elder... A man's life may be at stake!" Dori turned and ran, leaving the empath to watch after her with eyes of curiosity and wonder at the strange

flight. "Wyndel!" She cried as she saw the Elder. Then, she stopped, standing still in the dust her racing feet had made. He looked up at her. "May I speak with you, Brother?" she said more calmly, knowing that her terrible sense of urgency ought not to be so overly displayed. It would not do to rush her Elder, he had his duties, too, and she knew that what she had to say could wait a moment or so.

He smiled at the figure she had made, like a dancing star with dusty feet. "A moment... but a moment only. I was just showing Elana how to cut her herbs clean." He was as good as his word for he quickly instructed his student before coming over to Dori. "My child," he quipped, "you 'do' look distressed... shall we sit and talk?"

"Yes... yes, if you would, please." As they sat, Dori could barely contain her thoughts, "He's real... he's flesh and blood." she said, finally, "I find I am with child, and I have been with no-one. Not in moons."

"Who's real?"

She feared he did not remember and her heart sank a little, "The man in the Flame. The man at my Initiation."

The Elder's eyebrows quirked, "Then, you 'did' make love to him?"

"Yes... I said as such... And... you remember?"

"Of course, child... I remember... Hmmm." He said as he stroked a sparsely bearded chin of gray and brown, "There is a vague possibility... We 'did' find something in the Archives, just a day or so ago... But, not a legend... A Bard, actually. A Member of their Council who came here once to speak with the Librarian about... who knows..." He shrugged, "Anyway, we did not know he was so close, no-one had seen his boat in the night and an Initiation took place. It was only later that we found out that he had 'disappeared'. No remains, only the boat and the certainty that he 'had' come to the Isle... Well, in time we came to know that the Eldritch had taken him, else the Flame would have swallowed him. Unless shielded properly, our Initiation is death to anyone but us for our life force is not the same. Not even a Bard. As their Initiation would be certain death for us. The Eldritch saved him, and we let it be. Bards are usually more than happy to be with the Eldritch. What did this man look like?"

"Long, loosely braided hair. Almost white, it was so silver. Deep brown eyes, a handsome, open face. Slender, strong; but very, very sad. If I had considered long enough, I could easily mistake him for Eldritch. "

"Hmm... that 'too' is a possibility. Yet... your description fits, as such as we have. And Bards are as like to look a bit Eldritch themselves... and Tamlynn was quite noted for his fair, almost white hair."

"Pardon?"

"Tamlynn... That was the Bard's name that disappeared."

"But, then, if the Flame is certain death... how is it that I would see him there? 'In' the Flame..."

"Good question... Unless it had to do with the Eldritch, too. Somehow... Umm... but, why on Earth would 'this' man be asking for help? And why would the Eldritch be helping him to make this plea?"

"He is the father of my child." She stated earnestly, "If he is in need of help, I must give it to him. Hopefully, if this is his name, it may draw him back again... If, indeed, it is this Bard."

"And how do you propose that you shall find him?"

"Through the Flame... I must go back through the Fire, it is the only lead I have to him. And call for him... And I shall need as much help in supporting the Fires as I can get."

For a long while the Elder said nothing as he looked off into the distance, measuring her words and the possibilities of what seemed might be and what could be done. "The Flame is not meant for a second pass... Yet, you... you've been touched in a way I've never seen before..." He looked back at her deeply, searching down into her eyes in some quiet effort to touch the keystones of her soul. "I could not bear to lose you. Nor could any of us. Even so..." He put a hand upon her head, sighing, "You are quite right as well... The Bards are ever our partners; they, too, touch a sacredness... And as I am pledged to help all in need, I shall surely not turn my eyes from one such as I believe he may be... You shall have your help, all the support the Holy Isle can give."

As Dori faced the Cavern once more, there was a surety in her thoughts and more strength in her movements and heart. Again, she would go in alone; it was her life, her decision, she would not truly ask anyone else's life but her own. The idea of the Eldritch at work in this somehow crossed her mind and she fervently hoped this was not some trick they might have devised. But, did not the Eldritch love Healers, nearly as much as the Bards? She could well expect them to be mischievous; still, not evil, not truly cruel unless one deserved it. No, she believed this man was human, he was in terrible trouble and the Elves were somehow helping him to reach out to her. She had to believe that; and with that thought steady in her heart, she began her second walk beneath the moon.

This time, the Cavern did not seem nearly as dark or difficult to move into. It was as if the forces that the other Healers raised were actually making it easier, the path itself made clearer. And as she walked, she began to mentally send out the name the Elder Healer had given her. 'Tamlynn...' She thought over and over, hoping it would help draw him within as she also sought to visualize his face and form as best she could. It was strange to feel the Flame building up and flaring back through her again. Strange, perhaps because it felt familiar and sublime, as if she knew every aspect of this Flame, what it was and what it could truly do. Still, she could not determine even the slightest sense that the man she had met before was present or would be. When she nearly thought that she had lost, a movement in the shadows beyond the Flame's center where she stood caused her attention. This time, she spoke the name aloud, "Tamlynn?"

And though there was no further movement, a voice answered back, "You know my name?"

She wanted to ask him how he'd gotten there, what was happening to him and why he called for help; but she chose instead to solely reach her arms out to him, "Come... I am here... What can I do to help you?"

As he left the shadows she realized that his form was not exactly solid looking and that he would have seemed a ghost if she had not remembered the previous encounter. "I can not enter the Flame again without you... And I must enter this Fire in order to return to the World of the Mother's Wheel."

She smiled and reached more widely, "Then, here I am."

"Wait... No... You 'must' understand... He shall seek to take me back. You must hold onto me, no matter what you hear or see, or what shape I may become... Dori..." he

said and she was taken by surprise that he should know 'her' name as a nervous smile crossed his face, "are you prepared to love me?"

Question lit her eyes, "But we have...".

"No... no," he shook his head, "why did you come back?" She looked at him a long time, question and confusion passing over her face for she wasn't certain how to answer him. "Dori..." he finally broke nervously, "please... 'Are' you prepared to love me?"

Fear and anxiety began to play about his features as his eyes started darting to other areas in the Cavern as if he were expecting something or someone to begin appearing. Though there was still a trace of uncertainty in Dori's heart, she knew she could no longer hesitate, but must accept now or let him return to his fate. "Yes, Tamlynn, yes... I am prepared."

A sigh escaped him as he approached her, his hands out-stretched, "Hurry... they come."

Just as she pulled him in with her, sending her own energy protectively around him, an eerie call rang through the Cavern about them. Winds seemed to blow through as if trying to cancel out the Flame itself. Firmly Dori held the image of Fire channeling through her, knowing the other Healers would continue their support for as long as this journey might take. A great array of ghosting silhouettes began to crowd the Cavern, indistinct and crazily misshaped by the shadows from the Flame. The semblance that sought the most attention was of a horse who carried a great Masked Figure whose eyes burned anger. "Who do you think you are?" It said in a low, deep voice that sent chills running through Dori's veins.

"Hold me..." whispered Tamlynn, "Hold me tight... More is at risk than 'my' life."

"Who do you think you are that you would take my prize from me?" Said the Being, slowly approaching where Dori and Tamlynn stood, "Do you really think you can withstand 'my' tests, little Initiate?"

'Am I this brave?' Thought Dori, 'Surely, this can not be the Eldritch... can it?' Before she could consider anything more, she realized that the man she held was beginning to shift. A pounding of wings beat at her as talons gripped upon her; and though pain seared her, a trace of blood flowing down along her arms, she held with everything that she could pull from deep within herself. And a door in the East flew open, a surge of tremendous power releasing into the Cavern. She feared that it should come to blast her; instead, it blew gently through her heart relieving one echo of pressure therein. Passage to the East was now open.

With this, Tamlynn's image shifted again to the command of the Masked Being whose angry laugh made Dori realize that this test was far from over. A great howling came from Tamlynn's altered throat like the wolves in the Cymric mountains in the deeps of Winter and snow. Claws and teeth bit and tore until Dori wanted to scream in terror and pain; still, she called the Flame to strengthen her resolve as a door in the South flew open. Again the great surge of power pulled gently through her as another echo of pressure was released and the way of the South made clear.

Next she felt the scales and slickness of some huge fish-like creature. She nearly dropped him at her feet he was so hard to hold. She did not expect to have to grasp so tightly and quickly and she feared that this form might surely undo her. Yet, this too, she

managed, as she called upon the Flame once more in this unexpected turn. Another surge of power flowed and the Way of the Western door was free.

Suddenly a silence pervaded the Cavern and for a moment Dori thought Tamlynn had disappeared right from her arms, for they were empty. She stood, her arms nearly crossed about herself, sweat and blood tracing her person amidst the crystal shimmer of the Healer's Flame. Strangely, she discovered that her hand was grasping something, causing her to look without fully opening it. A single grain of wheat was enclosed within her palm and she knew that, this too, was Tamlynn.

The Masked Figure smiled some wicked smile beneath its disguise, laughing heartily at Dori's confusion. "Tell me, how can you hang on to that? He is nothing but an illusion. You have been fooled."

For a moment Dori nearly gave in as she stood looking from the Being to the seed in her uncertainty. But, she also knew that no-one would make such an effort to capture an illusion. And the child within her was no illusion, either. A curious notion filled her and she found herself smiling back at the Masked Figure as she cupped her hand to her mouth to quickly swallow the single seed before the Being really could grasp what had happened. One last time a door flew open, a surge of power from the North that passed through Dori as she sighed. Now all the passages were made clear and there was no way for the Being to turn. A great cry arose from the Masked Figure swearing cruel oaths upon Dori in impotent rage. "You've not seen the last of me! No, not even!" Was its exclaims as the horse reared and quickly turned to gallop off into the shadows. The rest of the ghosting shapes melted away as Dori stood watching, a little uncertain now that the battle appeared to be over.

The Flame slowly died down to finally go out as Dori supposed she would find herself alone in the dark. She believed she had released Tamlynn, but she also expected his spirit no longer remained. Perhaps, he would be her child now, it would make enough sense, she 'had' just ingested him. Nevertheless, as she began to move back out of the Cavern, a figure lay on the floor where she nearly stumbled over it. "Oh!" Exclaimed a male voice, "Oh, Gods! Help me!"

"Tamlynn?" Dori knelt down to find herself closing on another person, now quite definitely of flesh and blood. "Oh, this is awful!... I ache everywhere."

Dori laughed, a laugh of nervous relief. "Well, I suppose you might... Welcome back to the Wheel, my friend... Come, lean on me, will be all right."

Shakily he stood, very unsteady and weak, nearly falling over on Dori who did her best to receive him though, she, too, was in a weakened state. Slowly, they made their way back out, Tamlynn no longer making any statements, seeming to be more concerned with the unadorned fact of walking. Once outside they both nearly collapsed as the rest of the Healers stepped up to receive them gazing with wonder at them. As a couple Healers gently took Tamlynn from Dori's side, he looked at her intently once more saying, "Bright Star... What 'have' we done?"

As the Elder Healer came forward to help Dori back to her dwelling, she couldn't help watching the others drawing Tamlynn away. Turning to the Elder, she whispered, "Am I... truly prepared to love him?"

Through a fitful sleep Dori tossed and turned, strange images twisting at the corners of her mind. The Elder Healer had been rather awestruck that anyone could pass through the Flame a second time, for legend always supported the idea that one would

merge completely with those Fires to become a part of It, one's spirit consumed in Its ecstasy. What was Dori's potential and control now that she had successfully walked through It twice, and in such a short space of time? The Elder Healer noted that the rescued Bard, Tamlynn had called her Bright Star. Choosing to sit in Dori's dwelling to watch over her, the Elder Healer administered any healing she might need as she rested. Surely, she was changed in ways he could not even guess and he watched attentively as she continued her sleep in some restlessness. Once or twice he bent over her, touching her forehead and hands, trying to open what he could for her. So much seemed beyond his comprehension, for her own channels at this time would not open up for him. She was nearly enclosed in her own space, dealing with her heart and needs by herself.

In her dreams, Dori saw a beautiful woman clothed in Healer's robes, but with a voice as sweet and melodic as any Bard's. Her great, brown eyes sparkled beneath lights of her silvery hair. "Mother..." she spoke, her arms outstretched in greeting, "thank-you for opening the doors for me. I have waited patiently and for so long... Take care of Father; he does not totally understand what has befallen him. He shall need understanding and much healing no matter what he says or does. You do not know what it is to be drawn back from the Realm of Light."

"Daughter?" asked Dori in stark wonder of one who claimed to be her own blood. For a moment the woman smiled brightly. Then a shadow slowly appeared behind her daughter's image as a sound of voluminous pulsing wings filled the echoes of Dori's heart.

A Masked Being with fiery eyes stood with taloned hands that reached out and grasped the radiant, almost Elven-looking woman with silvery hair who screamed in startlement. "If I can not have Tamlynn, dear lady," It hissed, "Then I shall make do with this!"

"Mother!" The woman cried as the Being took her and hid her in a flowing cloak of midnight and stars.

Not knowing where the name had come from, Dori cried out, "Llyria!... Daughter!..." She wanted to run after the woman, but she could not sense her feet. The impressions faded from her as a bestial laugh echoed mercilessly in her ears. "Well, little Initiate... what are you going to do now?"

Waking up with tears streaming down her face, Dori quickly received the comfort of the Healer's arms. "Bright One," he spoke with disarming respect, "what is it, what can I do?"

"Wyndel, Wyndel..." she sighed, trying hard to calm herself, "my daughter... I..." She gasped.

"So... you shall have a daughter?" He tried to smile at her, insomuch he knew she was controlling a sense of anguish. "Open, child, open your channels. It is hard to help you like this."

"I am afraid of hurting you." She said simply.

"But, Dori... I am a Healer. I am fully trained. You' know' that." Gradually, carefully, she opened as she saw fit, wary of what it just might do to her dear teacher and friend. What passed to him nearly stunned him for the edges of the Flame Itself seemed to sparkle through her like darts of living fire. Still, he held, helping her to finally calm and give way to the healing he sent back into her.

"I do not understand what all this means..." She said at last, "I 'do' know Tamlynn is the key to it... but... he, too, requires healing and attention... I pray to the Gods we can afford to wait... 'how' is Tamlynn doing?"

"Sleeping... sleeping hard. They tell me he has barely stirred and is not like to for quite some time. His body is deeply weary, though healthy, mind you. He is physically whole and sound, albeit definitely weak. It may take him a little space to even walk much, although I am assured he shall... It is his heart and mind that appear to be in some conflict... And while we shall surely help, much of that may well be left to you."

"Yes...yes, it should... He is my responsibility... It is quite literally 'my' fault that he is even with us now at all." She smiled timidly and the Elder Healer felt Dori was finally relaxing.

Waking suddenly after several days of a near coma-like sleep, Tamlynn was confused and distressed. "Where am I?" He asked several times, sometimes calling out foreign names, his eyes hazy and distant. Despite the Healers trying to explain to him where he was, the filmy fuzziness of his eyes showed clearly that he didn't comprehend them or even really hear them. When he tried to get up, the Healers gently laid him back down telling him he was too weakened for that yet and he exclaimed, "I can't be ill!... what do you mean? One doesn't get ill in the Eldritch!... Where is Illana... Where is Gustan... Where are my friends? My People? My lovers?... Who 'are' you all?... Ah, where is the Lady?" His voice began to take a near frantic tone as he again partially raised himself from the bed.

Immediately one of the Healers sat on the edge of the bed, taking Tamlynn's hands, "Shh." The Healer said as he sent quiet strains of calming energy into Tamlynn, "It's all right... We'd begun to wonder if you'd ever waken... But, please... you are 'very' weak... do not stress yourself so." The Healer looked over at his companion Healer saying quickly, "Get Dori... That may help him." The woman Healer nodded before leaving the small dwelling that had been set aside for Tamlynn.

When Dori had been located and brought back to the dwelling, low sobbing could be heard from without. Dori's heart caught and sank within her chest as she entered. The Healer who had been left with Tamlynn cradled the man as he wept from a place difficult and bitter, "I was loved." Tamlynn moaned, "There was nearly no sorrow, never pain and never, never regret... I sang, how I sang... the Lady. How I loved to sing for the Lady."

For a protracted moment Dori could only watch him feeling helpless, being stricken with the fact of just how much healing Tamlynn would really need. And she realized that it was not truly by choice that he had left the Eldritch. How long would he mourn his decision and would he come to blame Dori for having found him? Now she really did ask herself, was she honestly prepared to love this man? What on Earth did she even know about him, would he even be much like a human anymore? What ethics, what standards had he come to know and accept? Besides, as a Bard, he would be as like to become estranged from her, anyway. Then she remembered her daughter and she remembered what her daughter had said. To try and understand and heal, no matter what he did or said. But, it would not be easy; Dori could feel how much it would hurt already. He had friends and lovers elsewhere, and he craved them, needed them and could not have them. At last she moved the other Healer away to take his place, enfolding Tamlynn to herself, letting the Bard continue as she opened up the entirety of her soul with every

channel she possessed. For a while he didn't seem to notice, yet as her waves of healing washed over him, he finally sighed greatly and began to quiet. "Dori..." he whispered, "Yes, Dori, it 'is' you... help me, my Bright Star... You are all I can see here, all that can give me life... I shall die for wanting the Eldritch. You've 'got' to understand that. It hurts, Dori. Oh, it hurts... I love you. I shall love you... but, it hurts... I see their faces in my heart and mind..."

"Shh, shh... just take in the healing, love. It's here." She waved the other Healers out, feeling she could deal with Tamlynn by herself, or at least, she ought to. Previously, she had looked in on him several times regarding his quiet features, wondering what sort of soul resided within. They always said Bards could be frightfully emotional, as well Dori knew; she had had quite a bit of concourse with them as an apprentice. They could be so strange sometimes, cold and distant one moment, and like a raging whirlwind the next. Especially Runners; those Bardic apprentices that seemed more like a bunch of wild children than anything. Sometimes she wondered how any of them got the positions of power that they literally had. Yet, she had met the Head of Council, Rhiannon, and well knew Rhiannon's Second and Consort, Taliesin, and knew that their power was not ill-placed. As she thought on it, any Council Member she had ever met seemed in general kind and reflective, the emotional fires far more controlled than ones of lesser status. Ah, but, the emotions were still very much there and Tamlynn was definitely out of control, Council Member or no. He appeared to be clinging to her and she sensed he felt as if he were trying to drown. 'Wonderful', she thought, 'Now I've got to try to stabilize all this, too... I do not understand Bards.' She sighed at last still thinking, 'What an odd configuration of life-force he has.' She stroked his silvery hair, his head nestled against her breast as his arms enfolded about her waist. "You are a puzzle, aren't you." She whispered.

"You'll stay with me, now, won't you?" He sighed softly and rather sensuously. It surprised her that she felt conflicting emotions about that. This was the father of her child, he appeared to be wide open to her; nonetheless, she could not rest those feelings that he would become naturally estranged to her.

"You are a Bard," she said at last, "and so Eldritch touched." Her words were a bit halting, it was not easy to admit her misgivings to him.

"What?... I do not follow." He hugged her strongly and moved his face up to hers, his cheeks still fairly damp with tears, "Please, Dori...I need you... You are a great Healer, don't you know that?... I was so close to being annihilated. And none of the Eldritch could help me... Only you could... Only you... Bright Star..."

"I am afraid you shall come to hate me... for taking you from those that you love..."

"Hate you?..." He gave her an incredulous look, "And I could hate the mother of my child?" He said as he kissed her face. Dori froze at his words and he smiled into her startled eyes, "You did not intend to tell me... and I do not understand why... Neither of us can have children, you know... but, the Flame..." He pulled her down beside him, "You said you were prepared to love me...That was a promise, Bright Star. A vow... Or else I could not have passed through the Flame. You have moved my soul through you... I know I am an obligation, a responsibility... But, I, too, shall be responsible... Yes, I'm a Bard... And a Member of the Council... And, I do not lie... you 'know' that."

"Bards do not lie... so they say..." whispered Dori, "But, they are wise in going around the truth."

The breath that escaped him was so hard she knew she had hurt him, "And 'how' am I wandering around the truth in this?" he said, almost bitterly.

"I am sorry," spoke Dori, her resolve melting at last, "it is fear, Tamlynn... I'm afraid... We are two different Worlds."

"And not even the moment can be good enough?" A shimmer went through from his words, a smile that filled his entire presence.

"I'm afraid I shall drink and want far more than just a few moments."

"There shall be, there shall be." He whispered in promise as he began to cover her with a passion and excitement Dori had not ever felt before from another human being.

Despite still being a trifle frail, Tamlynn often walked down to the Island's shore. A beautifully made harp by one of the craftsmen there was happily given in gift to him and he carried it with him whenever he left for the water's edge. He'd sit where he could watch the rolling waters sweep in and out as he gently played. Sometimes tears would still stream down his cheeks though the unconstrained sobbing was now very rare. It was realized that he was 'playing to' the Eldritch, hoping somehow that they were listening, as indeed, they very likely were. Oftentimes he would sing as well, the sweet lilting strains of his voice filling the airs like the scent of wildflowers. He was a powerful Bard, Dori guessed him as one of the best, for no-one was not profoundly affected when they heard him. It was not unusual to find a small group of Healers who had stopped to listen to him, standing far enough away to stay out of his sight so they would not disturb him. Anytime Dori knew where he had gone off to, she'd make the effort to wander down to sit with him. Usually she was silent, simply opening her healing channels as he poured out his energies through his music. Yet, sometimes they would talk quietly, reflectively, as they made the attempt to learn about each other as individual persons. She was some concerned about her obvious drop in studies, but the Elder Healer had only smiled saying, "You have all the time in the world, Child. Right now, these 'are' your studies. Learn them well." More and more Dori realized that Tamlynn would never again be like normal humans, his thoughts always seemed somewhat faye with unexpected twists, much as one might assume would come from one of the Eldritch. He also tended to have an uncanny tendency to 'know' things, though Bards were often accused of such in general. And there were times when he would simply sit and stare as if listening or seeing some 'other' no-one else was truly privy to. It was something he would do the rest of his life, finally revealing that that was how he did reach out and touched on inner spaces. Almost always afterwards he would create new music, poetry or stories saying this was his parting Gift from the Eldritch themselves. Of course, these inspired works were always amongst his best, so that Dori knew he was but telling the truth. He had taken to calling her Bright Star so much so that soon everyone called her that and it was assumed that that was now her true name. She also came to learn that he knew a lot more about her than she could have guessed. At last he simply told her that he had been quite aware of her since her entrance to the Holy Isle and had waited, not quite patiently, for her Initiation into the Healer's Flame.

"I had near despaired," he said softly, "I had nearly resigned to the idea that my very existence would become extinct... Burnt away, as if I'd never been in this life or any life."

"But why?... I thought the Eldritch loved you?..."

"They do... love me." He swallowed, this was not easy for him to speak of, "But there was a... a Being, an Eldritch Lord that everyone assumed was somehow 'Other' than Eldritch... with great power." The mention of these things caused sweat to form about Dori's temples. She had nearly forgotten her dream amidst all the excitement and Tamlynn's immediate needs, and her own need for some recuperation and rest. "For long his attentions were occupied with other concerns, though his focus has always been to gain power into the Realm of the Wheel... There is some struggle I do not understand, though it 'does' involve the Bards... So, I suppose my simple existence in the Realm of Light had to garner his attention sooner or late... He has the power to demand, to force others to do as he bids. The Lady of my People could do very little but plead... Nonetheless, she promised as much help to me as she could... Then you came to the Isle, and we saw a way. In this, we did as we could to stave him off until you could be Initiated and hopefully return once you realized I was flesh and blood. His focus is on that Flame of yours... I couldn't enter the Flame without you within it either time or I would have been destroyed then and there. But I had to enter It in order to reenter the Wheel once you had opened the doors to the Four Winds. The Fires concentrate in you and I am not harmed."

"How do you mean... his focus is on our Flame?" Fear unsteadied Dori's hands and voice.

"There is power you do not dream of in that Flame... You tend It and use It to purify prospective Healers; which is the true and good thing that It is for... but It 'can' be utilized else wise."

"Such as?" Gaspd Dori.

Tamlynn smiled briefly, "Such as the coming of our daughter..." Then the light in his eyes subdued, "Such as a Doorway between Realms and the raising of power undreamed of... And I was a key."

Dori looked off into the distance as he explained these things, her mind uncertain how to view all this. "And how, exactly, did he propose to use you as a key?"

"Humans have a different physical structure from the Eldritch. That part of ourselves has tremendous impact and energy that most people are unaware of. Bards are aware of it, and so are Healers, whether verbalized or no. The burning, the sacrifice of both my physical self as well as my spirit, for it 'would' be destroyed as well, would give him total access to the Flame's power, for he would ride the death throes of my being into the Fires so that he might be untouched. Somehow, he would then be able to utilize It 'any' way he wished. It would be 'his' Flame and yours no longer... Of course, he is unable to use a Healer or even one in training; your life force would slip away from him because 'of' your training... even the few children present on this Island are protected by their Healer parents. 'I', however, am a different story. And... I was far more available and vulnerable, at any rate. As yet, he has no power over any of you. You especially. He is apt to hate you for it, I'm afraid... I am hoping he even fears you."

"And he is looking for another way... our daughter."

Tamlynn's breath caught, this had surely not occurred to him. "But, I don't see 'how' he could?... She is within you, that virtue alone protects her now."

"And when she is born?... What am I missing? If the children here are protected, too... Yet, I dreamed, Tamlynn... and she spoke to me... but, this Elven Lord enfolded her at last to carry her away... how can he have that power?"

Tamlynn's eyes filmed slightly, "He can no longer touch me by virtue of your presence at my side... and I am also so wary, I wrap the natural protections of this Realm about me... But... when a child is born... something I have come to know and have seen in the Eldritch... for some short time, a child rides the edges of the Realms, truly belonging to no-one, under no-one's protection but the Gods Themselves." Tamlynn blew out a long breath, watching the glaze of fear glinting in Dori's eyes as he sadly shook his head 'yes', "And thereby... may be stolen... My Goddess, can he be so cruel?" He exclaimed, his voice shaking, "I would rather that I do as he bids and destroy myself than that he do this to our child!"

"He shall have neither..." A resolve building in Dori's heart as she arose from her seat. "If I have... these abilities... then surely I can protect my family... we shall gather the Healers here together and discuss what is to be done. If he is after the Flame, this affects us all. And must be answered by all."

While nothing was actually decided when the Healers met, for the first time it was realized that the threat posed included them all, their very lifestyle and existence. Tamlynn was not at all familiar with the proceedings of Healers, yet bore it all with remarkable patience, especially as no real decisions were forthcoming at all, except that Dori might find some way to study the Flame since Tamlynn suggested that It had other properties besides what the Healers used It for themselves. How she might do this, no-one could really say; still, she herself was resolved to find some way.

The time passed by as Dori and Tamlynn became more comfortable with each other. It had to be admitted that there was a strangeness in their pairing. Healers and Bards respected each other, but rarely became more than simply friendly associates. The high emotional temperament of a Bard was almost baffling to a Healer as much as the calm resolve of a Healer was difficult for a Bard to comprehend. Though it was highly uncertain just what Tamlynn's age was, and he gave no clues to what it was even before he had gone into the Eldritch, Dori and Tamlynn tried very much to be the young couple in love, looking forward to life and the birth of their child. However, the clouds of the knowledge of what may be would pass through them at unpredictable and difficult times.

As Tamlynn got stronger, he found himself often helping in the gardens or husbandrying the livestock, enjoying the simple work with a gusto that surprised the Healers around him. They could only assume that his childhood upbringing had been fairly simple, for he also showed a real knowledge for these things as well. Dori resumed some of her studies as she became more sure of Tamlynn and his own strength to be left to his own for longer periods of time. And sometimes she would wander down to the Cavern, to sit by its mouth to contemplate and reach out, finding that she could indeed touch on the Flame even though it was difficult for her to perfectly sense what the patterns within It could mean.

The Healers had to admit that they immensely enjoyed the presence of the Bard, especially in the evenings when they could sit about the fires inside or out and listen to his stories and songs. They also found that he had a quick and dry sense of humor, at

times being rather merciless with it, something they assumed he had picked up from the Eldritch, which could have easily been quite true. They were just thankful that he was not given to mischievous pranks, though he kept claiming that that was the work of the Faeries, not the Elves, a difference that none of the Healers found overly clear nor would Tamlynn offer much by way of explanation.

It was six months into her pregnancy that something occurred to Tamlynn that he felt he must resolve. He located Dori outside the Cavern sitting as she often did now as her concern grew stronger. She held her hands protectively about her child within, whispering a chanted prayer upon the scented breeze. The Holy Isle rarely got actively cold no matter the depths of Winter on the Island of the Mighty, nor exceedingly hot in the high days of Summer; the passage of Seasons tended to be equally mild for each cycle as the scent of wildflowers continually filled the airs. Sitting behind her that he might wrap his arms quietly about her, he nestled his face in the nape of her neck. "There is something I must ask you, Bright Star." He said as if he were part of the breeze.

Stopping her chant, Dori took his hands and sighed, "And what have you been up to today?"

He sat up and put his legs about her as well, trying to get himself comfortable, "I've been up to thinking... And I realized something we need to do..." Dori was silent, she was unsure where his train of thought was leading, albeit it did not seem to be of the darker veins that they often wrestled with. At that, she chose to wait and see what more he had to say. "Bright Star..." He said at last, swallowing a little as if his mouth were suddenly dry, "Would you... Handfast with me?..."

Startled, all Dori could think to say was, "Do Bards Handfast?"

Peals of laughter emitted from Tamlynn, "Oh my!... Do you think Bards can never commit themselves to someone?... Bright Star... my Love... I am already committed to you... I just thought... I just thought it might be nice... to make it ...official." He said hopeful and cheerful.

"I don't know." Said Dori, a bit offhandedly, "A year and a day?"

A little hurt, Tamlynn withdrew his hands a bit, "After all this... you still do not trust my love for you?... Or is it, you do not trust your love for me?"

"Your nature..." She stumbled, "Will there not come a time when you need to find your own? There are not other Bards here, and so rarely even Runners come and their passage here is brief... And would you not like to find yourself on the road once more?"

"Do you think so little of me?" He said sadly, "I thought we were in love... I am the Healer's Bard now and I have no intention of ever being anywhere else... Court Bards do not travel. This 'is' my Court, and you are the Lady that I answer to... That, too, Bright Star, is Bardic... And you know that."

She took his hands back and pulled them around herself once more, "I am in love with you... More than I knew it was possible to feel... Shall we Handfast, then?..."

"Shall we?..." He said, enclosing himself about her tighter again, "And not the year and a day... but as husband and wife."

"My husband." She whispered as if afraid of the sound.

"My wife," he said more certainly, "for this life... And may it be for well beyond..." They stay enclosed that way, simply listening to the breezes until the dusk came and moved into the shimmer of a star-filled night.

Having asked the Elder Healer to preside over their Handfast, who Dori noted was hardly surprised, and very pleased by their request, the three of them sat down a long time to discuss just what sort of ceremony this Handfasting would be. Healers' ceremonies were generally solemn and fairly short, whereas anything concerning the Bards had a lot of flash and dazzle with much song and celebration. Tamlynn was quite aware that he was rather surrounded by Healers and though some of them played instruments and sang, he quickly opted that the music and dance could be saved for after the ceremony. "I only truly ask that you remember that my vows be especially to the Goddess of Inspiration and the Cauldron of Kerwidwynn."

The Elder Healer smiled, "To the Gods of Healing, to the Goddess of the Bards and Her Consort... that would satisfy you?"

Smiling back, Tamlynn nodded, "And flowers... A lot of flowers... So that the Eldritch may bless us, too..." He looked over at Dori whose eyes spoke approval.

"Mostly a Healers' ceremony, then..." spoke the Elder once more, "with lots of song and dance and feasting after? How soon would you like this to be?"

"How soon can everyone start gathering flowers?" Laughed Tamlynn as he squeezed Dori's hand, "It is new moon tomorrow evening..."

Dori shook her head 'yes', "And the signs for this new moon are good... Though I know that would be awfully soon?"

"Well, it doesn't take that long to gather flowers... And I know the ceremony well enough... All three of us can go over the basics quite quickly with the minor adaptations Tamlynn has requested. But, you do not wish special robes?.. Or something?..."

Dori and Tamlynn looked quietly at each other for a few moments when Dori said, "I think our need is to be Handfasted as quickly as possible. We both have plenty of appropriate clothing... I think Tamlynn fears if we wait much longer, I shall change my mind... I won't, but... why make him nervous?"

"You have doubts?" queried the Healer of Dori seriously.

"No...no... not anymore... And I promise," she said, looking into Tamlynn's eyes, "I shall not express any more, either... I've wronged you... I could not want a better father for my child... Or a better husband... I love you... I love you a lot."

Smiling in an affirming manner as he squeezed her hand even more tightly, he replied, "Tomorrow evening, then..."

The Elder Healer took them both in his eyes, pleased at what he saw, "At new moon, with lots of flowers and much joy."

As was promised, flowers were strewn everywhere at a clearing near the Island shores. Insomuch that flowers of some kind always bloomed here, Spring had finally started and the brightly colored petals lit up the evening air as they glistened from the center fire. The ceremony was indeed quite simple, the Four Winds and Directions addressed quickly and directly before going on to the main aspects to the Deities. All in all, the only thing that either Dori or Tamlynn honestly cared about was their pronouncement as a couple and that everyone was enjoying themselves.

The night breeze hushed as the scent of the flowers lifted and filled the air about the Circle. The other Healers and students stood around the Circle beyond the flowers. A fire in the center of the Circle represented the Healer's Flame as much as the hearts of the bonding couple. After their respective Gods were invoked, Dori and Tamlynn exchanged

small gifts, both brightly colored beaded necklaces. A green stone centered Tamlynn's, as a bright, fiery crystal centered Dori's, both made by a Healer craftswoman who was more than pleased to let them be a gift from herself as well. Fortunately, the only thing that needed adding to existent necklaces were the center stones. A breeze wafted through them as it seemed the Gods Themselves spoke approval. Their humble robes of white; Dori's braided in blue, Tamlynn's in green; nearly glowed in the firelight. A modest ceremony, but very Elven, for everyone caught a soft sigh of music that appeared to echo from the trees beyond, though one might suppose it the low roll of the wash on the shore.

Colored ribbon of braided green, blue and white was bound about the couple's wrists to bless. Then the Elder Healer took the ribbon off again to throw it into the fire to seal the bond. At that, the couple walked around the Circle hand in hand in presentation of their new status to the rest of the Circle. A song did begin from the watching Healers, startling Tamlynn a little, but making Dori only smile. It was a modest song, a graceful song, a Healer's song of blessings, weaving the myriad strands of energy and life about Dori and Tamlynn that was nearly intoxicating. At the end of their circling, they kissed each other simply before they left the circle where the Elder Healer would finish reopening the Sacred Space. As it was now over, Tamlynn's heart was decisively at rest as they quietly disappeared from the gathering to be alone awhile as custom dictated.

When they did return, they joined in with the rest of the festivities, happy and satisfied with their new status. Tamlynn could not help but that he had to do a lot of the singing himself as the rest of the party danced and reveled into the night. For the most part, Dori sat next to him as he sang, content to listen, content to be a truly bonded part of his life, as her heart, too, no longer questioned. If only they could look forward to nothing beyond the simple pleasures of a normal wedded life.

A few times Dori requested that the Healers light up the Healer Flame that she might study It more fully. She would not reenter the Fires and they all took great care to shield Tamlynn as it rose. And despite coming to understand the Flame quite intimately, something about It always managed to elude her. And the time drew near. Dori stood in front of the full length, highly polished metal given as a gift. Aside the fact that it did not reflect as well as the waters by the shore, it surely showed Dori's pregnancy to herself clearly enough. 'Soon,' she thought, 'Too, too soon... I've searched and searched and looked straight into the heart of the Flame and seen... wait...' she felt a sudden impulse, "The heart," she said, "My heart, my heart... Could it be?... Yes... it's the only chance we have."

When she spoke of her ideas to the others, they agreed that it was the only hope. And now, with direction, they began to prepare Dori's birthing place. Finally some hope shined in all their eyes as shields were erected and built day after day around the place. Tamlynn helped in their effort in his own way and he made certain that the place was comfortable and well prepared. He knew he would be making as much of his own energies available to Dori as possible as this passage took place.

When the first pangs did come, morning had just streaked the sky and people were barely stirring. "It's time..." Dori gasped to Tamlynn, "My Love, hurry... It is time."

Tamlynn immediately pulled from the bedclothes to go find someone to spread the fact of Dori's need. Then he came back to help her get up and repair to the place set up for her. Nervousness set in, for now would come the true test, and if they should fail,

not only would they lose their child, but the Holy Isle stood to lose the very core of their being and strength. As they carefully walked, other Healers came up to join them, wrapping the couple with their own energies of calm and love.

As they moved into the area prepared for her, Dori smiled into Tamlynn's eyes. "The Healers shall keep the pain minimal so I may concentrate. And you may come to the center with me." He looked at her a little startled, "The Flame can no longer harm you. I know this, now... Come... Be where you belong... With me... With our child..." Through his apprehension, Tamlynn warmly smiled, kissing her cheek.

The Healers who could not be present within, stood in a circle about the structure, beginning the chanted hum as they began the final build that would seal their fate one way or the other. Within, Dori closed her eyes and began her concentration both with the labor as well as the Flame that she had now begun to deliberately draw into herself. It was as if the whole structure came a lit with fire that for a moment unsettled some of the Healers themselves. Yet, the center of It remained within Dori who became Its focus and control. Instantly, it was as if Dori and Tamlynn stood in the middle of the Flame, Tamlynn looking a bit frightened. Then the image of a radiant woman whose silvery hair and great brown eyes told Tamlynn she was his daughter, appeared to them. Dori reached out and took her, bidding Tamlynn do the same.

As they all held tightly to one another, for a final time the Masked Figure appeared, sinister and bold. "And what do you think you're really going to do?" He snarled at Dori.

"You know what I can do." She challenged, "And if you even try to touch us, then everything is lost to you."

Angered by her words and challenge, he hastily rushed upon them, which is exactly what Dori wanted. Instead of shielding, she drew him quickly into the Flame, into herself, rushing him through her as she let the Fires burn him mercilessly. A scream of horror shot through the skies as the Eldritch Lord sought escape. Still, Dori held him until his essence was but a seed. Only then did she release him for she could not bring her heart to actually destroy him. But she also knew that the Flame was now solidly the Healers' and could never be taken from them again. Not as long as she lived or for those she would summarily train in the crowning function of this wonderful source of Power.

The Fires died down to quiet loving embers as the cry of a newly born child sounded through the aires. A child that all the Healers marveled at for her silky, silver hair and deep, brown eyes though she had just been birthed. Fire danced in her eyes as it now did in her parents as well. And soon, new teachings would begin as the real Power of the Healers was finally born.