

## **Holy Isle, Blessed Isle**

*By Donna Lyon Rhose*

The twilight of the air filmed faintly in silver glints as Dori walked through a forest mist, her long dark curls occasionally catching on the leaves and branches. Somewhat tall, her slender form moved like a shimmering shadow upon the forest floor towards a clearing on a western hill. Finally parting the leaves on the moonlit patch of grasses, a peculiar sight met her that took her a space to even grasp. What appeared to be women in curious outfits within the clearing seemed to Dori to be playing some kind of elaborate game. They carried colored ribbons in their hands that they trailed behind them as they strolled from place to place, a voice from the background giving instructions to their movements, "Unicorn to thirty-three red... Elven Princess to thirteen blue opposing Griffin fourteen yellow." For a while Dori watched in complete fascination concerned that she might disrupt this intricate weave, for as she watched, she comprehended that this was a weave of great power and significance. Counting the women involved, Dori found their number to be twenty-four in all. Still, as she pondered that number, she was ambivalent just what that ought mean. And though she had kept as quiet as possible, trying her utmost not to move, at last she was noticed and for a moment the movement in the clearing stopped as all the women turned to look directly at Dori. A bit frightened, for the eyes that looked upon her did not look exactly human, Dori began to turn to run.

Before she could do so, however, a gentle hand upon her arm stayed her and she looked back into the face of what was obviously an Elven woman, strange and beautiful, with red hair and bright green eyes. The woman smiled, "Welcome, Healer." As the rest of the women resumed their strange and magickal game.

"Where am I?" Asked Dori, a little concerned that for some reason she might be caught in the Eldritch.

"Do not worry, Bright Star... We only wished to speak with you... or at least, I did..."

With that, Dori looked back at the weavers in blatant curiosity, "What are they doing?"

The woman beamed with a knowing twinkle in her eyes, "It is the Great Gameboard... We are playing 'Chess'..."

After a short span when Dori realized no other answer would be forthcoming, she looked back at the woman, her hazel/green eyes large and intent. "What... did you wish to speak to me of?"

"I am Gwyniffar... I have lost my special love to you, my Lady... And I ask that you treat him well... He was with us long and long... And would have been for even longer... But a shadow fell and he had to leave... I am sorry of it, yet, how can I regret? He has your love, now..."

"Tamlynn..." Dori said timidly, "You speak of Tamlynn."

A nudge at the Elven woman's shoulder made her turn to regard a Unicorn that sparkled of silver and gold and the woman laughed a little, "You have a visitor... He comes speedily now. A boat at your shores in the dawning light." The Unicorn reared and pranced as if in a delighted dance and the Elven woman laughed merrily at its joyful romping. However, when she looked back at Dori, there was an air of sadness in her eyes,

"Your visitor comes for healing, dear Lady... but I suspect, healing brings healing in return. And, I suspect, you shall be most pleased to greet him."

"Who is it?" She asked in wonderment for no Runners had come to the Holy Isle in quite some while, so very little of the outside world had reached them of late. She did appreciate, however, that when she had come to the Isle, the Cymric People had been making preparations for war. Any number of people could be coming here at last, and this suddenly unsettled Dori as she watched the Elven woman's bright eyes.

"He brings much news, Bright Star... But, do not fear that... You shall be very happy to see him..."

The images began to fade from Dori like a great haze across her eyes, "But... Gwyniffar..."

"Treat Tamlynn well... He is beloved to us... As are you..." The sweetness of the woman's voice echoed in Dori's ears as everything disappeared.

Waking to the sound of someone softly singing, Dori stretched sleepily to look over and find her husband, Tamlynn, by their newly born daughter's cradle, rocking it gently to and fro. The song was so relaxing that Dori nearly laid back to fall asleep again. Resisting such a temptation, she carefully sat up so that she might not disturb him unduly. Nevertheless, after a moment, he did look over to smile as he continued a couple more strains. His long, nearly white, silvery hair was loose and rather tangled, giving him an air of wildness in the budding glints of the early morning light, "Do the Elves look this wonderful in the morning? You look as if you've been hunting through brambles in the night..." She yawned and laughed a little at his askance look in response. "Does she need feeding?"

He shook his head 'no' as he got up briefly to lean over the cradle to check the child and sing a little more, very softly. Then he walked back over to Dori whispering, "Shh... she was a bit fussy, I just got her to sleep..." He crawled into the bed where he tried to settle down upon the pillows. But, he seemed strained and while Dori still admitted that the Bardic life force confused her, for such her husband was, she did sense an erraticness in his feelings and thoughts.

Despite the first rays of light filtering through the shuttered windows, Dori tried to snuggle up against Tamlynn, hoping he might relax at her contact. Speaking lovingly in his ear to elicit response, she said, "It amazes me how you are able to sing to her and she calms so easily."

He smiled rather wanly, "The Eldritch taught me that. You know, Llyria, our daughter, is likely an Eldritch soul." She brushed a hand through his fair hair trying to catch contact with his dark, brown eyes. At first he didn't seem to want to return her gaze, but then yielded. Dori saw some hurt there, although she wasn't certain why as he spoke, "You slept long and hard."

Abruptly Dori remembered her dreams and realized that they were not dreams at all. "We've a visitor coming... this morning... perhaps we ought go down and greet him."

Tamlynn's eyes grew very melancholy, "She spoke with you. You were asleep and our home became filled to bursting with the scent of wildflowers and fresh Earth. It woke me... It woke Llyria..."

She wrapped her arms about him and laid her head on his chest, "Open..." she said "open your channels as are mine." Doing as she asked and feeling the warm wash of her

Healer's forces, he sighed profoundly. A bit surprised at the extent of his apparent unease and near distress, she whispered, "It has been awhile since you've been like this."

"Without you, Bright Star... I would soon die... I spent much too much time there... too much time with Elven folk and Elven ways... I am sorry, but your husband shall never be truly whole... How did the Eldritch ever Cross Over, as the legends say? How could they've possibly survived?... Did they pair with Healers?." He shrugged and tightened his own arms about Dori smiling slightly to himself, "But, how could they've all found someone as special as you?"

While their voices undoubtedly had been soft, some fussing began again in the cradle. This time, Dori moved to get up, "Well, she probably needs changing and I would not doubt she may be hungry at last... Why don't the three of us make ready and go down to the shore?... I am highly curious who this is that is coming to the Holy Isle."

As they got down to the gentle shores to look out over the waters, both Dori and Tamlynn caught sight of a sailing boat with only half a dozen people aboard. Though the sails were up, an intricate standard drifted in the mild breezes from the Isle. Dori held Llyria tightly to herself as the child suckled, to nearly relax her hold when it dawned on her what standard flew. Looking at Tamlynn, it was apparent he also understood as he spoke, "My Goddess... It's the Head of the Bardic Council..."

For a moment Dori frowned, "But the Lady said 'he'. Rhiannon is Head of Council, unless..."

Tamlynn glanced curiously at Dori and shrugged, "I'm afraid it's been awhile. Did you not say there was a Second?... I'd never heard of such, but... times change."

"Taliesin..." She said softly, "Still... This is Rhiannon's flag... Or was... He's never used the Head of Council symbol while she lives... Ah, my Gods... Is that 'why' he comes to the Holy Isle?"

"Would he need such dramatic healing if he is become Head of Council? The Bards traditionally deal easily enough with this passage of Power..."

She regarded Tamlynn close, "In this case this was not the normal relationship between the Head and their 'Chosen'."

Soon the boat was entering the cove where other Healers had become aware of the boat's presence and made preparations for its entrance. When it landed at last, Dori and Tamlynn began their walk towards it to help in the greeting. Dori caught the likeness of a fairly tall man with a wonderful mass of rich, dark hair and knew for certain, "Taliesin!" She cried, "Maerdydd!"

Her calls caught the man's attention and he looked out at her to beam and call, "Dori! It 'is' you!" He came ashore quickly and would have hugged her in greeting had he not seen the bundle in her arms. Seeing this, he placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed her cheek, expressing merrily, "A child, Dori? How wonderful. I know how you love children..." He looked up to see Tamlynn standing by her. The look of pure startlement in Tamlynn's eyes persuaded Taliesin to grin richly, though Tamlynn's eyes grew wide and round. To this, Taliesin's beautiful blue eyes twinkled as he turned his gaze back to Dori, "Are the rumors true, Dori?... Are you the one they are calling 'Bright Star'? The one who understands the Healer's Flame like no-one ever has before?"

She smiled back at Taliesin, she remembered him well and his incredible charm; and although she had never noticed it before, she caught an interesting scent about him that reminded her fully of Springtime in Gwynedd, the home they both had come from

once. Now it was hard to say just where he might be and she was never certain what the next day might bring. However, she also knew despite his cheery expressions, something was not in order and he had assuredly come to the Isle for a reason. "Maerdyenn," she said again, for that was the name she had come to call him as did anyone who was a friend, "this is my husband, Tamlynn... and, of course, my daughter here, Llyria."

"Tamlynn..." Spoke Taliesin back, "Your name is somehow familiar... You are a Bard?... The rumors say such and I am surely inclined to agree. Certainly, you are not a Healer."

As if a terrible shyness overrode him, Tamlynn seemed to sink back a little from Taliesin, as he answered, "Yes, Father... I am a Bard." in a soft, almost passive voice.

Taliesin features became quizzical at the other man's response, but he also chose to smile warmly and kindly, "Perhaps we shall have time to talk later... It is surely unusual to find a Bard here, living here... amongst all these Healers." He said gesturing widely to all the others.

"May we show you somewhere you might rest?" Dori piped in, causing Taliesin to regard her again and nod his head. At that, the Elder Healer of the Isle came up to them at last to hug Taliesin formally, "Greetings, Lord." He said, "I'm afraid I am not as quick as the youngsters here. And I'm sure they have told you already that you are most welcome."

"Dori... ah, Bright Star, is it not?... was about to show me some place that I might settle and rest... I shall need that... Later, then, I shall discuss the reasons for my hasty appearance. This is not easy, please be patient with me." It was only then that all the Healers became keenly aware that Taliesin carried a deep sorrow, as if some of the energies of his life force were mercilessly shredded. It became obvious that he had been trying to cover it some, yet, he was unable to maintain that gloss for very long. Dori eyed Taliesin sympathetically, then quietly led him back up to where the Healers made their homes and had their places of teaching.

Tamlynn had taken Llyria back with him to he and Dori's dwelling so that Dori might help see to Taliesin's settling with the other Healers. When she came back, she found him holding the baby tightly to himself, quietly singing and walking about as if soothing her even as it was quite apparent that she was happy and asleep. Already realizing that the appearance of Taliesin had unsettled him, Dori went up to him and gently laid a hand on his arm, "Thank-you for taking Llyria back here, Love... But, don't you think she's ready to be laid down, now?... I know you like to help in the gardens and I do have some studies I can attend to here. Unless you'd like me to get one of the students to watch her and we could take a little walk?... And talk?" She took Llyria from him to put her softly in her cradle, "Tamlynn?"

"Yes... A walk would be good..." He said somewhat spacyly. She smiled and kissed his cheek before going out to find someone not overly busy, albeit all the students were more than happy to tend to the child. At the time there were few other children in the Community and little Llyria, with her near-white, silvery hair and dark brown eyes that for some reason had been brown from her birth, was more than anyone was able to resist. It only took Dori a moment or so to locate someone.

Having done all that, Dori took Tamlynn's hand and nearly pulled him along with her onto some of the paths into the surrounding wooded areas. It was obvious to Dori that Tamlynn's mind was racing into areas she wasn't quite sure she understood. After a little

time, she also found that she would have to be the one to open channels first, "You were... are... a Member of the Bardic Council... Yet, you are greatly disturbed... You acted as if Taliesin frightened you."

"Why did you call him... what did you call him?..."

"Maerdyenn... Well... In a way, the name Taliesin is sort of like people calling me Bright Star, though I am apt to consider that my real name, anymore. Taliesin is his... oh, Court name, official name. Maerdyenn is his personal name, childhood name?... If you know him well enough he will start to insist on you using it."

"What is wrong?... Why is he here?"

"Rhiannon... Rhiannon is gone... Something about it, too... I don't really grasp it at this point. In fact, it may actually take some time, it's hard to say... He is far more in need of healing than was honestly apparent when he first landed, even when he let his guard down some... and his life-force is 'not' real easy to comprehend at all."

"I'm not surprised..." said Tamlynn almost hastily, "he isn't human."

Dori stopped and turned towards Tamlynn, "What?"

Looking intently at her, he replied, "He's an Elf..." Dori frowned as he kept speaking, "Somehow he's managed to alter his being to remain here... but... he's not human... Maerdyenn is likely an Eldritch name."

"A bit tall and dark for an Elf, don't you think?" She tested.

"I don't care... I 'know' Elves... their scent, their glamour, the look in their eyes... besides... there's tall ones, short ones, dark-light... but an Elf is an Elf... they're not human."

Dori took his hands and squeezed them tightly, "Elf or no, he 'needs' healing of some kind badly. He's much thinner than last I saw him and there is grey at his temples, some age in his face I've never seen before. And you mustn't be afraid of him, Tamlynn, I know him well. He is Head of your Council now, and I know he was not put there by mistake."

Tamlynn sighed and scuffed his feet in the path, "It isn't that..." He looked down into the dirt, watching the puffs from his feet, "Sometimes it's hard. Hard to part of this Realm... And he, he made a 'choice' to be here. Why?... Now, he shall always be part of this Realm. He'll die and be reborn... reborn here, not the Realm of Light. And he'll be accorded human then. Something... Is something so wrong?"

"You spoke of the Cross Over... when Elves deliberately opened the doors between the Worlds and came to this Realm in numbers and were caught in the Wheel. Could he not be..?"

"That was long ago..." Tamlynn moved again to walk slowly, taking Dori this time, "A Doorway in 'this' time, for an Elf to fully step into this World, would have to have been forced open to let him pass through. Or, perhaps, his parents. And, he would be here for a specific 'reason', believe me."

Dori watched Tamlynn closely as they continued to walk, his face registering that his mind was surely elsewhere thinking, considering, wondering. The path there ran up besides a small stream where Dori bade that they might sit, "Perhaps we ought've brought our poles and fished..." She smiled and was glad to see him return it with a smile of his own. "Why,..." she said gingerly, "why did the Eldritch Cross Over?"

Gazing out over the water into the pretty foliage on the banks, Tamlynn considered her question, "It's not totally clear, the Eldritch in the Realm of Light do not

seem to honestly remember. They only know that somehow their Brethren felt they could help the Realm of the Wheel somehow... Why... How they felt they were helping, is no longer known. It is the only real sadness the Eldritch actually have."

Sensing an openness he was not always free with, Dori ventured, "What is the Great Gameboard?"

He looked at her suddenly and slightly started, "The Great Gameboard? " He frowned, "She showed you that?... Were they playing 'Chess'?" Dori nodded cautiously, "Ummm... Umph."

"Is it bad?"

"What?... Oh, no... not bad... It just means they're preparing for something... You are working much with the Flame lately... It may well have something to do with that. Weren't you working on Its potential as a Doorway? It could even be a welcoming. They are fond of you... Perhaps you shall see them from time to time."

"Perhaps the Fires can be used for communication?... You are better than you've been." She said, hugging him and laying her head against him.

"For some reason it feels good to talk today... It's beautiful here... it reminds me of their places. Perhaps... perhaps Taliesin's... Maerdynn's presence here shall be good for me." He enfolded her and pulled her to the ground amidst the leaves with him.

She laughed, enjoying his turn of temperament as he showered kisses on her, "Is he 'really' Eldritch? Really? There were always stories, but..."

"Have I ever lied to you?"

She laughed again, "Bards do not lie, as you are so fond of saying. Well, neither do I, and I love you a lot."

Through some gentle caressing and sighs, Tamlynn finally said, "You know, don't you... Elves are 'very' fond of making love in the woods."

Sitting across from the Elder Healer, a line of sweat across his brow, Taliesin folded his hands to lean his head upon them and sigh. He was undoubtedly much more slender, so much time had been spent in worry and hiding the last couple years or so. His hair had grown much longer and he would simply tie it back. Though it was combed out, one tended to get the impression he really didn't care too much. A little grey sat at his temples and the first signs of some lining moved across his face, despite the fact that he still looked impressively young. It was only his eyes that truly spoke to one of his real age for there was too much wisdom behind them, and they had assuredly seen too much sorrow. His clothes of green and white lay heavily on him as if the very pressure of their significance as a Bard were nearly too much for him. The Elder Healer placed his hands on Taliesin's shoulders, "I know none of this is easy, friend... there is more than just a healing here that must take place... Your life force is altering, isn't it?... We shall give you all the support we know to give. But you, my friend... You must learn to open yourself up... I know you do to a degree, but this is not the same. I believe it shall be quite necessary to open everything."

Taliesin drew in a long sigh, "I do not know how wise that shall be... What I am dealing with..." He looked up at the Elder Healer and for a moment what shined out from his eyes took the Healer back a little. "There's a tangle in there. I feel wrapped up upon myself."

"Rhiannon's death... Having to search so long for your captive daughter, you have been through..."

"You do not understand... Rhiannon left, and did not take me with her. And I feel as if I've been left on the battlefield hurt and bleeding with none to tend me but myself... there are things; I must trust, trust, trust to the depths of my being. There is too much here." He pressed a hand to his chest, "Too much of what the Bards 'are' is at stake here... In some ways I feel I am wrong to have come here, to expect so much from all of you... yet... I must do something. I must seek solace somehow. I am hardly fit to be Head of Council in my current state... I am fortunate, Gwen oversees the Council in my absence. She is far more than just a Chief Advisor, she handles the Council near as well as Rhiannon... Or, I like to think, myself..."

"Is she your 'Chosen'?"

At that, Taliesin permitted a smile that was surprisingly warm, "We shall see..." Then another thought touched him, "Jenna shall be coming. Soon, I hope."

"Jenna... Is that your mate?"

Taliesin nodded quietly, "I wrong her, too... I must... It comes time, I must let her be part of all of this. She is patient. She has never asked to know beyond her status as a Chief Bard. How can I truly honor a love like that? I sometimes feel I am poorly made beside her."

"Perhaps... Dori... Bright Star... Do you think you might be able to open to her? She is beyond any of the rest of the Healers. She is still learning her place with the Flame, but no-one has ever penetrated such knowledge before. And... She is your friend."

"She was apprentice to the main Healer at my Court in Gwynedd... It is so... wonderful to see the woman of the girl that I once remember... She has certainly gone far beyond the expectations of her Mentor. I know one Healer that is surely proud beyond her dreams that Dori apprenticed with her... And a Bardic husband?... I shall wish to speak with that man, we have much to discuss... I 'know' who he is, I remember now..."

"Yes, we had some real excitement here for awhile... You do not intend to request his leaving, do you?" The Elder Healer was suddenly a little fearful of just that.

"Oh, no... No... Not hardly. The Council never seeks to estrange one's happiness... I hope only to improve things for him... Yes... Dori... Perhaps there is something... I pray to the Goddess you may very well be right."

As a wind rang through the trees melancholy and strange, Gwyniffar took some of her people within a wooded shelter that seemed constructed entirely of leaves. For a long while she stood nearly motionless listening to the singing of the wind. "Samhain comes." She said at last, "Samhain comes soon... And he who might lead the Hunt with me has come to find healing amongst the Children of the Flame... Yet... He shall never be truly healed until he leads the Hunt."

"But the Wheel lays Her claim upon him now, Lady... And he was surely lost to us long before." Spoke an elf that was one of Gwyniffar's closest friends.

"Elan... why do you insist on being so certain he is even Eldritch any more than that he shall be human?... He has swallowed the soul of his brother and purified that essence, even as it remains his darkness and always shall."

"Is it the Bardic Temple? I have heard only rumors... But, is that not Rhiannon's?"

"He is the other aspect of that Temple... The Court of the Unicorn, my cousins call It."

"Oh, the Unicorn." Elan said, impulsively impressed. A howling in the wind caused all the Elves to nearly start, then stand motionless as they listened intently.

Gwyniffar turned and gravely regarded them all. "It is his duty to lead the Hunt... He has responsibilities now that he must learn to accept... And I know Bright Star shall help us. Help him to assume those responsibilities. And the Holy Isle shall become truly the Blessed Isle forever."

Dori frowned over some of the pieces of parchment she held in her hands. Whereas most things were committed to memory and experience, certain things were set down and ascribed to the Archives; most notably aspects of history that affected the Healers and their work. As she studied the Flame and Its Power, she also continued in her studies to eventually become Librarian and Keeper of the Archives of the Holy Isle. For many people on the Island, they had come to accept and believe Dori would become the human embodiment of the Isle itself. Her gentleness and compassion had always been noted from when she first entered the Isle and it was rare to see any sense of anger in her. But, now she did feel a little exasperation as she tried to decipher what had been set on parchment, some of it being so archaic she doubted even a Bard could make it out easily. In fact, she decided, she very well would ask Tamlynn to help her in some of this. That morning he had chosen to go off to help in the gardens, which he often did. Sometimes he helped pasture the sheep, but he never seemed near as interested in that, even though his knowledge in it was sound. Now and then he chose to hunt or fish and was proficient enough that some of the younger Healers and students asked his guidance in that area. Dori herself enjoyed fishing with him from time to time admitting that he always caught the larger part of the fish, despite it being something she, too, had always enjoyed and done since very young.

Sighing and putting the parchments down a moment, she reflected on the coming of Taliesin's mate. Jenna had landed just a few days before and this had brought much joy to Taliesin. She was surely a sparkly woman, full bodied, with great masses of curly dark hair and dark, deep eyes. A lot of Pictish blood coursed through her veins and it showed. She had more energy than a basket full of bees and it was obvious that Taliesin cherished her hugely. Sorrow had not left her untouched, however, the miscarriage of their second child was something she only presently was coming to terms with, and the long absence between herself and her mate with its worries and fears had nearly drained her. Thankfully, to be joined with him again at last did serve a certain amount of healing for she and Taliesin both.

They had spent several days in near seclusion talking, loving and just being with each other, in many ways honestly wanting nothing to do with the outside World for awhile. It was the night before on a new moon when the Healers were singing and dancing after some rituals and Tamlynn had told a tale or two that the couple emerged to join in the celebration. After some time, Tamlynn passed his harp to Taliesin, bidding the other man to sing. Looking at each other, a new sense of fondness sparked between them and Taliesin took the harp grinning warmly.

When Taliesin began to sing one could nearly hear the communal intake of breath. His voice was startling and beautiful, with great grace and power none had ever

heard before, including Tamlynn who had heard both human and Eldritch voice. Both Jenna's and Tamlynn's eyes filled with tears for they both were keenly aware of the great echoes of pain beneath the tones of his song. The Healers were affected as well, gasping and sighing unconsciously until he finished. He beamed again when it was over, but instead of handing the harp back to Tamlynn, he gave it to Jenna, who took his cue and chose to start up a dancing tune. A gratefulness passed through the whole of the group as they quickly returned into a festive mood to dance about the fires.

And there was now no outward question why Taliesin was the Head of Council, or even why he had chosen Jenna for his mate. They were so obviously happy to be together once again that it bled over into a sense of happiness for those that were around them. Dori smiled as she remembered this, starting when she heard the knock on the framework of her dwelling. "Welcome, friend," she said in traditional greeting, "come in peace and blessings."

"Blessings on your home and all who dwell within." Spoke Taliesin gracefully as he complied and entered. "And how is my friend and her beautiful child today?" He said as he quickly bent to look in the cradle before coming back over to Dori, "Indeed, she is a lovely child."

"Thank-you. She makes me very happy... Be seated, Maerdynn... How are you?"

As he sat he looked at her parchments inquiringly, "Studies?"

"Yes, and not very easy ones... Anyway..." She set the parchments down to go to fuss with water in a swung pot over a small fire whose smoke gently wafted through a hole in the center of the roof. "Would you care for tea? I know 'I' need some about now."

"That would be very nice... Dori... Bright Star... I should like to speak with you awhile..."

"Of course..." She said as she poured them mugs. While the weather never got truly cold on the Holy Isle, it had gotten a little cooler and they both welcomed their steaming drinks. "Would you prefer to sit outside? I can listen for Llyria well enough and we would not be as like to disturb her."

With that they retired outside where leaves brightened the day in a multitude of autumn colors. Sitting on logs formed into simple chairs, they made themselves comfortable before proceeding. "I know there are 'many' things that we shall have to go over." Spoke Taliesin once more, "I've spent time with your Empaths to try and release some of my internal pressure points. It is painful and I am concerned that I may be hurting them in the process. And I can not open in the fullest sense, the wash would be far too strong."

"What can we work on, then? How shall we proceed?"

Taliesin gazed at her for a long while, locking his eyes into hers deliberately, pleased that she neither turned away nor showed any fear or hesitation. "You and I must come to understand each other. And 'you' must come to perceive a great many things. I believe you capable. I believe you are a Healer like none who's ever lived before. You shall be given certain keys to the very heart of the Bardic Folk through this work with me. And I know you shall honor and preserve them as well as help heal the frayed strands of my soul. Life is a great series of Mysteries, Bright Star. You know that, I know that, and you must understand that the reason I am having the difficulties that I am in trying to heal is because they 'do' involve Mysteries... Are you open? Are you prepared for that fact?... Are 'you' prepared to perhaps become altered yourself? To become changed?"

A shiver went through Dori's spine as she realized the weight of his words, "I am a Healer." She said after a few moment's reflection, "My life is devoted to that fact, no matter 'where' it must take me."

Breathing deeply, Taliesin recomposed himself as he smiled, "Well... well... Let us speak of lighter things a moment... that Bardic husband of yours..." She raised her brows and he laughed a little, "In the time of Math, I believe... about a century ago; a fairly young Member of the Bardic Council disappeared into the Eldritch as he entered upon the Holy Isle. He had had the misfortune to come here during a ritual of Initiation when no-one knew to shield for him as no-one was aware of his presence. However, it also managed to open a Door for the Eldritch, if only momentarily. Seeing one of their own in trouble, they protected him and were able to bring him to the Realm of Light. Where there was much feasting and great joy... Until... Something happened... I'm not totally clear, but there was suddenly trouble on 'that' side, so you brought him back to the Realm of the Wheel... Tamlynn, the fair haired, beloved of the Elves."

"Exactly what do you mean, 'seeing one of their own in trouble'?" Was Dori's inquisitive but careful expression.

"Many humans... well, quite a few here and there... possess Elven souls... And the Bards tend to have far more than their share."

"Caught in the Wheel from the Great Cross Over, as Tamlynn calls it." Dori spoke reflectively.

"Yes... Caught and bound to be reborn in human bodies forever. They believed their joy, their music, their love for the Earth and Her Children was something the Wheel desperately needed. And the Bardic Path was born... Dori, Dori... even if a Bard did not possess an Elven soul, the touch becomes so heavy, so strong, they may as well have been... But your husband was once Eldritch. And the Elves would have done everything to keep him in the Realm of Light as long as they possibly could. I'd guess he'd have had another couple centuries before the pull of the Wheel would have forced his release and subsequent death... It hurts them, it hurts him to be here now... Believe me, he thinks about them daily... But you are... something very special... If it were not so, if you were any other Healer, the music in his blood would become too strong. He would leave to be with other Bards; the open road would call him and become too fair. And yet, even this would not satisfy him, he would finally die searching for the Eldritch and seeking a way to re-enter their Realm... And, it wouldn't take long. He should have left you almost immediately. You are without a doubt, truly incredible. His love for you is like a complete circle. It is as if something of him resides 'in' you and something of you resides 'in' him... And... I also wish to improve things for him. He is surely a Member of the Council and ought be treated as such. From now on, Runners shall come here regularly and he may expect a visiting Bard from time to time. He 'needs' that, and the Council needs his thoughts on many matters that face us now. He was not made a Council Member for nothing. He's clever and reflective, and now with his Eldritch knowledge he's even more valuable than he ever was... He was somewhat young for a Council Member, you know. Somewhere between thirty and thirty-five turns, I believe."

"I surely 'do not' have a human husband, then, do I."

"Is that so bad?" Taliesin smiled, cocking his head, eliciting a like response of her in return. "But I really think you well knew that already."

"And you... Tamlynn has said..." Dori looked at him in such a way that said she expected him to proceed.

He looked off, his smile warm though removed a space, "My parents... are Elven Sorcerers. They created a Doorway so that I might be born and left here in the Realm of the Wheel. They were aware a Member of the Bardic Council would find me and raise me... Yes, I am from the Realm of Light. And so, too, is my physical body. I surely admit it is not been easy, yet being birthed here did ease it quite a bit... It had been my request and my parents, albeit very hesitant, decided that it was right to honor that request. So... Tamlynn 'knew' I was Elven. I saw that in his eyes when I landed... Well, it is something you are to know, to understand. We most certainly can not proceed unless you do... And in some ways you ought rather understand why a Bard's life-force is a 'little odd'." Putting down his drink, he took both her hands in his, "Gently, gently, touch on my life-force. I shall guide you, so do not be concerned... But, I wish you to begin to truly, 'truly' understand." Carefully, slowly, Dori moved her channels open so that she might begin to touch on Taliesin's energies. Like an array of colored lights, his energies flashed about her and she became nearly awed by what she sensed. Nonetheless, he was true to his word, steering her gently through the maze as she seemed to watch. Avenues appeared, and tangled webs of broken colors where pain apparently bled. A sense of knowledge washed through Dori that she momentarily tried to grasp but let go as she recognized it was not yet time. Realizing that she had never touched on anything like this before, she sat and stared at Taliesin a long while when they drew apart. However, thoughts drew through her mind and he watched her face curiously. "You are impressive," he spoke quietly in order that he not disturb her unduly, "You were calm and steadied throughout. I was concerned at first, but you have proven to be quite strong... And, you have some ideas?"

"Perhaps... the Flame is very potent, It is capable of many things... But, one must be able to communicate with and direct It. And it must be specific. There are options. But, I shall have to find time to quest those things."

"I'm very, very impressed." Taliesin said as he stood up. "Healers are among my favorite 'humans'. " He quipped, "And you all have been most gracious to my mate and I... Blessings, friend. Until later." He inclined his head momentarily, then left as Dori sat considering. It was only when Llyria began to fuss that Dori finally stirred from her seat.

Watching the stream closely, Tamlynn stood motionless in its midst, a fishing spear upraised in one hand. While the water was rather cold, he enjoyed this type of fishing as it took a quickness and skill that he liked to keep well tuned. A splendid, large salmon swam near him and just as he was about to strike, another spear caught it causing Tamlynn to jump back, lose his balance and fall backwards into the water. Laughter met his ears as he looked up to see Taliesin with the salmon on his spear, "I am assuredly sorry, my friend..." He said coming over and offering a hand to help Tamlynn get back up, still laughing a little, "I did mean to surprise you, but certainly had no intentions of upsetting you."

"I've forgotten lately..." Tamlynn said a bit haltingly as he found his footing once more, "Just how quick and silent the Eldritch can be... I use to try to match them... But, it was a vain game and it amused them endlessly, yet..." Tamlynn looked at Taliesin and

smiled tentatively, "They were not cruel about it... I was always the one who insisted on trying."

"In that you have a human body, you are very quick, indeed, my friend... Dori, or rather, Bright Star, must have spoken with you that you so freely name me Eldritch."

Tamlynn shrugged plaintively, "I should've done so anyway," he said arching his brows, though he smiled as well, "but, yes... Bright Star spoke to me... of many things, and I am pleased you still consider me a part of the Council in truth."

Indicating that they might as well head for the shore, Taliesin replied, "I 'ought' request you as a Chief Advisor and ask your attendance at the Bardic Seat. Your knowledge now goes well beyond most Council Members... but... 'This is' your place, the Holy Isle... with your more than Healer wife and your beautiful star-child daughter... Besides... if I took you away, you would die soon... There is no point of that; not when you shall live a long and rich life here... so... Runners shall come often and whatever Sacred Singers, Dancers, etc. that you might like... however... you might prefer not 'too' many as it may disrupt the Healers." He grinned a bit wickedly, "Yet, I recommend you request some. Having at least a few of 'our' kind about you would only help you." Casually, Taliesin kept walking in a sort of wandering fashion along one of the paths as he continued to carry the speared fish. "It's a nice fish." He said as if suddenly noticing it, "I'm sure Bright Star shall appreciate it." He handed it at Tamlynn who took it gingerly. "Take it, take it... It 'would've' been yours if I hadn't been playing my little game." As Tamlynn nodded in acceptance, Taliesin formed a grave expression. "I want you to know something that I really don't think that you realize... Tamlynn... tell me a lie."

"What?" asked Tamlynn, startled as well as puzzled.

"Anything... the sky is yellow, the ground is blue... Come on... just try."

"But, why?"

"Try." Commanded Taliesin, "Just try..." He coaxed, a little more sympathetically.

For a long moment Tamlynn stood almost dumbfounded, his mouth open as he tried to form words that did not seem to want to come out of his mouth. A flash of fear lit his eyes as he grasped his throat. "I can't." He gasped, hoarse and dry. "I can not say it... but, I don't understand!" His eyes were large with confusion.

"Did the Elves, by chance, give you an apple to eat before they let you go to Bright Star?"

"This is the island of apples, my Lord... why should that be so strange?"

"Gwyniffar... You can be so curious." Taliesin said offhandedly, though it surprised Tamlynn that he should know the Lady's name. "They gave you many parting Gifts, I can tell that... And this is the biggest one of all... though, of course, you shall age much more slowly than most. I'm sure you'll enjoy that one." Taliesin's smile was rich and compassionate as he still saw the rage of confusion on Tamlynn's face. "Oh, Tamlynn." He laughed a little and shook his head, "Come on, friend... You 'can not' lie... You are totally 'unable' to lie... Which means... if I 'really' want to know the truth, I know whom to ask... Gwyniffar must have been very, very fond of you." He looked at Tamlynn knowingly who lowered his eyes and shuffled his feet. "You needn't answer that one... Let's go back and give Bright Star that fish... friend?" He said, hoping to elicit a like response.

Tamlynn finally smiled back brightly, "Yes... yes... my friend."

Because of their guest, Dori took care to insulate and shield her work with the Flame, aware that even if Taliesin very well might not be harmed by It, there were those around him who assuredly would be. It was Dori's habit to take some precautions anyway in lieu of the students and children on the Island, so it was mostly a matter of strengthening existent protection. Whereas she could call up the Fires anywhere that she was, she usually preferred to go down to the Cavern used for the Healer Initiations, although only going a little ways in to where she could still see. Sometimes she even took Tamlynn with her as he no longer needed the shielding and protection and he seemed to enjoy the warm wash as she did some of the more minor experimentations. Though it tended to raise the sexual energies about them, it had to be admitted that that was not an unpleasant side affect and it was important to Dori that she try to share what she safely could with her Bardic husband. It strengthened their bond in some way and Dori felt Tamlynn did certainly have a place in the workings of the Flame, even if she wasn't certain yet just how that might be.

One morning, having left Llyria with a wet nurse and deciding to do some heavier work with the Healing Fires, she also sent Tamlynn to enjoy their Bardic company as she took her walk towards the Cavern. It would be a sunny day, even if a bit cool, and Dori chose to wear loose, comfortable clothes that only just took off the chill. Three or four other Healers accompanied her as they would help in the shields. "And what are you proposing today, Bright Star? I see that Tamlynn is not with you."

"The stars are good, and the veil grows thin. I should like to see just what sort of communication is possible."

"Communication?" The Healer gave her a concerned look.

Dori smiled and patted the other Healer's arm, "Ethan, I think you worry every time I do something... And you are sweet to be so concerned. But, this is what it's all about. Just be supportive. No harm is going to come to you... And I hope there shall be much to teach you."

The Healer sighed, "You mean to try for a Doorway this time... I can feel it."

"I'm not going to step through, if that's what you're afraid of. I 'have' been working up to this." She stopped and faced him, smiling patiently, "I shall not take any foolish risks... But, we 'are' here to learn, Ethan... You 'know' that."

After a moment, Ethan tentatively smiled back, saying quietly in compliance, "Yes, I know."

Having been in the Cavern so often of late, Dori had set up a little area for herself where she could comfortably sit that was also removed from where novices walked to their initiations. Calming herself, she let herself briefly touch on the life-forces of each of the Healers who had come with her. Satisfied that they had put up the shields needed, Dori began to call and open herself to the Healer's Flame. Having learned to do this slowly and gently, Dori controlled the build of the Inner Fires, letting It move up through her like an exotic, sublime salve. She had to admit that she thoroughly enjoyed this aspect of her sessions, despite the fact that experiments themselves could be difficult and sometimes quite trying. Then the Fires coursed through her like crystal blue heat, which at times unnerved some of the Healers helping her. Still, they were always amongst the strongest and most disciplined of the Isle and always held their ground for her. How she had leaned to do it, she was never entirely certain; but, once the Flame was in Its full force, Dori's spirit walked a little ways from It to look back and regard It. This time she

also moved around in a sun wise circle quietly addressing the Winds of the Four Directions. Having done so, she stood in the center of this small circle and called the Flame within it. As the Fires entered, It became a spherical form as Dori could feel the shifting on Inner Spaces. Sparkles of flashing movement dashed throughout the sphere as Dori watched in some true wonderment. She felt herself at once part and not part of this new configuration. After a very short time, what appeared to be Four Doors in each of the Directions mildly glowed and Dori was now a little unsure how she ought proceed. Somehow she felt to open any of those doors would not only lead to Other Realms, but also that each must be approached with precaution and quite possibly in some very specific manner. And as she pondered this, a knock came from the Western 'Door'. Startled by this, she however felt nothing sinister behind that Door and she timidly said, "Come in?..."

Slowly, as if with careful hands, the Door did open, a rush of breeze bursting forth with the scent of wildflowers and moist fresh earth swirling through the sphere, nearly knocking Dori's senses over. An impalpable light shone from the opening as an Elven woman with the red hair and green eyes gracefully walked through. "Greetings, Healer. Greetings, Friend... It is certainly good to be seeing you again. You are becoming wonderfully powerful and I applaud your quick and astute achievements."

"The Lady Gwyniffar?"

"The Western Door is the Door of the Eldritch. At this time it is the easiest and safest Door for you to open as we are more than willing to greet you. In time, you may find the Eastern Door more to your liking. Also, for now, I would not suggest going through even the Western Door as you need more time with the Core Circle Itself before you go further."

"You shall help me?" Dori's eyes were wide, not at all concealing her delight at this unexpected prospect and alliance.

Gwyniffar watched Dori a long while, the intensity of her stare seeming to bore into the other woman to the point of nearly unnerving Dori. Then a magnificent smile broke upon the Lady's face as she laughed merrily, "Ah, Bright Star." She spoke rather happily, "Indeed... But, you shall help us as well... Dear Friend, Come..." She said as she went over to Dori and gently pulled her towards the open Western Door. "No, do not walk through... But, do look." As Dori stepped up to the entrance, the dazzle of lights and elysian music nearly overwhelmed her. Though the colors were brilliant, the images seemed to be in some slow but constant flux. "So, too, does your World change..." Remarked Gwyniffar, "Your awareness just does not focus on it so easily as does ours. And we die, and we are reborn. We are just far more aware of our rebirth because death comes to us but slowly and our transition is immediate... But, our numbers have dwindled and we become more and more tied to the Realm of the Wheel." A great desire suddenly filled Dori's heart and she nearly stepped on through the Door before Gwyniffar pulled her back and into the center of the Circle. "No, dear Sister, that Realm would be but death for you at this time. You do not know yet how to find your way back."

"But, you've appeared to me before." Said Dori, desire still singing in her veins.

"Between the veils, my Friend..." And Gwyniffar shut the Door so that Dori would calm back down, "I can re-open it," She explained, "Perhaps I rushed that... Forgive me... Well... Now you know why Tamlynn's heart was nearly torn to shreds." Gwyniffar's smile was sweet and sympathetic. "Your friend," she said, suddenly

switching her thoughts, "My Lord Maerdyinn. I expect you know by now some of his true nature?"

"Yes... which has created quite a puzzle for us. It is difficult enough to offer healing to a fully vested Bard... Yet, of course, we do. But, that he is physically Eldritch."

"And more." Remarked Gwyniffar, "He shall not return to the Wheel any more than return to the Realm of Light."

Dori watched the Elven woman curiously, frowning thoughtfully, whereas Gwyniffar made no further comment. "I realize that there is more than healing involved. From what you say, I expect we also deal with Bardic Mysteries."

"Umm." Gwyniffar raised a delicate brow, "We deal with 'Mysteries'... tell my Lord... I expect to see him at the Hunt... It is the only way he shall be fully healed."

"Samhain? Do you mean Samhain?" Asked Dori, trying to perceive a little more.

"He may come through this Door... There is no danger, 'he' would know how to return." In a wave of gentleness, Gwyniffar took Dori's hands and kissed her cheek, "I must go now, dear Sister. I do not need to be taxing you so." With that, Gwyniffar quickly passed back through the Western Door and shut it before Dori could respond. With Gwyniffar's exit, the Flame began to fade and Dori closed the Circle that she might return to normal consciousness. She was not surprised to find that although she had begun her journey that morning, it had become full night.

Waking that night, strangely disturbed and seeming to sweat profusely, Tamlynn looked over at Dori who was sleeping heavily after her day's intense trance work. There were no dreams that might have awakened him and he felt no presence other than Dori and his daughter who also slept quietly and peacefully in her cradle. Even so, he felt he could not continue to be there, listening to the blowing leaves outside the windows. A sense of sadness framed the edges of his mind, of some unspoken pain he was undecided how to touch on. The day before had been most enjoyable as he had truly visited with Taliesin and his mate, Jenna. It was clear that Jenna was Taliesin's means of grounding, of even keeping a true touch with the Earth's reality. Having the ethereal quality as all Bards possessed, she also had a very real Earthiness and a exquisite womaness that exuded from her. Taliesin almost always had an arm about her that was not so much sensual as it was as if he were simply drawing comfort from her. And Tamlynn realized that he did miss the company of others of his kind indeed, telling Taliesin that he should like to have a small nucleus group come to the Isle. It would not take too long to set up simple dwelling areas for both Performers and Runners, and Tamlynn began to feel some real excitement at the prospect as if he could have done with their presence right away. In many ways, Tamlynn would act as Chief Bard without a Second, even though it was clear from Taliesin that Tamlynn's opinions and advice would be sought as a Council Member with certain ritual duties to tie him in on the Inner Realms with the rest of the Council. He had left the couple with a great sense of lightness; nevertheless, he could not mistake a shadow of sadness in Taliesin's eyes. Now he wondered of that sadness having awakened in the night beneath the voided sky of a new moon. Something pulled upon him so strongly that he found he could not remain beside Dori's peaceful side without disturbing her; so he quietly rose, put on a simple girded robe and went to wander outside. Having left the dwelling, the pull upon him became much greater and the impact was deeply sorrowful, making his own heart ache miserably with tears catching at the

corners of his eyes. And he moved towards the source of that pull that seemed to be coming from the shores of the Isle in a small niche almost hidden from any view either from sea or land.

As Tamlynn drew close, he heard the heartfelt sobs that he knew emitted from the Elven Bard's lungs. The idea of an Elf being under such distress was so excruciatingly disturbing to Tamlynn that he really just wanted to fold in on himself and shut off what he was facing. Even so, he stepped quietly forward and gently sat down by Taliesin's side. His arms folded about himself, Taliesin's torso was bent over his knees as he let his anguish flow out in some endless stream of pain. For a long while Tamlynn did nothing but sit, aware that the impact of such profound sorrow might well overrun him. Still, he was a fellow Bard and a Council Member at that, he could not forsake another Bard no matter what the consequences. After what seemed an endless bout of hesitation, Tamlynn chose to stroke the thick mass of the man's dark hair whispering, "Brother... what might I do to help?"

"Oh, Gods, Rhiannon." Moaned Taliesin from deep inside, "Why have you left me here?... I try and I try... but, how can I be part of all this again?..."

"Maerdynn..." Spoke Tamlynn, trying to pull Taliesin softly towards him, "May I not help?"

Finally noticing Tamlynn's attentions, Taliesin grasped a hold of Tamlynn continuing his anguish in Tamlynn's arms. Tamlynn braced himself as best he could, but the searing wash of Taliesin's pain was so great he became dizzy and disoriented as he continued to embrace the other man the best he could. He felt so ill prepared for this, he only ever had held an Elf in love or pleasure and was absolutely amazed at the wells of difficult emotion that sprang from this particular Elf. After some time, Taliesin finally slowed and began to calm, much energy having been spent. "Thank-you." He whispered, "I am sorry... I had not intended to disturb anyone with this." He pulled away from Tamlynn to wipe his eyes and face. "I cast a deep sleep on Jenna and knew Dori would be far removed because of her work yesterday. The rest are easy to block... Yet... I had not counted on your strong sensitivity. I am truthfully sorry, friend." Taliesin kissed Tamlynn's cheek, "But, I thank you."

"Rhiannon?..." Tamlynn asked in curiosity.

"Was Head of the Council before me... yes... I know you don't understand and it's difficult to explain. Much, much has changed since your original Council existed. Rhiannon and I were heavily bonded in a way no Head of Council and their Chosen have ever been before. An Inner Temple between the Worlds is nearly built, but the Work has left me bereft for I know my ultimate place shall be at Rhiannon's side and I am so torn... And it's so unfair to Jenna. Jenna, my love, my heart... Yet, Rhiannon shall call to the very depths of my soul, we are mystically part of each other and I can not change that... But... I shall... I 'shall' have Jenna with me, somehow... somehow." Taliesin took both Tamlynn's hands to squeeze them tightly as he looked profoundly into the man's eyes. "The Hunt comes, and the Eldritch expect..." He sighed, "And well they should... but, I ask one favor of you..." Tamlynn frowned, clearly not confident how to follow anything Taliesin was saying, "I shall do as the Eldritch ask, for they are within their rights to do so... but, I wish for you to come with me, to be part of it... Do not fear, no harm shall come to you... But, you shall return enriched, and you well deserve it..." Taking Tamlynn's face in his hands in a gentle and deliberate fashion, Taliesin studied Tamlynn's

face. Surprised by the level of sensuousness from the touch, Tamlynn nearly drew away for he found himself frightened by it as memories of the Eldritch drew through his heart suddenly. However, it was momentary, and Taliesin withdrew to stand. "Soon, Samhain comes soon... And we shall ride the Hunt, you and I."

"You are the strongest, most powerful Elf I have ever known..." Spoke Tamlynn a little apprehensively, "You could well dominate anyone you chose."

Taliesin laughed a little, almost self-consciously as he drew Tamlynn up to stand and face him. "Give me a hug and tell me you shall ride with me... And I shall send you back to your bed where you can sleep in peace... I am much better now." As they hugged, Tamlynn felt as if he held all of Elfland and it was difficult for a moment to want to draw apart. But, Taliesin finally laughed, softly pushing the other man away. "Well?... You shall come with me?" Tamlynn shook his head 'yes', his mouth open as if in a daze. "Good. Go now... Sleep well... And thank-you... Thank-you... Your place in the Inner Temple is secure. Bless you..." Tamlynn nodded again still in the same daze, then turned and left to find his way back home. For some time Taliesin stood watching Tamlynn go before looking out at the waters. He had washed out some of his wounds and he felt some better, blessing Tamlynn one more time in his heart.

Jenna only accompanied her mate to Dori and Tamlynn's dwelling late in the afternoon of Samhain. One could sense the thinning of the veils as the very air seemed to shimmer and crackle. Lines of worry framed Jenna's face and eyes as she grasped Taliesin's hand tightly. So much had happened, so many things that ought well have pulled them apart. As most knew little of Jenna's early past they did not appreciate how remarkable it was that she should have remained with Taliesin as she had. She was so free-spirited and strong-willed and really remained so; yet, Taliesin had a genuine ability to temper that with just a soft smile or loving gesture. It wasn't that they didn't argue, it was just obvious that they loved one another unerringly, no matter how much distance or time had been spent away from each other. "These are our friends, my Love... It shall be all right... And perhaps, I may walk away from here well on a road to recovery." He kissed her forehead, then hugged her tightly as Dori and Tamlynn emerged outside. Jenna had asked to stay with Llyria through this, expecting that attending the child would help occupy her heart and mind. Dori had been delighted, remembering the times she herself had taken care of Jenna and Taliesin's musically gifted son, Lleu, and Taliesin's bright daughter, Jesse, who had a love of plants and showed promise as a Healer someday. Those children had been left back at court in Gwynedd with friends, for the roads were often dangerous now and it was felt it best that Jenna spend time alone with her mate. A wet nurse was also there as there always was when it was rather uncertain how long Dori might be occupied, and Jenna welcomed the company of the other woman gladly. The woman was a gifted Healer, especially for other women, who had only but of late given birth herself. So, there would be two babies and Taliesin laughed, "You'll probably forget all about us. Thank-you, Heather." He said, looking up at the wet nurse/Healer who stood just outside the door, "I'm sure you'll find plenty for her to do."

"Perhaps the Lady would like to teach me some cradle songs... I've not a bad voice for all that." She smiled, gently drawing Jenna away and into the dwelling where burned a small fire warming up some water for scented, herbal tea.

"Well," spoke Dori after the two women had left, "shall we repair to the Cavern? The Healers that shall assist us are already there... Tamlynn..." she said suddenly, a little halted, "are you so sure... this is something you ought do?"

For a moment Tamlynn held Dori's gaze, then looked at Taliesin who reflectively smiled and whispered, "It 'is' up to you, Brother... I was sad and distressed. But, it is not for ill that I asked it of you."

"I shall go..." Tamlynn said in definitiveness, "And I shall return." Dori nodded her acceptance, then led them as they walked towards the Sacred Site.

All three entered the Cavern as the beginning of the Healer's Chants echoed through the afternoon air. The first breezes of twilight drifted through the trees as the leaves rustled and some drifted to the ground. For the first time the Flame would be actively used for something other than Healer concerns and Initiation. The energy patterns of both her Bardic husband and friend made Dori rather nervous. And while Tamlynn clearly proved capable of entering the Flame, Dori wondered at Taliesin's certainty that he, too, was fully capable. 'Then again,' she reflected, 'he isn't quite human, is he. I guess I'll just have to trust him in this.'

Inside the Cavern they made themselves comfortable sitting in a small circle holding each other's hands. The first part of this journey would be left up to Dori as she pulled them all into the Fires and created the Circle and Four Doors. Dori had to admit that though she was well used to bringing Tamlynn into the Flame with her, pulling Taliesin seemed a bit confusing. His life-force was strong and complex and she felt as if she were drawing in the sky and stars with its swirling mass of lights. Nonetheless, he pulled in behind them like a glittering mass of luminescence streaming in the Fire's crux. Once within the Flame, Dori took them all outside It to help form the Circle before calling the Flame within that Circle to create the sphere. Though Tamlynn really only watched the process and simply offered support, Taliesin worked the Circle with Dori adding a certain 'touch' to each Door that Dori did not comprehend. As they went back to the center, Taliesin looked at Dori firmly, "Bright Star, you are our anchor, both for Tamlynn and myself, and for the Flame and the Circle. Hold steady, and do not be alarmed at anything you may see or hear... Bright blessings, friend. This could not have taken place without you... Think on yourself as the Axis, the Anchor... and do not let go that thought... our safe return 'is' contingent on that." With that, he kissed her forehead in blessing as a knock came at the Western Door and Taliesin spoke, "Enter." Dori was hardly surprised to see Gwyniffar step through; however, it was obvious that it had taken Tamlynn aback quite a bit.

Gwyniffar looked at Tamlynn once, smiling kindly, "How wonderful you have chosen to do this... You do not know the blessings you bring to your Isle for this..." Then she looked at Taliesin to softly incline her head, "My Lord... You are ready?... We have waited long and long." Taliesin inclined his head back to her in affirmation. "Good." She whispered as if she had been a little afraid things might have been otherwise, though his very presence there now was surely assurance that it could be no other way. For a moment, Gwyniffar stepped up to Dori to kiss her cheek and brow, then she stepped back, her arms outstretched as all the Doors flew open at once. It was like a great wind rushing through the Circle as Gwyniffar faded and disappeared. Then, Taliesin's life-force expanded like a mass of moving lights strung through the lines of infinity as his energies spread throughout all the Doors, seeming to fill the whole Universe. A

semblance appeared of a Great Stag that snorted and pawed the ground in front of Dori and Tamlynn, an eerie Other look in its extraordinary eyes of shining luminosity. Somehow, Tamlynn knew what he must do as he grasped the animal's neck to pull himself upon the stag's back. Holding tight and braced, Tamlynn shook nervously, knowing Taliesin had been transformed and that this indeed would be the Wild Hunt in all its ethereal Horror and Glory. The Great Stag Taliesin reared once before Dori, then as all the lights and shimmering airs whirled about once more, Taliesin and Tamlynn disappeared as well, the Doors all closing with an audible slam. A little shaken, Dori had a momentary sense of aloneness, the Four Doors staring at her silently, like curtains whose secrets should not become unveiled. Yet, then she comprehended the lines that bound her, that made her the anchor as she sensed the Hunt take place, the Flame in the Circle and that they counted on her strength to lead them back at last.

Tamlynn clung to the Stag's back riding into the Winds of the Universe as the Elven train raced behind them with wild cries of horror and pleasure. Other types of beings seemed to join them as well from Realms Tamlynn had no idea even existed, a shimmer of fear running through him like the flickering of strange, unsought fires. At last, human spirits also filled the airs of the Dead or the Dying and Tamlynn began to understand the truth of just what it was they Hunted in a deep and total sense. Impressions flashed before him that were both sad and touching as people left the Realm of the Wheel to abide their time within the Cauldron once more. And the Stag touched each one of them, calming them, enfolding them, extending peace and love that only Death Himself could bring. Even brutal violence was assuaged by the presence of the Stag as He uplifted their broken soul to breathe His calm within them. In time, Tamlynn felt magnificent and proud as he sat the Stag with confidence, thrilling to the sounds all about him, knowing he was taking part in a Mystery immersed within him. Sometimes the Living would note their passing and at times would run before them. However, others understood, raising cups in salute, while their faces were always grave and seriously drawn. Tears were often shed, and though that sorrow cried out into the darkened skies, the Stag's calm was always finally drawn across them as time faded their memory and softened their pain. Death was not cruel, but rather, a passage wherein He came as our Father to quietly accompany us as we sought entrance back to the warmth of Her Womb. Hunter, yes, but Guardian as well, who guided and guarded those He hunted with love. The web of lights that glistened throughout the etheric skies Tamlynn knew to be the shining of myriads of souls that wove within the Universe like stars themselves. The vision brought joy to Tamlynn's spirit and he marveled that he had been made privy to such sights. And they raced through the whole of the night, the Winds high upon them, between the Worlds, between the Realms, partaking of infinity and its Divinity. As the first rays of Dawn began to string itself on the edges of the horizon, the Hunt began to fade. Though he knew in reality the Hunt continued forever,

Tamlynn grasped that he and Taliesin would soon return to normal reality, drawn back to the comfort of Dori's anchoring spirit as she held tight to the threads of their wandering souls. As Tamlynn thought on this, they were indeed drawn back within the Circle, Taliesin returning to his Elven/Human form. And in a moment they were all seated in their tight circle in the Cavern, their hands still clasped. Taliesin sighed long and hard, and the shine in his eyes was strange and intangible, nearly frightening Dori

until he spoke and smiled, "Do not fear, my sweet friend and Sister. Without you, we'd surely have not returned... And, return we have."

"But, what have you become?" Asked Dori in the quiet morning airs, for the chanting of the other Healers had died as they knew the party had returned.

"I am become what I am meant to be... For when I finally enter the Bardic Temple to join Rhiannon in our eternal mystical union, I must be as she is... I understand that now in a way I had not before... I was torn in shreds because I could not stay with her. But, I did not truly grasp 'why' I could not... And you have given me that... You, the Elven Host and the Flame Itself... This 'is' the Island of the Blessed, and in time you shall come to fully appreciate it's meaning... I am ready, now... I am ready to fulfill the rest of my challenges and serve out my responsibilities... And one of them is to give Jenna her place and her due... Come, children... It is time I make ready my leave and be Head of council as my time dictates." As they all stood, Taliesin embraced Tamlynn once to whisper in his ear, "Guardian of this Island shall you be... In time, you shall comprehend just what that means..." Then he kissed Tamlynn's cheek saying, "I shall not forget you for we share something now that weaves our souls together. The Hunt shall ride through you so long as your soul exists... And it is a Gift you may now pass on to others."

As they walked from the Cavern, Taliesin held both Dori and Tamlynn's hand, occasionally squeezing them in a sense of affection. But as they came to Dori and Tamlynn's dwelling, he released them as Jenna came forward and his attention was turned to her in a full, long embrace. It was never so clear to Tamlynn or Dori just how much Taliesin loved Jenna for they both could feel how he wrapped his forces all about her and enclosed her. Taking her face in his hands to kiss her several times, he paused to say, "I have something that I 'must' ask of you."

Her eyes questioned, she knew he had changed, but, as always, she was accepting in her continued love of him, "What could you ask that I would not do my best to give?"

His smile was gentle as a tear touched the corners of his eyes, "Something I should have asked long ago... When we return to Gwynedd's Court... Would you do me the honor of Handfasting with me?"

The surprise on Jenna's face made it clear it was hardly what she had expected to hear, but then she broke into a wide grin, "After all this time, after all these years... Are you not my husband in heart if not in word? But, yes... yes... I have no doubts that our love is more than some passing thing." She nearly giggled at that as the rest laughed softly with her.

As Taliesin's boat sailed into the Autumn mists, the hint of Winter moved between the trees. Tamlynn embraced his wife and daughter as they stood and watched the last echoes of the boat, the water lapping gently at the shores. Feeling warmth and wonder and pride, Tamlynn sensed a new meaning to himself, an understanding of himself as a man and as a husband and father he had not recognized before. Proud of himself and proud of Dori, whose knowledge of the Flame would grow.

And now, so, too, would his knowledge grow as the Flame's protector and Guardian as much as he would be Dori's protector and guardian as well. He was so in love with Dori and now in love with life that he also knew that although he would always be linked to the Elves and what they were, he would no longer be so torn. He drew in a full, long breath to smell the sea, the earth, the richness of all the airs about him as Dori looked up into his eyes and he smiled, "I, too, have received healing... And I am whole,

and I am strong... And I have never loved you more." Dori snuggled closely into him, her arms about their child. The leaves blew about their feet, and they let the day close upon them as they stood in their personal glow, watching the boat, watching the waves, watching the passage of time in complete satisfaction and love.