

## Prologue to Heart of the Flame

"I love this place." Remarked an elf sitting upon an old stump as he gazed out over the land, "One can see all the way to the Island of the Mighty from here... And see all the people, too."

"You're daft." Said another who lay in the grasses near the stump, "You can see the shore line, I know, but even 'your' eyes can't see much further... You just like to talk."

"I can see Dori."

"Who?" He asked as he rolled over to look at his friend skeptically.

"Don't you remember the Lady speaking last time...A new Healer to be..."

"So? This is where they 'all' come."

"You never listen, do you... She's right pretty, you know, for one of the Wheel... Her people gave her a lot of gifts, too, when she left. She'll be missed. Her teacher there already misses her terribly.

"Why should the Lady be all that interested in one particular apprentice come to test their competence with the Flame?"

"Really, Erwin... all you think to do is feast and revel. You'd suppose that's all we're made for... You do not care about the shadow that overcasts the Lady's eyes...?"

"Must you talk in riddles to me, Klai? You mean that crazy lord who keeps making silly demands of us... What's he want, now?"

"The Lady's Harper."

"The Lady's Harper?... Goodness, what could that crazy lord want with a Harper..? And how can this possibly connect with your new 'Healer to be'?"

"I don't think you much care for the Harper, do you?" Klai stood up as he peered out squinting his long, green eyes.

Shrugging, Erwin sat up, "Sometimes the Lady is wont to curious pass times."

"Umph... Still, it would cause great evil to let this lord have his way."

"So... what does this – what did you say her name was, this Healer? What does she have to do with this?"

"Dori... Shhh... I hear her coming with Runners beside her as far as the crossing to the Holy Isle... They say there is a Rican in Cymru now... Gwydion, the brother of Arionrhod."

"Arionrhod?" Perked Erwin who shivered slightly, "She is that one nearly as powerful as the Lady herself, isn't she?"

"I don't believe you remembered! And for an 'other', as beautiful... I've seen her, she is almost like she were our Lady in the Realm of the Wheel. I sometimes think they might have been sisters once..."

"Hush, say not such things... It hurts my heart too much to recall those of the Cross Over. The shadows of their eyes remains in the shadows of my heart. I shall not mourn, we are surely not meant for that."

The sound of a curious, clear note echoed over the land, like a tone from a crystal horn. Both elves raised their heads to look in the direction of the sound. After a moment, Erwin turned to Klai, "Well, I guess that's that. I hope she just wants us for something pleasurable. Though, it doesn't really seem like it's dancing time, yet."

"It's about Dori... I feel it."

"You think so?... Maybe I'll ignore the call, then..." Erwin said as he stretched and yawned.

"Come on. You know better. Besides, there's like to be some feasting, anyway. And I 'know' you'd hate to miss that."

"Ummm, well. Maybe so." They both got to their feet, Erwin albeit reluctantly, and set off inward on the Isle.

In a hall of tall oak trees and strangely moving lights that shimmered as they passed, the Lady watched her People come in and find themselves a place to settle, on either rocks or in trees. Not only Elves had come, for the summons had requested all Earth Spirits on the Isle, so that the range of faces present (as well as size) was as diverse as Nature Herself. Looking upon them all, the Lady smiled an inward glow for all she pervade. Next to her, seated on the forest floor of the hall, was a figure clasping a lap harp, looking rather tired and despondent. His eyes were cheerless as he looked from the Lady to the throng in front of them. "You do us kindness." The Lady said at last to everyone there, "You do us favor and we thank you. I love you all... Some of you do not quite understand the ill that befalls us... I summon you with some concern. I know it is not your nature to worry... But, I must. And you must help me in whatever solution may be found... And, yes, after I speak to you, there shall be feasting." A wave of applause went through the hall after she had said that. "All right. Let us proceed, then. We have a problem... Though I've spoken briefly before on this, the problem has worsened. It affects all of us, not just my Harper." A sense of question filled the airs. "It does, believe me... And someone coming to this Isle whom I've said could help my Harper, can help us... will help us."

"I don't like it, " pouted an impish gnome, "you're going to help the Harper leave... And we won't have all that wonderful music anymore."

"We have plenty of music." Replied the Lady, "He spoils you. You yourself can play pipes, but you've let that go a lot to listen to him. You grow lazy, Breeli." The Lady's smile was so pleasant, the gnome didn't really know for sure if she had just been rebuffed. "Besides, if the lord were to be given what 'he' asks, there would be no Harper music, anyway. And worse. Many things are taking place in the Realm of the Wheel I would find difficult to explain to you. Those of our own who went in the Great Cross Over have become deeply involved in the conflicts there. And a shadow passes over; but, it passes over us first and we must help to stop it. If we can get the Harper back to the Realm of the Wheel where he came from, we shall go a long ways in preventing this shadow from overtaking us."

"But what would happen if we didn't?" Asked a faery who sat above in the limbs of an oak, her face nearly hidden by the leaves.

"What would happen?" Sighed the Lady, "The depth of it you do not want to know, it is so horrific." She felt a shiver go through all those present as she lay a hand gently on top of the Harper's head. A melancholia charged through her she knew came up from him causing her to sigh once more. "Do you really think the Harper WANTS to leave us? It is so very rare for any who've crossed to come back to us again, if only for a while... The Holy Isle of the Healers in the Realm of the Wheel is a sacred Isle, our Isle in the Realm of Light, the Island of Apples. This dark lord wants the powers of this Isle, the power of the Flame to rule both the Realm of Light and of the Wheel."

"But the Flame is kept safe by the Healers, how can he possibly touch It?" Asked the faery again, being very bright and clever and observant of what went on on the Holy Isle.

"Through the Harper, dear one. And that is why we meet. This lord has gained too much power here already and soon he shall be able to force our release of the Harper to him. He intends to use the Harper's unique energy to gain access to the Flame... But, if we can send the Harper back to the Realm of the Wheel; back through the Flame to the Healers themselves... Then the door shall be closed to him because he will not be able to penetrate their barriers." The Lady looked over them all and was satisfied that for the main she was being understood well enough. "All right... Soon we shall feast... But, I must speak of one final thing. And, don't be impatient, it's so very important." She was glad to feel when she paused that they were ready to heed her, "An apprentice Healer comes I've spoken of before. She's about to enter the Island now and shall be ready for her Initiation and walk through the Flame soon. We must prepare for her; she is a great Healer, much more than has ever walked the shores of this Island before. She will open the Doors, whether she understands or no. And the Harper shall gain access to the Wheel. We are not happy about it, but it 'must' be done. The Harper's existence depends on it, 'our' existence depends on it... Sooo... when I ask for your help,.. I expect you shall give it to me."

"Yes, my Lady." Was the murmured assent that went softly all through the hall.

Pleased, for she knew the approval was firm, she extended her arms, "Good... Let us put away sadness for now, then. And the Harper shall play for us as he always has. Let the feasting begin."

Though the Harper was not able to truly put away his anguish as the others did, he did set himself up to play choosing a spritely tune as he knew the Lady would approve. Before long, he at least felt better as the rest of them fell into revelry gladly. Later, darker discussions would take place as the strategy needed to create the Doorway the Harper would pass through was a tremendously delicate task at best. The Lady could not bring herself to truly voice how close they all walked to the brink of devastation. That if they did not meet with success, they were doomed, and that that success lay on a very thin thread. The Harper would make it his business to know all he could of this new apprentice, for he realized he was as like to become bound to her as well for what it would take to pass through the Door. How could it have come to this? Yet, there was nothing to do but to accept it, though the Harper understood that even the Lady herself felt remorseful by it in a way that went well beyond the Eldritch norm. He fervently hoped that this 'great' Healer would assuredly be able to heal him for he knew his heart would be utterly shattered, the Wheel to him was no longer his home. And he knew that somehow, he also needed to affect a strong bond with her, one 'she' could not escape or he would well be in danger of losing heart and dying of despair. Was there a way to make her comprehend just what this was going to do to him? No-one went to the Realm of Light and left again. Least of all, a Bard.