

Rhiannon – Child of Twilight

Chapter 6

Maerdynn's Court

It had been in the beginnings of the early Fall when Jenna slowly rode her gray dappled mare towards the Greathouse of Lord Sean; high upon an imposing hill with mountains in the distance, its large rambling buildings interlaced with apartments, accommodations, stables and servant quarters. It was one of the largest of the Greathouses, both from overseeing a strategic area as well as a certain testament of the wealth of its people and Lord. The evening had been fading as Jenna watched the streaks of variant colors from the sun embellish the sky, the soft rays glinting off the wonderful reds and golds of the leaves on the trees that liberally laced the landscape between village and town. Her mass of long dark tresses hung in great, lazy curls with a smattering of tiny braids intertwined with feathers. Full-bodied and strong, the life of a wandering Bard suited Jenna's temperament well. Her dark eyes ran along the high stone walls that moved around outside of the Greathouse with some amusement. "Well, if I haven't managed to get to Taliesin's Court. It's been three years since I last saw 'that' one..." she looked down at her mare and patted the horse's mane, whispering confidentially in the animal's ears, "I wonder if time has settled that personality some, you think?" The horse whinnied a little and shook her head slightly as if in response causing Jenna to chuckle and shake her head, "Yes, I agree... I doubt that one myself!" With that, she led her horse back along the path to finally go up the hill to get to the buildings and the Court. When she got close enough to see the stables across from the kitchens, a Runner came out to take the horse having seen Jenna from those kitchens, bidding Jenna go in to have some dinner as the Runner took care of the horse. Jenna accepted this gratefully, leaving the horse and her gear in the young girl's care.

Jenna sat on a bench at a long, low table to some warm bread and hot soup one of the cooks had provided for her in the common hall next to the kitchens. The area was mostly quiet now as almost everyone had finished their evening meal and gone to other activities before fully retiring for the night. The candles lit in the hall were soft and glowed their subtle gold in warm reflections about the room. It made Jenna feel a curious sense of homecoming and hunger and she ate her meal almost greedily in the half-light. A young man with softly curling brown hair and hazel eyes stepped casually in and seeing her, his smile grew wide. "Well, I thought it was you I saw riding up... Goodness, Jenna, but it's been a long time!"

"Dylan!" She exclaimed, standing momentarily to give the man a warm hug before sitting again. "So, how are you, my friend?"

"Hm..." He laughed, shaking his head mildly, "Maerdynn's Court, as always. You know, I've been his Second for over five years now. You'd think I'd really know the man by now... but, hey, I'm well." As there was a pitcher of ale on the table, Dylan went and got himself a mug, returning to sit by Jenna on the bench and pour himself a drink. "So, my dear Jenna. What's taken you so long to see fit to find us again?"

“Well, in honesty, I would have been by even a couple months ago or so but I was rather sidetracked. Or let us say, the Eastern influence in some of the areas here and about makes it a little hard to get to you at times. Even though I do so love your smiling faces.”

“Yes.” Dylan sighed, “There’s been some rather serious tussles here and there with ‘Christian’ areas around here. Unfortunately, even this place has acquired a couple of their priests. The Lady Creirwy seems to have an interest, though Lord Sean isn’t terribly fond of their presence. I guess he keeps hoping her interest shall pass, but I hear tell some of her own family has fully embraced the new religion... and some of that said family is the cause of some of the more serious ‘tussles’ as I’ve alluded to... In other words, I don’t much care for this ‘new religion’... And ‘you know’ Maerdynn certainly doesn’t”

“Ummm.” Nodded Jenna as she ate a couple bites of bread, intently listening to what he said.

The Runner who had attended her earlier came in with Jenna’s traveling gear and looked to Dylan in some consternation, “Brother, some of the Lady’s cousins are visiting and occupy the rooms usually accorded a visiting Bard... what should I do?”

Dylan shrugged almost as if there oughtn’t be any question to this, “Take them to the Court Bard’s apartments. I shall vacate my room and sleep on the floor in the front room with the servant.”

“Yes, Brother.” She said and left promptly.

“There’s no problem.” Frowned Jenna, “I could easily stay with the Runners. I do all the time on the road. In fact, the young folks are rather fun most of the time.” She smiled thinking kindly on the many antics she had seen, some she had even been party to.

“Now, you know Maerdynn would never hear of it.”

Giving Dylan a rather more than curious look, Jenna shook her head, “Uh hmm, sure... And ‘you’ even call him Maerdynn now, do you? What is that about?”

“Well...” Began Dylan, “He likes it when his people call him that, really... I used to some before, though I wasn’t as comfortable about it. He does still use ‘Taliesin’ with the rest of the Court outside Bardic... I gather it was an old Wise Woman said he was from faery, a changeling and that his parents, his ‘real’ parents, for they were Elven, named him Maerdynn. That it means ‘little hawk’ in Eldritch. Or is it salmon, I’m not sure how that goes. But it’s not got meaning anyone knows for certain. Not in Cymric, anyways. But the Bards named him Taliesin when he came to Waljanargel because his Gift was so apparent and he so very young. Maybe as young as three or four, I’m not sure. Perhaps it’s just some crazy story, but there’s enough of the common folk believe it and he doesn’t counter anyone about it. And you have to admit, he does seem to have a bit of a ‘glamour’ to him.”

A sly smile lit Jenna’s eyes and she looked sideways at Dylan playfully, “Ah, yes. Need I forget. And just ‘who’ has Taliesin been into lately?”

A little startled, Dylan drew back from his mug, “Jenna!” He laughed.

“Um, um... and I am wondering, you know... Just how many stray children that boy has? Just out of curiosity.”

“Why, is that an Eldritch thing?” Dylan smiled, “Sounds pretty human to me... though in his case it is more rumor than living, I assure you. And he never denies his offspring. Or certainly, I’ve never known him to.” He shrugged, “Why are you being harsh? He’s always been good to his folk.”

“Oh, Dylan, I’m just teasing, you know that. But he’s great fun to tease. Gentle, kind, odd and temperamental... what a combination! Though I’ve known him to be strong-minded and resolute when warranted or he wouldn’t have these holdings under his Bardic Counsel and Court. I know well that you can attest to that, my friend... but... I do sometimes wonder. Just what would happen if he were a Wandering Bard? Would not half of Cymru end up being his bloodline? You think?”

“Now, Jenna.” To which they both laughed a little as Dylan rolled his eyes a bit. “Perhaps you like him a bit more than you admit?” When Jenna gave him a slight disparaging look, Dylan passed on it, “Well, at any rate, I expect you’d like a bath and a chance to rest. Feel at home in my room. I’ve got a cat. She likes to stay in the room with me. Not sure if she’ll want to be in the room or will wander out to be with me. But I don’t expect you’d mind? Perhaps you might even tell me what she says and thinks. Would you?” Jenna looked over at him arching her brows a moment as she pushed her spoon distractedly about her wooden bowl of soup, her smile soft and quirky causing Dylan to respond to this gesture with, “Well, you ‘do’ speak with animals, don’t you?”

“Did Tal tell you that?” She replied, searching his eyes a little, “I generally don’t speak of that, though sometimes the Village Wise Women or Men may pick up on it... and I think I may have told Taliesin once.”

Shrugging, Dylan took a shallow of his ale before asking frankly, “Why not?”

“Ohhh...” She blew out a breath, “I really don’t so much mind other Bards knowing, though for me it is a rather private thing, anyway. With common folk, it’s just not always an appreciated thing... And there have been times when I was young when others would pester me to death. ‘What did the crow say’, ‘what does my horse think about such and such?’ So I came to quit speaking of it altogether... And in some ways, it is a private, personal pleasure. Their minds are patterned differently, Dylan. When I ‘speak’ to them, it is communal. Very personal.” Dylan fingered his mug thoughtfully as she spoke on, “But. I’ll let you know what your cat feels, eh? Besides loving you very much, though I’m sure you can garner that on your own.”

“I did not mean to pry.” He said seeming a bit chagrined.

A little surprised, Jenna sat back a bit, “Tal didn’t tell you, did he? You just knew... Well, you are a Bard, after all... It’s just that I tend to block that pretty well.” She smiled pleasantly seeing him a bit ill at ease.

Dylan cleared his throat and shook himself out a little, “To be honest, you were rather right about Wise Women - Men, you know... They likely would ‘pick up on it’... yes, they would.” He smiled carefully. “I was being groomed to be a Wise Man when a boy.”

“Really?... But you’re not much apt to speak of that, either, are you?” She said wonderingly and surprised at his sudden candidness.

“Oh, doesn’t much matter, I guess. Though I do sometimes fall into a light trance without meaning to. But I don’t try to do real readings of any sort any more, or try to retrieve people’s essence.”

His eyes grew soft and distant and Jenna sensed a twinge of remembered hurt. “It bothers you.” She whispered kindly. “Might I be so rude as to ask what happened?”

Dylan shrugged and sighed, “I was never much with herbs, you know. Remembering what they do, who to put with whom, all that. Flowers of this one, roots of that, leaves... I just couldn’t make it stick with me for some reason. Didn’t interest me

enough, I guess... Sooo. When I nearly poisoned an elder of my boyhood village in my haste and general youthful stupidity, my vocation sort of got rethought.”

A twinkle lit in the corner of Jenna’s eyes. She had observed him enough to know full well he had a sharp mind and memory. It was obvious to her that something about being a Wise Man to his people just had not interested him enough. Perhaps even personal pressures such status confers on someone that ties one so to their people, their village, their land. There might be more here than Dylan was really saying, but she would not press that one further as she held a smile back watching him as he seemed to sulk a moment before he turned his face to her and smiled. At this, Jenna remarked pleasantly, “So that’s how you became a Bard, then?”

He laughed a little as they gave each other an impulsive smile or two, “Well, sort of. The Wise Women ‘finally’ paid attention to ‘all’ my gifts. And the fact that I’d spend every free moment with the Storyteller learning his tales. I could tell those tales right back with very little trouble when they finally asked... and I could sing.”

“Umm,” Jenna pushed around her soup, then ate a bitefull or two. It being that quiet time with only a couple apprentice cooks rustling about in the kitchen itself, they continued their quiet talk with a certain sense of privacy. “You wanted to leave your people?”

“Leave my people?” Dylan was surprised by that remark though he pondered it thoughtfully a moment or two. “I hadn’t thought so. My parents were very proud of me. Being a Wise Man confers a certain amount of status for my parents and for my siblings as well. And my parents had already recognized that they were unlike to have any grandchildren from me. But, as I said, I had siblings... I don’t know. Being a Bard. It’s a good thing. It’s something my parents are proud of, yes. But, it’s not the same. The village doesn’t consult one’s parents or really regard them with the same respect. Probably from the simple reason that I am just not there. I am far away. And I am quite far away, actually.”

“Where are your people, then?” Asked Jenna suddenly curious.

“South Gwynedd. Seacoast. A fishing village. A place we called Addiencant for the beautiful white waters of the sea. A plentiful sea. .. Every now and again I get a note or letter from the Village Storyteller; as my parents don’t read or write, he does this for them. He is still the same one as from my childhood and has always been very kind to me. I think I was rather in love with him but wasn’t totally aware of all my feelings quite yet. Though others had put that together well enough.” He shrugged again dismissively. “I miss them all sometimes. Very much. I mean, don’t you miss yours?”

“Mine?” Said Jenna, a little startled, “Oh, mine... Not really. Or, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to miss.” Dylan frowned, a bit taken aback. “I’m a Pict, you know. I’m from a good journey North and West of here. Just North what was once the borders of Briton. And certainly too close for temptation and Briton’s aggression.” She sighed, “Briton can be pretty nasty and cruel about things. Burning villages. Torturing the men, raping the women, then killing them. Slaying children before the eyes of the parents before killing them as well. Awful stuff. Stuff I’d rather commit to forgetfulness. They delight in torture, I think. Evil memories, dear Dylan. I haven’t any family left to remember, to miss. I simply was too young. All I recall is fleeing with a handful of others. How on Earth we got away, only the Goddess might say, for surely I’ll never know. Nights, days in hiding. Then crossing an immense length of water from Pictland

having skirted Briton's edge seeing nothing but fighting and carnage everywhere we turned. And across the waves we came to the Northern borders of Cymru. We had drifted on the water. Thirsty, hungry. We had no sense of direction, but it was Cymru we landed on, a Cymric village that found us, took us in. And I thank the Goddess every day for it. We were fleeing foreigners and they made us work hard for our orphan status. But they were good to us, none-the-less... and I had realized my gift with animals by that time, though it was my gift in song that caught the attention of a Wandering Bard as she passed through... You know, as I remember it now, it was rather interesting. I think she threw caution to the winds with me. She wasn't a Council Member, but she decided to take me with her to the Council Seat. Being the orphan I was, nobody objected. Soooo... off we went. My ability to speak both Pict and the Cymric language benefited me as much as my communion with the beasts. After that point, life was much happier. The Bardic Path became my family. But I think it's why I prefer to wander, you know?" She finished her meal and sat back looking at Dylan to see what impact her words had made.

"And every face holds a story we can never guess unless that person grants us the gift of access. Pretty Sister." Dylan remarked, cupping his face in his hands and smiling a reassuring, thoughtful smile at Jenna.

After a moment or so of amiable quiet, they both got up to retire to the Bardic apartments. After a moment of walking in relative silence, Jenna suddenly piped up, "Now, Dylan... You 'do' know I have nothing but of utmost regard for Taliesin, don't you?"

"Of course I do." Said Dylan, a bit taken aback. "I wouldn't question you that... And I'm so glad to see you again." He said turning to her a second before resuming their walk. "Much, much too long this time, Sister. Don't do it again, eh?"

Just as they got to the door to enter the Bardic apartments, the door itself flung open nearly hitting Jenna who backed away quickly as a young, very pregnant, very pretty woman with long red hair stormed out in a flurry down the halls. A fairly tall man with beautiful blue eyes appeared at the door to call after the woman, "Iola! Iola, come back! Please! Let's talk about this!" Yet, he did not follow after her, only watched her rush out of sight. He shook his head, "Damn!" he exclaimed under his breath. "How could she do this to me?" Finally he seemed to notice Dylan and Jenna standing and staring in the hall. "Oh! Sorry. Yes, Jenna. How are you? Come in, come in." They followed him into the main room where he gestured for them to sit, "Would you like something to eat? I will send Kymon. The Runner, Kigva brought your things earlier. I hope you'll be comfortable enough."

As they walked in and closed the door, Dylan turned to the man as Jenna sat, watching curiously. "Are you alright Maerdynn?" Dylan frowned.

"No." The other man sighed and flopped into a long, low couch across Jenna rather unceremoniously, "But it's not really your concern." He said not unkindly.

"Oh, come on, Tal." Said Jenna, "You look pale as a ghost. I'm going to assume that's your child she's carrying and she's upset you somehow... Really upset you."

"Well." Taliesin rolled his eyes disgustedly, then looked straight at Jenna, "Damn her. Really." He said seriously.

"Tally." Said Jenna back, a little aghast at the force of his words and the seriousness of his face. "Be careful."

“Careful...” Frustration marked his features as he gestured largely with his hands. “Yes, you’re right... That’s my child. For all the good it does me... Do you know what she wants to do? She wants to raise our child as a ‘Christian’.” He said rather nastily and was satisfied at the look of stunned silence that came across both Jenna’s and Dylan’s face, “Yes, a ‘Christian’. For the Lady’s sake! I’m an idiot... I know we were no longer that close anymore and I knew she had some flirting interest. Hanging about with Lady Creirwy now and again. But I swear by the Goddess I didn’t think she’d shoot this arrow at me... I thought we still respected each other. I thought we understood each other...” He shook his head. “Not ‘my’ child, not ‘my’ child. I am so upset, I don’t know what to do.”

“Calm down, Maerdydd, calm down.” Dylan chose now to sit down next Taliesin to hug him and lend a little energy. “The child isn’t born yet... Maybe you can talk her out of it. Come on, you’ve a silver tongue. Give it a little time.”

Taliesin took a deep breath. “I hope you’re right, Dylan. But I fear it’s been brewing in her and she’s waited long to tell me. She was very determined and wouldn’t listen. And I got over angry. It was foolish, I know. But, I admit, it’s a little hard for me to think straight about such a thing... God’s, Dylan.” He said looking into Dylan’s face, “A Bard’s child. Raised a ‘Christian?’” He shivered.

A great calico cat entered the room from one of the inner areas, lazily looked at each and every human, then perfunctorily jumped up into Jenna’s lap to curl herself up and commence purring. As she distractedly pet the animal, Jenna looked over at Taliesin, “Do you think you may be being a bit prejudiced?”

“Prejudiced?” Taliesin drew away from Dylan, “Jenna! I’m surprised at you. You’re out on the road all the time. I really can’t believe you just said that! Those people hate us. They would like nothing better than to destroy us, our religion, our love of the Mother. If they caught you on the road in their territories they’d kill you in a moment. Or worse... Goddess, you ‘know’ that.” He frowned, shaking himself out from the disagreeable thoughts.

Jenna shrugged and looked down at the cat as she stroked her, “Yes, yes, Tal... I know... You’re very right. And I have no love for them, either... I am simply trying to point out that it does you no good for you or your child to flare up so at its mother. You’ll just drive her away, and then where will you be?”

Taliesin sat back and sighed long and low, closing his eyes, “There was a time not so long ago when I was dearly in love with her.” He moaned and shook his head, “I just don’t understand this. Is it because she believes she no longer feels what she once did for me that she would punish me? Do the Gods punish me? And for what? That I was in love but now that love no longer swells in me?” Taliesin bent forward and put his head in his hands as Dylan wrapped his arms about his friend.

Looking back over at Jenna as he did this, Dylan spoke lowly to her, “Why don’t you bathe and get some rest? He’ll be okay.”

“Umm.” Sighed Jenna giving a soft smile at him. She put the cat back down on the floor, then walked up to Taliesin where she lent and kissed the top of his head and brushed a hand through his hair before taking her leave. “We’re all friends here, Tal. We’re here.” His anguish and sincerity had surprised her and she thought on this a long time as she made her preparations to settle down for the night.

The next day Taliesin was cheerful and engaging, causing Jenna to wonder if the night before had actually happened until she saw the sad look in his eyes whenever Iola's form was within even casual range. Apparently Iola had decided to quit speaking to Taliesin altogether, avoiding even his eyes and sometimes rather quickly leaving if they were in the same room.

Because Jenna had a lot of information to give and discuss with Taliesin and Dylan from her wide range of wanderings that gave knowledge about battle lines and political ties, and that she had finally decided that the best thing was to winter at Lord Sean's Court, her stay became rather indefinite. Taliesin's Court was in very strategic area in North Powys and there was always a great need to know just what might be going on. To know the sentiments and how to pursue positive results from the townspeople and villagers as well as the rulers. "Besides." Spoke Taliesin once, "You, Jenna, have more information and range than almost any other ten Bards combined. I've been greatly hoping you would finally see fit to be with us a spell again. I could well use your insight just now. Especially in these more and more troubling times." Though rather unconventional in his attitudes and methods, Taliesin was known for a shrewdness, which kept his Court as well as much surrounding area nearly devoid of any real Christian sentiment that was of much concern. It was to his great consternation and puzzlement that one who had been his own lover should have decided to move in such a direction.

Though Creirwy's cousins finally left the guest apartments, Dylan maintained that Jenna stay as she was, stating that the couch or floor in the main room was comfortable enough for him. They simply had far too much to go over and it seemed more logical that they all remain in the Bardic apartments. It had just become obvious that so much time was being spent together that there would be no point in what would end up as a great deal of running back and forth or sleeping on the floors, anyway. Kymon was often sent to bed down in the kitchens when Dylan felt a need for a little personal space and as he did not appear to be seeing anyone in particular at the time was content with his arrangement. Jenna wasn't totally certain she wished to get to know these two men quite so well, but she admitted the convenience and when a couple other Bards finally came to claim the guest area for a time, the matter seemed likely settled. At least Jenna made no more protests, leaving the guest apartments open for others to use and pass through. Dylan had seemed especially insistent that she remain and though Jenna wondered if he might be intending she and Taliesin to find some interest in each other, she could not pry such thoughts from him. It became a rather tight group at times, all huddled in the Bardic main room hours on end, other Bards sometimes attending as well, as all tried to get a good feel for the true political state about them.

It was interesting to really observe Taliesin in all this, for this is where he seemed to really shine as they continued to discuss. Some days were spent riding out into the villages and towns of the surrounding areas attached to the Greathouse, speaking and working with the people. Doing rituals and healings and getting a feel for what the people themselves felt and wanted. Singing and reciting and conferring with the Wise Women and Men, for Court Bards were there for more than just simply the Court itself, and that the thoughts of the people would be brought back to the Court of the Lord and Lady of the area. Taliesin seemed to enjoy these duties and though usually taking turns with

Dylan doing so as in the main it was best to leave one of them at the Court at all times, Taliesin was obviously the one who preferred the ventures.

And on these brief trips they also brought with them a boy named Korwyn, Taliesin's son. He was the second child Taliesin had with one of the villager's on the east of the surrounding area named Bridget. A woman Taliesin had loved years ago who had cared more for the country and village than the halls of the Greathouse and so had finally married someone from her village. As with his daughter, it was agreed that this child might come to live with his father after reaching a certain age, to see the ways of the Court and those of the Bards. It was to Taliesin's great joy that Korwyn proved to be Bardic, staying with the Runners to learn something of that, yet hanging about with either Dylan or Taliesin as much as he could. Having proven Bardic, he would also be repairing to the Bardic Seat for training in a couple years, though it was thought to be well enough to stay awhile with his father to learn something of the Court life. Jenna always enjoyed the company of this serious young male with light brown hair and green eyes that flecked slightly of gold. He didn't usually say much, seeming to prefer to listen, soaking in all that took place about him. Though his coloring was far wide of Taliesin and more of his mother's people, his physical shape and form declared his father well enough, and he had a quick and easy smile Jenna knew would melt other's hearts as surely and simply as his father's did.

Time passed swiftly around them as the Fall festivals were enacted and the time of Samhain drew near. It was well into this time of carved out gourds lit with candles and colorful masks and whispered secrets that a fervent knocking came on the doors of the Bardic apartments in the little hours of the night. Being there that night, Kymon answered the door, though Dylan was beginning to sleepily rouse as well. At the door stood a breathless young girl who was apprentice of the Court Healer. "Tell my lord Maerdynn. Iola's given birth. But, she's got fever... Those priests have got their 'physician' there and won't let my mistress Mali or me in to help. But I caught a glimpse and heard her, too. She looks really bad. She needs Mali."

Taliesin who had been aware that Iola was near her time and had been restless that night had heard the knocking and was behind the servant before the girl had really finished speaking, quickly brushing the servant away when he heard all the young girl had had to say. "What did you say, Dori? Physician? What physician? What do you mean they won't let Mali in?" His usual melodic voice began to quaver with anger, his face taking on a dark and foreboding mien.

By this time both Jenna and Dylan were awake from the sounds, sleepy eyed and confused as they watched Taliesin move in a flurry trying to quickly put on something impressive and imposing. When they finally realized just what was taking place, they also pulled on some things in order to join Taliesin in his decision as he moved out in the hall to follow the girl.

When they got to the quarters the girl, Dori, led them to, Taliesin pounded on the door as he listened to the cries of a baby and the moans of someone very ill and distressed. Though the door was answered, the man tried to shut it immediately when he saw just who was on the other side. As Taliesin was a strong and fairly powerful man, he forced his way into the room, though it was rare for him to use his physical prowess. Startled, the Eastern priest who had answered the door fell back as the Bards entered the room. It was a large, singular room with a couch and bed, dressing table and a place by a

great window where one might sit and sew in the sunlight. It might have been a bright and cheery room but for the woman tossing and turning in fever upon the bed. Rushing to the woman's side within the bed, Taliesin held and hugged her feeling the fever all through her body as if claiming it into himself. A perfectly formed baby girl lay unattended at her side as a priest stood praying at the foot of the bed. What must have been one of their physicians was rummaging at the other side of the bed setting up what appeared to be a basin with leeches. Taliesin gave him a menacing look as he sighed and kissed the ill woman, "Iola, Iola, what have these fools done to you?" Looking up at the Healer's apprentice, Taliesin directed his next comments to her, "Dori, come take the child. Find, get her a wet nurse. And get Mali. These fools are letting Iola die."

"Yes, lord." Said Dori who advanced to the bed to do as Taliesin asked. The priest at the foot of the bed tried to restrain her, but Jenna and Dylan quickly defused it as Dori swept up the baby and hurriedly left the room, a look of pure worry, but firm determination upon her young face.

"By what authority do you rush in here and impose your will?" Remarked the other priest who had been too startled initially to even try to stop Dori from leaving yet now came up to the bed as well. The physician stood by uncertain and even rather unconcerned.

"What authority do I need?" Asked Taliesin incredulously, "That's 'my' child. This is the mother of my child. And if you idiots don't have sense enough to get her proper care..." He looked back over the physician who stood with his leeches, his clothes dirty and unkept. "Get those filthy creatures out of here." Taliesin snarled nastily, looking directly into the other man's eyes who felt a strange chilling sensation run down his back. With this, the physician quickly began to pack his things to leave as Taliesin readdressed the other two men, "I think I have every right to step in and try and save their lives."

"Your child." Asked one of the priests, rather shocked and narrowing his eyes in a stern line, "She swore to us that this child was the progeny of a young man from Lady Creirwy's family, though she would not give his name. And though we hardly endorse such conduct, at least she assured us he was of Christian faith. She swore she no longer consorted with you, that that was over long ago. Too long ago. Too long ago for this child."

"Ummm..." Taliesin shook his head sadly, "No... not too long ago..." He hugged Iola to him, brushing a hand through her hair, "So, you lied, my love... to me, to them." He kissed her forehead as she moaned in her sickness. Then he looked back at the priests, "Still... that child 'is' my child. And I shall do my poor best to save and protect them both."

"Maerdynn?" Whispered Iola up to Taliesin in her fever so that Taliesin responded by hugging her closer. "What's happening? Where's my baby?"

"Shh, shh, love. She's fine, she's okay. It's you I'm concerned about. Rest now. Mali is on her way."

"Mali?" She tossed feverishly, her hands fluttering about so that Taliesin had to take them both and hold them in his own. "Mali? But, where are the priests I sent for? The physician?"

Both priests had backed to the doors, but now one strode over to one side of the bed as Jenna and Dylan kept a close watch that he make no untoward moves. But, he stayed where none of them might touch him as he spoke to the sick woman in Taliesin's

arms. “Woman, you lied to me and my fellows. You have consorted with the devil and your soul will burn in hell.”

“What? What?” Were Iola’s confused words as Taliesin stared at the man in pure puzzlement.

“The only hope you is if you were to consign yourself to your father’s house never to set foot from your rooms again and remain in continual penance for your grievous sins... As for your child. She is damned already, she holds no interest for me or my brethren.”

With that the other priest left, and as Iola began to rave and cry, Taliesin took voice before the remaining priest was gone, “If that is your decision, then get out and stay away. Stay far away. I shall bear all responsibilities for the child and her mother... and know that I shall give back any curse you may inflict on them. That any god could be so cruel to a woman with childbed fever and to the innocence of the child itself. I really don’t understand you people. How is it you fool anyone? Or do you wrap people in fear somehow that I just do not perceive?” The priest spit on the ground and turned to leave as Jenna and Dylan stepped aside. Though Iola screamed and pleaded to the closed door for the priests to forgive her and not desert her, they did not return nor had they even looked back as they had left. “Shh, shh, my sweet.” Whispered Taliesin to her as he softly restrained her as best he could. At last Mali arrived accompanied by Dori with herbs and water and clean clothing. She motioned Taliesin away, then gently and patiently pulled him from the sick and distraught woman when he did not seem to wish to do as she asked. Finally letting go, he slumped down in a simple chair on the other side; both out of the way yet near enough to help where he could. At that, he also instructed Jenna and Dylan to go back to the Bardic apartments to wait for him and thought they protested, saying they too, could offer Bardic healing, Mali concurred with Taliesin.

“Send your healing, but please go on, now.” Spoke Mali reasonably and calmly, “The fewer people here right now, the better. This woman is very distraught and confused. It is best you leave.” With that, Jenna and Dylan left reluctantly, Jenna pausing at the door, watching Taliesin a moment as he managed to take Iola’s hand to hold as Mali began her ministrations.

It was late the next day when Taliesin finally returned to the Bardic apartments drawn and sad, his face distant and confused. He said nothing as Jenna and Dylan came up to him having heard him at the door. He passed them as if he were sleepwalking and moved towards his room where he began to draw off his clothes now stained with blood and sweat. Before he could really do so, Dylan went up to hug him only to find the other man suddenly weeping in his arms, causing Jenna to come up and hug as well. “She didn’t make it?” Dylan quietly asked and Taliesin shook his head ‘no’ in confirmation. “We’re here, Maerdyynn. Don’t block us out.” For a long while they just all stood holding each other in communal silence allowing the sorrow to pass through them, allowing the energy to spread between them. When Taliesin broke away at last, the other two helped him remove his outer clothes and eased him on his bed to rest. Quietly they removed themselves after, shutting the door softly as Taliesin drifted into a thick and weary sleep.

The next day a little funeral was held, one taken over by the Bards as the Christian faction at the Greathouse had withdrawn any support or concern. The chill of Winter beginning to close in surrounded the small party as the grave was dug to receive Iola's body near a small stand of oak and pine a short ways from the Greathouse. Though Taliesin would have well preferred a pyre in what he felt to be more traditional, he believed Iola sincere in her new beliefs and he would honor them the best he knew. Of course, he would receive no help from Creirwy or the priests, but he only felt sorry for Iola on this, not himself. At least some of her own family from the Court and near town did attend, not interested in her new found faith anyway, and pleased to know the child had the father that she did. Though greatly distraught, in the night Taliesin had sent out to ask one of the Wise Women from a surrounding village to perform the rituals.

Much of the Bardic folk present at Court attended with the others, somber and watchful. Korwyn stood near his father where Taliesin offered him a quiet smile and squeezed the boy's hand, "You have a new sister." Taliesin remarked sadly, "She is with her nurse. It is too cold. But, I would have you meet her later, she will need her big brother." With that, Taliesin sighed, putting his arm around his son and hugging a bit. Though unsure, Korwyn bore it well. He was really just a child himself yet, having only vaguely known Iola, and only his natural empathy understood any of his father's sorrow or those of the people about them.

The funeral rite was short, though strong in ritual and color, the elder Wise Woman graceful and well spoken. The people of Iola were pleased and Taliesin thankful. Jenna and Dylan stood near and though watchful of their friend, saw no reason to intervene at any time. When Iola's body was lowered into the ground, her mother wept and keened, pulling her hair as she made moves to jump into the grave herself. Her family restrained and proceeded to gently subdue her, but it was nothing unexpected, Iola had been deeply loved by her parents.

Afterwards, all silently retired up to the Greathouse and went into the area next the kitchens where food and drink was spread for everyone in honor and memory of Iola. Once everyone was settled in and could mill about on their own, Taliesin sat and spoke with the Wise Woman for a long while. They discussed what needed to be done for Iola's spirit, that it would be satisfied and find its way to the Summerland or Heaven, whichever she preferred. The Wise Woman promised to check the grave from time to time and look for signs, briefly discussing and instructing what Taliesin might even look out for himself. It seemed good to the Wise Woman that the father claimed his child, but she also instructed that he make certain women were with her and continued to be as the child would need that and it would be what Iola would want.

Just as Taliesin was making his assurances the room seemed to hush, causing Taliesin and the Wise woman to look up. Towards them came a fairly young woman with a tiny bundle in her arms. The sadness that had been shadowing Taliesin's face all morning brightened just a bit as the woman stepped up to him and he reached for her to give it over to him. For a moment he clasped it tenderly to him as the Wise Woman looked on pleased and patient. Then he carefully stood and raised the bundle up in a salute to everyone present. "Behold my daughter." He said, "Behold Jessica, for I know that is the name her mother had chosen for her and I would honor that choice." With that he held the child back to himself. "And I promise to protect and see to her well being... I say that to all of you. I say it to the Gods. I say it as a Bard."

Amid murmurs of assent and praise, Taliesin sat down again as the room resumed as it had been. For a long while he looked down at his child wonderingly and tenderly for these were moments he had never had the opportunity to partake of before. He would have enjoyed doing such things with Bridget, the mother of his other two children, but she had not seemed to wish his presence at such things nor even to help much with their early years other than to visit from time to time. The nurse sat next to him and watched him carefully, though he seemed at ease enough for all the newness. Perhaps it was that he was flanked by both the nurse and Wise Woman, knowing that if something were to happen the two women would quickly remedy whatever needed to be done. “She’ll need feeding soon.” The nurse finally said, obviously asking for the infant’s return. “And she needs be away from all this. But I thought it proper you see her and let everyone else see her as well.”

“You did most well.” Remarked Taliesin pleasantly, carefully returning the child to the woman’s care. A child that was sleeping peacefully no matter the tumult that was going in the room about her. “How goes it with you, Erina? I know I shall wish to see my child as much as possible, as I’m sure will her grandparents.”

“I’ve finished nursing my own bairn. My mother stays with my husband and I to help me to care for my young ones and see to the rooms. We’re next the stables, you know. My husband, he’s Stable master now. And I teach and oversee the sewing at Court much of the time... You’re welcome in our rooms. Any of her people are, too, long as they aren’t pushing that Christian foolishness, anyway... But, you know, you’re always welcome. At anytime.” She smiled widely and patiently, and though not beautiful, she had a soft prettiness in her features that Taliesin admired. The sleeping baby finally began to fuss a bit in her arms. “Well, I best go and see to her now. She’ll be awake in a moment and bawling for milk. And all these folk may cause her to fuss all the more... I’m deeply sorry, my lord, for your loss.” With that the woman stood, Taliesin quickly kissing her cheek before she could get away. His eyes followed her and the bundle in her arms as she left the room and he sighed thoughtfully.

In the corner a musician and singer began some songs, respectful and quiet at first, though all knew they would turn lively after a while. Though there was sadness about them, they also knew it was meant as a time to celebrate. To celebrate Iola’s life when alive and to celebrate the new life she now entered. Taliesin wasn’t certain he was truly up for celebration, but he recognized that this was the right and time-honored way to proceed. The Chief Singer, Olwen, merry and round, who had by then become an old and firm friend to Taliesin, sang the songs and encouraged the guests to join her as she continued. Taliesin smiled and nodded to his friend in acknowledgement.

After a space, Dylan pressed Jenna to go and see how Taliesin was doing, explaining that he wished to go on and see to some other things at Court that needed attendance. Raising a brow at him she shrugged and nodded and Dylan took this as a signal to gracefully leave. Frowning a little, Jenna decided she might as well do as Dylan asked, walking casually over to Taliesin to sit.

“Jenna.” Smiled Taliesin, “Did you see Jessica? I think I shall call her Jesse.”

“Yes.” She smiled back. “She’s beautiful.” A little uncomfortable and noting that the Wise woman was taking close stock of her, Jenna said, “How are you doing, Tal?”

Looking off a moment, a quick ripple of pain moved across his face. Jenna impulsively squeezed his hand as Taliesin blew out his breath. “We weren’t lovers

anymore.” He whispered. “And I may have been angry with her... But, still. She was a good soul. And she was Jesse’s mother.” He swallowed long. “I shall be angry with those priests the rest of my life. If we had been soon enough.” He gritted his teeth hard and squeezed Jenna’s hand back so forcefully it made her wince. “That’s the ‘real’ horror of it, Jenna.” He looked directly and intensely into her eyes. “We could have saved her... But the infection was far too deep.” Some tears traced his eyes and Jenna responded by immediately hugging him hard, noting the Wise woman continuing a study of her. “Let me get out of here. Take me back to the apartments, would you?” He said softly in her ear. With that they rose and began their movement across the room to leave, pausing here and there to make proper excuses for their early absence. No one tried to detain them, nor was anyone especially surprised and Taliesin was fully grateful when they made it beyond the doors. He never did ask where Dylan might have gotten off to though it seemed reasonable he may have already guessed. There were always things that ought be seen to or done and Dylan likely felt he ought pick up the slack in order to give Taliesin a little space.

Once they returned to the apartments, Taliesin simply repaired to his room and asked to be left alone for the time being. Although Jenna let him go easily enough, she stood at his door after he closed it for a long while thinking. She knew she felt intensely sorry for her friend, for now she truthfully saw him as such, and wished there was something she could honestly say or do to help him through his grief. Nothing truly came to mind other than to just be there for him, be supportive and send healing. She reflected back a moment and saw the face of the Wise Woman once again and how she had studied Jenna. Perhaps she had assumed Jenna was Taliesin’s lover now. This made Jenna smile and shake her head though at the same time she felt a shimmer of energy run through her. “Hu.” She breathed, then went to the room Dylan had given over to her to occupy in her stay. Dylan’s great calico cat greeted her heartily and happily so that Jenna picked her up as she moved inside, hugging the purring animal as she sat on the bed. “I don’t know. What do you think, Missy?” She pet the cat in her lap distractedly, feeling the love and contentment the animal emitted. “You don’t really care, do you, little one... Auh, but I think Dylan might be happy enough if I got together with ol’ Tal. But, of course, Dylan probably would just like to have his room back, don’t you think?” She took the cat’s big furry face in her hands and looked into the animal’s wonderful yellow eyes, the purr continuing nonstop, making Jenna laugh a bit, then proceed to pet again as she sighed. “I don’t know, Missy. Tal’s pretty and all, I’m sure you’ve noticed that. For a human, anyway, um? But... I’ve always taken him to be a bit on the fickle side. And willful. Course, not that I ought care if he’s fickle, I guess... but that willful stuff. He does indeed like to have his way.” She shook her head. “Welllll... I ought go see the Runners. Who’s here, who’s going, if any Bards are passing by soon. Who really ‘is’ likely to Winter here now that that is about to be.” She got up, gently setting the cat down on the bed as she rose. “Besides. I don’t know that Tal has even noticed me. Cared to or would.” She said firmly to the cat who looked back at her as if considering what she had said. Jenna laughed some at the unusual seriousness that seemed to light the animal’s eyes sensing that the calico only evinced a certain curiosity. With that she left, turning her thoughts elsewhere as she went down the halls towards the Runners’ area.

For many days Taliesin was withdrawn and moody, spending much of his free time in his room in silence as he looked out the window. The skies had become heavy and some slight hints of snow began to fall and change the landscape. As the land began to truly change, the mountains becoming whiter and thicker, it seemed rather uncertain that Taliesin really noticed. Several times he had gone out to the little copse where Iola was buried no matter the cut of wind that began to whip across the area. At least he did go off to see his child often, and those times seemed to lighten his mood some, but it never lasted very long. Sometimes the woman, Erina, even brought the baby to the Bardic apartments where Taliesin always managed to enjoy and smile for his child, yet his mood seemed to shift almost the moment the child was gone. And though it looked like the guest apartments would actually be empty for the Winter months, Dylan asked that Jenna not reconsider as he was a bit disturbed by Taliesin's continued despondency and didn't seem to wish to try to handle the situation by himself. It did seem to help to have the activity and movement around Taliesin, so Jenna acquiesced, though she began to suspect the situation even more. Yet, in their continued discussions, both she and Dylan would keep out a close watch over Taliesin for he seemed to drift easily into a strangely despondent manner. After a time even Mali began to check on Taliesin some for she began to believe this to be no longer simply grief, telling Dylan and Jenna in confidence that she didn't care for the color in his eyes nor how often and easily they could become unfocused and distant. This did unnerve both Jenna and Dylan a little; Jenna taking on some of the actual Court duties as well as the days began to deepen into a heavy snowbound Winter.

It was in the depths of the Season when Yule was just past and the Bardic faction began to speak of what they might plan for the Imbolq rites, that Jenna got up in the middle of the night feeling unable to sleep as if the very air itself had awakened her. She went into the back room that although open to the hall between the two private rooms and the main frontal room, would allow Jenna to keep from disturbing Dylan asleep in the main room. She might have stayed in the private room, but she felt restless and this inner room had a window where the private one did not. She felt a need to go to the window and though shuttered, she managed to crack it some so that she might look on the landscape outside. She had brought a small taper with her and the moon was full and it all gave an eerie light as she sat to watch the snow flakes gently drift to the ground. Suddenly she thought she heard soft moaning causing her to pause and listen in her revelry. She frowned and a shiver went through her when she heard it again, realizing that it was coming from Taliesin's room and that he sounded as if he might be in pain. She took the taper up, her heavy gown of white making her appear rather ethereal in the shadowy rooms as she moved towards his door. Standing at the door she gently knocked calling Taliesin's name softly. When no answer seemed forthcoming, yet the sounds of distress and pain continued, Jenna decided to breach protocol to carefully and quietly enter his room. She found him tossing and turning in his bed, the windows unshuttered and open as Taliesin began to say in a peculiarly muffled voice, "No... Who are you? No, I won't go." Jenna quickly shuttered the window, then came up to Taliesin in his bed where she realized that he was sweated and feverish, an odd smell of wildflowers all about him as if he sweated it through his pores.

Seeing this she set the taper down and called out, "Dylan! Dylan!" as she tried to think of a way she might comfort Taliesin in his distress and whispered to him, "Tally,

Tally. What's wrong?" She received no answer and looking about herself found a pitcher of water on his side table where she poured him a cup and managed to get a good dose of it down his throat. When Dylan entered the room having jumped up from the couch in hearing her call out, his eyes large and his features perplexed, Jenna exclaimed to him, "Get Mali quick, Dylan. I think Taliesin is quite ill."

By the time Mali came into the room with her apprentice, Dori, Taliesin had calmed back down and had even opened his eyes some. Mali studied him a long while as she checked, rechecked, sometimes seeming lost in thought, a puzzled frown across her face. Finally she looked at her apprentice, "Dori, stay with him." She said, "Give him lots of water if he becomes delirious again. Perhaps Jenna or Dylan will help you change the bedclothes? He's sweated them pretty well." She seemed to look more at Jenna with this who responded quickly with a 'Certainly!' making Mali nod affirmatively and state, "I'll be back shortly."

When Mali returned, Jenna and Dylan had propped Taliesin up on pillows, though he looked weak and pale as if the fever had put him through some terrible battle, his hair disheveled and his face drawn. "What's the matter with me?" He asked as if the question also included 'Where am I?'

The flurry back and forth to the Bardic apartments had awakened many in the night, including some in the Runner's area where Korwyn stayed. When Korwyn realized where the commotion stemmed from, he also went to the apartments where the servant stepped aside easily once he saw it was Taliesin's son. He went towards his father's room in curiosity, his eyes like green almonds as he finally came up to stand next to Dori in resolute silence. Inside the room, Mali had set down a full pot of some sort of tea and poured just a little in a cup to hand to Taliesin. "Just sip this. Let me watch you. I have to decide if this is the right sort of thing to be giving you. If it's not, it's the sort of thing that might poison you, so be 'real' easy with it as you sip." Taliesin sniffed at it first and looked at Mali with a startled face. "Yes, Maerdyinn, you're quite right. The Wise Women are like to call it FaeryLocks in these parts." Both Jenna & Dylan's eyes grew round at that. Mali saw their looks and responded for them as much as Taliesin. ". As I said, poison, unless you know how to use it correctly. Or when and for whom. Healers often call it DragonsBreath, though I'm not sure why other than for its very earthy attributes... So Maerdyinn, be right easy with it." As Taliesin slowly sipped at it, it seemed amazing how quickly his color returned and some strength came back to his form. Seeing this, Mali finally encouraged him to continue his drink. "Continue to sip this and finish the pot, if you would.. Dori will bring this up to you from time to time. As you know the herb is good for other things, so I have plenty in store. Sometimes the Wise Women come up and ask for bits of it for charms. Keeps the 'good folk' friendly, they say. Thus the name 'Faerylocks', I expect." Taliesin blinked a little at that, but Mali went on, "Anyway, you ought drink as much as you can, my friend. You will be able to taper off in a few days, but you will have to continue to drink it until I am able to deliberate this thing further and find some sort of solution... And rest. Get a good amount of rest. I know Dylan and Jenna can well handle things for a few days."

"Mali." He asked of the elder, straw haired woman as she sat on a chair next to the bed. "How do you come by knowing to try giving me this? I really would have thought that no one would even consider it under any circumstances. Not anymore..."

His words created a puzzled stir in the room but Mali answered forthrightly, “I have spent many years in study at the Holy Isle, sir Bard. My knowledge is as complete as the teachers I studied from. Do you think your Runners carry only messages and news for you? I continue my studies always. Certainly I can read and write, and any thought or knowledge relevant is passed from place to place.”

Taliesin smiled wanly, “I surely did not mean to insult you, Mali. I am just so simply surprised that ‘anyone’ would know what you know. And believe me, I am deeply grateful.”

“Umm, well.” She said, not sure she totally accepted his apology, “You won’t be so grateful when the delirium comes back. I cannot truly stop that. I can only keep you from becoming weak and spent from the experiences. The other you must battle by your own means.”

Taliesin held her eyes for several moments as something seemed to pass between them, an understanding that eluded the rest of the room, “Yes, lady.” He sighed whispering, “I comprehend. And I will do all as you say.”

She rose from the chair and looked up at the other two Bards, “Come Jenna, Dylan. I wish to speak with the both of you a bit. Dori, you and Korwyn might stay a moment with Maerdynn, if you would while I am with the others. After that, Dori and I needs get back. Since we are up, we have plenty of work we might go on and see to.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Replied Dori as she and Korwyn moved into the room while the others left, closing the door behind them.

In the main room Mali sat with Jenna and Dylan watching their drawn, worried faces and rather glad to see the serious cast in their eyes. Though the servant had lit some candles, some small rays of the dawning sun were trying to filter through the shuttered window. Morning waked and it seemed there was to be a full and golden sun despite a gentle fall of snow. Both Jenna and Dylan looked at Mali with question and she met their faces with a tiny nod to each. “Maerdynn should not be left alone. Not for now. Perhaps not for some time to come... But, he will be able to move about all right. Right now he just needs rest. But there will be signs now to all this and you need to note it. His eyes will get a pervading bluish cast and it may well seem that the smell of wildflowers and the open woods will have come to call. He may become disoriented and a bit estranged to all around him. You must then get him somewhere as best you can to let him sit or lie down. Comfort him and give him plenty of water at that time. Not the drink. That will only do him good before and after. Talk to him. It may not seem it but he will be able to hear you when he becomes like this. Hear you and understand you. Call him. Tell him how much he’s needed here. That he is loved here. That this is where he belongs.”

Dylan and Jenna exchanged long, puzzled looks, “Water?” Whispered Jenna, “And not the tea?”

“No... not during the delirium itself, as I said. The water would cool his fever in any case. But with Maerdynn, it also shall help to clear his life-force. Like sea salt or crystals might under other circumstances.”

“Clears his life-force?” Questioned Dylan, frowning more and shaking his head as he tried to understand. “What on Earth is going on, Mali? What is happening to him?”

Mali shook her head back and sighed hard, “It is his nature and he must wrestle it. At this time the most you can really do is offer support.”

“His ‘nature’?” asked Jenna rather incredulously, “What, by the Cauldron of my Goddess are you talking about?”

“I shall say no more.” Mali replied as she got up. “Perhaps I have said more than I should, but he truly needs your support... Jenna...” She said as the other two stood as well. “Please consider staying for the time being... I mean past the Winter. Past the Spring and even on. Whatever it may take. Do not return to the roads. He will need your help. He will need it from you both. And it will take you both.”

Jenna held Mali’s gaze for several protracted moments but did not reply to Mali’s request. Finally realizing that there would be no forthcoming answer, Mali turned from them and went to retrieve her apprentice. Jenna sighed again as she and Dylan returned to Taliesin’s room. At the door Taliesin implored Jenna to enter but that Dylan take Korwyn out, perhaps to go on to the kitchens for some breakfast so that he and Jenna might speak alone. “In fact,” Taliesin said to Dylan in a seeming faint attempt at good spirits, “You might speak with the Players after. I know they are beginning their plans for Imbolq and I am certain you would like to see that they include a tune or two or your own, Dylan. I know you’ve written something of late. I’ve heard you. And I think you ought even press it. They’re very good, you know... And be taking Korwyn with you for that, too. Later we’ll go over some scrolls. We might even let Korwyn try his hand at some fair copying, eh?” He smiled at his son. “You have a nice hand. And I’d like it if you practiced your harp here later as well. After dinner, perhaps.”

With that, the two smiled back the best they could and took their leave leaving Jenna alone with him. Taliesin indicated that Jenna take the chair next his bed where he took both her hands in his. “Jenna.” He started, his voice becoming low and a bit raspy as if he were uncertain how he ought phrase his words. “Dylan is my Second, but he is no Chief Bard. I love him. He’s my dearest friend, my best friend. But it is not his time... Somehow I must contact the Council as soon as possible. I hate to send anyone out in the Winter months, and may needs wait to the first break of Spring. But then it ‘must’ be done, and no later. I am really no longer fit to be a Chief Bard.”

“Tally.” Spoke Jenna surprised and rather upset at the tones in his voice and the reason in his heart. “You mustn’t think such things.”

“No, no, Jenna, you are wrong. How can I deal with the Court properly if I’ve always to worry about this difficulty? And until I may send out someone and until the Council is able to respond... Will ‘you’ act as Chief Bard?”

“What?” Jenna was so startled at his words that she drew her hands away from him as she sat back in the chair.

“I’ll help you, of course. I know you don’t know all the intricacies. But, we can sort of do it together. But, you see, I am quite aware of your standing, my friend. You’re fully capable. Even for as confusing as this Court can get.” He smiled a little trying to elicit a calmer response from her.

“Tal, I...” Her eyes danced, thinking and evading and even just a bit panicky, her heart racing.

Seeing this reaction in her, Taliesin sighed and looked away himself as emotion crossed his face. “Jenna, please... I know this is not the type of life you prefer. But for the time... Won’t you please help me?... You’ve just ‘got’ to. I don’t have any way to turn... Gods, don’t you understand?” He breathed sadly as she finally looked back at him and listened. “It’s like everything’s been taken away from me suddenly and totally...”

There was a time, not so long ago, when I truly loved Iola... And now, no matter what, no matter how things could or would have been, she's gone forever.... And now I can't even function in my Path... And so what use am I? Jenna, why should I bother? Why 'should I' go on?"

Silent tears began to trace his eyes so that Jenna felt the emotion well up in her as well and she found herself reaching over and hugging him. Encircled in her arms he found he could not retain himself and began weeping bitterly. "Hey, hey... Tal... This is so unlike you, dear friend... And I am being selfish, and I shall stay as you ask. I shall stay. I promise. I promise... It's going to be fine. We'll do fine." After a moment of continuing to try to settle and comfort him, a thought came to Jenna to try and move his heart away from his distress. "Your daughter, your newborn."

"Umm?" He whispered and frowned through the emotional tempest.

"When she is weaned... We could convert the back room into a nursery. I know you have things stored there, but mightn't you put it elsewhere? Maybe in the guest quarters?... I know it might get a little crowded in here.. But, she'll need you. And I think you need her... Later, perhaps, a new room could be built to include her... Or rooming could get rearranged somehow. Other apartments... Do you think?" She drew away from him a little and saw that he was smiling just a bit. Impulsively she found herself smoothing his hair and tracing his face with her fingers.

"Do you think so? Have my daughter with me? Raise my daughter?" Though tears continued to mark his cheeks, a brightness filtered his eyes.

"My goodness, Tally, why not? She 'is' your daughter, after all."

"I guess I'm just used to the fact that my children have stayed with their mother. Everything has moved so quickly around me, I hadn't been realizing what the future of that was to be."

With a slightly amused smile that was happy he was beginning to recede some from his depressive state, Jenna drew back and asked, "Sooo... just how many children 'do' you have, Taliesin?"

A little surprised, though it perked his spirits up and found him chuckling some he replied, "Ohhh... would you believe three? Counting my newborn."

"Oh, please! Three? Only three? I don't think that I believe you!" She stated truly startled by his remark.

He shrugged, "My rumors proceed me, I see... I certainly admit to various lovers over the years... And as a youngster I was a Wandering Bard for a time, so you may be right to doubt some of what I say... Yet, I've been here for many years now... and all I can say is that here I have not proven to be terribly prolific despite it... And I 'do' have wonderful children, you know. My eldest who is not here, she's gone off to serve at another Court, she's fifteen now and a most wonderful Sacred Singer. I hope someday you may hear her. Her name's Branwen, she went with a woman named Kelyra to a more Southerly Court of Powys..."

"Ohhh... oh, yes, I may well have heard her, then... And yes, indeed, she is wonderful." She smiled at him and he responded with a warm look of his own that moved through her like a wash of melted snow.

"And you know Korwyn... Who shall make a fine Bard. He was tested when he first came here, which made me very happy. After a time he will be for Waljanargel, but for now he learns the Court life. It has been a great pleasure to have him around."

“Not very prolific, ummm? Isn’t that what they say of the Eldritch?” She teased though she also tested a bit as well.

“The Eldritch?” He smiled at her oddly, “Do me a favor, Jenna... If you are going to stay for the time. If you’re going to work with me as you are promising... Would you be so kind as to call me Maerdynn.”

“Maerdynn... Hmm... so why is that? Why do folks about here call you Maerdynn?”

He shrugged, “It’s my name. My ‘real’ name, that is.”

“What do you mean?” She frowned, “I thought Taliesin was your name.”

He blew out his breath, “Well, you see... Taliesin is the name the Bards gave me when I was about seven years old. For anyone outside this Court I maintain the name Taliesin. Sort of a courtesy. What the Council wanted; preferred, I guess. And I’ve maintained that name a long time here, too... But, not always... And now, not with you.”

“Then some of the rumors are true.” She said a little too wide-eyed.

“What?” He looked at her curiously, “That my parents would name me something else?” He cocked his head, “Rumors, rumors... I guess I have a few, eh? And I expect Dylan may be the culprit for a few of them... He tends to like that sort of thing, I’ve noticed.” He shook out his head and laughed some, “My mother looked Pict. A bit like you, I expect, um? And my father was fairly tall but slender, like me. I look a lot like my mother in the face, I believe. Her hair and eyes... And you have beautiful hair.” He whisked, noting Jenna’s long dark curls. “You’ve got Pict blood, I know... How wonderful. They say Rhiannon’s mother is full Pict herself. I’ve always been proud of my mother’s blood. I think it gives a sparkle to the eyes. Like you have.” His own eyes were sparkling now and very soft. “Thank-you so much for the suggestions concerning my new daughter. And thank-you, thank-you for saying yes to staying.” He held his arms out for another hug.

With this she felt like she melted in his embrace and for a moment all she could think of was how soft his hair was and how wonderful he smelled. When he gave her a quick kiss she pulled him back to linger in it which he hardly rejected seeming to relax and meld into it himself. Realizing what she had just done, she pulled away sharply saying, “You really do have the glamour, don’t you?”

Looking fixedly in her eyes a bit askance he responded, “The glamour? Jenna, Jenna, Jenna. If you are attracted to me, why do you have to blame it on faery glamour? Why can’t you simply be attracted? Or is there some reason you have that says you ‘should’ dislike me? Therefore anything to the contrary would have to be faye or eldritch or something...” He gestured largely as if somewhat annoyed.

“Tally. I mean Maerdynn, I...” Jenna said avoiding his eyes and moving from his grasp, “Why don’t I go and get your daughter?”

Letting her move away he said, “Jenna, listen to me. I ‘am’ attracted to you, you know. And it’s not glamour. To be honest with you I’ve been some attracted to you for quite awhile though in the past and even now I’ve been rather shy of it. You travel. And I’ve never wanted to infringe on that...” He breathed as if this had cost him quite a bit to even say, “But I promise you, friend. I would never, ever use ‘any’ sort of magick to entice someone to my bed. I swear.”

For a moment Jenna paused in her retreat to look back at him to see a patience in his beautiful eyes. Not being able to hold it long she turned quickly and left the room.

As she went to find the apartments of the wet nurse and her family, Jenna went over and over the events of her last talk with Taliesin as if she could glean something she just was not seeing. Something was not right about it and she knew it. Or believed it so. And yet, the man had made enough sense with his words, with his apparent feelings and gestures. 'He's right, you know.' She thought, arguing with herself, "You want an excuse now for being interested in him at all. You've made jokes of him so long you are no longer much willing to see the real man behind your thoughts.... And what's wrong with you, anyway? So what he'd obviously like you to share his bed? Where's the harm? He's probably distraught and on the rebound... And it most certainly would make everything so much easier. Especially for poor Dylan. I know that poor thing feels cramped. I'm almost certain he's been trying to see someone himself of late but has been too polite to broach things..." She shook her head as she walked. 'So, Gods, what 'is' wrong with me? Was it that this surprised me, so sudden?... Ah, no.' She began to admit to herself, 'You're afraid... I know it. You're afraid there's some real chance of falling in love with him. And you, my Jenna, you do not wish to be in love. It's inconvenient, it's messy. You don't wish to get hurt or to do any hurting. You've always cherished your freedom. The open road. You feel very, very threatened. By someone you never even expected this from.' "Damned faery-glamour!" She spat out once as she finally got up to the doors of apartments of Jesse's wet nurse.

Though fairly early yet that morning, Erina answered the doors already up, full of motion and very willing to fetch the baby to see her father, especially when she heard that he was feeling poorly. Having wrapped the child up well and about to move back out into the halls to go with Jenna, Erina stopped them both a moment to remark, "Lady. He's put the glamour on you, hasn't he?" She looked deeply into Jenna's large dark eyes as if seeing into a great depth and as if she had made some wondrous discovery.

"What?" Frowned Jenna at the door, "Who has?"

"He's Elfin, you know." Responded Erina as she smelled of Jenna's clothes, "His smell is all over you. He's claimed you, hasn't he?... I rightly wondered how long it would take him once Iola turned him away... Longer than I would have even thought possible... But, he's finally made his statement."

"What on Earth?... No, he's very been sick, Erina. He's sweated a lot. I'm sure I've still got that clinging to me, nothing more. Certainly his sickbed has smelled a little odder than most, but it might well be strong. You've got it all wrong." She smiled, though a wriggle of uncertainty raced through her mind.

"On Earth... You think that that's a sickbed smell. Ummm... I see. Ah, but Maerdynn... Maerdynn can make one believe 'anything' he says."

"Hmph... He's a Bard. All of us can be accused of that, Erina. Whether or not it's true."

"Ohh, but he can make any other Bard believe 'whatever' he says. Can't he.... I've seen him do it, my Lady. I have." And she smiled knowingly, "I right believe he could put Rhiannon to task given the chance."

With that, Jenna rolled her eyes a bit and moved them out through the doors into the hall, "Don't be silly, Erina," she said as she took the baby from Erina into her own arms as they went, "Rhiannon is Head of the Council."

"Aye... and they're both Eldritch."

A little disturbed by this sentiment, Jenna asked the other woman seriously, “Erina. Don’t you like Tal? I mean, Maerdyenn?”

Erina looked at Jenna and smiled an open friendly smile, “Of course I do, lady. How can anyone help it. And I surely wish him no harm. He’s good to everyone and I shall help him in any way I can... I just want you to be knowing what you’re getting yourself into. I like you, too, you see.”

Jenna realized that the woman was being genuinely honest, so she smiled back warm and wide, “Don’t worry, Erina. Believe it or not, he’s just another Bard.”

“Whatever you say, my lady.”

In his room Taliesin received his child with great joy. Though he had dressed, he was reluctant to leave as he continually sipped at the tea Mali provided. “My little Jesse!” He said as he took the baby girl and hugged her gently to himself. Then he looked up at Jenna as she sat next Dylan on another chair who had re-entered with Korwyn earlier. Korwyn sat on the edge of the bed watching his father and sister with intent interest. “There may be a break in the weather soon.” Taliesin said finally once everyone was truly settled and Erina had left to wait in the main room. “If it looks it, I shall send a Runner or two to at least begin the trek to the Seat... Actually, Dylan tells me there is trouble in the East. It’s why he and Korwyn came back here so soon. Some Runners came in very early this morning having weathered through the snow and ice. He told them they were ‘not’ to go on again until Spring proper... Foolish children... But the trouble worries them. Worries me, too, really. Too many pockets in this Country do not have this Country to heart. They would about betray us all to Briton if they could. To Christianity. To servitude, though I expect they don’t really understand that. Ahh... But, why do I care?” He cooed at his child as he sighed and shook his head. “If I could but gain the attention of Rhiannon. Just once... If I must leave my position. How wonderful a thing it would be to ‘see’ her. Hear her.”

“Maerdyenn,” Frowned Dylan as if about to scold, “You’re making it sound as if you’re about to die.”

“Well, but aren’t I?” Replied Taliesin in such a way as if he were speaking pleasantries as he continued to coo and fuss at his daughter.

“I think there’s a good chance they’ll let you maintain your post here.” Spoke Jenna somewhat defensively. “You’re just too good at what you do.”

“So, your promise is good, then? I can count on you. And you’ll stay, and you’ll help me?” He asked her seriously as the eyes of both Dylan and Korwyn turned to Jenna as well.

“And I’ll stay. And I’ll help you. I promise.” Obvious this drew a look of both pleasure and relief from Dylan, surprise from Korwyn; it was also clear that something passed between Taliesin and Jenna, and Taliesin was well satisfied. Taliesin nodded a little as a wide and open look crossed his face and echoed itself into his bearing. With that, they began discussion of how best to proceed with the rest of day and how Jenna might begin to align herself with her new household properly.