

Rhiannon – Child of Twilight

Chapter 7

The Chosen

Mab felt as if she had been climbing and crawling forever, a close darkness about her filled with the smells of damp earth, roots and humus. It was as if the earth might mean to swallow her, her dark hair clammy and clinging about her smudged, dirty face, her clothes close and torn. She began to find it difficult to breath as she wondered just how she could have gotten there. As no hint or perception came to her, she began to wonder, though she continued in her struggles, her limbs feeling more and more leaden.

Finally, she burst through like someone who might be clawing through a grave as she realized she was coming straight up through the earth. A burst of clear air filled her lungs and she gasped from it as she struggled for the ground above her. The sky was dark and nearly moonless, the branches of trees overhead thick and menacing as they crowded out the stars. Getting to her knees, dirt still caked upon her clothes, Mab gazed about in confusion. She had no perception or notion where she might be and she began to wonder of it. Was she awake? Could she be in some other realm, some other world? Silence moved itself about her like a cloak; no insects, no birdcalls, no frogs, not even the waft of a breeze. There seemed to be grasses on the ground and the smells of a forest met her as she gingerly stood in tentative awareness. Her feet were bare, her clothing sparse and tight around her, the type of clothes she usually might chose for weapon's practice. The soles of her feet were tough and could traverse most any but the cruelest of terrain when necessary, but as it was not her usual wont, she wondered on it, trying to make sense of it.

The forest was strangely dense with great massive trees that gave Mab the sense that they were watching her in silent study. A shiver of fear glistened down her spine as a bead of sweat framed her face along her temple and jaw. Her dark eyes tried to pierce some comprehension of the woods about her, but she felt none. Suddenly the call of an owl rang through her ears causing her to turn towards it, startled by its singularness in the airs.

Gazing about in this new direction, Mab caught the sight of quick, darting movement that flitted between the trees. A strange glow seemed to emit from it and after a moment, a certain sort of glazed and tingled laughter drifted to Mab from it. Frowning, Mab watched it for a bit, certain now she was not in any waking state.

Feeling a terrible draw to the movement, Mab decided to follow; it was better than simply standing as she was and she hoped might lead to something that made a little sense. The shimmering, glowing motion continued as Mab pursued as if it knew some path within the trees that led ever further into the forest's depths. The Eldritch could seem like this, she thought, but she knew that this was neither the Eldritch nor really anything that bordered it. At least she thought not. A dream, perhaps, thought the clarity surprised her if it was.

Continuing to pursue the glow in front of her, thoughts of Rhiannon began to press upon her mind and she squinted. Was it Rhiannon she saw in the gleaming, she

wondered as she began to note a figure within it. Why would Rhiannon create this strange ethereal quest? The tree's branches grew more and more dense, their leaves thick and opaque until Mab could no longer see the sky and the only sense of any light was what she continued to trace.

In time she could hear the gurgling of water and she knew a stream flowed near. The soft, lighted form before her seemed to grow dim and then to disappear close to the sound of water creating an apprehension in Mab as she continued in the direction it had gone. Now she was like to find something for she expected the game must be ending as she drew near the sounds of the stream.

As she carefully found her way to it in what had become a blanket of total darkness, she also came to realize there was an area she could just make out and as she got ever closer, the clearer it became until it was nearly daylight where she stepped.

The bank of a stream lay in front of her, the grasses soft and green, with trees shaded and friendly, lit by a blue sky with tall, puffy clouds. Beside the stream was an array of animals all crowded about a seated figure who was clothed in variant shades of greens and had a mass of wonderful wheat colored hair. Rhiannon looked up at Mab, a sad sweetness in her eyes and she smiled a great warmth as Mab returned the gaze. "Come, my love." She spoke, "See what we have created."

Moving uncertainly towards her mate, Mab saw that Rhiannon held something in her arms, swathed in large leaves of reds, golds and greens. The animals gave way as Mab approached giving Mab a sense of some deference to her as if somehow they were her subjects in some way. Rhiannon smiled fully on Mab as she approached, an affection that reached out and surrounded Mab like a cloak of down on a wintry day. As she knelt down by Rhiannon close and soft, Rhiannon touched Mab's face gently, carefully, sending a wash through Mab that both startled and confused her. When Rhiannon saw that Mab was settled and fully seated, Rhiannon drew away some of the leaves from the object that she held to reveal it. Mab stared, narrowing her eyes as she frowned and shook her head in total consternation and bewilderment. For in Rhiannon's arms was an infant with dark, curly hair and great dark eyes who smiled at Mab, waving its arms in a way that babies often do when they see someone they know and like. "What does this mean?" Mab asked, looking back into Rhiannon's eyes.

"What can you mean?" Replied Rhiannon, clearly uncomprehending, surprised by Mab's statement. "He is ours. We have made him. I only wished for you to see."

"But, that doesn't make sense." Whispered Mab as she felt a rush of cool vibrations move through her and the air itself began to shift and fade.

Smells and sounds gathered around her, the stirring of human voices and bodies as light began to touch through the cracks of the tent where Mab shared her bed with Rhiannon. Feeling the warmth of Rhiannon's body next to her, Mab reached out and encircled her lover as she breathed in the scent of skin and hair. Slowly she slit open her eyes to gaze about at the familiar surroundings of the tent about her. There was bird song in the air that somehow drifted on the edges of her mind as she began her return to consciousness. Rhiannon shifted slightly as if her body sensed that Mab had already awoken. A soft sigh went through Rhiannon as she, too, began to waken, pulling her eyes open and finding them looking into Mab's. "Is something wrong? You have the most curious cast in your eyes." She whispered lowly, the sound of her voice so like the whisper of the breeze.

Narrowing her eyes briefly as she recalled her strange, confusing dream, Mab shook out her head a bit as she replied, “No, nothing. I dreamt. And it was nothing.”

Stretching some and gently pushing Mab a little away in order to do so, Rhiannon remarked, “But dreams. They speak to us. They know us. They tell us about ourselves. Are you certain you do not wish to tell me?” She softly pushed back some hairs from Mab’s face to regard her mate with promised understanding.

“I think.” Mab said with a tinge of evasiveness, “I might puzzle it out on my own for now.” She frowned, then looked back into Rhiannon’s face to smile. “Truly... It is nothing.”

“Umm.” Spoke Rhiannon, lightly stroking Mab’s arm and face. “It’s early yet. I think no breakfast fires are lit. The light is still low and gray. The air still quiet, though crisp.” With that Rhiannon kissed Mab fully and deeply letting the images of Mab’s dream fade away as Mab seemed to merge within Rhiannon’s embrace.

Life had taken on a sort of intriguing reality for Megan. The priest who had taken up her cause had also remained with her as she became vested with her priesthood and began her supposed ministry. They had traveled some from village to village and town as it was considered a great thing for people to hear from a pious and repentant Pict. She knew she confused and tormented the young priest who had come with her as she feigned a need for total privacy. He had become entirely devoted to her and she could have treated him as if he were a mere servant if she chose, but she dared not, though it tempted her sorely. She was quite aware that others watched as well, so she contented herself with a continued whisper about needing to vanquish the Bards and inventing nightmares, crying out in the night that the other priest might hear creating pity and solace for her fabricated injustices.

Yet, it all seemed long and at times very tiring to Megan as they moved about in what sometimes seemed an endless stream of humanity that held no real interest to her but for the continuation of her ruse. But finally she began to receive some word as their travels got them closer to Cymric borders. News that surprised and rather pleased Megan for it would allow her new angles that she might scheme. It appeared the Bardic Council was on the move and there was a real possibility the Seat Itself might no longer exist. Megan pondered that, wondering why Rhiannon would decide to do something so drastic. Though not all of the Council was ever at the Seat at one time, it also seemed that Rhiannon now had the Council traveling in various separate groups. It seemed it might well be a possible statement to Megan. Concern, fear; a wish to make the Bards more elusive, perhaps? But, why destroy the Seat Itself? Unless Rhiannon did not wish its present whereabouts known, which certainly suggested that the physical place of Waljanargel held important power for the Bards. Perhaps, then, Megan’s knowledge of where that Seat was could prove important, though it would both require absolute trust from the Christians as well as finding some way to get in Cymru to lead anyone there. For the moment that seemed fairly remote, though she let that thought ease at the back of her mind. The best chance and plans would be to try to draw the Bards out, to draw Rhiannon out. Only in gaining Rhiannon’s possession would any ideas in seeking Waljanargel’s power source be of any real worth to Megan, for it was Rhiannon’s power

Megan truly sought. And gaining that might well be sufficient enough to wield what was in Waljanargel whether or not she might actually go there again.

Megan was also always thankful for the privacy she might claim as a priest, even from her companion, father Lucius. For all his travels, he actually seemed a terribly young man who could not quite understand his need and devotion to this dark, beautiful little priest that exuded some unfounded charisma. Though Megan could nearly command him like a slave, she knew she must be very careful just how she utilized his devotion. But he never questioned the times she might wander off into the woods into the night, readily accepting her expressive need for prayer and contemplation. The times he protested with the very real concern of bandits or wild animals, Megan simply countered that God would protect her, and that her need to pray in seclusion for forgiveness for both her past as well as her parentage were great and that risk of her life were a little thing in her need for that forgiveness. Though Lucius knew somehow that this logic was not entirely sound, it stayed him, though it would cause him to worry and fret the entire time Megan was gone leading him into weary, sleepless nights. Not that that bothered Megan for she certainly preferred him less alert and more vulnerable to her considerations as she pursued her night's activities.

It was at night she would hunt for points of power in the land, seeking to touch them, to use them for her concerns, the scroll she managed to keep in her bags with her to glean from though she often could do little more than light a candle to read from that she might not attract undo attention. The wounded, outcast spirits of the Eldritch followed her tracks, watching her as she traversed the landscape. She was careful, she was subtle; she drew a little power from each point she found, enough to feed her but not enough to draw an awareness of her that might undo her from either the Bards or the Eldritch themselves.

In time, she and Lucius spent some several weeks in a remote village pockmarked with crags and caves, a place where Megan could remove herself for days, despite Lucius' protests, to work upon her magicks in more earnest, convincing her companion priest at last that here was a perfect place for her to truly pray and possibly find some contrition and forgiveness at last. And though care of the other world always remained a concern to her, Megan had found that one of the caves had a natural cloak, yet allowing her to tap into the energies she sought to work and weave her desires. Deeply pleased, she realized that she could finally execute an idea that could be thereafter expanded without her implication in its creation.

Making certain that none of the villagers came near her intended area with sheep or other business, Megan spent many nights in the cave, thinking, working out exactly what she planned as she examined her scrolls to decide exactly what the best procedure might be. She had managed to take up blankets and some other clothing to the spot in her returns, though she kept close to her where she went, never indicating where in those crannies she might be going. She knew Lucius continued to worry, but she made so much light of his concern that he began to feel ashamed. In the cave she had made herself as comfortable as she could, checking from a little landing close to her chosen cave to make certain of her aloneness each time she came. And though she often made fires within the cave, she kept them small and the smoke down as best she could, using them for the purpose of reading the scrolls only.

Then one night on the dark of the moon she had come to her cave early before the night could settle in and she might prepare her work without the aid of a candle to find

her way in so dark a night as it would become. It pleased her that Lucius had no sense of what the moon did or why, nor what Megan's long times away from the village surroundings could really mean. Nor had anyone else in the village for they had come to accept the Christian ways and though they might fear magick and the fair folk, they no longer sought any understanding of it being heavily discouraged to even question of such things. At least no-one Megan could decipher and she was satisfied that she would sense it of any of them if they did. Lucius had come to believe that Megan as the young Father Brac had come to find a wonderful refuge in the hills for prayer and finally finding an admiration for Megan's wish for such austerity, something he himself had no such desires for. He much preferred the safety and human contact of the village, keeping Megan's occupations secret, which pleased her greatly for he even helped to discourage any others to follow her or try to make discovery of her. Megan also sought delay in this village as much as possible. This was not so difficult to convince of her companion priest, yet this village did have its own priest and as she and Lucius had been charged to move from place to place, in the end they would need to do just that. It was something she herself would also wish as soon as she was done, but for a time she needed to convince the village priest of her need to stay a spell. That she had found some repose for her soul in these craggy hills and caves. And to this the village priest also came under Megan's charisma believing her fervent protestations for a need to spiritually cleanse her soul in the wilderness. Sharing Lucius' tastes for warmth and safety, the older priest also made no offers to accompany her, leaving Megan to the privacy she desired in her task. All she had said she had made seem reasonable and spiritual and the other two priests left her to her own devices.

As the night began to shade in over the day like the silence of a smooth fitting mantle, Megan placed herself well within the cave, a small clean fire before her that she intended to keep at a low glow barely above the state of embers. She had obtained and brought a good-sized clay cup and a fairly large, sharp knife knowing neither would be missed in that the cup was unremarkable and the knife was easily returned. Besides, both were certainly explainable enough for even priests may become thirsty or find the necessity for a knife though they usually did not carry real weaponry. The extra clothing and blanket were also about near the small fire and in truth had she been come upon, nothing she had done to this point could be seen as strange for a priest who had chosen this austerity for meditation and prayer. Yet, she discerned no awareness of her whereabouts and had striven to make her movements as unremarkable as possible.

The cave was neither small nor large as she looked about it in her final preparations. It was more like a craggy room built as an afterthought of some being not much given to looks or symmetry. Yet, it was purposeful enough, masked as it was in its own curious energies. Not really useful as a portal, but good for other things well enough. Megan sat cross-legged on the ground, facing the embers' glow, the cup and knife in front of her. She had left her priest's robes beside the scroll in a little pile nearby, the gleam of her naked skin giving her a fairly ghostly semblance for she was near as pale as the moon despite her travels as she was not much given for spending time in the sun more than she must.

Her breath was muted and hushed as she gently slipped into semi-trance, her eyes glazing as a low hum whispered steadily from her lips like a whirling purr into the darkness calling into the air. The shadows that often followed her and watched now

gathered in an ominous clutch near her as if drawn by another will other than their own as Megan continued in her trance. One shadow being in particular felt strongly drawn to her and what she did, believing in her purpose as she had moved across the landscape, observing her rituals with stoic patience, watching her as she chanted and how she slowly drew power into herself. That the Eldritch seemed to pay no heed to her movements surprised and pleased this being, sparking in them a hope so long ago thought of as dead and letting a long despair overrule any thoughts of overturning the bleak situation.

As Megan continued to chant in this curious hum, this being moved ever closer as a slow dance of power built in the moonless night about her pale, ghostlike form. Soon two red eyes began to stare from the other side of the fire, inquisitive and watching intently. It, too, had been drawn, summoned by the power of Megan's quiet humming that seemed to float into the airs of the night like an enchanted mist out of some dream. Finally, the eyes moved towards her, the silence of its footsteps proclaiming its catlike nature, a large tawny bobcat appearing at last to stand directly before her, his curiosity shining brightly in his great golden eyes. After a moment he sat down beside her, a purr strumming through its throat as if he had joined her in her hypnotic chanting. Megan looked at the cat and momentarily pet it with seeming affection, then drew the knife from where it lay next to her and cut a long clean slice along his shoulder and neck. The great cat sat silently as if he, too, were in deep trance as Megan gathered the blood that welled from him into the cup that she had set nearby. When she had gathered what she obviously perceived as enough, Megan carefully staunched the animal's blood where it quickly subsided at her seemingly magickal touch and the cat laid himself down to fall into a deep and peaceful slumber. Watching the animal a moment, a strange smile across her lips, Megan made a small cut on her arm to let a few drops of her own blood well and then drop into the cup to mix with the animal's blood. A hiss and mist curled up from the cup as she did so, startling the shadows as a glow emitted from the cup, the blood within taking on a golden cast, nearly sparkling in eerie lights. Slowly she arose, the cup in her hands, raising it up skywards as if in some silent salute when suddenly she turned to face the shadow so wrapped in her activities and dashed the contents of the cup upon it before it could even sense what she might be about.

Startled, the shadow drew back from her impulsively as it also felt a strange and nearly painful change beginning to take place over its whole being. A peculiar, almost feral smile drifted across Megan's face as she looked upon the shadow with an almost evil interest. Colors shifted, a breeze seemed to move through the cave and looking down, the shadow saw the slow emergence of form. After several moments in this strange shifting and irregular movement of energies, a young male stood in the place where the shadow had been; slender, beautiful, with dark brown hair; reminiscent of Megan's own form and coloration as if cousin and kindred to her. Breathing in the air with sensation, he felt his chest to note a heartbeat and the warmth of flesh. "What is this?" He whispered in a wonder that filled his entire being.

"Umm." Smiled Megan, obviously pleased with her handiwork. "Grace... From the strength of our friend. And a trace and bond of my own magick..." She looked over at the animal that lay deeply asleep upon the cave's floor. "But... there are rules to this game. Come and sit by me. There is much to discuss." Megan went and brought over the blanket to spread it before them upon the rough hewn ground near the embers of the fire and looked up at the newly formed male with a sly and seductive smile.

Frowning a moment for he was not at all certain what to make of this most peculiar of events, the young male finally decided to sit by her on the blanket as she herself had done. Neither being clothed, they looked almost like twin beings in the darkness of the cave with only the glow of low, slowing dieing embers. "I do not understand." He whispered as if afraid someone might hear them. "Is this permanent?"

"Yes... and no." She remarked, a mischievous glint in her large, dark eyes. "It must be fed. By blood... Elves. They bind by blood, as you know. It is from that ritual that I made this especial discovery. To give you substance, to retrieve you from your twilight state. And it binds you to me... But, it is also temporal. It will last but a few days and nights unless... Blood is spilled again in some form for you to draw from, to continue." Abstractedly Megan ran her hand along the bobcat's fur for she had laid the blanket close to him. He slightly stirred in his sleep, emitting a new, low round of purring. "Death can be powerful, but I've other uses for this beast." She smiled, "However. I chose him because, he, too, walks between worlds with ease and grace. Yet, full doses of human blood binds better and shall give you more time. And the death of humans shall give you even more for you shall drink the essence of that death even more than the essence of their blood... Umm..." Her face drew a contentedness upon it as her gaze fell fully across his body and he felt himself begin to quicken in ways he had not felt in so long that it alarmed him. "But if sunlight catches you, then you shall dissipate as well."

A little distressed by this he looked back at her, catching his breath and firming his thoughts, "And if I do not spill blood or the sunlight catches me, I am sent back to the shadows?"

"Until someone spills blood for you again, calls you again... Of myself or those you create." Megan turned into him and stroked his face much as she had stroked the fur of the cat, looking deeply into his eyes as if she could see into the depths of his being. "I shall teach you. If you should like something more tangible, you may even drink the blood, but it needs only be spilled upon you... And you need only spill a little of 'your' blood upon the shadows of others to let them join you. But choose your fellows well. As I have chosen you, my dear. I shall help you in these first days, nights. For I, to, can restore you." She kissed him lightly on the mouth gaining a tension in his body and draw of breath that pleased her. "Yes," she whispered pleasantly, though darkly, "It is as if you possessed an earthly form, solid and firm. But you will not eat; you need naught but blood to sustain. Ah, but bodily pleasure. Not only may you partake of, it helps you as well. In fact, you will learn to draw energies from it and this, too, will help sustain you." With that, they fell to kissing and fondling, Megan allowing him to pull some of her own energies so that he would understand and that it might also give him extra power and the sense of that power within him. "I am making you special, you know." She whisked in his ear as he entered her, his heart and body lost in her embrace. "I shall call you Corryn. My spider. And you shall weave a wonderful web for me. Yes, you will." With that she allowed herself to enjoy their communion, though she timed her release for her best effect tying his spirit to her tightly.

Seeing the glint of morning light at the edge of the cave, Megan rose, waking the now christened Corryn as well. Looking out at the gray light, his eyes grew round with dread. "Oh, no." He spoke in fearful tones.

“Don’t worry, my one.” She said simply, “The sun’s light must fall on you. You are safe as you are.” With that Megan got up fully and went to retrieve her clothes that she might return to the village and resume her masquerade there. “I would stay, but I have other games that needs playing. And I think I might find you some better clothes now that I am sure of your figure and form.” She grinned widely as she picked up the other clothes she had brought, tossing them to him so that he might cover himself. She smiled warmly over at the bobcat as he stretched himself out having recovered from his ordeal and she nodded at him, “He’ll help you, if you’d like. He will stay with you. He calls himself Kimble and will answer to such. A warrior... You might ask him to bring you prey. He needs bring it live to you. Use the knife, learn to spill blood cleanly. And then you might both share a meal... And you will gain strength... I hope to be back tonight. And thereafter... but if not, learn and gain while I am gone... Soon we needs leave this village and you will need to be able to follow, to gain repose in shadow during the day and find what you need during the night when you may traverse easily... You do not need sleep in the traditional sense, but as you’ve experienced, it can be renewing. If nothing else, it preserves your strength, especially while the sun is up.” She said this all as she dressed, enjoying Corryn’s eyes as he watched. When she finished she turned and looked at him to give a fully beguiling smile. “I will do all I can to return tonight. For I also wish to teach you to hunt human prey. It is a more subtle business and any death must look accidental unless battle is an easy excuse. However, do not try to create others. Not yet. You will need to let me show you that. You are but born. Rest, sleep, enjoy. Send Kimble out if you would. There is much for you to learn and I shall take pleasure in being your teacher.” With that she stepped up to him to kiss him and was rather surprised to find herself truly enjoying the warmth of his arms about her. Slightly frowning at this unlooked for emotion, she pulled herself away. “Tonight, then.” She said finally and walked out of the cave into the sunlight where Corryn now dared not to follow as her mind clicked with new ideas and plans for the uses she might find for him.

The mid Spring day was cool and clouded as Rhiannon rode up a hill that overlooked a deep valley laced with the bloom of flowers and Spring’s greening of the trees and grasses. Mab rode up beside her as Rhiannon reigned in her horse at the top. A skirmish of fighting went on below them and they looked upon it with a certain stoicness, the only glint of sadness shading itself in Rhiannon’s eyes. She and some of the immediate Council had ridden ahead of the rest of their train for she had realized that there were some rough areas that they must traverse, pockets that did not look kindly on Bardic intervention or guidance. And though it was unpreventable that it was becoming known that the Council had left its Seat, it would not be wise to give too strong an indication just which facets of that Council went where. They had contacted some of the strongholds of the area that were allied to the Bards, looking for clearance, even if that were to mean fighting, which in this case it had. Though Rhiannon’s riding outfit was tight and leathered for battle, it was dubious she would be lifting her sword as the fighting this time looked to be short-lived and fortunately in their favor. Although it might cause some real unrest throughout Cymru that the Bards were taking this sort of action here and there, Rhiannon was coming to realize that the days might be arriving

when some sort of firmer action would have to be made and Cymru decided in Her direction and loyalties. Her tightly braided hair had many stray strands that had come loose and they glimmered from the sun across her dark skin like flecks of gold. On another day, Mab might have lost herself in reflection on those strands and the beauty of Rhiannon's near flawless skin with her intense black eyes, but today was not of that ilk as Mab, too, sat dressed much the same and sat her horse as still as glass. They looked the embodiment of two warrior icons above the field and knew that their presence had been seen giving renewed hope and strength to those they would have win the day. Rhiannon breathed at last in a near sighing, "Perhaps we will flush this immediate area... Though it saddens me, it would also be a boon for us. This area is better cleared. We will need more confident paths as this in the future."

"Yes, my Lady, my Love." Mab responded in quiet strains as if in a light trance. Some of their retinue finally rode up to them and Mab looked at them as they gathered, though Rhiannon did not seem to pay them any mind as she kept her watch below.

Suddenly, Rhiannon looked full back at Mab as if a curious shadow passed over her, "The day may come when we can no longer win the war between the old ways and the impudence of these new beliefs that seeks to enslave so many souls..." She shook her head as if she could not totally understand what she herself had just said, "But, I know, it will not be from lack of spirit, drive or desire..." With that, a gentleness formed through Rhiannon's face, connecting with Mab as a warm wash that filled the other woman, making her nearly wish to cry.

As the last of the fighting below them began to ebb to a straggling few, a Runner rode her horse up to Rhiannon from a separate direction, getting off her mount and walking a few feet away before addressing the Head of Council. "Mother," She said, handing Rhiannon a rolled and sealed parchment. Rhiannon nodded to the young woman to admit her to explain. "It is from Taliesin, the Chief Bard at the Court of Lord Sean and Lady Creirwy of Powys in its Northern Province wherein I have ridden directly to you. He begs audience from some portion of the Council. And due to illness, he asks that whatever portion can be found, that they might come to him in Powys... It is with great honor that I find the Mother here to make this request." She added at the end, truly surprised that this was so.

As the Runner spoke this message a soft, inward smile drew across Rhiannon's face, her eyes glinting with a curious sense of foreknowledge. She broke the seal of the parchment to read the more impassioned plea Taliesin had written inside, letting her breath out slowly. Mab looked in query at Rhiannon as the other woman read, then glancing up to see the puzzlement in Mab's face as Mab asked, "Why do I get the feeling you are not so surprised to be hearing from this man?" Rhiannon had not spoken of Taliesin or of her impressions of him so that Mab felt some pangs of confusion and a bit hurt at the exclusion. "Lady." She said after a moment or so as Rhiannon was obviously considering what needed to be said before finally joining her thoughts with Mab so that Mab might speak to the Runner. It took but a moment for their thoughts to join before Mab spoke, her voice curiously modulated from their unique procedure, "Go to Taliesin... Tell him the Mother comes... Tell him, also, we are most proud of his efforts for his Court has been a bastion of strength for much and many in Powys. We should hardly think him less for his illness... So, Runner. Go to the village of Ryndlespar to the West of here where you may eat and rest and a get a new mount. I can see you have taken

pains to get here as quickly as you may. The villagers there will gladly attend you. Tell the village that I and those with me shall be returning soon as well and we shall offer recompense for your quick departure and gratitude for their generous support with asked for ritual, news and some song. We are thankful to the Greathouse and all in this area... But ride quickly, young one. Do not tarry overmuch anywhere, for we shall be following soon behind you.”

“Yes, Mother.” The Runner said, giving a slight bow in deference and turning to retrieve her horse to ride out to the village of Ryndlespar as she had been charged.

Watching the Runner ride out, her eyes returning to an inward turn, Mab looked over at her lover and frowned, “My Love...” She whispered seriously, “Why have you not spoken to me of this before? Who is Taliesin that you take such special note of him?”

Keeping her voice low as well, Rhiannon looked away from Mab and out upon the field, for she did not really wish to include the other Council Members about them in the conversation, “My dear. Please do not query me on this. We have come to a time when there are many things that I must decide, and I must decide them alone. For I know that even Kyle might try to persuade me in a direction I know would not be for the benefit of our future. So very much is at stake.” Then Rhiannon looked back at Mab and into her eyes with a familiar intensity that touched into Mab’s soul, “Trust me, my Love. Trust my love for you. And support me when my decisions have been made.”

“My Lady, you know I shall.” Mab said finally, bowing her head slightly in acquiesce. “I have no wish to contradict you, Mother.”

“Good.” Sighed Rhiannon, low and with a tinge of sadness in her voice. “Come. I can see that the fighting is done. There is wounded to succor, dead to be buried and rituals to perform... We must see what repair can be made to the Greathouse and villagers that have lent us their time and strength.”

For a short while the fevers had been fairly frequent, strong and labored, but within a few weeks, the tea had helped them to become less intense and recurrent, and though Taliesin did not wander far or alone because of concern when he might have another bout, he did begin to resume some of his duties with Jenna and Dylan’s help. One morning, with Spring truly finding a firm hold of the landscape, Mali took Taliesin for a walk out beyond the Greathouse along some paths by some of the villages nearby to check him and let him feel his strength. It gave some space to Dylan and Jenna to be alone to face each other as one was almost invariably with Taliesin, and they fell into some discussion seeming to look for some clarity of thought. “As much as I have been with him these last few months, I truly do not understand these strange fevers that Maerdyinn has.” Spoke Jenna to Dylan in the main room as they began to go over some of the duties that needed seeing to for the day. She had pretty much stopped calling Taliesin by his Court name and the familiarity of this, though it ought not, had finally begun to bother Dylan just a bit. “It is as if he were being called or pulled or drawn into. A few times when he’s come back out of it to some normalcy again he seems very confused as to where he is. What kind of illness could possibly create these strange illusions?”

“I don’t know.” Replied Dylan sullenly as he crouched before the fireplace that warmed the whole of their apartments and poked about at the low flames that kindled

there, for though fully into Spring, the rooms inside were cool and a bit damp. “Maybe it’s true, do you think? What some of the folk say? Perhaps the Elfin are trying to call him home.”

Jenna sat down heavily on one of the couches in the room and sighed at him, “Oh, Dylan.” She breathed, fairly flustered at what seemed to her a rather flippant answer.

A bit annoyed, Dylan straightened up and came over to her, a serious frown drawn across his features. “Don’t Dylan me, Jenna...” He gestured. “I am not the one who’s fallen so heavily under his glamour. I think you hardly know your own mind anymore. You’re a Wandering Bard, less you’ve forgotten. But after all these years you suddenly forsake it.” He shook his head out and looked out the window thrown open for the brightness of the day. “All for a man you used to make merciless fun of, I might add.”

“I’m not under his glamour.” She protested, though it sounded clumsy. “You know, I promised to help him... You were there. Until the Council can make a decision. And if the Council should ask me to stay, I shall stay. I decided that of my own accord.”

“Umm. I see... But I also see that helping him has included bedding him and fairly obsessing over him.” He stood over her, not aware of the menacing mien he had put on his face.

Turning her face up to him, she returned his scowl with a sharpness of her own. “Goodness, Dylan, why are you suddenly so upset? This is not like me being with Maerdyann happened yesterday... Are you suddenly jealous somehow? Of me? Of Maerdyann? That he would have me to be Chief Bard jointly with him? Surely you can see there’d be too much for you to do alone no matter what... We both have to watch out for Maerdyann as much as make sure everything else is seen to.” Her face had become firm in a set of authority much as any Chief Bard might make and Dylan felt himself give ground before it.

Softening and retreating from her, he moved to stand by the window, “No, Jenna... no, no, no... I am sorry.” He breathed softly, “I...” He sighed low as if the wash of breath were trying to ease his sensations, “I’m afraid.” He said somewhat darkly. “I’m afraid for him. For you. It feels so that we may be losing him. To something. Something I don’t understand. Mali doesn’t understand; surely not. And I really believe you shall end up getting very hurt. Deep in your soul... Don’t you see that? Of course I’ve known you’ve been with him, how could I not? But now he’s pulling you with him, Sister. He needs love so badly right now. He’s clinging, and here you are... But I fear we may well lose him. And I just don’t want to lose you in the process.”

Jenna leaned back in the chair looking at him, her eyes thoughtful and a bit glazed. Closing her eyes softly, she downcast her head, “You’re not kidding, are you? No, you’re not wont to kid about such things... So, then, Brother, Maerdyann lied to me. That he’s been attracted to me for a long while.”

Dylan filled his chest with air and breathed out in a gradual sigh as he walked back over to Jenna to sit next to her on the couch. “No, Jenna. No, he’s not lying.” She looked up at him as he continued, his words muted and somewhat gulped. “A little over two years ago... If you had been willing... Umm. He really thought you were the most wonderful thing on Earth. Seems so silly. I tried then, and you are probably well aware that I’d been trying lately to get the two of you together. But not like this... I wanted to see the two of you have fun. And you would have. You would have had a great time. But I also was aware that you would have been on your way in a season or two. It’s your

nature... Your time would have come and gone. For both of you. 'You' would return with affection and understanding... But this... this is 'not' like you. Like either of you... Oh, I admit, Maerdynn is one of those men who are more at ease, happier and functions better when with a companion. But this is all like some headlong rush and it puts the both of you in jeopardy. Jenna," He said, brushing a hand through the curls of her dark, thick hair and looking at her face intently, " You don't understand him... I 'do'. I say I don't, but I do. I came here, barely declared a Bard. Next to my paternal home, this is the only home I've ever really known. He made me family to him. There are very few secrets between us... And now he's very ill, and he's grasping, and he's scared... Please, please, Sister... back away long enough to see what's really going on." He hugged her and kissed her cheek. "I love you, you know... I love both of you. And I love the both of you too much to watch you destroy each other." With that, he sat back looking at her with a consolatory smile.

"I'm listening, Dylan." She smiled back at him slightly, then looked back off into space. "I love him... I love him so much." She frowned and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't know if I 'can' step back... It's too late."

Dylan sadly shook his head 'yes', "I know." He whispered, "I know... But I had to... I had to try."

Just then the door to the outside hall opened allowing Taliesin to enter along with Mali. Having been outside, their hair and clothes were a bit ruffled from the breeze and there was a slightly flushed tinge to their faces. Taliesin seemed peculiarly excited as he looked at his two compeers. "A Runner came into the Greathouse this morning bearing a message for me. Actually, the very same Runner I had sent out for me, bearing an answer to that request... It appears that the trouble we heard about in the East before the weather turned is far more than we had realized. More serious, more dire. There are pockets that would challenge the Council Itself it seems. Perhaps even deliberately looking for the Seat. So now, much of the Council is on the move. And Bardic folk traveling towards the Seat are turned back. There is no Seat, not at the moment. So those who lived at the Seat with the Council, the students, the tradesmen, the villagers; all are on the move with variant parts of the Council as well... And in this, the Runner actually came upon Rhiannon, the Mother, herself." Both Dylan and Jenna sat with shocked looks drawn across their faces for this was hardly the news they had anticipated. The first true flush of Spring had carried with it an uncertainty that no one had foreseen though they were well enough aware of the tension in the last several years. A little tired from his exertion of his morning's walk, Taliesin finally went and sat down in one of the chairs opposite the couch where Dylan and Jenna were seated pensively watching him. "The Runner came upon us as I and Mali were walking... Rhiannon is coming... The Mother is coming here."

"Coming here?" Whispered Dylan, his mind still trying to take in everything being conveyed and a bit unsure just how much was, "How far? How much?... How did we not know all these things sooner?"

"They are a ways yet..." Taliesin pursed his lips, studying his Second thoughtfully, seeing some distraught emotions filtering across the young man's face. "It is actually very recent, the decision, the move... The Spring had hardly begun... They are not like to be here until Summer as they move with many. And they must evade some areas, as we well know... The Runner did not see but a few of the Council with the

Mother when she came upon them, but she spoke a long time with others on the road returning here... Dylan, do not be so distressed... The Mother is wise, despite her youth. I do not sense doom in this."

Her face startled and blank, Jenna finally broke her thoughts. "My Goddess, though, Maerdynn... It's a bit hard to take in. Though I know I felt strange energy surges at the tail end of Winter."

Taliesin nodded thoughtfully, "Yes, even in my illness I knew other strange and disjointed things were happening in the weave of the Wyrd. But I 'know' this is but a beginning, not an ending. And in truth, in this we shall be first to know what that beginning is." He smiled giving out a little warmth with it that nudged both Dylan and Jenna into more positive feelings. "For she comes here... And the whole court needs preparing. Actually, the whole countryside, I should think! There is truly a fair amount of people coming in this train and therefore there is much work to be done before Summer sees us." For a moment Taliesin reflected within internal thoughts as he looked down at the floor seeming a bit flushed and embarrassed as he spoke very softly, "The Mother... She is... She says... She is proud of me."

Hearing in spite of his hushed tones, Jenna came over to him and hugged him as he looked back up at her. She smiled warmly, the shock of the general news finally beginning to settle into more reflective tones and even excitement at the prospect of Rhiannon's appearance, "Proud of you, you say? Who could imagine, eh?" She gently teased, "This Court is only known as one of the best counseled Courts in all of Cymru." Beginning to pull at him to get up, she quipped, "Come on. Let's go see your daughter for a bit. After that, sounds like there's work enough to keep us all crazy busy. Don't you think, Dylan?"

Dylan looked over at them, finally pulling out of his own dark thoughts and sighing quickly, "I guess so!"

Just as Taliesin began to respond to Jenna's prodding to rise, the main door flew open and Korwyn tumbled in disheveled and sweated. As all eyes turned on him in fair surprise, he apologized, "I'm so sorry, Dylan. I forgot the time... I was... we were..."

Rather pleased to have his thoughts pulled in another direction, Dylan immediately responded, "Ah, yes." As he remembered himself, "You were supposed to help me work through some histories today, I believe... Racing again, Korwyn? You know that isn't very smart." And though he wasn't really irritated, Dylan thought this time Taliesin ought know about Korwyn's recent, though occasional sport.

"Racing?" asked Taliesin a bit perplexed as he looked at his son though everyone seemed happy to be thinking about something else for the moment.

"Racing horses. With the Runners." Replied Dylan. "Weren't you, Korwyn?" Dylan tried to show some semblance of sternness in his voice and face, though it wasn't working to the greatest effect.

Korwyn looked at the floor and studied his feet, partly to hide his face for he had nearly begun to smile as he finally said, "Yes, sir.... I just..." He thought to explain, "Horses like me, Papa. And one must learn to be nimble and quick sometimes on the road. It's why the Runners race sometimes. So, at least the Runners tell me. And they say I am good at it and natural for it." He rambled.

Dylan shook his head, giving a slight smile as he looked over at Taliesin. Jenna kept her peace, though she also was more than aware of the proclivities of the Runners.

“Well.” Sighed Taliesin, “Understand something, son... Horses may like you and I rather believe you are quite right in that. However, just like any living creature, horses do what is best for horses. And when push comes to shove, will do what they feel they need to do for themselves first. Even if that means throwing you off... Certainly, they are wonderful creatures. They give us much. But they are much bigger than we are. And are like to do a good bit of damage should they have a mind to sit on us.” With that both father and son smiled tentatively at each other.

“Yes, Papa.” Korwyn finally replied.

“Yes, well... Did you stable him or her properly? A horse put to task like that needs a bit of attention after.”

“I, uh... I was late here and the Runners said they’d take care of it.”

“Umm... I think Dylan will excuse you for now. You go take care of the horse. Always, son. Always. I don’t care if the Runners offer; I don’t care if they have. I don’t care if you are late. Take time with your horse. Let him or her know they did well by you. You ‘know’ this...” Taliesin frowned some, trying to place some emphasis on this lesson, “Then clean up yourself, too, eh?... You seem as sweated as the horse probably was. Besides, there’ll be lots of work to do in the near days ahead. The Bardic Council is on its way here and I think you’ll wish there was just some histories to go over with Dylan. And it’s going to take some real time to get everything all prepared.”

This information startled Korwyn making his whole being light up, “The Bardic Council? Really, truly?”

“Um... With the Mother herself. With Rhiannon. So, you best learn to put your best face on and do as you should.” Taliesin raised a brow, watching his son thoughtfully.

Though still too young to honestly appreciate what the coming of the Council really meant, Korwyn had instinct enough to recognize it as something rather monumental, especially to his father and other Bardic folk, and therefore ought be terribly exciting. “But, that’s wonderful, isn’t it? The Council, the Mother? To be coming here?”

Sighing slightly, Taliesin breathed a “Yes,” trying to smile in an encouraging tone though he could not escape some sadness glinting in his eyes. Yet, he, too, found it exciting and would do as he could to place those feelings in his son and all the rest around him, “So, off with you. See to your horse and yourself, but come back here when you’re done. And do be prepared to ‘work’ with Dylan.”

“Yes, oh yes.” Said Korwyn, happy once again as he rushed back out of the rooms once more, his boyhood showing brightly causing Taliesin to chuckle lightly despite himself.

“Well.” Remarked Taliesin, chuckling a bit more openly after his son was gone, “Not like he can’t move when he’s a mind to.” With that, the rest of the room laughed quietly with him, fairly pleased to see his spirits in more pleasant form. The laughter subsiding, he looked back to Jenna, “Didn’t you say something about seeing my daughter not long ago?”

“Oh, yes... Yes, certainly. Why don’t we?” Remarked Jenna as Taliesin stood up and she took his arm. With that, they too, exited the apartments where suddenly Mali was left with Dylan alone in the room. Even the Bardic servant, Kymon, was off somewhere, likely helping in the kitchens as he was wont to do when there wasn’t much he needed to see to in the Bardic apartments, cooking being a task he especially enjoyed. In the

intermittent silence, Mali went and took up the chair Taliesin had just vacated in that she had been standing. She had been watching Dylan in the previous exchanges and sensed questions brewing in him, so she looked for no excuse to leave.

For long moments Dylan said nothing as he gazed out the window that was opened out to the day. They were fortunate in having some windows in their space, not everyone had any windows to speak of, or at the most had one; but in these apartments there were three. And although it meant building up the fires heartily in the main room during the Winter months, it gave the area a wonderful sense of lightness. A lightness the tight Bardic Company needed sorely of late. Knowing well why Mali had remained and much desiring to do as her presence encouraged, Dylan finally broke the stillness. “So, Mali... It’s been a bit of time now. How ‘is’ Maerdynn doing? I mean, ‘really’ doing?”

Embers burned lowly in the fireplace and Mali looked over at it, then closed her eyes a moment as if to feel its gentle warmth, “A little cool today, but so lovely. The sky is so blue.” She pursed her lips some as she opened her eyes back up to look at Dylan once again, “The outdoors is good for him. It’s a part of him more than you realize. He enjoys it and it lets him connect with the beauty of this world. It reaches to him and he to it. Let him be out as much as he can. Especially now that the days are turning better... He needs it. He needs to be reminded of it.”

Dylan stretched his legs out long before him as if trying to adjust his thoughts, “Mali... You’re evading me. Be honest. What has been happening to Maerdynn? Why so suddenly? Why now?”

Mali got up and walked over to the embers as if to warm her hands, though in reality she was trying to give herself a little space to think. She bent down and squatted, pushing at the quiet glinting with the poker, thinking over what she might or ought answer him, hesitant about her choice of words. At last she breathed out long and low, “There’s a door within him, Dylan. A door that is hard for me to explain or convey... You speak of the Bardic door. When you receive your Bardic ‘Gift’. And so, too, do the Healers have something like... But, this is different. Another kind of door. One of a world of dreams and colors you and I cannot imagine... I do not understand the timing of these things. I’m not sure of why now. Perhaps anger at Jesse’s death? I do not think so, but again, I don’t understand these things... Not in this. His age, somehow?” she went back to her chair and sat, watching Dylan’s face and eyes, and seeing a wash of confusion on his features she continued. “It’s a rare door these days, Dylan. I’m not sure how to explain much more of it... But, Maerdynn must deal with it and I am doing my best to help him, though some of my understanding is poor at best... How is he doing?... I cannot see into that door, Dylan. Only he can... In some ways, only he can tell you how he does.”

“But, can he die of it?” Dylan squinted, not sure he really wanted to know the answer.

“Tell me, Brother. Can you die when the Bardic door is opened?” Dylan looked at the floor at her words, for surely that was a possibility, though often unexpressed. “Well, it is the same with this. Only the process is much longer and there is more at risk... I know you are confused... I even feel you are somehow hurt by it... You have not been trying to discourage Jenna any of her ministrations, have you?” An off guarded look of surprise moved across his face allowing Mali to realize that her intuition had proved correct. “I see... Don’t, Dylan. That would be a mistake... Unless you were considering

filling that space yourself?” He frowned and shook his head no, looking up at her sharply. “Alright... But, leave Jenna be, then... Oh, yes, she is at risk, I agree. He’s grasped her and he’s pulling on her. Jenna, his daughter, his work as Chief Bard... even you, my friend... But, that is his hope, you see. That’s what keeps him grounded. All of us... our love for him. His love for us... And I hope that the Mother, Rhiannon, does not deign to take those things away from him. I hope she is truly as wise as Maerdyenn believes she is. For if she were to do that, he would be lost.”

On a vibrant, clear Spring morning, the flowers beginning their burst of riotous color and the grasses their wonderful fresh breath of green, Taliesin met with various of the Wise Women and Men, Healers and Elders of the villages and towns the Greathouse of Sean oversaw and protected. Instead of asking that everyone attend up at the Greathouse, it was agreed by all to meet at one of the nearer villages in that villages' central area. A circle of space where the villagers' houses fanned out around, where they held rituals, fairs, meetings of their own. It being such a pleasant day; villagers, townspeople, even those from court had come, putting blankets and such on the ground to sit, or milling about. It was in the center of the area itself that low stools had been set up and here that the discussion began. This time Dylan had accompanied Taliesin, for though the Court was familiar well enough with Jenna by this time, those of the surrounding villages and towns were not as yet and so she remained at Court this day where there was plenty to be seeing to anyway.

Bearing the meetings importance, Lord Sean attended, as well as Lady Creirwy who had brought one of her Christian priests as well. Though Taliesin wasn't fond of the priest's presence, he recognized that element would need to know what was said as well, whether or not they were happy about it or its impact upon them. Letting everyone settle in place that needed to be part of this conference, and even giving folks gathering about who weren't, Taliesin scanned the faces that quite represented friends and associates of many seasons. He smiled and nodded to them some, knowing several had their personal sorts of fussiness as they calmed down in whatever fashion they felt they needed.

Dylan watched Taliesin carefully for though Taliesin appeared alert and rested, there had been a comparatively difficult bout a couple nights before. Yet, this time Jenna and Dylan were more at ease and accord than they had ever been and it served to create a firm and lasting bond between the three of them. By the time they had gotten Taliesin through this especial episode, the energy connecting them all had altered and Dylan knew his need for family was answered well and he would no longer miss his boyhood village as he had. Though he had not felt he questioned it, he no longer had doubt of his place in other's hearts and when he suddenly realized Taliesin was looking back at him with arched brows, he merely smiled and shook his head as a warmth passed between them. Taliesin smiled back sensing it was about time that they move on with the proceedings.

“I am so pleased that all of you have come today. Though I assume that by now all of you have heard something of what shall soon be taking place here, I knew it would be most important that it be discussed, as it should because it shall involve everyone across this countryside. I am pleased to note and say that the Bards are respected here.

That you heed our advice and council, enjoy our services, entreat us our rituals and welcome news and messages we bring you. We are honored and grateful.

“Soon, by this summer, we shall be honored by the presence of one who represents the very backbone of the Bardic Brother and Sisterhood. The Mother, Rhiannon, Head of the Bardic Council, is coming to our poor presence. I admit that it was I who asked for some portion of the Council to attend for I had need of their reflection and advice for my own person. But I had no expectation of this response.

“I will admit to you that there have been difficulties in the East. Difficulties that has caused the Council to disperse and look for and examine new avenues for its continuance. Please do not misunderstand this. The Council is well and strong, the Bardic system still well in place. But understand, too, that I am saying something to you today that is not totally known by all of Cymru. Though many are aware of the dispersal of the Council Seat; where, how much and what portion of the Council goes where, is not. Not at this time, not until decisions and direction is confirmed. Most villages, town, even Greathouses, know as little as possible right now. However, in our case, as much information as possible is being given us. Because... Along with part of the Council, along with the Mother, others come. Refugees from the Seat Itself. Healers, villagers, craftspeople, servants, families. Not all of the Seat’s people came with the Mother as this, too, was dispersed and split in various directions. But, from what I understand, this is the greater amount. Runners have been very active getting us every bit of information we can so that we might make ready for them.” With that, Taliesin paused, allowing all he said to sink in for those gathered as he waited for the questions he knew would come forth. Some of the Runners present moved quietly around offering some of the main gathering something to drink as the words of Taliesin were thought on and considered.

After several moments one of the Wise Women stood up, her clothes tied off with variant amulets and she leaned a little on an ornate walking stick. Her white, braided hair framed her weathered face with casual delicacy; she was the eldest of the Wise Folk gathered and the most respected. She looked at Taliesin with pleasant eyes, but said seriously and with understandable concern, “And what can we expect of such a host as you say come, sir Bard? Are you asking we set our lives aside, our food, our homes? Do they even have their own food? Will they want our cattle, our store?”

Taliesin shook his head, “No, you need not fear such things, I promise... And I am glad you said this for I wanted such thoughts to surface from you. My Lord Sean has set aside an area North and East of the Greathouse. It is mostly wooded with some fielding beyond. But the fields are not much used and we will offer any recompense if anyone is indisposed by it. These people bring their own provisions and are also quite wise in the use of woodland bounty. They have their own horses, cattle and other livestock, though they’ve kept that to some minimum for obvious reasons. They have taken great care not to impose too much on any they’ve had to ask hospitality of. Some of the folk have even returned to their home villages and some livestock dispersed. But, they have tents, and like any Bards, are well met for the road. I also do not expect that they shall stay overlong.”

“Ummm... But, surely, they scout for a home somewhere? From what it sounds there are too many folk to remain on the road indefinitely?” asked a younger Wise Man, his hair braided in russet brown over colorful robes of tartan and greens.

Shrugging some, Taliesin looked quickly at Dylan before answering as if for a little energy support, which Dylan happily gave. “Yes, I’m sure they do. But there is no reason to feel they would infringe on us in any way in their search. They simply would not do that. Please recognize that this shall be something to enjoy. There will be Players, Musicians, Singers, Dancers. Which will mean much rituals, plays, songs and music. I expect they shall be here by Solstice this Summer. Let us, then, prepare for the greatest Litha Celebration this area has ever known and seen, or likely ever to see again. It shall also be a time to exchange great healing and information in healing. Though it is a difficult time for the Bards, for the People under Lord Sean’s protection, it can be a time of great joy... You know me, all of you. I do not lie. I’ve always kept faith with my charges. I keep faith with you today.” At that, Taliesin sat back again allowing for his words to measure with them all.

The gathered group murmured lowly and thought fully amongst themselves, but it was positive murmur and both Taliesin and Dylan sensed the air of good will that moved through in the gestures and smiles of those around them. There was a great many nodding heads with those smiles and an easy acceptance of the drink and food offered by Runners who stood by. The Elder Wise Woman looked about herself having continued in her stance, gazing at her peers and listening to the voices about her before finally speaking once again. “This is well met, sir Bard. My Lord, Taliesin. We have no reason to doubt your words and I believe I speak for all here that we shall take your words to heart and look to prepare for a Midsummer Fest as you envision... We are proud to host the Head of your Council and look forward to her entrance upon our soil.” Having said as much, the woman sat back down at last leaning heavily on her stick to do so for she would not accept other help that was offered. She was a proud woman, after all, and would not concede her strength.

Having sat amongst her peers into a comfortable sense of well being, for a moment it was thought by all that the day’s basic business was settled and all were ready to move into discussions of plans for the future event when the priest that the Lady Creirwy had brought with her suddenly stood and turned to Taliesin, a huge frown across his brows and darkness on his mien. “Here me, Taliesin.” He said fairly loudly for the gathering had begun to break into very noisy and disconnected conversing. “Here me and abide my words.” Not really very far from the man as Lord Sean and Lady Creirwy were naturally seated near him and Dylan, Taliesin looked over at the priest with a curiosity. Seeing the man was emphatic about speaking, Taliesin raised his hand and asked in his beautiful and strong Bardic voice for the rest to settle down so that the priest could be heard. “Thank-you.” The priest said perfunctorily and with some slight irritation, “You need to know, ‘sir Bard’.” He said the words ‘sir Bard’ with a near sneer that was hardly lost on anyone present, “That I and my brethren do not accept the presence of this woman or of any of those she may bring. The Head of your Council is not welcome to us and if we must we shall recede and vacate this household.” Having startled Lady Creirwy with his obstinate words, her face became unsettled and her hands showed some tremor.

Looking back fully at the priest, his eyebrows arched and his face placid with pleasantness, Taliesin gave a little smile knowing full well the reaction of most who had congregated would be feeling much as he did. “You know I had neither asked nor expected the presence of you or any of your brethren today. You evince so little interest or concern of what my Bardic folk or I do. But the fact of the Mother’s journey to our

Court and her subsequent stay is something I can neither control nor would I even wish to. I asked for this conference to both let people know what is going on and to assuage and address any fears that this might greatly infringe on their lives. It was certainly 'not' to ask 'you' permission." Having said that, Taliesin smirked a little and shook his head quelling a desire to openly roll his eyes. "If you and your 'brothers' would wish to vacate this Court, why, I should hardly stand in your way."

The priest looked about at all the people there; his face beginning to redden with embarrassment and anger, as he realized no one in this assembly would back him for all the preaching he and others had tried to do throughout this countryside. It suddenly seemed obvious that they had been merely tolerated for even those faces he saw who had demonstrated interest for his beliefs merely shook their heads at him now. He began to realize that he had overstepped his bounds and that the very excitement that Rhiannon's coming into the area meant for these folk was far beyond what he had grasped. The only face that showed any concern or distress was Lady Creirwy and her servant, the Lord Sean merely shrugging his indifference as he looked at the priest. "You've not heard the last from us!" Spat the priest as he turned to walk from the crowd to leave and go back to the Greathouse. Lady Creirwy might have gotten up and followed but she knew better than to resign her place by her husband in such an affair. She looked intently at Taliesin, her eyes glinting with anger in a deep-seated passion that had turned into a nearly obsessive hate. Taliesin only glanced at her momentarily; this was neither time nor place to confront her for any reason. He had become truly surprised by her husband's continued love and support for it was surely apparent she no longer cared for his.

With the priest finally gone on his way and the tension relieved from his seeming intrepid departure, the gathering relaxed as Taliesin spoke once more, "Well, with that out of the way." Taliesin chuckled lowly as several others did the same. "Please continue to enjoy the food and drink the Runners offer. Perhaps we may discuss what everyone may like to do. How you'd like to prepare. And even what sort of rituals and blessings you would like seen done from the Mother in her stay."

Having finished his statement, the discussions truly began, Taliesin listening and speaking as Dylan took down occasional notes. Many of the regular villagers and townspeople finally dispersed as the day went on, but the assembly of those who had been requested stayed deep into the night with their dialogues, little fires set about and many falling asleep beneath the stars, including both Taliesin and Dylan.

When the time came at last that Rhiannon and her entourage entered the area of Lord Sean's protection and influence, excitement filled the airs for miles around in their slow but steady pace. Along with the area set aside for the Council and those with them to find encampment, a great gathering Circle had been erected, one that would not only accommodate the usual holiday festivities, but for the new guests as well. Much time had been spent, new stones put up or old ones cleaned, brush cleared and blooming flowers planted, creating a delightful array of colors all about the festival's Circle.

It had all gladdened the heart of Taliesin greatly as he had watched and assisted in the progress. It helped him tremendously to have this focus, for even his bouts of delirium lessened significantly for the attention demanded of him. Although always in

either Dylan or Jenna's presence, he began to take back more control, which pleased both of his colleagues deeply.

Often Erina came with the baby Jessica, spending whole days and sometimes the night in the back room where a crib had been placed for those occasions. Though it might have taken her away some from her family; her own children, husband and mother were welcome whenever they wished, so that often the Bardic apartments were filled with all sorts of unexpected movement that Taliesin seemed to richly enjoy. Taliesin also enjoyed just having the presence of his daughter near him in a room and would often let Erina remain with the baby as he conferred with other Bardic folk or village representatives. All the new activity found Korwyn becoming more serious and dedicated in his own contributions and studies, never being very far from one of the Court Bards' sides. Even Jenna, whom Korwyn still not know very well, he made an effort to work with and learn from which greatly pleased his father.

All day as the assembly, folk and Council of Rhiannon moved into their encampment, Taliesin, along with Jenna and Dylan, watched from the window in the main room of the Bardic apartments for it faced directly out over the area. It was a wonderful sight of colors that moved and settled in the trees in the patch of forest the Lord and his kinsmen were usually wont to hunt for it had been initially set aside for that purpose. Runners came and went up to the Greathouse simply reporting the progress and if there might be anything the people might need or had questions about. Small cooking fires might be lit, though it was understood to keep these low and under good control with the promise that once all had dispersed, the area would be put back as it was to the best of anyone's ability. Some fencing had been put up a little beyond the trees where their livestock might graze for the time and this, too, slowly metamorphosised as the said livestock was turned out to do just that. The whole process had been fairly lengthy, as reports had come in for days on the final few miles before sight alone could dictate their progress. From what was accounted, it seemed Rhiannon would not appear at the Greathouse itself until she was fairly satisfied that her people were settling and in appreciable order. The Bardic guest apartments had been made ready and though there was no certainty how many Council Members she had with her, there would be as much effort made as possible to accommodate whatever she might demand of Taliesin's hospitality.

It was in the first glints of evening that the banner of the Bardic Council flew over a small group astride horses approaching the gates of the Greathouse. All Bardic folk within the House and its surrounding structures within the fortification gathered in the grand Courtyard of the House about the edges as they awaited the party's arrival. Taliesin stood flanked by Jenna, Dylan and even Korwyn whose eyes were round and alit with excitement. Both Jenna and Dylan held one of Taliesin's hands and he squeezed them both as the sound of the horses neared their approach. Lord Sean stood in the Courtyard, too, along with his own advisors, staff and some personal soldiery with the absence of Lady Creirwy being a stark slap of noble protocol that the Lord did his best to ignore. Other folk of the Greathouse hung about in the windows and terraces, curious and excited, trying to capture as much sight of this event as they could.

When Rhiannon entered the Courtyard of Lord Sean of Northern Powys, an utter hush seemed to move through the whole of all present as Runners came up to take the horses as the party began to dismount. Robed and dressed as befit her station at Council

with her wheat colored hair strewn about her shoulders, Rhiannon made an impressive sight, flanked by Mab and other Members of her Council, including Kyle. There was a wonderful regalness to her, her large brown eyes questing all about her and though small of stature, she overshadowed anyone else's presence like a queen. Many at the Court felt a slight wave of fear as they watched her, her moves slow and purposeful.

Once the horses had been withdrawn and some settlement was established, Mab formally announced Rhiannon's presence, thanking Lord Sean and the people for their hospitality. Once said, she then asked that Taliesin might step forward. Suddenly nervous and shy in a way he had never felt before in his life, Taliesin slowly let go of his friends' hands to go and stand before the tiny woman with the stance of greatness. Rhiannon met his eyes feeling her own wave of nervousness and knowing she dared not show any. Instead, she offered a wide and warm smile to this man whose name had been whispered to her in dream and vision. Nodding slightly to him, he returned the gesture as Mab proceeded. "Greetings, Brother Taliesin. We have come here at your request. The Council with me are my personal Advisors. This is my chief Advisor, Kyle." Rhiannon nodded to her right where Kyle stood, his gray form still straight and impressive though a flash of surprise had moved through his eyes seeing Taliesin. A flash of surprise and recognition that Taliesin realized but did not respond to as both men chose to merely nod to each other. "And this is the Speaker for the Mother Rhiannon." Mab said, indicating herself to Taliesin and nodding as well. He gazed at Mab a moment, the dark haired woman obviously tied to the Head of Council's mind and sensed the deep love that also flowed there in this unusual communion. How other could it be? He smiled warmly at her, though he was uncertain she returned his sentiment as she continued, "I understand preparations have been made for I and my Members' stay. While they are being settled I would speak with you alone. Come." That being said, Rhiannon offered her arm to him and though nervous and uncertain, he took it as the rest proceeded to disband. With some formal demeanor, he proceeded and took her to the Bardic apartments where he knew all others would stay without while he and the Mother conferred. Even Korwyn and Erina, who was there with Jessica, were asked to leave for the time, though Rhiannon stopped Erina a moment to touch and smile at Taliesin's child.

When the rooms were empty and the doors shut, Rhiannon seated herself on one of the chairs, indicating Taliesin sit as well. Very uncertain of himself, he sat on the couch opposite her, watching and waiting nervously. Seeing his anxiousness she smiled kindly allowing for the wash to move over him as Taliesin almost gasped at its sweetness while she began to speak. "You live in beautiful country here, Brother." She said as she gazed out the window looking over the countryside, her voice filled both with power and grace that startled and delighted Taliesin. "And strategically very important country, I know."

"Yes, Mother." He whispered.

"You don't remember me?" She asked of a sudden.

"Remember?" He said, quickly reviewing his memories.

"My mother and I. Long ago. We traveled through here." She watched the movement on his face and decided she rather liked his offhandedness.

"Oh, yes." He smiled rather delighted at the turn, "Yes." Then nodded, pleased, "The child of rumor. Became the child of reality... Yes, I should have realized. I'm sorry.

And now you are the Head of the Council. Of course!" For whatever reason this relaxed him terribly as Rhiannon got up and walked to the window. "It was a joy, Mother."

She looked back at him, her smile like the Summer itself. "Yes. Yes it was. And you taught me a great deal. More than you know..." Then she sighed a bit before turning the conversation back again, "But let me return to why you requested our presence."

Taliesin nodded and breathed in deeply as if in sync with her, "You say you have fevers. Delirium of some sort? You say you think you are in another world or realm. And that there are those who call to you. Implore you... To leave. To leave this world... to die?"

"I'm not sure, Mother. But it will not leave me long. And our Court Healer here, Mali, tells me I cannot escape this. And that she is unable to do ought more for me." His words were tumbled now that he knew it was time to speak as he must.

Rhiannon held up her hand. "Alright." She sighed a bit again, sensing the fear welling in him. "But your Healer does not know everything, though I surely admit she has done well by you. What does she do, give you tea to drink?" He nodded. "Faerylocks, I venture?" With his continued nod she went on, "Then she knows your life force is shifting. What she does not understand is that this is more than a shift. It is a shift compounded by battle. Else what she gives you ought ease your distress far better than it has. And though I will tell you to continue the tea as preventative, I shall give you what you truly need." From her robes she pulled out sprigs of a leafy herb with a small pink flower or two dotting upon it. "They often call it 'Moonlove', one of the most poisoness plants known, I dare say. But not for you. Nor I." Taliesin stared at the herb a moment as she came up to him. "Take it." She said, handing it to him. "Take it and chew it, eat it... It grows in your forests and with proper care can be gathered safely, though you, yourself may handle it with ease. Even in distress you may take it and though those who might draw you are strong and there will be times of fever, you will win through. And even those times will greatly decrease. For I know well, Brother. I had to use those herbs myself for many years. And even now I take them for they aid me when I look between the Worlds." Taliesin frowned some though he took the herb from her and extracted a leaf to chew, making a slight face at the initial bitterness. "I promise, you'll get used to it." She grinned, then breathed out lowly. "My body has now adjusted and so I am no longer sought. And so they now turn to you. And you are another matter. Your blood, your body is strong. And is still pure from karmic ties to this world. And though for long you experienced no difficulties being here, now your body does strain from it and therefore it forces you to make a choice. Because of that, because time runs out, they pursue you."

"Choice? Pursuit?" Taliesin asked in confusion. "I thought I had chosen. This world. This life. I do not have doubts about that." His face ranged puzzlement and a certain dismay at her words.

With that, she sat next to him on the couch, her visage full in thought. "I understand you are often called Maerdynn here. Why is that? Taliesin is your name."

Somewhat distracted, Taliesin looked at her next to him a bit surprised by a curious sense of familiarity as he shrugged. "But, Mother, Maerdynn is my real name."

"Ahhh." She said, sitting back as if needing to rest herself a bit. "An unusual name, too. But the Bards dubbed you Taliesin and I think the name quite apt, don't you?"

"I am told they took to calling me that because I was very young when I showed Gift. Seven, I think. But hardly the only one as such."

“Young and one who also showed tremendous adeptness, ability and awareness... ‘That’ is unusual... Kyle has told me much about you. He remembered you, you see. And believe me, you surprised him, friend.” She put a hand over his and drew herself to him a bit, saying rather quietly. “Just how old are you, Taliesin?” Drawing himself back from her hand and words, he stared at her and said nothing. She shook her head a little and went on. “You look like you might be no more than thirty, if even twenty-five years. Yet, Kyle claims recalling the young Taliesin. A perhaps twenty-five year old man he met as a colleague over forty-five years ago.” She smiled and shook her head. “Taliesin, the ever young, umh? It can mean that, too. I richly suspect it shall take another forty-five or fifty years before you look a day over thirty... Were you even so young when Kyle last knew you? How many times have you had to become the Wandering Bard to avoid too much over suspicion? How much longer did you even think you could remain here? And to a degree I even wonder it has taken so long for your body to begin its shift... But, perhaps it is more contingent with my appearance than either you or I even understand.” Taliesin said nothing, his eyes closed and a slight tremor filtering throughout him. “Dear, Brother.” Rhiannon said at last watching him and feeling a certain sorrow for him. “My dear Taliesin. Do not be afraid. I have come all this way for far greater reasons than to aid you in your process. For you are to aid me and the Council as well.”

Hearing her words, he opened his eyes and looked at her, frowning and disconcerted. “Aid the Council? Aid it how, Mother?”

“Umph... by becoming part of it.” Having said this, she drew something else from her robes to place squarely in his hands. “You should have been part of the Council long, long ago. Selfishness let it pass. You were needed here; your wisdom, your keenness; and to have you removed as you would need to be in your adjustment to the Council for even a short time could have proven too dangerously difficult. But now, the Council Itself needs your wisdom, your foresight where it truly belongs.”

Taliesin looked down at the item in his lap between his hands, his mouth dropping open, his eyes staring, for a sparkling opal the size of a large egg filled them. “My Goddess. What is this?”

“Yes, Taliesin. You are my Beloved, my Chosen.”

“Chosen?” He whispered. “I? But, but... You are far too young. Surely your time does not draw near.” He spoke in terrible confusion.

“No, it does not draw near. You are quite right.” She admitted carefully. “But we live in strange times. And to some degree your very condition makes this necessary. I ‘will not’ lose you. Nor will the Council. You are too important. The Eldritch do not come here casually. Not anymore. For Eldritch both you and I most assuredly are... And though I cannot tell all the reasons for our entrance, I do know one of them must now come to pass. For we shall be Bonded... and for the first time in Bardic memory there will be a Second to the Head of Council and you shall be answerable as such. And I expect years to pass before we might enact the final transitions.”

Totally shaken by this strange and unsought turn of events, Taliesin curled around the opal staring into its depths like a child immersed in a new toy. “When... When do we do this? Where? Where do we do the Bonding?”

Patting his hair and hands, calming his energy the best she could and smiling with openness and affection, Rhiannon responded. “We’ve time. You have the Midsummer Festivities all prepared for and we will not alter or deter that. It shall be done here. A

place will be set up in the encampment. As soon after Litha as possible, that we might catch some of that energy as well. There will be a full moon three days after the Holy Day. We can ascribe to that, I think... I would have far more preparation, but it is not to wait much beyond that. You must be invested. As soon as can be.”

“This is so very hard to believe.” He said, looking into her eyes. “My Gods, I thought I would be retired.”

“Retired?” Queried Rhiannon, honestly quite surprised. “Surely not! What, you think we’d send you off to some caves to be tended and pitied?” Seeing his face and manner she realized he had thought something of the sort. “Oh, Dear one. Do you think we feel so little for our own for something you have no control over?” She took his hands as they were still tightly clasped to the opal as she encased them with her own and drew them up to her lips and gently kissed them. “Some have said I am stern, unbending, humorless. Perhaps to some degree it is true. But, I am hardly without compassion. Nor am I wasteful. And neither must you ever be.”

A certain panic suddenly swept over him as he pulled away from her self-consciously. “But, what does this all mean? I mean, I have family here. A daughter and son. And Bardic companions. Jenna. Dylan. I have a whole life here. People I love with my whole heart.”

“That shall be discussed in time.” Her eyes sparkled, but seeing continued panic in him she smiled gently, “Ah, it is so good you have such concerns. It does you wonderful credit. But do not be worried, friend. Much is really your decision.” She touched his face carefully and shook her head. “You are a delight and a surprise. And I am truly gratified.” She sighed lightly, “I do not think you quite realize your Standing yet... But you will. You will.” Having said that, she got up bidding him stand as well. “Keep the egg with you.” She instructed. “Close on your person and allow its energy to commingle with your own.” Standing with her he put the opal in his clothing close to his heart as she took his arm. “Come now, Beloved. Show me this beautiful Greathouse you live in and speak to me of all the wonderful preparations you have made for the Solstice.” Leaving the apartments they were soon joined by Jenna and Dylan and though they could tell something of import had happened, a sense of relief also pervaded them. It would be a long night, but a welcome one as a renewed sense of life and vigor settled within Taliesin’s awareness.