

# RHIANNON – CHILD OF TWILIGHT

## Chapter 1

### *Winter's Whispers*

The rage of snow and wind whirled about the shuttered windows in the deep of night like whispers from the dead. Gasping once for air, Morgan sat straight up in bed in a rush of cold sweat. For a moment he sat with his mouth open and his eyes staring wildly into the depths of the darkness. Finally remembering where he was, a slow breath escaped from him as his mind softened into a drifting state and he could feel his muscles relax. In his mental wandering an amused memory wafted before him, so he grasped for it.

Earlier he had gone to the kitchens of the Greathouse and Court of Ian where a fire still burned low, knowing some snatches of cheese and bread would still be remaining about from the evening's meal. Sitting near the fire with a portion, he heard voices in the halls entwined with a woman's delighted laughter. Her form slightly appeared in the entrance as a tingling of bells tuned from her clothes and hair. "You're a wanton child and should repent." A deep voice said, "You'll be repaid your lavish sins and depravity." But she laughed at this and shook her long walnut colored hair to let the bells play their sweet, frivolous music. "You waste your time," said another voice to the first, "all her folk are evil... That the Lord Ian continues their presence amazes me. Can he not see the very devil in their eyes?" Sensuously toying with the wall, the woman glimpsed Morgan and smiled before laughing again at the men in the darkened hall. In disgust the two men left, their footsteps echoing heavily as they went.

Morgan smiled widely, his eyes soft and amused. "Whatever 'have' you been up to, my Genevieve?" She said nothing, but slightly danced about him as she took some bread he held and ate it. For a moment she put her face closely up to his, letting her hair fall across him midst the laughter of bells. Then as suddenly, she laughed in the same tones and dashed from the rooms leaving Morgan to chuckle lightly, shaking his head.

And now in the midst of the deep night, Morgan smiled again in his thoughts as he sank back into bed. Reaching over to find his lover and mentor, Kyle, Morgan found he was alone. This startled him out of his revelry as he remembered his dream when he first gasped to consciousness. He turned about, noting the faint stream of light from an inner room. "Kyle... was I dreaming?"

A graying figure entered back into the room where Morgan lay. "No, Morgan, it was not a dream... We must pack now and leave by dawn... How many Runners do we have at Court at present?"

"Five... including Genevieve." Said Morgan fondly as he lit a candle next to the bed.

Folding clothing together, Kyle reflected, "We must take them all with us. And we must not take any of Lord Ian's Guard."

"All the Runners and both of us? 'One' of us must stay." Insisted Morgan, frowning and watching Kyle closely.

“No... there are Sacred Singers and Dancers here... a Wandering Bard is on her way and will take care of the basics while we are gone. That will have to be. We must both go. It is necessary.”

Pulling on a gray/green tunic trimmed with golden-yellow braiding over his under tunic of off white and pants of a deep forest green, Morgan made moves to leave their rooms, “I’ll alert the Runners.”

“No need... Genevieve will already know.” A smile drifted to Kyle’s lips, “So wild and talented.” He shook his head and stuffed clothes into packaging. “She ought to be training at Court, a near-Bard like her... Wandering feet. She’s always had such wandering feet... well; she’ll get a good dose of that this time... We’re going to the South of Cymru... down into the lands of Dyfed.”

“Dyfed?... Dyfed?... To what, Kyle?” Morgan pulled on traveling clothes and began to help Kyle with other gear and clothing, “Why this urgent call? What on Earth is in Dyfed?”

Stopping Kyle looked deeply into Morgan’s young face, the grooves of age creasing his own as he drew patience and love into an indulgent smile. “We are Bards... The journey is as important as where we may go... We are the song of the Moon and Stars... There are new words that She would sing, and we must go to seek those words out... Do not fear, Her words are not tidings of anger or sadness... but of great joy.” And he hugged Morgan, knowing well that Morgan indeed had become a bit fearful. When he felt the younger man relax, he drew away. “Come, we must be off as soon as possible.

But as they walked down the halls towards the stables, Morgan felt a cool sweat of anxiety and uncertainty; some sadness he could not place. Meeting the Runners at the kitchens, they all warmly greeted each other as they accumulated foods and drink. How gentle and open they were with each other, this bond of folk that much of the Court held in some fear and near awe. For a moment Morgan brushed back his light brown hair with his hand from his eyes to quickly swallow some cool drops of water. He smiled, remembering how often when he’d enter a room at Court near all conversation would stop. As if by their quick silence they could keep the Bards from knowing anything that might be going on. The network of information of the Bards had waned some since the invasion of the Romans into the Island of the Mighty; yet its effectiveness was still legendary and something to be reckoned with, especially in Cymru itself where the Bards still maintained true power and influence. And so, though this group of Bards left in estate, they left before alerting the rest of the Court, lest from fear, some of the Court attempt to impede them.

For a moment Kyle took Morgan and Genevieve aside, “Genevieve, you’ve been on the roads far more than either Morgan or myself these last few years, so I know your guidance on the way will be invaluable. But, Morgan will understand gentler signs with more perception, and some of these roads are not traveled much by our kind anymore. Some towns and Courts have now embraced the Eastern Priests that crossed the channel into the Island of the Mighty a generation or so ago. Many of these Priests and their God have no love for us. I do not want to go into an area where their influence is great, for we may well risk unpleasantries. That is also why we take no Guard from Lord Ian; his quasi acceptance of this new religion may mean some of his people are rather risky. I take it you all have packed weapons?”

“Yes, lord... always.” Were Genevieve’s quiet words.

“Good, good... You and Morgan will guide our entourage. Come to me at any sign you find confusing... I shall ride at the rear. Are we ready to go?”

As they moved outside the snow blustered about them. The horses tramped in the stables as if they already knew their riders would come seeking them. Though the rest of the horses were varied in color and size, Morgan and Kyle had large gray geldings with the riding trappings dyed a forest green and trimmed in golden yellow. However, all the company wore clothes of off white and green with belts of leather and woven wool whose wool was either white and gold-yellow for the Runners or gold-yellow and green for the Bards. Kyle wore an over cloak of purple and Morgan wore one of gray/green and the Runners wore a muted golden-yellow to contrast with Wandering Bards who wore dark green. Kyle and Morgan both had broaches of silver and gold of a twisted braid encircling a harp that they wore upon their left shoulder that also distinguished them as full Bardic rank. No one would mistake a Bardic company riding in estate.

Into the last hours of night they rode midst the turbulent pull of snow and wind, their backs hunched, huddling them from the cold. Morgan rode silently next to Genevieve, for they both knew the general direction that they must take. And it would be a long, difficult journey for the Court they left was in Gwynedd, the North Western area in the land of Cymru.

Winter was especially hard and deep that year. Each day was a long tedium in the cold, listening to the crunch of snow and watching the steam of horse and human breath. Fortunately, they were able to stop in many towns and villages where they might receive a Bardic due of supper and a warm bed for news, songs and Bardic blessings. But there were several nights in caves and abandoned shacks as they avoided those areas the Eastern Priests had taken hold. Though Genevieve was joyful and laughing whenever they were in favorable places of rest, on the road she was quiet and pensive. She never spoke a whole lot anyway, though when she sang and recited she seemed to fill the airs with near bursting. During the journey Kyle developed a fondness of playing the harp for her when she took her turn to perform.

Only on occasion did either Kyle or Morgan recite or sing, for their words could cause changes in people; so they took great care to know what time or place was right. However, they were almost always called upon to do blessings and/or healings before they left. And once or twice they were asked to participate in a village ritual. Morgan had near forgot how it was to be a Wandering Bard; though as a boy his duties had been those of a Runner, he had also continued to wander some when it became known that he was a Bard. Later, he had been called to serve at Lord Ian's Court as Kyle's Second. A deep and lasting bond had formed between the two men almost immediately and they were often commended by the Council for the way they utilized their Court. So, years had passed for Morgan, and the Runners and Wandering Bards were seen mostly as messengers of diplomacy. In a way, Morgan found the journey exhilarating, though he never lost a sense of some sadness and fear. When they slept at night, Morgan often found himself grasping Kyle closely with a sense of anxiety moving through him. And yet, Kyle would not say what the journey led to or why it must be made. Morgan received no inner messages, though he often tried to reach out with his mind, knocking at the Council's door. They seemed deaf to his inner confusion.

As they neared the end of their destination, they were able to stop at a town that gave them a near celebration for their appearance. At the Inn that they were to be staying

at, a feast was brought as the fires made to blaze. Many bells and ribbons were hung, and the townspeople brought instruments that they played with relish. A Runner had come through before them, letting the town know that Bards of note would soon appear, and whose long journey could be soothed by happy recreation. The town had become pleased and greatly excited by the information, meeting the company in the swirls of snow, ringing bells and pounding drums. One of the Runners took out a wooden flute and began to play midst all the mixed beating and the whole of the town created a procession as they went from the edge of town to the stables of the Inn.

At the Inn, all got private quarters beside the private room always afforded to Kyle and Morgan. They all quickly laid aside their outer clothes and gear that they might go back down to the revelry provided as soon as possible. Kyle was genuinely pleased by the town's efforts. To show his pleasure, he brought down his better harp and played it often. Morgan sat and watched, smiling, but speaking little as he sipped at a draught of ale. But Genevieve danced and laughed and sang, her feet bare and bells attached everywhere upon her. She was little and dark with great dark eyes, having Pictish blood, and she exhibited the faye enchantment her people were noted for. Watching her, Morgan's thoughts moved with her dance, his blue eyes soft as if he were moving into a light trance. Noticing Morgan's attentions, Kyle smiled slightly, shaking his head. Finally, Genevieve came to where Morgan sat, pulling him to his feet in her playful, gentle manner. Coming out of his musing state, Morgan laughed and danced with her. Slowly an energy began to weave about them, like banded colored cords. As Kyle continued to play his harp, Morgan sensed that Kyle was aiding this weave for some effect that Morgan was rather uncertain about. Soon the energy between Genevieve, Morgan and Kyle became so hot that everyone else moved away as the two continued to dance and Kyle continued to play. Just as Morgan believed he could stand the intensity no longer, Kyle abruptly stopped. The sudden release caused both Genevieve and Morgan to fall on the floor in a swoon. The Runners went up to the fallen pair, gently aiding them as they slowly came back to consciousness. Morgan looked a long while at Kyle in a near wild stare. The elder man merely looked back at Morgan with his clear gray eyes, finally evoking a soothing effect over the younger man.

Later, when everyone had gone to their rooms, Morgan turned to Kyle in theirs, puzzled and distraught, "What is this all about, Kyle?... This important meeting... it has to do with me... And with Genevieve... doesn't it?"

Kyle looked out the window at the snow that in the last hour had become still like frozen glass. Its beauty sparkled across the landscape beneath a moon that was nearly full. "We will enter the camp tomorrow. A village has been erected for us by the Runners in the area. It will be simple, but efficient." He sighed long knowing Morgan would now have to have some kind of answer. "Much I can not tell you, Morgan; it is for the Council to let you know. In the camp, and in person... But, I can say this much... You are right in your suppositions. Though it also is concerned with me..." For a moment Kyle paused, his thoughts lost in the snow. Drawing a deep breath, he went on, "Know, Morgan, that I love you deeply and always shall. Your appearance in my life was like the sun appearing after an endless night. You've been the most important thing that I have ever experienced in this life." Kyle turned and looked at what he knew he'd find, confusion and anxiety written all over Morgan's features. "Please, Morgan... We go to a great thing... It is not to be feared, for I have spoken truly, it is a great joy." With that he hugged Morgan

tightly and Morgan realized there were tears in the gray man's eyes. And Morgan also knew it would be a night of bittersweet gentleness; something Morgan would remember the rest of his life.

By the evening of the next day, they did indeed enter the Bardic Camp. Everywhere Runners moved back and forth, the servants and messengers of the Bardic hierarchy. Other than Genevieve, the other Runners that had come with Kyle and Morgan went to take up the tasks they were due. But, somehow Genevieve knew her place was with Kyle and Morgan, and she did not stray. After her dance with Morgan, her eyes had become fixed and a strange seriousness had descended over her. Her place in the fabric of the web of Wyrd had dramatically changed, and in her own way, she was trying to face that fact. The three of them were shown to a small dwelling that had a simple fire pit with warm bedclothes on the floor. The door was flaps of leather and no windows looked outside. Only the opening for the fire pit saw a wink of sky. On the way to their dwelling they noticed a large circular building at the center of the camp. Compared to the dwellings the building was large and somehow eerily impressive. Both Morgan and Genevieve looked at it as if it ought provide some sort of mystic answer.

In the dwelling they were served a luxuriant meal, with Kyle telling both Morgan and Genevieve to eat what they could, "For three days after this you will eat nothing save a small amount of honey, and you will drink nothing but water provided from an underground spring near here. Your meditations should be that of release of all negative and extraneous energies. I shall be staying here with the both of you as your Guardian to make certain you're both all right. Have no fear, you will be monitored closely – let yourselves relax and worry about nothing except ridding yourself of outside forces." After they ate, Kyle simply went up to each of them and kissed their forehead, then retired to sleep by himself, as did Morgan and Genevieve.

Neither Morgan nor Genevieve were unfamiliar with fasting, so they went through the three days in stoic patience. Occasionally Kyle would go up to each and check their vital statistics, carefully watching their every move.

On the evening of the third day, beneath the fullness of the Winter Moon, a rap came three times upon the frame of the dwelling. Morgan and Genevieve were both clad in white robes and Kyle had already anointed them with oil. He followed behind them as all three went outside where the air stilled in the cold, the stars beginning to make their night's appearance. The woman who had summoned them turned as they came out, walking before them with a staff and a brightly lit candle towards the large building at the center of the camp.

When they entered the woman stood at the door inside to monitor the entrance. Morgan was surprised to note Kyle move away to sit midst the Members of the Council, for Council it was who lined the sides of the circular building. An ancient woman with long white hair directly across from them arose and spoke, "Welcome and enter, Morgan and Genevieve, for I bring tidings of great joy... I am the Spokeswoman and Head of the Council. Please step forward to the center of the building." Just then, Morgan noticed the large crystal encased in silver at the center on the floor. Genevieve had noticed it as well and quickly looked at Morgan before they both walked up. The ancient woman smiled on them as she spoke, "It has come to our attention that Genevieve is about to come into her full membership with Our Lady. It is our ancient practice that one who has achieved that state themselves and is close to the one about to enter that state be the one to open the

door for them.” Both Morgan and Genevieve swallowed hard, for though it indeed was a great thing that was about to befall Genevieve, it could also be highly dangerous for both people involved.

“Morgan... do you accept this duty, for it is not our desire to enforce you.”

“Mother...” he paused and drew a quick deep breath, “How can I do otherwise?”

“Do you accept?” The answer had to be straightforward.

“Yes, Mother, I accept.”

“Then, both of you, go to the crystal; sit and place both your hands thereon. The crystal will help you to stay at your purpose... Morgan, you must go into Genevieve’s center. There you will find the door that you must open. You know the door, just as all of us here do. Bless you, both of you. May Our Lady see you success.” With that she sat again, and the Council began a slow, subtle chant that they would maintain throughout the procedure. For a moment as he sat across Genevieve, Morgan looked into her eyes intently, their hands slightly enfolding each other over the crystal. Aura opened into aura, a link tied within the crystal as their eyes began to slowly close. They felt the energy of the Council winding around them; bands of color that gently began to uplift them.

Morgan opened his inner eyes within the crystal seeing deep within its core a brilliant flame. It was the Well of Inspiration; it was the center of Genevieve’s highest being. Reaching out, he found himself within the center of the flame, and as he watched the fires around him, he felt no heat or cold. Yet, the warm inner love of her heartbeat went through him as he looked. And then it was before him; as if a valve within her heart had never learned to open or close. Yet, how easily he had found it, and how easy it was to open it now. So, he pushed.

Regaining consciousness Morgan heard the ringing of screams within his ears, whether of himself or Genevieve or both, he could not tell. A gentle face wavered before him and he tried to reach out only to be softly settled back under the coverings, “Mother...” he whispered, “What has happened?”

“You have returned, my son... it has been three days, your spirit became confused. But, we called you back... As soon as you are able, you must eat.” With that the Head of the Bardic Council gave him some gruel to sip at.

“Kyle?”

“He’s here, he’s by Genevieve... Later you must join him to help him bring her to us.”

Morgan turned his head to see Kyle kneeling by Genevieve, his hand on her brow, a low melodic chant whispering from his lips. “Will she be alright?”

“Shhh... by all accounts, it will be well. But it will take you to connect with her and finally bring her back.” The fire pit was ablaze and the dwelling was warm. Bits of food were wrapped and kept close to the pit’s perimeter that all might be hot and ready to eat whenever one chose. Outside a storm was again in progress, though Morgan reckoned Winter would be closing by the time they returned to Lord Ian’s Court. As he sipped the gruel, the cup in the ancient woman’s hands, he listened to the howl outside. Such a deep Winter, such a magickal Winter, perhaps the most magickal time he had ever come to know.

In a few hours Morgan regained much of his strength, sipping ale and slowly eating warm foodstuffs. As soon as the ancient woman knew he would be all right, she ritually kissed him and signed over him before going out into the night to find her own

abode. In time Morgan moved over where Kyle knelt, listening to the elder man's beautiful chant. Sitting, Morgan closed his eyes, gently swaying to the sounds, concentrating on feeling Genevieve's aura, then her inner self, then her higher self; breathing life from his life, filling her soul with a warm glow. She was right there, she had not gotten lost; she was only disoriented from the huge rush of power that had so fully encompassed her very being. But, now that the door had been opened, she'd be able to open and close it at will. If she was well, if Morgan brought her back safely to a sane and healthy mind. With all his might he set to heal any burning edges, to fill her being with the glow of health and wholeness.

Through the edges of a timeless state where Morgan no longer knew of minutes, hours, days; he slowly sensed a quiet awakening beneath her slumber. Opening his eyes, he saw her shallow attempts to open hers, "Genevieve..." he whispered and smiled, "You are well... You are whole."

Kyle moved away to get her the same sort of gruel Morgan was given when he first awoke. As he tenderly coaxed Genevieve to sip, Kyle spoke, "Welcome Sister, for you have joined the ranks of the Gifted. Now your journey truly begins. And be aware, young Sister, this Gift must be used carefully, for you now have the ability to bend minds with your words. Always seek the will of Our Lady and never the will of Genevieve when you choose to open this door."

"Father, I vow it so." Her words were hushed, but her voice was strong. At the title 'Father' Morgan looked quizzically at Kyle, but did not look for an answer. He set about gathering food to help Genevieve to break her fast. As she ate, Kyle also presented her with the broach that would declare her as a bard from then on, quietly explaining to her whose it had been before as broaches were passed down from Bards who had passed on, giving a little extra 'life' to the one who would receive it. As the night wore on both Morgan and Genevieve gathered much of their strength back, finally breaking into a fit of laughter when Kyle told them a funny tale.

For three more days Morgan and Genevieve were made to take much rest as preparations were made about them to break camp that all might take their journeys home or go about their ways.

On the third day as Genevieve bathed in an area provided for that, Morgan was alone with Kyle for the first time since he had reawakened. Somberly Kyle went and picked up his purple cloak, then hung it over Morgan's shoulders, "You, too, Brother have passed a test, for it is known that that was the first time you have taken another into their Gift. If it were not so, you would not have been called to be my Second."

Morgan stood still, the Winter's chill creeping within as understanding washed over him, "And you have entered the Council...?"

"You are not happy for me?... You are the Chief Bard now for Ian's Court... and Genevieve is your Second. The gray/green cloak is now her right just as the purple is yours... Do not deny your standing... do not deny me mine." Yet there was sadness in Kyle's voice.

"You won't be returning with me, will you?"

"No... my place now is with the Council. Where we go is in our own direction and of our own time... But, my heart shall stay with you forever."

In mental anguish Morgan turned away. "How can you do this to me?... I am not ready... How can I be a Chief Bard?"

“You’re very ready, Morgan... Near past ready. You and Genevieve both. I am ashamed to say that I held you back as long as I could. I was selfish, I wanted you by me as long as I dared. But... I, too, passed ground... and I would have to leave you at last, no matter what.”

“But, Kyle... I am in love with you.” Was Morgan’s final plea.

“Ummm... and you are also in love with Genevieve... You will find the bond created between you by the opening of her door will go beyond this life into eternity... Just as I will always be attached to you; for in lifetimes past, I was the one who opened your door... Enjoy your youth with her. Love her and teach her, for her the whole of experience will be strange and new as she finds the depths of her Gift. You have no right now to abandon her... and you have no right now to try to hold me back. My only regret is that I must send you to your new standing in troubled times.” For one last time Kyle kissed and hugged Morgan closely, but this time he had dispensed with tears or sorrow. “Always, Morgan,” he whispered, “I shall be with you in heart... always.”

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The journey back was not near as difficult for the Winter storms began to wane and some evidence of Spring began to fill the airs. Genevieve rode beside Morgan at the front followed by several Runners. At first their words were few and somber, but as the days wore on, laughter filled their hearts for they indeed were young and had much future to look forward to.

Though Lord Ian greeted them with all due respect, he made it clear he did not understand, “Morgan, you left without my knowledge or the guard due your standing... All I was given was the information that you had urgent need to leave. This from one of the Court Singers... I was concerned.”

“You need have no concern about the business of the Bardic Council.” Morgan looked directly into Ian’s eyes knowing he met some challenge there.

“Where is Kyle? And why does the Runner Genevieve wear your cloak?... As I now see you are wearing Kyle’s?”

“I am Chief Bard of this Court now... Genevieve is my Second.”

“What?” frowned Lord Ian.

Morgan looked away, noting there seemed to be more of the Eastern Priests than he remembered. “Do you challenge the decision of the Bardic Council?... It is of no concern of yours...” Morgan said in such a way as if to say, ‘Are you daring me?’

The Lord moved slightly away, an Eastern Priest noting the interaction as Morgan watched the Priest as well. After a moment Ian responded, “No... no, hardly... I am merely surprised... Come... your apartments are ready. The Bard who had stayed in your stead waits to meet with you before she leaves and my Lady Jessica has seen that all is to your comfort... I hope you will be pleased.” The Eastern Priest who had been watching gave a bit of a sharp look, yet Lord Ian had obviously decided to back off from any more assertions for the time.

Though Morgan did notice some increased friction at Court, he also did indeed find himself capable to the new responsibilities. He was also glad to find that Genevieve had not lost any of her liveness of spirit as well as quickly learning and understanding her own responsibilities, though Morgan often wondered if she regretted that she had not

been allowed to be a Wandering Bard. Yet, when he looked into her eyes he knew he couldn't possibly seek or agree to her release.

The Seasons came and went and Winter settled back upon the landscape as it became increasingly evident that Genevieve would soon be giving birth. She had said it would be a Bardic child, a girl with light hair and dark eyes. And Morgan was often amazed how she could still dance about their rooms, bells everywhere, singing now with full Bardic force. The Runners loved her so, she understood them well, and this made for a clarity and openness that pleased Morgan for there was not good news across the countryside. There were areas now where the Eastern Priests who sometimes would call themselves Christians seemed to be slowly getting bolder, sometimes backed by various Lords and Ladies.

Often Morgan would sit by the fire, listening to the howl of the wind, listening to its voice. The coming of winter made Morgan think of Kyle and their long final journey through the snow. Where was Kyle? Was he even alive? Yet Morgan could feel a warmth come out from somewhere and he knew the bond would tell him should anything untoward ever happen to Kyle.

On occasion Morgan would have words with the Eastern Priests, though he tried to avoid such things as much as possible. They hardly liked Genevieve and her status, taking every opportunity to tell her so; a complaint he had also heard from the Bard who had held the Court when they had been away. Too often Morgan would have to demand an apology from Lord Ian because the Priests would make it almost impossible for her to perform some of her functions by either barring her way or simply refusing to co-operate with her. This led to irritations and sometimes angry words, and Morgan hated to have it be that way. He, as all his kind were, was a diplomat; and though he was used to the subtle fencing of politics, this sometimes open hostility was difficult to assume. Never complaining, Genevieve simply reported whatever she must, knowing that it did indeed upset Morgan. "Goodness, what 'is' their problem?" He finally said one day, "Does their God teach them no respect?"

"I do think their beliefs have been teaching them that women are by nature evil, Morgan. Something such, anyway... And certainly a creature such as myself should surely not have authority..." she shrugged plaintively, "Not that I understand them... It doesn't make much sense to me."

"Umm.. I think I understand... they are trying to undermine the core of what we are... If they could convince the people that somehow women are inferior... or even to be disdained... then it follows that anyone of the Lady might ought be disdained as well... I do not like this, Genevieve... I fear what it may mean over time...there have been foreign religions in this land before, but none that seemed so bent on removing all other religions around it. To have it seep into so many corners of Cymru is disturbing. To even see it here in Gwynedd... Sometimes I wonder if we ought not consider leaving this Court and let it flounder in its own devices... I know Lady Jessica loves the Lady, but I see a wavering in the Lord Ian and I fear it could prove to even be a danger to us."

"Two moons and I shall give birth." She came to Morgan and put her arms about his neck, "I wish to name her Rhiannon... her love of horses shall be great... as great as her aspirations."

Smiling and hugging back the best he could about her swollen roundness he said, "I guess you're right... I am being edgy and I know we should stay... Yet, I may still

send out queries to the Council... Perhaps I am too jumpy, perhaps I ought be more even tempered, such as you are.”

Though Morgan did as he could to let things be, a few weeks before the birth of Rhiannon he was suddenly called before some of Lord Ian’s administrators, being accompanied by several of the Eastern Priests. In a swirl of green and purple, Morgan stood before them in the hall, suspicious and clearly out of sorts at being summoned under any circumstance. Looking at Ian, Morgan said in an authoritative voice, “Whatever do you mean by ‘demanding’ my presence here?” And with that Morgan gave the haughtiest look he had making Lord Ian quell some.

One of the Priests spoke up, “We but wished to ask you some things... We have found that your code of ethics has come under question to us.”

“My what?” Morgan looked stumped for a moment, then narrowed his eyes. “My what?” he said again with a slight note of venom.

Though Morgan could see that the Priest was nervous and avoiding Morgan’s eyes, he was impressed despite the situation that the other man kept his voice calm, “We do not see how you can run your office effectively when your personal affects are in such disrepair.”

Looking about the room Morgan noticed that there seemed to be an attempt to close him in, “I hardly begin to know just ‘what’ you are indicating.” He looked at Lord Ian and held his eyes until the other man looked away a bit red faced causing Morgan to arch a brow at him.

“One does have to wonder, Morgan,” said an old dour man of a Priest from another corner of the hall, “How you could serve as a woman to one man, then serve as a man to an unsanctified woman who will soon bare your bastard. I would think even your Gods would be abashed at your long unnatural conduct.”

Quite taken aback, Morgan’s mouth suddenly dropped open, incredulous a moment. Then he straightened himself back out as he pushed back his surprise putting his hands on his hips allowing his cloak to flow out in back of him. “And what would you know about ‘my’ Gods?... Is this some kind of a joke?” Morgan whirled about to survey everyone there.

“There have been a lot of complaints about you lately.” Said the same dour Priest looking through slips of scrolls as if certain of his quarry.

“Complaints?... Not from ‘my’ people... Lord Ian...” he faced the Lord directly, “I demand to know the meaning of this insipid game.”

Ian avoided Morgan’s eyes that were now smoldering with anger, “I was only trying to keep peace...”

“Peace?!”

“That perhaps if you were to confront each other and debate together... It’s not been easy, Morgan... I am but trying to make this a place where all my folk can live together...”

“Peace, you say... ‘Peace’ can only be kept if I and my people are left alone...”

“You and your people are condemned... You refuse to accept Christ as your savoir.” The dour Priest felt safe thinking that he had somehow managed to corner Morgan.

Seeing this, Morgan sauntered up to him, a stillness filling the air. The Priest looked up into Morgan’s eyes when Morgan was directly before him and at once felt a

great disturbance release in a wash over him. Suddenly he felt unsure. Then Morgan turned back to Ian, “You... you ‘dare’ to tell the ‘Bards’ what to do?... You ‘dare’?... Well, my Lord... you shall now have the vent of their full power... I pronounce a Destiny upon you.”

With that Ian turned ashen white, sweat forming on his brow, “No, Morgan... I only wished...”

“For three months... and believe me, this sentence is light... for three months neither I nor Genevieve nor the Runners or Wandering Bards will give you information. Any attempt at using your own men will be thwarted. No Singers will sing, no Dancers will dance – all music will be stilled, all performances of any kind shall cease... live in fear, my Lord. You will not know whether peace or war confronts you... Perhaps then you may learn just what sort of ‘game’ you are really playing.” With that Morgan turned, his cloak swashing behind him as he walked huffily out through the doors. The guards did not dare to impede him for the energy he had raised by his sentence made everyone in the room fill with fear.

For long moments Lord Ian stood staring. Finally an administrator pulled at his sleeve, “Lord, we’ve work to get to... Let us forget this and go on.”

“Forget it?!” spat the Lord, “Morgan!” he called. Realizing Morgan was out of earshot Ian ran to the doors, “Morgan wait!” He ran down the halls and saw out a window that Morgan had gone into the stables. In a moment Morgan dashed back out astride his horse bareback. Snow piled everywhere and flakes started coming from the sky in a sudden flurry. When Ian got to the stables the sky began to blizzard. A stable boy met him, “I must have my horse readied. Where did Morgan go?”

An administrator ran up, a bit out of breath, “My Lord, there’s a storm, you’ll never find Morgan in this... Like he’d disappear, anyway. He’s been known to do that.” For a moment Ian brushed the man aside, then realized he was right. “Wait for him to return, my Lord... We’ve much to do here, now... You ‘are’ the Lord... your attention is required elsewhere.”

Later, Ian knocked at the doors to Morgan and Genevieve’s apartments. The wind had made things so cold, he shivered violently as he waited. The doors opened by a young male servant who bowed and let him in.

“My Lord...” said Genevieve as she passed through toward another room.

“Has Morgan returned, Lady?... I need to speak to him.”

A sadness shadowed her eyes, “He is here... But he is most distraught... He rode out into a blizzard and I had to call him back as he could not see his way... He is resting by the fire in our inner room, but he is in no mood to speak.”

“I must speak with him. It is I he is angry with.”

Genevieve shrugged, “Go, then...” she pointed into a room, “He’s in there.”

Lord Ian entered where Morgan sat huddled with mulled wine as he reflected on the flames. Getting to his knees, the Lord pleaded, “I’m sorry, Morgan... I did not realize what they would do.”

For a moment Morgan did not speak but sipped his wine. Then he turned his eyes to Ian, “My authority as diplomat is not to be broached... Not by you... and certainly not by ‘those Preists’... Do you assume you are only speaking to me when you make such pronouncements?... Foolish accusations... What sort of a God do they worship, anyway? Trivial, silly... I don’t ‘ever’ wanted to be called up again for ‘anything at all’... If I am

judged, I am judged by 'my' Council... 'You' of all people know you have no authority over me... the people come to 'me' for true settlements... You 'know' all this..." Morgan spoke evenly as he looked up into the other man's eyes, "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Lord, yes... I am so sorry."

"Does your Lady know how much sway you've been allowing these Priests? If she did I think she'd leave you for the Holy Isle. She 'is' a Healer, if I recall."

A white fear lit Ian's eyes, "No, Morgan, please... Say nothing of this to my Lady."

Morgan sighed long and drawn, "I won't... but you 'must' make those meddling 'Priests', those so called 'Christians' leave me and my People alone... I shall not have another incident like this. Not for me... Not for 'any' of my People."

"I promise."

"Do you...?" Morgan looked away back into the flames, "But the Destiny stays."

The Lord put a hand to his eyes, "I can not sway you?"

"No... once pronounced I shall not move.... I shall only tell you this... Peace is not in your favor." Morgan looked back again deeply into the other man's eyes, but said no more. After several moments Lord Ian resigned himself, got up and left the rooms.

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Rhiannon was born at the edge of Spring before the ice began to melt. Having no children of her own, Lady Jessica came to stay with Genevieve as much as her duties would allow. Border skirmishes broke out a few weeks after Rhiannon's birth. Snow was still sticking to the ground in small clumps, though the ground was often thick with mud and slush. The direction that the skirmishes broke out was a surprise and Lord Ian learned of it nearly too late from soldiers near death upon arrival. Lord Ian also knew that they had only managed to get through at the last because Morgan had allowed the dying men access, and it made the Lord shiver inside.

With Ian gone in battle, the Lady Jessica turned attention in favor of Morgan and Genevieve, keeping both much in her company, making the Eastern Priests become chaffed and unsettled.

A secret meeting was held when a Bishop of the Eastern Priests traveled through on his way towards Pictland. He did not much relish the trip as there were still but a very few Christian areas that he felt comfortable about. So, the Priests at Lord Ian's Court provided an interesting diversion as they spoke of their struggle with the Court Bards.

"He is a great evil here, your Reverence... He and that witch woman. Removed, we may yet sway the Lady Jessica and gain a true foothold here.... But for the Chief Bard... the Lord Ian actually seems to fear him.

"Soooo... what has he done specifically?" said the Bishop as he settled himself down to listen. Perhaps the arguments would be long and interesting. Having dealt with some of the Bardic folk, he had grown sly, though unfortunately now it meant traveling into much more Pagan areas than he truly cared for. So he listened and he nodded, getting a feel for the personality that his Priests were struggling with. At long last they finished and all turned now towards him looking for an answer. "My dear Brothers in Christ, you

indeed have a feisty one here. Forceful... proud... demanding... eh?... but, I shall tell you what you might do... Make peace with him.”

“Make peace with him?!” was the irate cry from the others.

“Uh. Uh.” The Bishop held up his hand, “Leave him alone, make him feel relaxed. Let him have his way, respect his witch woman, as you say... His Second? Give him pause, play his game. Use diplomacy... Let him believe there is no danger... And this ‘will’ take time. Grit your teeth, speak pleasantries to him. Step aside for him... Bide your time. Eventually he will leave himself wide open... he’s proud and vain, they all are. Be patient. Let him trap himself... You will see a time and place... You will win victory over Lucifer, but ‘only’ if you understand him.” The Bishop sat back pleased with himself for understanding dawned on all the Priests’ faces and they quickly agreed.

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A couple years passed, and indeed the Priests did as they were bidden, though the wait was long and often extremely difficult to bare. Yet, eventually, Morgan did relax his guard to a large degree. He still remained suspicious for he sensed that a proselytizing religion is hardly going to totally leave anything alone forever. However, he did begin to feel ‘safe’ and began to be freer about where he went and what he did.

It was in late Summer that he, Genevieve and four Runner friends took Rhiannon and a basket of food to ride out beyond a patch of woods where lay a pretty field full of late blooms midst the slight scents of Fall. They laughed and sang, Morgan playing a harp and a Runner a wooden flute. They made no pretence of their whereabouts as they rode; and in truth dark figures had noticed them to at last see a perfect chance.

As they sat and joked while they ate, Morgan abruptly grew tense. For an instant he listened, then hushed the rest to do the same. Next he got up and rushed to Rhiannon, picked her up and sat her on a Runner’s horse. “My Lady,” he said hurriedly, “Fly!... Ruthen and Gil, take her and our child... Go to the Council Seat at Waljanargel ... seek the Council. Hurry!”

Ruthen and Gil jumped up on their horses, but Genevieve took up her sword, “Lord, I shall not leave you!”

Morgan grabbed her shoulders, “You must!... Rhiannon must survive and so must one of us... She is important for she is to grow and eventually replace the Mother Danu as Head of the Council...” He shook her slightly, afterwards hugging her quickly, “Fly, my love, fly!” On his horse Gil came up from behind to pull Genevieve to sit in front of him before she could offer any more protest. Ruthen grabbed the reigns of Genevieve’s horse to tie to his saddle as he held onto Rhiannon tightly. As the horses ran, Morgan called after them, “Tell the Council... The Bards here are betrayed!”

Taking up his sword he turned with the other two Runners; a man and a woman; by his sides, swords drawn and ready. Half a dozen Eastern Priests bore down on them, armed and gleeful to catch their adversaries in so remote and defenseless spot. But the swordplay of the Bardic folk was superior, taking them by surprise by the fierceness and making it imperative that the Priests still hidden in the woodland about them would have to draw bow and arrow in order to fell their foe. Not one of the Bardic folk said a word or cried out when they were hit or as they died. To the dismay of the Priests, when they looked at Morgan’s lifeless body they saw he smiled and seemed at peace. “What will we do with them? Should we not hide them?”

“Leave them, I say.” Spoke another, “Let the buzzards take them... let the people know that the Bards reign here no more... We shall give out that he disappeared and know nothing... Bandits are as like to have fallen on them... Without Morgan, the Lord Ian will bend his ear to us no matter what Morgan’s witch may say... Besides, she is as like to flee the area as the rest of the Bardic folk... I believe we are free of these pests at last.” So they agreed to leave, pleased that their rival had been removed at long last. They all knew that all the other Bardic folk at the Court were like to hurriedly leave once they found that their leader was gone.

However, by nightfall all the bodies of the fallen Bardic fellowship disappeared.

Indeed, all the Bardic folk did leave the Court of Ian and a month passed by with no news as the fields were near to harvest. It was then that a line of folk was seen coming slowly to Ina’s hold. As the Lord looked out one of his windows to see this sight he grew afraid. He had hoped the Bards would leave him be in disgust, though he had been hardly so sure of it as the Eastern Priests had been as they assumed an almost immediate boldness. Yet now, here they were, the Council flying its standard of a silver harp flanked by a white unicorn facing the harp argent on the right and a white dragon facing the harp argent on the left on a field of dark forest green; flying it before them as they rode with many others, riding towards him like crows of doom. No one stood in their way as they rode, not even the very surprised Eastern Priests. They had thought that surely one Chief Bard could not have garnered such attention, it would be like their principal leader whom they called the Pope sailing across the seas for a single Priest. Could they have misjudged the Chief Bard’s status so completely? Lord Ian wanted to hide; yet he knew he could not, not with much of the Bardic Council coming to his holdings. Lady Jessica was calm and aloof, coming to the doors to let the Council into the outer Courtyard. An ancient woman came to the front of the gathered folk, a staff in her hand and a sword at her side, “I am the Mother, Danu... As Spokeswoman and Head of the Council I demand that lord Ian come forward.” In the background with the Council, Genevieve stood with Kyle, Rhiannon’s tiny hand in hers. Kyle had an arm about Genevieve’s shoulders as if it might protect her from what they knew they’d hear. After a few still instants, Lord Ian did step up to face the Bards, knowing he could not escape his fate. “Lord Ian,” she said in a voice that brooked no argument, “Our Brother is dead.”

“Yes, Mother.” He whispered.

“It is sacrilege to murder a Bard... Yet, the villains of this crime have gone unpunished... In fact, we hear that they have even grown bold and boastful.”

“Mother, I...” he flustered.

She held up her hand, “No... I accept no excuse... Bring us the remains of our Beloved.”

“But, I do not know where they are... They disappeared... We searched when we realized something had happened to him. We only found the horses. We were given to believe it to be bandits.” He was in near tears.

“Mother,” said Lady Jessica, “I have their bodies.” She clapped her hands and three caskets were now brought in from a hiding place behind the stables. Inside the bodies lay intact and had not decayed. “I have studied with the Wise Women here and am a Healer myself. Through our herb craft and words we have been able to preserve them... to await your coming... Thieves indeed... I am ashamed of my husband’s involvement with the Eastern religion that so wishes to defame us, but I am grateful that I could do

this last service for you, Mother. I beg reprieve for me and those in my personal service... Let us stand with you... and then remove ourselves to the Holy Isle where I might find some healing from this sad affair.”

“Welcome, Daughter.” Said the ancient woman, hugging the Lady to then let her and her servants pass with the bodies into the protection of the Council.

As the body of Morgan passed Genevieve and Kyle, Genevieve hid her face in Kyle’s cloak to weep. Yet Kyle looked into the young, smiling face of the casket and a wane smile appeared upon his own. “Sleep well, Brother... For we will meet again. And, oh, how I look forward to that meeting.”

When Lady Jessica and her people were settled, the ancient woman once more returned her gaze to Lord Ian, “This ‘can not’ go unpunished. You know the penalty of this crime... We have already called the faithful of the villages to us so they will not suffer your plight, but will come with us to be resettled elsewhere.

“What do you mean?” Fearful, Ian was also perplexed.

Suddenly a servant ran in crying, “My Lord, my Lord... the fields are ablaze!... Everywhere! But, no-one started them, we saw no-one, I swear!... Burning! A hot blaze! Our fields are lost! We can not seem to stop them no matter what we try!” Lord Ian ran to a place that looked out over the fields only to see the truth of the boy’s cry. In the distance he also saw a line of people, packed and moving along the roads as all the fields blazed. As he watched in horror, another servant ran in, “My Lord, the grain stores are on fire!... The Guards saw no-one, but the stores are already near destroyed!”

Lord Ian turned in rage towards the ancient woman. He let out a tormented scream and rushed at her. Quickly, more quickly than any might believe, she drew her sword and let him impale himself. He sank to the ground at her feet in his own blood, the look of rage still in his face. As she withdrew her sword, Lord Ian’s people drew back from the Council. Then the Mother Danu spat on the ground in front of her, “No more will the Bards come here... This ground is profane... Seek solace in your Eastern Priests, then, if that is what you will. The Lady walks here no more.” She turned and walked from the yard, as did the rest of the Council in turn.

Soon they mounted their horses and rode slowly to the North West, behind them the fields and then the woods in a burning rage. And the whisper of a Winter wind moved across the land; the whisper of the cold, the whisper of hunger, the whisper of the dead.