Touch of the Goddess

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The Touch of the Goddess:
An Historical Novella
set in 13th Century
Ireland in the Fictitious
Village of Ceole

By Mary A. Dziorny
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Signature, Student

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Signature, Second Reader

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The shrill cry of a newborn brought rudely from his mother’s womb into this cold world pierced the still night, followed immediately by the cheers and cries of joy of all those in attendance. I sighed and finally let my spent muscles relax for the first time in literally hours. The birth had been successful, both baby and mother were doing fine. Wearly, I handed the child to my daughter Caolainn to bathe and wrap in a blanket. She quickly and efficiently went about her tasks, even though she too had been up all night waiting for the child to come. When she was finished, she lovingly handed the child to his mother.

“Congratulations, Eileen. You have a beautiful baby boy,” Caolainn said softly, as she settled in baby into Eileen’s arms for his first meal in this world. I watched silently for a moment as baby and mother got to know each other for the first time. Still, I wondered at the miracle of birth and the gift that the Goddess gave to women in being able to bear them. After a moment, I wearily gathered my equipment and herbs. Caolainn had already collected the bloody linens to be put in to soak for tomorrow’s washing.

“Eileen, I’m going to leave you now. If you need anything, you just send someone for me right away. I’ll check in on you tomorrow. Is there anything else I can do for you before I go?” I asked, Caolainn at my side, ready to fill any request Eileen made. Eileen looked up from her new son and smiled an exhausted smile at us.

“Thank you so much for your help, Sequana...you too, Caolainn. I wouldn’t have been able to get through it without you. I just wish I could repay you somehow.”

“Now, don’t you go troubling yourself about that. We all help each other in whatever ways we can. You just concentrate on bringing up that handsome young lad we’ve all just worked so hard to bring into this world.”

“I will. You go home and get some sleep yourself. I don’t know who’s worked harder tonight...you or me!” I laughed softly then squeezed her hand before turning to stumble home to my own bed.

... Miach and I woke up before Ma today. That almost never happens, but she has been working so hard lately. It seems like everyone is either sick or with child now. And I know she misses Father greatly. I hope he returns soon. Then he can help her with her jobs before she makes herself sick. Anyway, I cooked breakfast and got Miach to do his chores, so that Ma could sleep a
little later. We were both up very late last night helping Eileen have her little boy. I'm so glad that Ma is teaching me to be a healer and a midwife like her. There is something absolutely beautiful about seeing a little one brought into this world. It makes me even more thankful for the Goddess's gifts.

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I awoke a bit late the next morning. Both Caolainn and Miach were awake already. Caolainn, thank the gods, had already started breakfast. I stretched sleepily and forced myself from my bed. After quickly dressing and rebraiding my hair, I went into the kitchen to help her.

"Good morning, Ma. Did you sleep well?" Caolainn greeted me.

"Yes, I dropped right off by the time we got back here last night. Did you sleep?"

She laughed. "Of course I slept! Delivering babies is hard work, and they never seem to have the courtesy to be born at more reasonable hours!" I chuckled at her youthfulness as I set the table and helped her set out the food.

"Where is Miach?" I asked.

"Oh, he's out doing his morning chores."

"How did you get him to do them? I usually have to do everything short of calling down the Goddess to get him to do them!"

"I just told him that he could either cook breakfast while I did his chores or he could do them himself. Of course, I also told him that if he chose to cook, all of his friends would know about it by dinner!" she said with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. I laughed at this and finished setting out the breakfast. Just as I was about to call for him, Miach came wandering through the door.

"Is breakfast ready yet?" he demanded.

"And a fine morning to you, too, Miach," I said, gently reproving his rudeness.

He colored slightly, then said sheepishly, "Sorry, Ma. I'm just hungry. Did everything happen right at the birth last night?"

"Yes, everything is fine. Both the mother and the little boy are doing well. In fact, I was going to go check in on them later. Would you like to go with me and meet the newest member of the village?" His eyes lit up.

"Can I really?"

"Yes, I think you are getting old enough to learn about such things. You are the son of a
"midwife, after all." We all sat down to our breakfast. After the exhaustive night that Caolainn and I had and Miach's excitement, conversation was very brief. We ate quickly and quietly, each lost in thought. My mind was turning with all the things I had to do that day. There was the washing which was sorely overdue. I had to tend to my herbs and my vegetable garden. It was also the right phase of the moon for harvesting many of the herbs. Then I still had my patients to see to. Just thinking about it all made me want to go back to sleep for a few days. Sighing, I finished my food and then stood to start clearing the table. Caolainn and I quickly cleared everything away, then she started washing all the dishes and cooking utensils while I gathered up the washing. I wanted to get down to the lake before it got too hot. I also wanted a little time to myself before the rest of the women came down to do their washing.

Despite oversleeping, I was still able to get down to the water before everyone else. I set my washing into the water and then settled onto the ground next to the water. I loved this view of the world. I could see the lake, smooth as obsidian, in front of me. In the distance, I could see the rocky hillsides and the green pastures. To the west, I could see the tall, flat bluff that was the sacred place, the Rock of Cashel. Just gazing upon it gave me sense of peace and tranquility. Breathing deeply, I let my muscles relax. Slipping into a light meditation, I concentrated on the sounds of the birds overhead and the little splashing sounds the creatures in the lake made. I could feel the breeze blowing gently over me, ruffling my hair and skirts. The tensions in my mind and body slid away from me, down into the earth to be renewed and cleansed. Silently, I thanked the Goddess for her help in delivering the child last night. I was already thinking of the preparations that must be made before the child could be blessed by the Lord and Lady in the Wiccaning to be held in a few weeks.

Then a wave of sadness engulfed me. It was also time for Taliesin and me to honor our parents' death in an ancestral ceremony. This was going to be very difficult for both of us. We lost our parents in the clan wars. They had only been gone from this plane for a year. Both Taliesin and I were adjusting fairly well to the many changes in our lives since their deaths. Taliesin had a much harder time than I did. I was already married with two children. He was still off exploring the world. It was very lucky that he was able to get back in time to say his farewells to both of them. Unfortunately, he had to give up all his traveling and come back to take over the cattle and land. Though he hasn't complained, I think he still misses his wandering ways. Now that he is home again, everyone is trying to get him married off. That is the last thing he wants to do right now!
The thought of settling down and starting a family scares him half to death. It is really quite amusing to watch him turn completely pale and start stammering whenever anyone suggests it to him. I smiled to myself at the memories I was calling forth. Then voices began intruding upon my thoughts. The other women were arriving. Ah, well! I sighed. It's time to get on with today. I opened my eyes just as the women appeared over the hill. Taking a deep breath, I began the tedious task of washing. As the women got closer, I called out my greetings to them. They all settled onto the shore and began their washing, gossiping the whole while. I listened with half an ear, my thoughts still turning in my head.

"Greetings, ladies. How are all of you this fine morning?" Taliesin called out as he came upon the women of the village washing their laundry on the shore of the lake. His jaunty walk and exaggerated movements belied exactly what he was to the most casual observers. He was a rogue. When he was younger, he loved traveling, getting as far away from Ireland as he could possibly get. On the surface, he was a cross between the town jester and the village paramour. Underneath, there was a loving, gentle, and very caring man that very few people ever saw.

"Hello, Sis. How is my favorite healer today?" he asked as he brushed my cheek with a brotherly kiss before settling onto the ground next to me.

"I'm fine, brother dear. Judging by your tone, I'd say you shared the company of a lady last night. Anyone I know?" I teased. He colored slightly before composing himself once again.

"Now, Sequana. You know I'm not one to kiss and tell." 

"That's not what I heard, Taliesin O'Tarbat!" one of the other women piped up.

"And just who's been telling tales on me, Aidan McFinegas?" he retorted playfully.

"A lady never reveals her sources."

"Then you shouldn't have any problems...at least you didn't last week," he added suggestively. Aidan flushed bright red all the way to the tips of her hair.

"I'll get you for that, you rogue! You'll never again have to worry about my problems!" she exclaimed in mock anger before splashing him generously with the lake water. Taliesin just laughed and shook himself off, all over me, of course. I cast him a bemused look and wiped water out of my eyes.

"You behave yourself, brother mine, before you get yourself into real trouble," I chided gently. He looked sheepishly at me for a moment before jumping to his feet again. Then he picked up a
round loaf of bread from what would have been my lunch, before he got to it, and began rolling it along his body. The women, glad for a diversion, looked up from their washing and watched him. As if by magic, the bread rolled along his arms and across his shoulders and back again. His audience sat, mesmerized. Finally, he flipped the bread into the air and caught it in one hand before taking a bite of it and handing it back to me. The women all applauded him as he took his bows.

“You’re getting better at that. Had many ladies to impress lately?” I teased again. Chuckling softly, he smiled one of his rare, genuine smiles. These were the smiles that made him so irresistible to the ladies he treated them to. He reached down and hugged me warmly before standing again.

“You know me, Sis...always in demand!” he retorted saucily as he began to stroll back toward the village. I watched him walk, smiling to myself. Yes, Taliesin, I do know you, I thought to myself just before he disappeared over a hill. Well, I was done with my washing, so I gathered up my things and got to my feet.

“I’ll see all of you later,” I called to the other women.

“Leaving so soon?” my friend Brid asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid. I have so much to do today, and I still have to check in on Eileen and the little one. I’ll talk to you later.” She smiled and waved as I hurried off to hang out the washing to dry. I was in the middle of hanging out the washing when Caolainn came out to me.

“Ma, why don’t I do that while you tend to your gardens? I know it is harvesting time. I’ll help you with the drying later, if you like.”

“Thank you. I could really use the help. Eileen just wore me out last night. If you need anything, just come find me.” She nodded and took the wet cloth from my hands. I dried my hands on my skirts and walked around the house to my herb garden. I really don’t know how other healers get their herbs, but I quite frankly do not have the time to harvest them from their natural surroundings. Taliesin, during his travels, saw this practice of growing herbs in a contained place and brought the idea back to me. I then went out and found all my herbs in the wild and brought them home to grow in my garden. It took me a while to encourage them all to grow out of their natural surroundings, but they seem to all be happy now. I checked each patch for weeds and bugs before moving on to my vegetable garden. Thinking about dinner, I again checked each area for weeds and bugs before finding some ripe turnips for the stew I was making. Let’s see, I thought, I need leeks,
carrots, and herbs. Once I had collected the vegetables, I went to the kitchen herbs in my garden and plucked what I needed from the patch. That done, I went into the house to get the stew started so it would be done in time for dinner.

As I was cleaning and preparing the vegetables, Caolainn came into the kitchen.

“Everything is hung and drying. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, dear, all is well here. I just have to put everything into the pot.”

“Good. I’m going walking with some of the other girls. Some of the younger men who didn’t go off to the wars are herding cattle through one of the low pastures. We were going to watch them. They usually play war games and sing at this time of day.”

“That sounds like fun. Off with you! The longer you talk to me the less time you have to admire them!” I playfully hurried her out the door. I chuckled to myself. I could remember being that young once. May she enjoy it as much as I did...a blush flooded my face as my mind was flooded with memories of that fun. Sighing again, I put all the makings for my stew into the pot and then lit the fire under it. Looking around my orderly kitchen, I got a sense of pride and serenity at the sight of everything where it should be. Now that dinner was started, it was time to harvest my herbs.

...I went into the common area of town and looked for my friends. They came out to join me shortly.

“Good morning, Caolainn,” Mary greeted me.

“Good morning,” I responded, “Let’s go. We don’t want to miss any of the show.”

“True. And what a show it always is!” she exclaimed with a mischievous glint in her eye. We both giggled and began walking out of town. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining brightly over head. There was a cool breeze blowing across the land. The wildflowers were starting to bloom. My friends and I laughed and joked as we walked toward the lower pastures. Soon, we reached the hill overlooking to field were the beautiful young men of the village were wrestling and playing war games. We sat on the side of the hill and got comfortable to watch the boys play.

“Oh, isn’t Michael absolutely beautiful!” exclaimed Mary. I blushed deeply. Michael and I had been secretly courting for a while. We really liked each other. Mary glanced over at me and her eyes lit up when she saw my blush.

“Oh, ho! Have I hit upon a nerve, Caolainn? What have you not told me?”
“Nothing, Mary. Nothing at all.”

“Tell me! Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me!” She was bouncing by now.

“Shhhhhh! They’ll hear you!” I whispered angrily. Her smile grew even more impish.

“Caolainn McCairbre, you tell me what’s going on or I’ll start yelling so that they’ll all hear!” I sighed. Well, now was as good a time as any to tell her that Michael were starting to think about getting married.

“Oh, all right. I’ll tell you. Michael and I have been secretly courting for a few months now. We just didn’t want anyone to know yet, at least not until we are positive of it ourselves. We were going to start courting openly in a few weeks anyway. We are thinking about getting Handfasted for a year and a day. But you can’t tell anyone. We haven’t told our families yet. We were waiting for the men to return.”

“I can’t believe it! My friend is getting Handfasted! I’m so happy for you!”

“Mary, it’s not definite yet. Michael and I still have to talk to the families. I know my family can not afford much of a dowry, so we still have talking to do before we can announce anything. You have to promise me that you won’t tell anyone about any of this! Promise!”

“All right, all right. Don’t get so upset! I promise I won’t tell anyone...but you have to tell everyone soon. A Beltain Handfasting would be beautiful!” I thought about that. She was right. I had always wanted to get Handfasted on Beltain. I would have to speak with Michael about it. I looked up just in time to see him wave at me and start walking toward us.

“Oh, dear. Here he comes. Do I look all right?” I asked nervously, fussing with my hair and clothes. Mary burst out into hysterical laughter.

“This is highly amusing. I have never seen you like this! This is really serious.”

“Mary, just answer the question. I didn’t have time to do much with my looks this morning.”

“You look fine. I won’t say anything to him. In fact, would you like me to leave you two alone?” She gave me an impish look and began to stand. Hastily, I grabbed her arm and literally dragged her back to the ground beside me. I couldn’t be seen alone with Michael by the other young men. The whole village would be talking about it!

“Don’t you dare go anywhere, Mary Eileen O’Donald! You know as well as I that Michael and I can’t be seen alone until we announce our courtship. I just don’t want to be the center of
conversation until ke and I are ready.” I pasted a smile on my face and grabbed her hand just as Michael got to within earshot of us. She repressed a giggle and smiled at him.

“Good day, ladies. How are you both this fine afternoon?” Michael asked. His eyes wandered over my face and made me blush with the intensity of their gaze. He and I were very attracted to each other, but we hadn’t had the chance to do anything about it yet. I hoped we could fix that soon. The thought made me blush even harder.

“How are you today, Caolainn? I heard that Eileen had her baby last night. Did you get to help your mother with the delivery?”

“Yes. It was so exciting! I’m still amazed at the miracle of birth every time I see it. Ma and I did get to sleep very late though. How are you doing?”

“I am well. I heard that the clan wars are almost over. The other men might be back as early as Beltain.”

“Really? That’s wonderful! It’s about time the Duke quit playing with their lives. For a ruler who lives so far away, he is far too able to disrupt our lives! It will be very nice to have all the men back. I know it will much easier on Ma when Pa returns. She gets so lonely without him. I think she is also missing her parents very much now. It is time for her and Taliesin to so the ancestral rite to honor their death. They have been gone for a year now. I hope she and Taliesin will be all right. I see so much sadness in them both when they think no one is looking. Hopefully, they will be able to finally put their grief aside after this ritual.” I leaned over him and began tickling his face with a few blades of grass.

“When do you want to talk to our families?”
"I think we should do it soon. I had to tell Mary already, and she won't be able to keep it secret for terribly long. What do you think of a Beltain Handfasting? If we hurry, we should still be able to plan everything in time."

"That would be beautiful. Do you really think we could get it all done by then?"

"Yes. This is the year and a day ceremony, so we don't have nearly as many preparations to do. The hardest part will be preparing the feast, but if both of us work together, we should be able to do it."

"When should we talk to our parents then?"

"How about tonight after dinner? You talk to your family and then come to get me. I'll be talking to Ma while you talk to your family."

"Till tonight then, my love." He reached up, wrapped his arms around me, and rolled me onto the ground beneath him. Then he gave the most passionate and soul searching kiss I had ever felt. When he broke the kiss, I was more than a little breathless and dazed. He stood up and walked back down the hill toward his friends. I laid back in the grass and just reveled in the feelings he had aroused in me, feelings I had never felt before. I really must talk to Uncle Taliesin, I thought. He should be able to help me understand all these new feelings and what to do about them. The thought made me smile and blush again. I got up off the grass and began walking home. I couldn't wait to tell Ma and Misch.

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I went into the small apothecary that Mael had built for me next to the house and gathered the small, consecrated stones that I would use as a gift to the earth in exchange for the herbs she gave me. I also put the small knife that I used solely for the purpose of harvesting my herbs into a basket. I hope Caolainn is enjoying herself today, I thought to myself as I gathered all the things I needed. Then I went out into the garden and began choosing my plants for harvest. I very carefully examined each plant to make sure that it was full grown. Then I could only harvest certain plants at this particular phase of the moon. It took me most of the afternoon to finish cutting all of the herbs from the garden. Lastly, I made an offering to the Goddess and the earth in thanks for the harvest they had given me. To do this, I blessed each of the small stones I had and then scattered them throughout the patches I had harvested from. Then I sprinkled water from the lake over all of the plants. Now came the very time consuming task of getting all of the plants ready to be dried. Back
into my apothecary I went with my basket of freshly cut herbs.

I settled myself at my little table and began sorting the herbs into little bundles. Each bundle was then carefully tied with thin yarn that I spun especially for the drying of my herbs. As I was doing this, I noticed that I was using the last of my yarn. I knew I would have to fit spinning into my evening in order to replace what I was using. After the bundles were tied, I suspended them from the rafters above my head. This was one of the reasons I loved being in my apothecary. The rafters were completely covered with bundles of drying herbs. It always smelled so good in here. Satisfied that they would dry properly, I began cleaning up after myself. When all my things were back in their places, I left the apothecary and went to look at my stew.

As I entered my house, the smell of herbs and cooking food filled the air. I looked around for Miach as it was time to do the evening chores and look after the cattle. Of course, the little scamp was nowhere to be seen. I must have Taliesin talk to him about his responsibilities, I thought. Back out into the yard I went. As I took care of all the evening jobs and fed the cattle and secured them for the night, I let my mind wander. It would be so nice when Mael finally came home. He had been gone with most of the rest of the men to fight in the clan wars for almost a year now. It seemed like he had been gone for an eternity. I missed him so. I love my home and our land, but it gets so lonely here at night. There is so much that has happened since he left, so much that I would like very much to talk with him about. Ah, well...I couldn't afford to let his absence make me sad. It wouldn't bring him back. Soon, I had all the chores done. As I checked on the cattle one last time, I heard steps behind me. Before I even turned, I knew it was Taliesin.

Without turning, I said, "Hello, Taliesin." He walked up to me and rubbed my shoulders before responding.

"This week is the anniversary, isn't it?" he asked very quietly. Smiling sadly, I nodded. He slipped his arm around my shoulders, and we stood silently for a moment.

"Are you ready to finally put them to rest? You know as well as I do that it is time," I asked softly. He stiffened slightly. Any mention of this ceremony made him tense, but he knew that I was right. By the laws of nature, it was time to honor their passing and set them free of all obligations in this plane.

"I know we must, but it will still be difficult. I still miss them terribly. Some nights, I wake up...and I have to remember again that they are gone. I feel like they just died again. I know that
this ritual will help me put them to rest in my mind, too...I just don't know if I can do that yet."

"I know, I know. It is the same for me. Every time I have a difficult patient, I want to ask Ma for help. I worry that I didn't learn enough from her before she died. These gods forsaken wars! When will they end? While I am thinking about how to finally set them free, I worry always about Mael and if I will have to do the same for him." I couldn't stop the tears from flowing, so I let them. It is said that tears are the pain of the spirit being purged by the healing element of water. Taliesin and I held each other as we let our grief flow back into the earth. I don't know how long we stood there before we heard the children returning. Hastily, I brushed the tears from my face and tried to hide my sadness. Taliesin and I started for the house just as Caolainn and Miach came into the yard, laughing and chasing each other. Their joy was infectious. Soon Taliesin and I were laughing and playing with them. 

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I ran into Miach as I was coming home from the lower pasture. He was playing with some of the village boys when he saw me and ran over to me.

"Hi, Caolainn. Do you really think Ma will let me go with you to see Eileen and her baby tonight?" I chuckled at his excitement. I had never seen him interested in one thing for as long as this had obviously been on his mind.

"Yes, but only if you behave yourself between now and then. You know tired Ma is right now. She needs a little rest, so you just do what you're told."

"I know. I will. I'm worried about Ma. I hope she doesn't get sick. She is so busy right."
I smiled at his sudden wisdom. Miach is a very smart and observant boy...when he wants to be.

"We should be going, Miach. It is almost time for dinner." He said farewell to his friends and we continued walking home. He was full of stories that he had learned from his friends, and he was telling me all of them as we walked. When we got within sight of the house, I noticed that Uncle Taliesin was in the yard with Ma. Then I noticed the sadness that permeated the air. I put a restraining hand on Miach. He slowed his pace and looked at them. A moment later, he too felt the sadness. He gave me a worried look as we continued walking slowly.

"It's all right, Miach. They are just talking about the ritual, I think. I don't sense anything besides grief in either of them. Do you?" I said softly to him. He cocked his head to one side and focused on them for a moment.
"No. All I can feel is their normal sadness." I could feel the muscles in his shoulders relax. Then he started telling me another funny story, making us both laugh as we came into the front yard. Still, I saw Ma try to hide her emotions and put on a smile just before we got to her. She started playing with Miach a few moments after we arrived. That made him feel a little better. I was still very worried about her. We all went inside for dinner.

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I was very glad that I had experimented with the herbs I put in it a little. I would definitely have to teach this recipe to Caolainn if it tasted as good as it smelled. Caolainn and Miach set the table while I made the final preparations of the stew and the bread that Caolainn had baked that morning while I was doing the washing. She always made terrific bread. By the time I was ready to serve, the table was set. We all sat down and began eating.

"Caolainn, the bread is wonderful, as usual. You are going to make some lucky young man one hell of a mate...if you ever choose one, that is," Taliesin teased her gently. She blushed a deep red and looked down into her stew. I was amazed. Had she been seeing someone that I didn't know about? Taliesin noticed it too, and he got a very self-satisfied smile on his face.

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I couldn't believe he said that! Uncle Taliesin has the timing and sublety of a wolfhound in heat! I sighed. Well, this is as good a time as any, I thought to myself. When I looked up from my bowl, I saw the entire table looking expectantly at me. I took a deep breath to steady myself.

"Well, now that you mention it...I have chosen someone. I was going to talk about this after dinner. Anyway, Michael Donovan and I have been courting for a while now and we would like to be Handfasted for a year and a day. Obviously, we still have much to discuss. That's why he's talking to his family tonight as well. Then he and his family are going to come talk to us. Uncle Taliesin, will you represent my father?" I looked anxiously at him and then to my mother.

"Of course, I will!" Again I looked at my mother. She was staring at me in wonder and amazement. As her silence grew, I began to get worried.

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I can't believe it! My little girl finally found someone to make her happy! I never thought she would get Handfasted. I realized that I had been silent for too long when I saw and felt the worry cross her face.
“That’s wonderful! When did you two want to get Handfasted?” I asked her. She sighed with relief and a beautiful smile dominated her face.

“We would very much like for the ceremony to take place on Beltain. I know that doesn’t give us a lot of time. Do you think it will be possible?” she looked hopefully at me.

“Of course we can do it! You can wear the robe I wore for my Handfasting. Everything else we need is already in the family chest or on the altar. We even have enough food to prepare the feast. The only thing we don’t have is any mead. Maybe someone else in the village will have some we can buy.” Taliesin noisily cleared his throat. All eyes turned to him.

“Or you could just ask your beloved brother. It just so happens that I have a batch of mead that will be ready in time for Beltain. I will gladly share it on such a joyous occasion.” Caolainn got up and threw her arms around him in a huge hug. The look of love that crossed his face at that moment almost brought tears to my eyes. I was able to recompose my face before she looked up again. At this point Mickael went over to her and wrapped his arms around her as well.

“That’s good, Caolainn. I like Michael. He sometimes lets me play with him. I’m glad you are getting Handfasted to him,” he said with childish innocence and joy. I went around the table and wrapped my arms around the whole lot of them. We stood like that until a knock at the door interrupted us. I went to open the door as Caolainn smoothened her hair and composed herself to meet her new family members.

When I opened the door, I was greeted by Michael and his mother Emer. She looked as happy and flustered as I did as I lead them into the house and to the table. Caolainn showed them to seats around the table with us.

“I’m so glad you came, Michael and Emer. This is a very happy day.”

“Yes, Sequana, it is. I couldn’t believe it when Michael told me that he had found a bride. I was so happy when he told me who. I have always liked Caolainn.”

“I was ecstatic when she told me she wanted to marry Michael. I have always thought he was a wonderful young man,” I replied. I took my seat at the table beside Caolainn who was looking shyly at Michael.

Taliesin spoke up, “We have much to discuss if this is going to happen by Beltain. Perhaps we should get started?” Caolainn and Michael stood up and walked toward the door.

“Ma, we are going to be outside in the front yard while you three discuss things. If you need
us, just send Miach after us,” said Caolainn as she opened the front door and lead Michael outside. The rest of us began negotiating Caolainn’s bride price and Michael’s honor price.

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Michael and I quietly walked outside into the darkness. We went to the edge of the yard and then settled onto a patch of grass to gaze at the stars above us.

“I can’t believe this is happening. I’m so happy!” I said to Michael. He reached over to me and pulled me against him, nestling me in his arms before answering.

“I just can’t wait to get to know you a little better,” he whispered into me ear just before he bit it gently. A strange thrill ran through my body and I shivered.

“I can hardly wait myself. Where are we going to live, Michael?”

“There is a small house out on our land. It was my parent’s first house when they first got Handfasted. Ma says we can live there. It is far enough away from everyone that we should have complete privacy.” His words sent another shiver up my spine. He was just starting to run his hands over my body when Miach came out to get us.

“Caolainn! They’re finished talking. You can come back now.” Michael and I groaned softly at the interruption before we stood and walked, hand in hand, back to the house.

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Taliesin, Emer, and I worked out all the finer points of the union in very short time. All of us wanted the two to be happy, so there was really no arguing about prices. Now we had to plan everything. As Michael and Caolainn came back in, Emer was just standing to leave.

“I’m very glad that everything has worked out so well, Sequana. I look forward to the joining of our two families.”

“I too look forward to it, Emer. I thank you and Michael for coming out here tonight. We will talk again soon to finalize plans before the ceremony.” I walked them to the door and closed it behind them. Then I turned to Caolainn.

“Well, young lady, it seems we have a lot to do. However, tonight I need a rest. I’m going to do some spinning tonight. Why don’t you take Miach to see Eileen? If there is any problem, just send Miach to get me.”

“I will as soon as I talk to Uncle Taliesin, all right?” I smiled to myself. I knew exactly what that conversation would entail. I still remembered the conversation I had with my uncle
shortly before my Handfasting.

"That's fine. I'll retire for now. Good night, dear." I turned and made my way to my sleeping quarters to get my spinning things. When I returned, Taliesin and Caolainn were gone and Miach was clearing the table.

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"Uncle Taliesin......I need to talk to you." I looked at him apprehensively. There was a strange copper glint in his eyes that I had never seen before.

"And what do want to talk to me about?" I looked down at my feet for a moment.

"Well....I have some questions."

"Such as.....?"

"Such as....now that I have a man, what do I do with him?" Taliesin burst out laughing. It was a moment before he was able to control himself again.

"Are you attracted to him?" I blushed as I remembered the strange, wonderful feelings that Michael inspired in me.

"Oh, yes.....very much," I said dreamily. Taliesin chuckled again. Then he sat on the grass and gestured for me to join him. I sat next to him and looked at him expectantly.

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As I sat spinning, I let my mind wander. I was very happy that Caolainn had found someone to make her happy. It had been quite easy to arrange everything. I often think that the men make everything much more difficult than it needs to be. I went over the list of things that I must do the following day. Gradually, I let my mind drift wherever it wanted to go. Soon, I wasn't thinking of anything at all. I was just relaxed and in a meditative state, the rapidly growing thread between my fingers holding me entranced. I had already sent Miach to bed and Caolainn was still out talking to Taliesin. I chuckled as I imagined how the conversation was unfolding. Caolainn was a very intelligent girl. She had just had no use for certain kinds of knowledge every time I had tried to teach her in the past. Now that she was going to be a wife very shortly, she desperately wanted the things I had tried to explain to her. I knew exactly how she felt. I had done the same thing with my mother and my uncle just before my Handfasting. I knew that Taliesin would be very kind in his explanations to her and that he would be able to ease all of her fears. He had always been very caring when he had to be. With no distractions around me, my spinning went very smoothly. Very
soon, I had plenty of thread, so I put away my things and went to bed. There, my thoughts were restless.

It had been a very long time since I had seen Mael. Caolainn's engagement simply made that fact all the more apparent. I truly felt lonely at that moment. If he had been there, he could have helped with the arrangements. More importantly, he would have been able to share in the joy I felt. He would have been able to be part of this very special day for Caolainn. As it stood, I didn't think he would even be home in time to see his daughter Handfasted for the first time. I knew it would greatly hurt him that he had missed it, but I also knew that we had to all go on with our lives while the men were gone. There were no guarantees that he would even come home. That thought brought tears to my eyes and a deep sense of sadness to my soul. I fervently wished that he would come home where I could protect him from the world and keep him safe. I resolutely pushed that thought from my mind as I drifted off to sleep with visions of my Handfasting filling my mind.

After Uncle Taliesin and I talked, I felt much better. I had a better understanding of my feelings and urges toward Michael. In fact, I couldn't wait to get the chance to try out all the new things that Uncle Taliesin had told me about. A wicked grin spread over my face as the thought of our Handfasting night came into vivid clarity in my mind. If it was only half as wonderful as I envisioned, I would be a very happy woman. With that thought, I went into the house and went to sleep, dreaming of the ceremony that would soon take place. I could hardly wait!

The next morning I awoke very early. Both Miach and Caolainn were still fast asleep. After putting breakfast on the fire to warm, I went down to the lake to wash myself. As I approached the lake, the peace of the area descended upon me. I absolutely loved this time of the day. Everything was calm. No one needed anything from me yet. This was entirely my time. I quickly stripped off my clothing and waded into the water. It was chilly, but not overly cold. Laying back in the water, I let my body float. My muscles quickly relaxed and my mind went blessedly blank. I let the water simply wash over and support me, taking all of my tension with it. As I lay there, I could hear the splashing of the fish as they swam around me. The birds were calling to each other overhead. The lowing of the cattle reached me faintly from the lower pastures. Life was all around me. I could smell the grass and the first wildflowers of spring on
the breeze that lightly caressed my skin. I could feel the loving presence of the Goddess all
around me and it was comforting. Gradually, I began to be aware of another presence. At first it
startled me, but I felt that it was familiar. As I came out of my meditation, I realized who it was.

"Good morning, Taliesin," I called to him. He was not at all surprised that I knew he was
there, even though I could neither see him nor hear him. All our lives, we had been very close. We
just took it almost for granted that we would be able to feel this sort of connection with each other. I
stood up and began wading toward him. When I reached him, he looked sad but resolute.

"It's time, Sequana. Tonight. The moon is in the right phase and today is the anniversary,"
he said very quietly and steadily. I nodded and sat on the shore next him, pulling my cloak around my
shoulders.

"I know. I feel it too. They want to be set free from this plane. I think I'm actually ready
to do it." We looked at each other for a moment. A tear slipped silently down his cheek. I reached
out and took him into my arms and held him as he cried. I had been waiting for him to finally come
to terms with the loss of our parents. I cried silently with him, both of us wrapped in each other's
arms, locked in a private sorrow that only he and I could fully understand. When we were both able
to stop crying, we pulled apart and looked at each other again. Without a word, we both stood. He
stayed with me while I got dressed, then we both turned at headed toward my house. On the way, we
talked.

"I think we should do the ritual at midnight tonight," he said.

"I do too. Up on Cashel. By midnight, we should be relatively undisturbed. Besides, the
whole village knows that it's time for this. I will meet you up there. That way, we can both make
our own private preparations beforehand." He nodded in agreement and then turned toward his own
house in silence. I continued on to my house, completely lost in thought.

When I returned, Miach was outside doing his morning chores. He waved to me as he went
out into the pasture to feed the cattle. I went inside to find Caolainn had already made the bread for
the day. I set the table and then checked on the wheat gruel I was cooking for breakfast. Caolainn
looked at me closely when I came in, but she didn't say anything. A few minutes later, breakfast was
ready and Miach was done with his chores. We all sat down to eat.

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Ma must have gotten up very early today as she had already started the gruel before I even
awoke. By the time I was dressed, she had left. She probably went to the lake. That is where she often goes in the mornings to think and meditate. I usually leave her alone if I can, so I made the bread and started it baking before she got back. When she returned, I could see and feel so much pain in her that I almost started crying myself. She was so deeply saddened that I knew I could do nothing for her. I left her to her thoughts as we continued readying the breakfast. When she was silent through the meal, I knew what she was thinking about.

When Mael excused himself from the table, I looked into her eyes and asked quietly, “It's time, isn't it? You and Taliesin must do the ritual tonight.” She simply nodded and visibly tried to establish a sense of composure. When she realized it would be impossible to fully compose herself, she silently rose and went out into her apothecary, where her personal altar is. I just watched her go and then cleaned up from breakfast.

... Caolainn is entirely too perceptive. She knew I was upset when I got home from the lake. Sometimes, it startles me when she sees into my soul like that. I simply couldn't share with her what I was feeling, so I decided to start trying to ready myself for what I must do. I went into my apothecary and sat on the floor in front of my altar. Silently, I asked the Goddess for the strength and guidance to survive this very difficult time. I knew in my heart that this ritual was going to be one of the most heartrending ones I would ever have to perform. I also knew that it would take me many hours of meditation to gain the tremendous courage I would need, so I sat, deep in meditation and my own personal grief for most of the day before I again emerged from my apothecary.

... Ma was in meditation for a very long time today. I didn't disturb her because I knew it was what she needed. Instead, I prepared a few of the remedies that needed to be delivered to her patients that day. Luckily, she had already brought in the herbs I would need, so I would not need to disrupt her peace by going into the apothecary. Normally, I would not have prepared the remedies without her supervision, but the herbs required were not dangerous, and I had prepared these teas and deoctions literally hundreds of times before. I briefly meditated in order to get my energy focused on healing. Then I began preparing the herbs. First, I had to make a tea for Brid. She and her husband were having a difficult time conceiving, so she had asked Ma for help. Ma prescribed acorns, basil, and fennel. I put the appropriate amounts of each into the mortar and ground them
with the pestle, charging them with all the fertility energy I could possibly muster. Then I put the mixture into a small cloth pouch and set it aside. Next, I had to make a tea for Caer who had caught a bit of a spring cold. For that, Ma had prescribed a tea of chamomile, hyssop, echinacea, and just a touch of Golden seal. After wiping our mortar, I put the prescribed amount of each of these herbs into it and, concentrating on healing energies, I ground them into a coarse powder before putting them into a pouch. Looking around the room, I saw that the rest of the remedies had to be done by Ma, so I took the two pouches and headed toward Brid's house.

Upon arrival, I saw that Brid was out in her front yard, hanging out her washing.

"Good morning, Brid. I have your tea for you," I called out to her. She looked up and smiled at me before answering.

"Ah, good morning to you too, Caolainn. Is your mother well?"

"Yes, she's fine. She is just meditating today, so I decided to deliver this for her."

"Oh, that's right. It's time for her and Taliesin to release their parents, isn't it?" she asked, with sudden understanding and concern.

"Yes. I believe they are doing the ritual tonight. I know it will be very hard for both of them, but they must endure it to heal and to let their parents go on. She is trying to prepare herself to let them go."

"Give her my love for me. I'll be sure to let her know if the tea works." She smiled suggestively and then went back to her washing. I left her and went to Caer's house. She was in bed, but her son let me into the house. Instantly, my senses came awake and I began assimilating everything I could about her. Her color was not good and she was very weak. Also, her personal energy level was alarmingly low. I kneeled at her bedside and gently ran my hands over her body, searching for the main blockage. Finally, I found it right over her heart. Understanding dawned on me.

"Caer, you miss your husband and sons, don't you?" I asked her gently. Her weary eyes met mine and filled with tears. She silently nodded. I began trying to pull the sorrow out of her heart. Gradually, I was able to remove most of it from her, but I couldn't remove it all. That would only happen when her family returned to her. After removing the blockage, I ran my hands along her body, reinstating the normal flow of energy. Once that was done, I could see her color improving. She looked at me in amazement as she felt the change herself.
“You are as good as your mother. You are going to make an incredible healer when you finish growing. Thank you, Caolainn. I’m feeling better already,” she said gratefully, reaching out to hug me. I hugged her back before standing.

“I have your tea, Caer. Ma says to take it three times a day, and to let it brew for at least fifteen minutes each time. You should feel much better in a few days. You should even be able to go to the Beltain ritual. Ma says it should be a good one.” I gave the pouch to her daughter who went to brew a cup for her.

“Where is your mother? She usually makes her deliveries herself.”

“She is meditating today, I’m trying to make sure that nothing disturbs her. If you want, I can ask her to come see you tomorrow.”

“No, I’ll be fine. I was just worried about her. Isn’t it about time for her and Taliesin to do the Ancestral rites?”

“Yes. They are doing it tonight.” Sympathy filled her eyes.

“Tell her my thoughts are with her.”

“I will. You concentrate on getting better. Try grounding and centering. Then work on recharging yourself. Your energies are very low right now.” She smiled and nodded as I turned to leave. After Leaving Caer, I decided to go see Michael. I figured that our times alone together would be severely limited until our Handfasting. Maybe we could still catch a few moments of privacy before the whole village heard about our plans.

I went to his house and found him outside repairing a fence. He stopped working when he saw me approach. Then he smiled at me and my heart nearly stopped at the sight. I still got all flustered when I saw his smile. It was one of the first things that attracted me to him.

“Good morning, my love. How are you this fine day?” he asked as I came near. I blushed at the intimacy his voice held.

“I’m well. And how are you?”

“I’m a little tired this morning. I couldn’t sleep for thoughts of our first time alone together. I can’t wait until I can take you out into our little house and have you all to myself.” A little shiver ran up my spine at the lust and desire I heard in his voice. To tell the truth, I felt exactly the same way, I was just a little more shy than he was. He laughed as my blush deepened. Then he took my hand and lead me into the fields behind his house. We walked for a while before we came to a small
house surrounded by a small grove of trees.

"This will be your new home. I have already repaired the roof and made it fit for a beautiful lady like you." It was beautiful! The tiny house was just big enough for the two of us. It was secluded enough that we would have all the privacy a newlywed couple needs. We opened the door and I saw a huge bed in the middle of the room. Instantly, I was filled with a desire I had never felt before. He saw my eyes flare and smiled.

"I thought you might like to see what is in store for you." I was totally lost in my own thoughts. The things that filled my head made my blush again. Michael again laughed as he saw the lust in my gaze.

"I see you've talked to Taliesin." His comment startled me out of my reverie and I looked at him.

"Yes. He and I talked last night after you left. Frankly, I can't wait to try a few of the things he told me about. It seems like such a long time till Beltain, even though it is only a few days away.”

"I know. It seems like I have to wait forever to finally have you in my arms as my wife." He wrapped his arms around me and gently nuzzled my neck and ear. Again, I was flooded by new and exciting feelings. Finally, I had to step away from him.

"Michael, behave yourself. We will have plenty of time later. Right now, I have to go check on Ma. When I left, she was meditating at her altar. She and Taliesin are doing the final ritual for their parents tonight. I have to make sure that Miacb doesn't disturb her. I hope she will start healing after tonight. Maybe when she finally lets go of her parents she will be able to let go of her grief as well.”

"Give her my love. I hope she and Taliesin will be well tonight." As he spoke, we began walking back to his house. Just before we got to his yard, I turned to leave. I hugged him and, for some reason, I felt compelled to gently bite his neck. A low growl arose from his throat as he stepped away from me.

"You behave yourself, too, my love, or I might just have to forget that we aren't married yet and take you to our house and make you mine right now.” I looked at him in surprised and secret delight. Uncle Taliesin was right. I would have to remember that for later. After a quick kiss, I started home. When I arrived, Ma was still in her apothecary, so I began washing the dishes from
breakfast. I basically spent the rest of the day putting around the house, sweeping the floors, tidying the kitchen. Miach returned from playing with the village boys a few hours later.

"Where's Ma?" he asked, puzzled at finding her gone.

"She's in the apothecary meditating. She's been out there for a while now. I went ahead and delivered her remedies to her patients this morning. We should just leave her alone until she comes back on her own. She has a lot on her mind today." His young eyes filled with sorrow as he was finally able to connect with her on a subconscious level. He felt her sadness and struggle, and I could see him struggle with his overwhelming desire to save her from all her pain. Even as young as he was, he understood that this was something she had to do for herself. Once he came to terms with the situation, the sadness in his eyes cleared a little.

"Can I go for a walk with the other boys?"

"Where are you going?"

"We're just gonna wander around in the hills for a while."

"All right, just stay away from the Rock today. Ma and Taliesin don't need you disrupting the energies up there. They are doing the ritual tonight, so they need all the peace and calm they can get."

"All right, Caolainn. I promise we'll stay away from Cashel. So I can go?" He looked up at me with such youthful hopefulness that I had to chuckle.

"Go on with you, then! Just be sure to come back by dinner. I won't have time to come find you tonight."

"Thanks, Caolainn!" He scampered out of the house, calling to his friends as he went. Sometimes he made me feel so old. I could remember being that young, once. I truly enjoyed the skills that Ma was teaching me. I loved healing people and helping them to bring babies into the world. I just wished that Father would come back, so that I could concentrate on my studies a little more and chores a little less. Ma had basically split his responsibilities between us because Miach was simply too young for most of them. We had been letting him take on a few as he got older, but the bulk still fell to me and Ma. I knew that once he returned, if he returned, Ma would be a lot happier and we would all have a little more time to be a family again. The thought that he would not be there for my Handfasting made me supremely sad. Since I was a little girl, I had dreamed about having him at my first Handfasting. Sighing, I put away the broom I had been using and I went
outside to think. Walking toward the Rock of Cashel, the holy place for our village, I found a sunny
spot covered with grass and wildflowers. I settled onto the ground and sat gazing at the great rocky
bluff that was the Rock.

As I sat, half in meditation, I suddenly felt someone watching me. I looked over my shoulder
and saw a beautiful woman in flowing white robes standing behind me. Immediately, I recognized
her. She was Cyhiraeth, a water Goddess, and the deity I looked to most when I needed guidance.
She only came to me when I truly needed her.

“Good day, Lady. What message do you have for me?” I asked with the utmost respect. She
smiled and gestured to the Rock in front of me. I looked away from her and immediately became lost
in a vision. I could see the battles taking place elsewhere. Then I saw my Father, badly wounded,
but alive. The sight both disturbed and comforted me. I opened my mind and let her tell me what it
was that I needed to know. I heard her voice on the wind, almost inside my head.

“Do not be afraid of what I have shown you. He will be fine, for I have shown you the
future. He will be home in time for your Handfasting. I would never allow him to miss such a
special day in your life. The clan wars are reaching their end for the time being. He is only a day of
two away from here. I will make sure that he is back in time. I want you to meditate today, for your
mother will need your help tonight. You must be fully charged and focused when she leaves you
tonight. Be prepared. Blessed be, Caolainn.” She touched my hair lovingly and then faded away
again, leaving me to assimilate and understand all that she had told me. I sat perfectly still for a long
while, simply thinking about the vision I had just had. It didn’t frighten me. In fact, I had them
fairly regularly. I then heeded her advice and began drawing energy from the earth. After absorbing
this energy until I could take no more into my body, I stood and concentrated on drawing down the
energy of the sun and letting it flow through my body. Standing with my arms outstretched and my
head thrown back, I could feel the energy of the Goddess coursing through my body. Finally, I
grounded the energy that I didn’t need and began walking back home.

By the time, I arrived home, the sun was starting to set. With a start, I realized that Ma
was still in the apothecary. I hurried inside to prepare something for dinner. I ended up simply
reheating some of the gruel left over from breakfast. Miach would probably complain, but he would
live. I also set a bucket of water on the stove to heat. I knew that Ma would want to take a
ceremonial bath before she dressed for the ritual. Just as I was setting the gruel on the table, Ma
came into the house. She was much calmer than she had been in months. She was also more focused than I had seen her in quite a while. She moved as though she was in a dream, each motion very slow, deliberate, and graceful. Even Miach bursting loudly into the house didn't break her mood.

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I finally awoke from my meditation, surprised to see that the sun was rapidly setting. I had lost all track of time. Finally, I had the clarity that I had been desperately craving since my parents were killed. While I was under the trance, I was able to travel on the astral plane and speak with my ancestors. I spoke with my grandparents and their grandparents. I spoke with ancestors that I had only heard on in family myths. They all gave me advice and support. All reinforced what I already knew. My parents wanted to be freed from their obligations on this plane. It was time to let them go. I also knew that I could still contact them just as I had contacted my other ancestors any time I needed them. A sense of peace and tranquility descended upon my previously grief-racked soul. As I stood to leave the apothecary, I could feel the presence of the blood of my ancestors in my body. For the first time in months, I knew exactly who I was, where I came from, where I was going. It was time to get on with my life. I walked into the house to find Caolainn preparing some left over gruel for a quick dinner. She knew that I would not be eating with them, so she had only set two bowls out on the table. As I watched her move, I became aware of a new sense of peace in her as well. I was just about to ask her about it when Miach came dashing through the front door. Not even his exuberance was able to shake this sense of calm that had come over me. I knew finally that I was ready to perform the ritual with Taliesin. I gathered my sacred purple robe and the few pieces of jewelry that I wore only in ritual. I was just turning to start my bath water when Caolainn silently held out the bucket of warm water to me. I gratefully took it and retired once again to my apothecary. Once there, I took the special herbal soap that I used to bathe and purify myself before ritual from my altar. Then I carefully bathed my entire body, dipping water from the bucket and pouring it over my skin. As I washed my body, I purified my mind as well. When I felt that I had thoroughly cleansed myself, I put on the robe and settled the silver and amethyst pendant over my shoulders. I could instantly feel the love emanating from the pendant. Taliesin had made this necklace for me in his travels through the world. I smiled as his energies enveloped me like a warm hug. Then I fastened the hammered silver torque that Mael had designed and made for me, over my
right wrist. As I straightened the robe about my body, I felt that I was finally truly in the right mindset to perform this ritual tonight.

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Miach stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Ma and how she was behaving. He gave me a very frightened look as his young mind struggled to understand what exactly was going on here.

"Miach," I said quietly, "Everything is well. Ma is just very focused on the ritual tonight. There is nothing wrong with her." He visibly relaxed when he heard this, though he still watched her carefully. I honestly don't think she even really noticed that he was there. She had turned herself entirely inward in order to start her own healing process. We watched her walk out the door again after I had given her the water I heated. She would be fine. Miach snapped out of his reverie when she closed the door behind her. We sat down to a quiet and hasty meal. Miach seemed to be much more relaxed by the time we had finished eating. I think he just finally worked things out in his mind so that he understood all of the undercurrents he was feeling. I could see that he was starting to get in tune with Ma and me. It didn't surprise me when he felt his creative energies stirring.

"Caolainn, I want to work on my knotwork."

"I'll get you the ink and paper. Just sit here at the table. I'll be right back." Father had started teaching Miach about leatherworking and knotwork before he left. Miach had developed his technique in his knot work very well despite having no teacher for so long. I returned to him and put the supplies in front of him. I had barely moved away from him before he began drawing. I felt my creative muse speaking to me as well, so I took up my harp and began playing. I had no real tune in mind when I started, but my absent strumming soon developed into a hauntingly bitter sweet melody. Even Miach stopped drawing to listen for a moment. As I played, my earlier vision began sorting itself out in my mind. I started to understand all that the Goddess had told me. I also felt very connected to Ma and Uncle Taliesin as they started their ritual up on the Rock of Cashel.

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I walked slowly toward the rock, deep in thought about the ritual Taliesin and I were about to perform. As I got closer, I could feel him even though I couldn't see him. Then I saw the fire he had lit in the center of our normal ritual area. He was standing in front of the fire, arms upraised. I could tell that he was using the energy in the fire to recharge himself in preparation for the ritual. I walked quietly up the path and stood just outside the circle of light that the fire cast. In a moment,
I saw him draw the energy within himself and break from his trance. He then turned to where I stood in the dark.

"Hello, Sis. Are you ready to do this?" He walked toward me and we embraced.

"Yes. Are you?" I stepped back and looked directly into his eyes as I asked this. His eyes were clear and steady.

"It's time to release them and start our own healing processes. Let's get started." I nodded and walked toward the fire. Starting in the north, I withdrew my sacred knife from the sheath on my belt and began casting the circle. As I walked deosil, or sunwise, around the circle, I envisioned a beam of energy delineating the circle as I cast it. Taliesin took some burning sage and followed me around the circle, purifying the space. Then we blew the smoke over each other, purifying ourselves before we stepped into the circle. I again walked to the north and faced out of the circle.

Holding my arms outstretched above my head, I called out, "Guardians of the watchtowers of the North, keepers of Earth. Lend us your guidance and support on this most important of nights. Welcome!" Slowly, I walked to the East.

"Hail Guardians of the Watchtowers of the East, keepers of Air. Help us to keep our minds clear as we honor our parents this night. Welcome!" I continued around the circle to the south.

"Hail Guardians of the Watchtowers of the South, keepers of fire. Fill us with your warming light, passion, and courage this night. Welcome!" I walked to the West.

"Hail Guardians of the Watchtowers of the West, keepers of water. Lend us your healing powers and help us keep our emotions in control in this very difficult ritual tonight. Welcome!" Finally, I completed the circle and joined Taliesin in the center. Again, I raised my arms and voice.

"Welcome Goddess, mother of us all. Help us to properly honor our parents and set them free this night. Guide us as we undertake our journey to healing and wholeness. We welcome thee!"

Taliesin raised his arms and called out, "Welcome God, father of all. Help us this night to set our parents on their long awaited freedom. We welcome thee!" We both stood silent for a moment, our voices echoing off the hills. After a moment, we could both feel the Lord and the Lady arrive in the circle. Next it was time to invite our parents into the circle with us.

Taking a deep breath, I called to my mother, "Mother, come be with us this night. Help us
to understand all that you want us to know before you depart from us. Be with us, your children, once more before we release you from your obligations here.” Tears silently streamed down my cheeks as I felt her presence beside me. I could barely see her, but I knew she was there.

Taliesin called out, “Father, be with us tonight. Help us to understand all that you would have us know before you too are released to other things. Be with us, your children, once more this night.” His voice broke slightly as he finished his invocation. Shortly thereafter, we could feel our father’s presence. For a moment, both of us could do nothing but cry and look at our parents’ spirits. This was the final step in accepting their death. This was in essence the entire purpose of the ritual. By allowing us to see them in spirit form, we were forced to accept that we must turn them loose to their next lives. I became aware of my mother’s voice in my head. I cleared my mind and sat down, facing west to listen to her.

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“Sequana! Come quick! Arianrhod is having her baby!” I was broken from my musical reverie by the near hysterical voice of Brid as she came running into the house. I looked up from my harp and quickly refocused my thoughts. As she stood, panting, I put my harp away and began trying to piece together the situation.

“Calm down, Brid. Ma’s not here now, tell me what happened,” I said soothingly. I could see her visibly trying to bring herself under control. Finally, she took a deep breath and looked at me.

“Arianrhod is having her baby. She sent me to find Sequana because it is almost time now.” Panic filled me, but I tried desperately not to show it. Arianrhod was not due until well after Beltain. This early, there could be severe complications. Quickly, I grabbed Ma’s bag and ran out the door with Miach and Brid close on my heels. Within a few moments, we were outside Arianrhod’s door. I could hear her anguished screams as her labor progressed. Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I brought to mind all that Ma had taught me about midwifery. I could at least help her until Ma arrived. Motioning for Brid and Miach to stay outside, I went through the door and straight to Arianrhod’s side. She was sweating, and I could see the panic and pain in her eyes. She knew that there was something wrong. She knew that her baby was not supposed to come until after Beltain, at least a few weeks after Beltain.

“Arianrhod, it’s Caolainn. Ma is in ritual right now, but I’m here to help you. Everything will be fine.” I spoke calmly and soothingly to her as I began examining her. I could tell from the
way that her belly was bulging that the baby was not in the right position to be born. I could also tell that she was going to give birth within a matter of hours. She was very far along in her labor. Looking into her frightened eyes, I smiled at her and wiped her face with a wet cloth. I could see her fear starting to subside. Then another contraction hit. Her whole body tensed, and she screamed in agony. I held her hand and tried to reassure her until the pain had again passed. Then I quietly went to the door and slipped outside.

"Miach, you have to get Ma. I will not be able to deliver Arianrhod’s baby by myself. Just tell her that she must come immediately. I will try to ease Arianrhod’s pain until Ma gets here. Run, run!" I told him. He took off across the fields for the Rock. Brid looked at me and started to cry.

"No. You have to pull yourself together. I’m going to need your help until Ma can get here. Everything will be well, but we have to work together. Now, Arianrhod needs us," I told Brid sternly before going back into the house. After a moment, she followed me, and we both tried to keep Arianrhod as comfortable as possible. We talked to her and told her stories, all the myths and legends she had heard since she was a child. It all helped to keep her from panicking. Brid and I would alternately hold her hands and wipe were face. When the contractions came, we would try to comfort her and help her through them. Silently, I hoped Miach would hurry. I knew that the situation would become critical in a very short period of time. If Ma didn’t get here soon, both Arianrhod and the baby could die. I tried to keep the worry from my eyes, but Brid saw it and reflected it in her eyes as well. We both resolved to just wait and do all we could.

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I was deep in meditation when Ma started to back away from me.

"Wait!" I cried out, "Don’t go!" She smiled at me and stopped moving.

"Sequana, I must go. You are needed elsewhere now. We will talk again. Do not fear...you will never be alone. Whenever you need me, I will always be here. Now, you must take care of Arianrhod. She needs you...." She faded into nothingness, but I could still feel her presence in my heart. Then her last words registered. Arianrhod, I thought to myself, she isn’t due for at least another few weeks. Confusion filled my mind until Miach’s approach broke through.

"Ma! Ma! You have to come now! Arianrhod is having her baby! Caolainn says it’s an emergency!" he yelled as he came charging up the hill to where Taliesin and I were. By this time,
Taliesin had also returned from meditation. As soon as I understood Miach’s words, I took off at a
dead run for Arianrhod’s house with Taliesin and Miach right behind me.

As I approached the house, I could feel the fear and pain in the air. I knew that Arianrhod
was starting to panic. Opening the door, I immediately took stock of the situation. Arianrhod
was in the middle of a contraction, Caolainn was bathing her face with a cool cloth, and Brid was holding
her hand, trying to calm and reassure her. Once the contraction was over, everyone looked at me
expectantly.

“Arianrhod, your child is obviously a bit impatient. He wants to be here for Beltain.” The
whole room visibly relaxed when they heard my calm, light-hearted tone. Caolainn stepped back
from the bed and handed me my bag. I quickly examined Arianrhod and discovered that she was
ready to have this baby. Then I realized that the baby had not turned. I reached into my bag and
pulled out a small bottle of herbal tincture.

“Here, this will help ease your pain,” I said gently as I placed a few drops onto her tongue.
Then I gave her a cup of water to wash the medicine down. Next, I probed her belly to see exactly
how the baby was positioned.

“Arianrhod, your baby has not turned all the way. I will have to help it.” The medicine was
already starting to take effect. She looked at me calmly and nodded. I began pushing on her belly
and manipulating the baby. Finally, I had the child turned the correct way.

“Now it is time for you to push.” Both Brid and Caolainn took her hands and helped to
steady her. Then she began pushing. After many cycles of pushing and resting, the head was finally
out of her body. I cradled the infant’s head in my hands while Arianrhod rested.

“One more time, Arianrhod, and this baby will finally be born and we can all get some
sleep!” She smiled at my joke and steeled herself for the last push. With a mighty shove, and a
blood curdling scream, the baby slid out into my hands and began crying. We all cheered at the lusty
wails of the infant. I handed the baby to Caolainn and then dealt with the afterbirth. Caolainn
after cleaning the baby and wrapping it in a blanket, gave it to its mother.

“Congratulations, Arianrhod. You have a beautiful baby girl,” Caolainn said softly.
Arianrhod’s eyes filled with tears as she gazed upon her daughter for the first time. I quietly
examined both mother and baby and, finding them both healthy, Caolainn and I slipped out into the
darkness. Taliesin, Miach, and a man I did not know were waiting for us.
“Is everything well?” asked Taliesin.

“Yes, both mother and daughter are fine.” I turned to the stranger.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t recall seeing you before,” I said to him.

“I’m a traveling missionary on my way to see the nobleman of this land. I heard that there was a woman in labor and I came to see if I could help. I heard that she might lose the baby so I thought I could at least pray over them.” A tingle of panic ran up my spine. There was something about this man that I did not like. I felt that he had ulterior motives, but I could not discern what they were.

“Thank you for your kindness. The Goddess has safely delivered another child to us, albeit a bit early. They are both healthy and resting comfortably.” He looked at me a moment more, and then bowed slightly and bid us good night as he walked into the shadows. I frowned as I tried to figure out why I was afraid. Taliesin saw the frown cross my face and concern filled his eyes.

“What is it, Sis?” He put an arm around me.

“I don’t know. There is just something about him that makes me uneasy. Perhaps I am just tired.” I put aside my fears and went home to sleep.

The next morning, I was still a bit perplexed about the missionary. My questions were all answered when a strange man on horseback arrived shortly after breakfast. Miach and Caolainn had gone to the lake to bathe, so I was alone. I took a knife from the kitchen and tucked it into the waist of my skirt. Then I went out to greet the stranger.

“Good day, my lady. Are you Sequana McCairbre?” he called to me as I opened the door. Cautiously, I answered, “Yes, I am. And who might you be?”

“I am a messenger with a message from the Duke.” Puzzled, I stepped forward to accept the scroll of paper he extended to me. When I took it, he bowed slightly and rode off. I watched him go with a sense of foreboding. Then I opened the scroll and began reading.

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Miach and I were just returning from the lake when we saw a strange rider go past us, leaving our house. Both of us quickened our pace. Strange riders were very rarely good news here. At first, I thought it was news of Father’s death, but then I remembered the vision I had. We saw Ma open a scroll and start to read it just as we entered the yard. Anger quickly overtook her features and she threw the scroll to the ground in disgust.
“What is it, Ma?” I asked, Miach silent beside me.

“It seems that the Christians have decided to tell us who is and who is not a healer. The Duke has just sent a message telling me that I am not allowed to help people because I do not have a license from the church. Now, not only do the Christians want to tell us who to worship and when to do it, they want to tell us who can and can not make us well when we get sick. The Christians can go hang! The Goddess gave me the gift to heal, and by the gods all mighty, I’m going to use it.” With that, she stormed into the house, slamming the door behind her. I picked up the scroll from where she had flung it and began to read it myself. The scroll did indeed tell her that she was not allowed to practice midwifery unless she had a license, which required two years and more money than we had to get. In addition, it stated that she would be excommunicated from the church for breaking this law. The most chilling was the next section. It said that she would be arrested and tried if she ever did it again, with the most likely punishment begin death by hanging. My heart froze. I knew she would never stop helping people. That meant that it would only be a matter of time before she was caught again. Panic filled me. There was nothing I could do. Gods, I wish Father were here, I thought desperately, At least he would be able protect her from them if they tried to arrest her. Tears filled my eyes as helplessness overwhelmed me.

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How dare they! I thought to myself, How dare those damned people tell me that I cannot do what the Goddess put me here to do! I stormed around the house, cleaning and straightening furiously, as I am wont to do when I am upset. After a while, my ire cooled and I began to think rationally again. I knew what the penalty was for breaking this law twice. I really didn’t care that I had been excommunicated from their church. As far as I was concerned, I had never been a member in the first place. What worried me was the possibility that they would come back. I really wished that Mael would come home. I really needed his support and help at that point. Sighing, I finished sweeping the floor and put away the broom. Miach came bursting into the room, full of energy and excitement.

“Ma! Father’s home! Father’s home!” After a moment, I realized what he had said. I flew out the door in time to see a group of men on horseback approaching. As they came closer, I began to recognize the men. The whole group stopped in the yard and began to dismount. Then I saw them take Mael off of a horse and carry him toward the house. Fear and panic threatened to
overtake me. Instead, I ran ahead of them and cleared the table so they could lay him on it.

"Sequana, he's still alive. He's badly hurt, but, if anyone can heal him, you can," one of the men said gently to me before leaving. I heard all of them ride off as I began examining him. He was awake, but only barely.

"Sequana. I made it home." Tears filled my eyes as I saw his whole body relax. Then I saw him breathe again and realized that he was still alive. Hastily wiping away my tears, I started removing his mud and blood soaked clothing. Finally, I had him skyclad on the table. I could see vicious sword cuts and wounds from arrows. He was bleeding heavily, but it looked like the wounds were pretty clean. Quickly, I began washing and dressing his wounds with a poultice that would help him heal faster. Then I bandaged them and wrapped him in a cloak. When he awoke, I fed him some gruel and some water. Then I started trying to increase his personal energy levels. I placed my hands on his body and concentrated on making him healthy and whole again. When I felt him start to respond, I increased my efforts. Just before I was about to drop from exhaustion, I felt his energy level rise and stay up. He opened his eyes and smiled at me.

"Do you think you could walk if I helped you? I can't carry you by myself. I need to get you into bed." He leered at me.

"Gods, Sequana, you might let me heal before you do any damage to me yourself." I rolled my eyes and began lifting him off the table.

"You'll be just fine with a little rest." Slowly, we were able to get him to bed. I got him tucked into the blankets and lay down next to him. Carefully, I wrapped my arms around him and held him tightly. I closed my eyes and just listened to his breathing and his heartbeat for the first time in what seemed like forever. A few moments later, I felt him turn his head and kiss me on the top of my head before he drifted off to sleep. I stayed with him until I heard his breathing level out and get deeper. Then I heard his heartbeat slow down and his muscles relaxed. Rising silently, I leaned over him and kissed him gently on the forehead before I left him sleeping peacefully. I would have loved to have stayed with him longer, but I had so much to do to get ready for the Handfasting.

I couldn't believe it when I saw Father being carried into the house by the other men. Miach and I were both terrified when we saw how badly wounded he was, but then I remembered my vision, and I knew that Ma would nurse him back to health. Miach and I stood out of the way while Ma
undressed him and took care of his wounds.

“Come, Miach. Let’s go for a walk,” I whispered to him. Confusion filled his young eyes.

“Why? I want to see Father,” he wailed. I hurriedly quieted him and took him out the front door. Once outside, I kneeled in front of him and hugged him. Then I pulled back and looked into his eyes.

“Father will be fine. We just need to give Ma some time and space to help him. She needs to concentrate on him instead of us right now. We’ll go for a walk and give her some time alone with him. Then we’ll come back and he’ll be feeling better. We can’t talk to him right now anyway because he is asleep.” I could see that I still hadn’t convinced him. I knew how bad the wounds looked to his untrained eyes, and I knew it was very upsetting to see his Father so badly hurt.

“Miach, I’m going to tell you something I haven’t even told Ma yet.” His eyes widened as he realized what I was telling him.

“I got a vision from Cyhirael. She showed me how badly hurt Father was before he ever came home. She also told me that he would be just fine once Ma got a chance to heal him. Now we have to let her work without any distractions. Let’s just walk for a while.” He relaxed and nodded at me. We then walked out into the fields and just wandered for a while. As we walked, I thought. I knew that Father would be well by the time I was to be Handfasted. I also knew that he was going to be very upset when he found out about the trouble the Christians were causing Ma. All of us were going to have to keep him from attacking them in defense of her. I sighed as I realized exactly how difficult it would be to do that, but I also knew that we simply had to do it to keep him home with us. It never occurred to me that the Christians might come back to check on Ma.

Once I had gotten Mael settled, I realized that Caolainn and Miach had disappeared. I sent a silent thought of thanks to them for their understanding. I decided to take the time I had been given to check on my patients before Mael awoke. I grabbed my bag and headed for Eileen’s house as I had severely neglected them in the chaos of the past few days. I felt guilty about it, but I also knew that if there had been a problem, someone would have sent for me. I knocked on the door and waited for permission to enter.

“Come in, please. I have my hands full at the moment.” I heard Eileen’s voice through the door followed by the cry of an infant. Opening the door, I almost burst into laughter. Eileen had the
baby in a shallow tub of water, trying to bathe him. I don’t know who was wetter and soapier, her or
the baby. She had soap suds on her face, in her hair, covering her tunic. The baby was not at all
happy about being washed. I quickly went over to her to help. After much wrestling and splashing,
we were finally able to get him bathed, dried, and dressed. Once she had put the baby in his bed, I
wiped my hands on my skirts and took the tub of water outside to dump it out. When I returned,
Eileen was sitting in a chair with an exhausted smile on her face.

“Well, I see that you are both doing well. He is strong little fellow, isn’t he?” I asked her
with a smile. She laughed and nodded at me.

“That he definitely is. He is already keeping me on my toes.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m just tired, but that’s normal. Other than that, I feel fine. The soreness I felt the day
after his birth is gone. My energies are still a little low, but they are already returning to normal. I
think I’ll be fine.”

“Just the same, I’d like to examine you both just to be safe. I know I haven’t been back
when I said I would be, so I just want to be sure that you are both well.” When she nodded, I rose
and put my hands on her shoulders. Slowly, I moved my hands over her body, feeling for any
problems or abnormalities. After a few moments, I was satisfied that there were none.

“You are fine. I don’t feel anything out of the ordinary.” Then I went to the baby and gently
ran my hands over him as well. Again, I found nothing to be concerned about. Both mother and baby
seemed to be doing fine, despite my neglect.

“Well, Eileen, you both seem to be fine. You know where I am if you need me. Now I have
to go check on Arnothod and her baby. Had you heard that she had a daughter last night?”

“No, I hadn’t heard yet. She was awfully early, wasn’t she? Are they both well?”

“Both were fine last night after the birth. The baby was not turned at first, so Caolainn had
to come get me to help with the birth. She did very well until I got there. I’m proud of her.”

“You’ve trained her well. She will be a great help to you, now that Mael is home. Aaron
told me that he was badly injured.”

“Where is Aaron? I would have thought that he would be here by now.”

“He was here briefly, but he wanted to check on the fields and the livestock before dusk.
He’ll be back in a bit. I hope that the little one will sleep for a while so we can have some time
alone.”

“I understand completely.” I took a small bottle out of my bag and handed it to her.

“Take this and give him a few drops on his tongue right before you feed him. By the time he has finished eating, he will be very sleepy. Once you put him to bed, he should sleep through the night. Just be sure to feed him as soon as you awake in the morning as he will have missed his night feedings.”

“Thank you, Sequana. I hope Mael will be well soon, and give my love to Arianrhod and her little one.”

Taking my leave of Eileen, I quickly walked to Arianrhod’s house. Again, the cried of an infant greeted me before I even reached the door. Just as I was about to knock, the cries were muffled and then stopped. Quietly, I opened the door and entered the house. Arianrhod was sitting in a chair with her daughter in her arms. As my eyes adjusted to the relative darkness in the house, I saw that she was feeding her baby. She looked up at me when I entered the house.

“Good day, Sequana,” she greeted me tiredly. I walked over to her and gently touched the baby as she contently sucked on her mother’s teat. Then I heard a slight sound and looked into the shadows to see Arianrhod’s husband Patrick seated at her feet, gazing with awe and wonder on his wife and new daughter.

“Hello, Patrick. It’s good to see you home again. I see you have met your daughter.”

“Hello, Sequana. How is Mael doing?”

“He is resting at the moment. I think he will be fine once his wounds heal. The wounds look pretty clean, so I think he will heal fairly quickly.”

“Good. Tell him that I am thinking of him.”

“I will. Now, let me examine Arianrhod and the little one.” I gently ran my hands over the baby, again looking for any problems. The little girl seemed a little weak, but she was doing well for her difficult birth. Arianrhod was also a bit weak, and I felt a little pain in her chest.

“Arianrhod, have you been coughing?”

“I’ve had a bit of a cough lately, but nothing too bad.” I gave her some dry tea out of my bag.

“I want you to brew a cup of this three times a day until you stop coughing. You need to be careful right now because your energies are very low due to the birth. Make sure you wrap yourself warmly in the night and early mornings.” I again ran my hands over her body, this time feeling only
came from the birth. Concentrating, I removed as much of the pain as I could from her lower body and back. Then I put pure healing energy back into her body to raise her energy levels.

When I finally removed my hands, she said in absolute amazement, "Thank you, Seanna. I keep forgetting how powerful you truly are. I feel so much better now. The pain is almost entirely gone. Thank you!" She grasped my hands with her free one and squeezed them. Then she turned her attention back to her little one who was almost done eating. I quietly let myself out and left the newly reunited family to wonder at each other.

I wandered around the village, checking on all the people I had been neglecting for the last days. Caer's cold was getting better. She looked so much better since her husband had returned. In fact, my visit was extremely brief for that reason. Both she and her husband kept looking at each other with undisguised lust and longing the entire time I was there, so I decided to do a very quick examination and leave them to their reunion. I didn't even try to see Brid. I knew that she and her husband would be trying out the fertility tea Caolainn made for them. I also knew that she would be very unhappy with me if I interrupted them for anything over the next few days. I could feel the change in the village as I walked through it. Everyone was once again happy. Spring was starting to bloom everywhere. There were many children but no adults in the common areas. I could almost see the passionate reunions going on in all the houses in the area. Smiling at the thought, I went home to check on Mael.

Miach and I wandered until the sun began to set. Then we headed home, arriving just before dusk. We stopped outside the door, listening, to make sure that we wouldn't interrupt anything between Ma and Father. Hearing nothing from inside, Miach and I went in. Father was still asleep and Ma was not home yet. I sent Miach outside to take care of the animals while I started dinner. By the time I had almost finished dinner, Father was starting to awaken. I could hear him stir and then call for Ma. Quickly, I went to him.

"Father, it's Caolainn. Ma hasn't come back yet," I told him soothingly. He opened his eyes and looked at me. I could see him trying to reconcile the girl that I had been with the young woman I had become. He had been in the first group of men to leave the village, so he had been gone for about a year. I had grown and changed a lot in that time.
"Caolainn, I hardly recognize you. Tell me all about things. What has happened since I left? I've missed so much and I want to know everything." He patted the bed beside him. I sat next to him, just as I had when I was a child and sick or scared.

"A lot has happened, Father. Ma and Taliesin finally said farewell to their parents last night. They performed the ritual up on the Rock. Unfortunately, I had to interrupt her because Arianrhod had her baby last night and there were complications that I couldn't handle on my own. Ma has taught me so much about healing and midwifery. I have learned how to play the harp, and I have worked very hard on my singing and reading and writing." I was uncertain about how much I should tell him at first. I knew he still had a lot of healing to do before he was well. He saw the indecision in my eyes.

"What else are you not telling me?" he asked gently, raising a hand to stroke my hair as he did when I was little. I could never keep things from him when he looked at me like that.

"Father, I am engaged to be Handfasted on Beltain." He was unable to conceal his surprise and it was a moment before he answered.

"Who is the young man?"

"Michael Donovan. Ma and Taliesin have already met with Emer and agreed on all the arrangements. I'm so happy that you came home in time. Now you can be here for the ceremony. I was so worried that I was going to have to get Handfasted for the first time without you. I'm so glad you finally came home. I know Ma has missed you terribly, and Miach and I have, too." He looked deep into my eyes and frowned.

"There's more. What else aren't you telling me? I can see that you are greatly troubled by something. I'm home now; let me help."

"It's about Ma. She's in trouble. A stranger, a traveling missionary, came through last night. He heard that Arianrhod was having a difficult birth, so he came to help, so he said. He must have gone straight to the Duke because this morning a messenger arrived. Apparently, there is a new law that the Christians are trying to force us to obey. They say she has to have some sort of license in order to heal. They excommunicated her and they told her that if she continues to heal and practice midwifery, they will try her. The penalty for breaking the law a second time is death. I know she won't stop healing, so I don't know what to do." He sighed and then tried to rise off the bed. I pushed him back down.
"No, you can't get up yet. You are still sick. There is nothing you can do for her until you get well again. I didn't want to tell you because I knew you would want to charge to her rescue. I don't think they will even come back. We'll just have to be more careful around strangers. As long as they don't find out that she is still practicing, nothing will ever happen to her." Anger clouded his features, but he did lay down again.

"Damned bastards! First they tell us that our gods and goddesses are evil and how we must live and when we must celebrate their holidays. Now they tell us who they think the Goddess has blessed with the ability to heal." His voice was ragged with suppressed emotion.

"I know, Father, but there really isn't anything that we can do to stop them. They make all the laws of the land. They have all the control. We just have to be more cunning in order to outsmart them. I think everything will be fine in a short time. As soon as the missionary moves on and the Duke gets some other person to amuse himself with, he will forget all about us and the whole village of Coor. Once that happens, we can go back to living the way we want to live. Until then, we just have to be more careful." Just as I was finishing my sentence, I heard the room become quiet. Father and I both composed ourselves and began discussing plans for my upcoming Handfasting. Ma never knew what we had been discussing.

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I arrived home after Miach and Caolainn. Miach greeted me as I entered the yard. He was just finishing his evening chores. I went into the house and felt the tension immediately. At first I thought that Mael had gotten sicker in my absence. Then I realized that he and Caolainn were discussing my recent excommunication from the Christians' church. I don't think they knew I knew, but I couldn't mistake the fear and anger that they tried to hide from me. I went in to see Mael and check his wound. When I entered the room, I immediately went to Mael's side and removed the blankets from around him.

"Caolainn, will you help me check his poultries and wounds? I think it is time that you learned this side of healing as well. These are probably the worst wounds you have ever seen." She nodded and stood, ready to do as I said. I carefully removed the first dressing and poultices. The wound was an angry red, but the bleeding had finally stopped. I heard Caolainn gasp as she saw the gash in her father's abdomen.

"This looks a lot worse than it actually is. First, look to see if it is still bleeding." She
carefully examined the wound for signs of bleeding.

“No, it doesn’t look like it’s still bleeding.” She then looked to me for the next step.

“Now, look to see if there is anything in the wound. It could be an arrowhead or rocks or other things from the battlefield.” Again she examined the wound.

“There is nothing in it. It looks very clean.”

“Next, feel the skin around the wound to see if it is feverish. That will tell you if it is infected.” She gently probed around the wound. Though she tried almost desperately to be careful, Mael still winced when she hit several particularly sore spots.

“The skin does feel feverish, but not too bad. The infection has probably just started. A poultice to draw out the infection and help in the healing would be helpful, I think.” She stopped and looked at me uncertainly. She was waiting for some sign from me that she hadn’t overstepped her bounds. I was very proud of her. She had come up with exactly the same treatment that I intended to use. She really had learned a lot very quickly. She would make an incredible healer some day.

“Very good. That’s exactly what I thought. Now you know how to assess and treat battle wounds. Help me apply the new poultices and dressings.” She prepared the new poultices while I removed the rest of the old ones and checked each of his other wounds. Then we both very gently applied the new poultices and wrapped new bandages around them. While I was finishing with the last bandage, she went to get dinner on the table.

“How are you feeling, lover?” I asked Mael softly. In response, he reached up and pulled me onto the bed next to him. Then he engulfed me in a huge hug and a kiss that took my breath away. When I could breathe again, I pulled away from him and stood up.

“You are obviously feeling better. I’ll bring your dinner to you. You need a few more days of rest before you’re back to normal.”

“Does that mean you will help me stay in bed?” He leered at me as he said this. I laughed and then went to get his dinner for him. Caolainn had already put Miach’s dinner out for him, and he was eating hungrily as I entered the kitchen.

“There is Father’s dinner. I gave him mostly the broth from the stew with a little gruel mixed in. There’s also some bread there for him too, and some fresh water.” She pointed to the wooden tray on the table.
Thank you, Caolainn. I'll take it to him in a moment. Why don't you have your dinner and then go see Michael? You haven't seen him in a couple of days, have you?"

"Actually, I saw him briefly yesterday, but we haven't had any time to talk since we got engaged. We really need to discuss our vows." We both looked over at Miach who was still eating ravenously.

"Miach, why don't you go visit Uncle Taliesin tonight? Maybe he will teach you how to fight tomorrow. Would you like that?" Caolainn asked him, silently egging me on at the same time. I was trying to think of a way to get some privacy with my husband that night. This was perfect. I seriously doubted that Taliesin would be compañía around any of the men had just returned.

"That's a great idea. Caolainn, would you mind taking him over to Taliesin's after our dinner? Then we can finish putting together your Handfasting tomorrow. We only have tomorrow to get everything ready. Beltain is the next day."

"We'll leave right after dinner. Michael will write our vows tonight. Then I'll get up early and we can start the preparations for the feast." Nodding, I left the room to take in Ma's news. I wasn't sleeping at home that night. I hope Taliesin explained everything to her. She probably just wanted to give me some time to think. Hushand, I vowed. Coming quietly, I went to my husband and promptly shut everything else from my mind. I heard Miach and Caolainn leave a short while later. With them went, there was nothing to distract me from my reunion with my lover and mate after our year of separation. The rest of the evening passed in a haze of bliss and passion.

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Shortly after Ma went back in to see Father, Miach and I left the house. He was strangely silent as we walked.

"What is bothering you, Miach? You are awfully quiet."

"Is Father going to be all right?"

"Yes, he will be fine. Why are you so worried now?"

"Ma kept trying to get us to leave. Is it so she can heal Father some more?" Understanding dawned on me. With Father gone for so long, Miach had never learned anything about the relations..."
between a man and a woman.

Stifling a giggle, I answered him, “No, Miach. They just want to be alone. They have been apart for so long, and they have so much to talk about. They just don’t want to be disturbed tonight. Everything is exactly as it should be.” He still looked a little bewildered.

“But why do they need us to leave all night? They’ve talked with us around before. I wouldn’t have bothered them. I don’t understand why they wanted us to leave.”

“Miach, there are things you are still a bit too young to understand. You will just have to trust me when I tell you that everything is fine, and that they are just acting the way men and women are supposed to act when they have been separated for a long time. Now, hurry up. I still have to go to Michael’s and it is getting late.” He still looked unconvinced.

“Miach, if you are that worried, why don’t you talk to Uncle Taliesin about it? I’m sure he will explain things better than I can.” This seemed to reassure him, and he quickened his pace.

Soon we found ourselves at Taliesin’s front door. He answered immediately when I knocked. He didn’t look at all surprised to see us.

“I was wondering if you two would come tonight. I figured that your parents would want a little privacy. Come in, I’ve already prepared beds for you.” I looked shyly at the ground. Taliesin’s eyebrows shot up and he grinned at me.

“Unless of course you are not staying, Caolainn?” I blushed.

“No, Uncle Taliesin. Miach is staying with you tonight. I need to see Michael so that we can discuss our Handfasting.”

“So that’s what you are calling it these days,” he teased gently. Again I blushed. Miach just looked at us with comical frustration at being excluded. Uncle Taliesin turned to him and starting talking about their plans for the evening and the following day.

“Miach, what would you like to do tonight?”

“Teach me to juggle like you do!” Uncle Taliesin laughed at his enthusiasm.

“I’d be happy to teach you. What do you want to do tomorrow?”

“I want to learn how to fight like the older boys do.” Again, Uncle Taliesin chuckled.

“Then tomorrow we learn to fight. Why don’t you go in and make yourself at home. I need to talk to you sister for a moment.” Miach went into the house and left us. Uncle Taliesin then turned to me with a kind but teasing smile.
“So you and Michael are going to talk tonight?”

“Yes. We are going to write our vows.”

“Caolainn, you don’t have to pretend with me. I know what will go on between you two. Are you comfortable with it? Do you have any questions?” I smiled at his words.

“No, I think you explained everything when we talked. I know, though. Michael is so loving and gentle, I know he won’t hurt me. I’m not afraid of those feelings we talked about last time anymore. I really love him and I am ready to become intimate with him. I think you might have some very interesting questions from Michael, though. He wanted to know why we had to leave tonight. I tried to reassure him, but I don’t think he understands. I told him to ask you if he still had any questions.” Uncle Taliesin laughed heartily.

“I’ll take care of him. Besides, there are some things that have not made sense since those days. He may want to ask me about all the questions and curiosities in his mind. Does Sequana want me to watch him all day tomorrow?”

“I think that would be helpful. Ma and I have a lot to do tomorrow. The Handis are back in less than two days. Michael would probably be happier here with you than at home with us. No one will have time to even talk to him tomorrow. I think it would make him feel important. Would that be okay if you played with him.”

“I thought as much. I’ll keep him occupied tomorrow. Now you can alone, Michael will be waiting for you, and you don’t ever want to keep your man waiting for very long. We tend to get surly when we feel neglected.” He chuckled as I quickly turned my back and made my way to Michael’s house. As I neared his house, my heart almost stopped me in my tracks. After taking a few steadying breaths, I continued to the house and knocked on the door. Michael opened the door and motioned me to follow as he took my hand and lead me towards the little house that would be ours soon. A few moments later, we reached the house. Michael led me inside and lit a lantern. Then he turned to me and smiled.

“I was hoping you would come tonight,” he murmured in my ear. Then he wrapped his arms around me and held me tightly against his body. A warm shiver ran through my body as I snuggled into his embrace.

“Ma and Father need some time alone, so I took Miach over to Uncle Taliesin’s house. I told her that I would come here to write our vows, but I think she knew the truth.” He continued.
need to write our vows before we do anything else.” I pulled away from him and sat at the table. He sat across from me, and we started discussing our Handfasting. It didn’t take us long at all to agree on our vows. We discussed the rest of the ritual, making all of the decisions we were responsible for. As soon as we agreed on the last detail, Michael stood and walked behind me. Then he gently embraced me and began nibbling on my neck. We walked over to the bed and stretched out. Michael got up and extinguished the light. The rest of the night passed in a haze of new feelings and passions. By morning, Michael and I shared so many memories and secrets that I blushed whenever I thought about it. Uncle Taliesin had definitely explained things to me. I will definitely have to thank him later, I thought to myself as I walked home that next morning. Michael and I both agreed that I should leave early so as to avoid and comments that might be made about us in the village. Our behavior was perfectly acceptable by the social standards followed by everyone in the village, but we just didn’t want to start any rumors. Both of us had always been intensely private people, so we wanted to keep what we ha just shared to ourselves. Consequently, I left the little house just after dawn.

Instead of going straight home, I went to the lake first. I took advantage of the perfect calm and peace of the water to help me sort out all the new feelings I had running through me. I walked out into the lake and sank into the water. Letting the water simply flow around me was very soothing to me. I lost all track of time as I just floated there, the water supporting me and cradling me. My thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of the women coming down to the water to do their washing. Collecting my thoughts, I waded onto shore and got dressed.

“Good morning, Caolainn. How are you this morning?” Aidan called out to me.

“I’m well, and you?” I responded.

“All is well with me. Tomorrow is your big day, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Ma and I have so much to do today. I hope we will be able to get it all done.”

“If you need any help at all, you just let the rest of us know.” She gestured to the women around her. They all nodded in agreement before wishing me well. Bidding them all farewell, I made my way home. I approached the house cautiously, listening for any sounds that would tell me that Ma and Father needed more time alone. Hearing nothing, I walked into the house to find Ma already cooking breakfast. Then I saw Father sitting at the table.

“Good morning, you two. I wasn’t expecting you to be up and around yet, Father.” His
when he realized that I was just coming home, but he didn't comment about it.

"Good morning, Caolainn. I probably shouldn't be up yet, but I argued with her so much
that she finally gave in. I feel fine," he said, with a slight wince as he shifted a little. Ma
and I looked at each with bemused smiles.

"Hello, dear. Did you and Michael get everything worked out?"

"Yes, we agreed on our vows. We also decided which deities to invoke. Now, I need to see
started on the embroidery on the cloth we will use to bind our hands."

"Go look in my trunk. There is some cloth in there that should be the right color. I have
finished spinning some new thread, so you should have all the colors you need. Just look with my
spinning stuff. If there is anything you need that isn't there, look out in my apothecary. If you need
any help, just let me know."

"I will." I went into Ma's room and found a piece of green cloth that we absolutely needed.
I went a round some more tonight and sat down and sat down to start the time consuming process of
embroidering Michael's and my name into the cloth.

Caolainn came home with that characteristic glow of a young woman who had shared
intimacy with someone for the first time. I know Mael saw it too, but he didn't say anything. I was
proud of him for his restraint.

"Our little girl it growing up."

"Yes, she is. I can't believe she has changed so much since I left. I still find it hard to
believe that she is going to Handfasted tomorrow." Mael said in amazement. I chuckled and set his
breakfast in front of him. Then I sat down with him. We ate in silence, sharing secret smiles as
we recalled the memories we created the night before. When we finished, I cleared the table and
helped Mael back to bed. Then I settled next to him on the edge of the bed.

"Honey, we do need to discuss how we are going to perform the ritual tomorrow. I know that
it is a standard ritual, but we need to at least talk about it."

"I know. Are we splitting up the duties as we normally do?"

"Yes. I'll take all the regular High Priestess duties and you take the normal duties of the
High Priest. All we really need to discuss is how we are going to invoke the particular deities that
Michael and Caolainn want. We already have all the tools we need. She has a robe, as I'm sure he
does too. I think we should do the Maypole dance during the Feast. That would be appropriate,
don't you think?” We grinned mischievously at each other.

"Later today, we need to talk to Michael and Caolainn to see what changes they want to
make. We also need to find out exactly which deities they want invoked.” Mael’s eyes flared as he
reached up to me and pulled me down onto the bed next to him.

"Later,” he growled as he began covering my face with kisses. I resisted him for a moment
before finally giving in and letting him have his way with me, so to speak. It was quite a while before
I again emerged to check on Caolainn.

... I heard Ma and Father go off to their room, so I took my embroidering out into the field
around the house. Settling into a patch of wildflowers, I worked diligently. Finally, I finished the
tedious work and put the cloth aside. I rested for a moment, with the sun on my face. Sighing, I
started thinking about how my life would change the next day. A little fear crept into my thoughts,
but I pushed it aside. I knew that Michael and I loved each other and that the Goddess would
provide for us. I began looking at the flowers growing around me. Then I started collecting flowers
for the headwreath I would be weaving to wear during the ritual tomorrow. Once I had gathered
enough of them, I started very carefully braiding the stems of the flowers into a beautiful wreath.
Then I made streamers out of more flowers to attach to the back of the wreath. When it was all
done, it would encircle my head and then cascade down my back. As I wove the flowers, I again
fantasized about how my life would change after the ceremony tomorrow. After much time, I
realized that the wreath was almost done. Coming back from my thoughts, I finished the wreath and
then gathered it and the cloth and went home. Ma and Father were relatively quiet by the time I
arrived, so I decided to stay. I knew that it would take a lot of work to get all the food ready
tomorrow. I started on the bread for the ceremonial feast. Going into Ma’s apothecary, I found
freshly dried parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme and took them into the kitchen. Then I added them
to the bread dough, concentrating all the while on putting positive energy into the dough. This would
be the bread we ate during the ceremony, so it was important that I put all I could into it. Once that
was done, I started making the bread for the feast after the ceremony. It would take many loaves to
feed all the people in the village, so I had to bake it all today. There simply would not be time
Just as I got the first batch of bread into the oven, there was a knock on the door. Wiping my flour-covered hands on my apron, I went to open the door. Brid was standing there.

"Hello, Brid. How can I help you?"

"Actually, I wanted to help you. My husband and I wanted to give you a newly slaughtered cow for the feast tomorrow, as a gift for your Handfasting. If you accept, we would slaughter it tonight and cook it tomorrow for you." I was taken aback by the impromptu gift offer.

"Of course I will accept. I cannot thank you enough for the gift you have offered me!" I hugged her in thanks.

"I remember how difficult it is to get everything done before the ceremony. My mother’s first Handfast and her husband made the same offer to me the first time I got Handfasted, so I decided to continue the tradition with you. If you need anything, just shout. All of the women in the village are excited about this. We all want to help in any way we can."

"Thank you so much. I promise I will tell you if Ma and I need any more help. You have already helped tremendously." She hugged me again and then left. I closed the door, still a little in shock at her gift. A cow was worth a lot! I went to check on my bread. As I was closing the oven, another knock came at the door. I hurried to open it. Aidan was standing at my door this time.

"How are things coming, Caolainn?"

"Everything is going well. I have already finished my wreath and the cloth we will use to bind our hands. Brid and her husband just gave me a whole cow to be prepared by them before the feast tomorrow."

"Well, that’s why I’m here, too. My husband and I want to give you all of the fresh vegetables for the feast tomorrow. We have plenty to share with everyone. Of course, we will prepare them for you and bring them to the feast."

"Thank you! I can’t believe how generous everyone is being!" Aidan then bid me farewell and left. As I watched her go, I realized that the entire feast was finished. I had the bread baked, and the rest was being prepared by other women. I couldn’t believe how everything had worked out. I was still reeling when Ma came into the kitchen.

... 

When I finally left Mael, I found Caolainn standing in the doorway with an awed looked on her face.
"What is it, dear?"

"The whole feast is being given to us as a gift. We have nothing to do. I made the bread already, both the ceremonial and the loaves for the feast. Brid and her husband are giving us a whole cow, fully prepared, and Aidan and her husband are giving us all of the vegetables, also fully prepared. Uncle Taliesin said that he would give us the mead. That means that it is all done. I just can't believe that everyone is helping out like this."

"Why? You know how we all help each other around here. Everyone is just very happy for you. Now, what do we have left to do?"

"I have already made my wreath, and I've finished embroidering the cloth. I guess I should go try on the robe I will be wearing, so that I can make any alterations that are necessary."

"I'll go get it for you. You check on the bread." I went into my room and carefully withdrew the robe from my trunk. It was just as beautiful as I remembered. It was a rich brown, dyed with dye made from acorns. It had intricately embroidered knotwork all over it. The knotwork was done with bright blue-green thread. This robe had been in my family for generations. Each daughter had worn it on her first Handfasting. Now it was time to pass it on to Caolainn for her future children. When I returned to the kitchen, she was putting the last of the bread into the oven. All the rest of the loaves were cooling on almost every available surface.

"Here, try this on." She gasped when she saw the robe. I had forgotten that I'd never shown it to her before. I could see her eyes start to tear.

"None of that now. Just go try it on so we can see how it fits." She took it from my hands and went to put it on. A few moments later, she returned wearing the robe. This time, my eyes started to tear. She was absolutely beautiful! The robe perfectly accentuated her coloring and her natural curves.

"Michael will love it. You look so beautiful, honey! I think you are going to be one of the most gorgeous brides ever! It looks like it fits perfectly. How does it feel?"

"It feels wonderful. The cloth is so soft and it drapes so smoothly."

"How is the length?"

"It is fine, Ma. Everything is fine, perfect in fact. I'm so excited about tomorrow! It's going to be beautiful!" I hugged her and then sent her to take off the robe before anything spoiled it. While she was gone, I quickly dashed the tears from my eyes. My little girl was growing up! By the
time she returned again, I had composed myself.

"Why don't you go get Michael so that we can discuss the ritual and final details?"

"Just make sure that you wash the bread. I'll be back shortly." She all but ran out the door in excitement. I checked the last of the bread and then removed it to cool with the rest of a large loaf. I began wrapping the loaves that had already cooled in cloth to keep them from getting stale.

Very soon, Caolainn returned with Michael. We all went into Mael and Caolainn's room to discuss the upcoming Hamam ceremony. For the rest of the evening, with a short dinner break, we worked out all the detail of the upcoming ritual. Finally, everyone was ready.

"Caolainn, why don't you walk Michael home? Also, go over to Taliesin's house and check on Miach. I suspect that they were having so much fun that Taliesin just decided to keep them in as well. I don't want to assume." Michael and Caolainn left, and Mael and I went to bed. We knew we all had a very busy day ahead of us.

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Michael and I walked slowly toward his house. We idly chatted about whatever came to mind as we strolled under the stars above us. When we reached his house, we embraced and kissed each other passionately.

"Until tomorrow, my love," he whispered to me.

"Yes...tomorrow," I answered dreamily. I almost floated to Uncle Taliesin's house when I finally left Michael. Raucous male laughter greeted me as I approached the house. Apparently, they were still having fun. I opened the door to see both Uncle Taliesin and Miach wrestling on the floor. They stopped when they saw me.

"Hello, Caolainn. Was Sequana getting worried about the sprite?"

"She just wanted me to check on him. We didn't want you to have to take care of him tonight too."

"Well, I was going to keep him tonight anyway. We were just having so much fun, I didn't want to leave." Miach nodded enthusiastically.

"Can I stay with Uncle Taliesin? Please, Caolainn," he begged.

"All right. Just make sure you two are ready by the time the ceremony starts tomorrow. Uncle Taliesin, are you still providing the mead?"

"Of course I am! I would be a terrible uncle if I didn't!"
"Then I'll see you two tomorrow. I'm going home to bed. I have a feeling that I won't be sleeping much tomorrow night." Uncle Taliesin smiled slyly at me.

"So I assume that all went well last night? Do you have any questions for me?"

"No, you explained everything very well. Thank you. Now, I must sleep." Uncle Taliesin laughed as I left. I quickly made my way home and found Ma and Father already asleep. I got ready for bed and fell asleep almost immediately.

... 

Mael and I awoke before Caolainn. I made breakfast while Mael gathered all the tools we would need for the ceremony. Caolainn awoke soon after us. We all ate a very quick breakfast and then went our separate ways to make our own preparations. Mael and I sat silently, each meditating, to prepare ourselves to officiate the Handfasting. When we both felt ready, we stood and took our ritual baths, cleansing our bodies as we had just cleansed our minds. Then we both donned our ritual garb. By then, it was time to start preparing the ritual space. We began carrying the various things we would need for the ceremony out to the Rock. Just as we were about to leave, Taliesin and Miach arrived.

"Is there anything we can do to help, Sis?" Taliesin greeted us warmly.

"As a matter of fact, you could help us carry everything."

"Just tell me what to take."

Between Mael, Taliesin, and me, we were able to carry everything in one trip. Once on the Rock, Mael and I set up the altar. First we laid the altar cloth on it. Then we set the candles and other sacred objects in their places on the altar. Next we laid out the circle and identified each of the four directions.

"Taliesin, could you go announce that it is time?" He nodded and then headed for the village. I went to get Caolainn, and Mael went to get Michael. When we all returned, I cast the circle. They stood in the center while Mael and I purified the circle with sage and salt water. By the time this was done, the guests were starting to arrive. Meal and I took our places in the north of the circle. Mael took the ceremonial sword and challenged each person that wished to enter the circle. When they gave him an appropriate response, he let them into the circle where I welcomed them. Once everyone was in the circle, the ritual began.

Mael began. "We welcome you, spirits of the north. Be with us on this joyous occasion."
“Welcome, spirits of the east, please be with us,” I called out.

“Spirits of the south, we welcome you to join us this day.”

I finished calling the directions and then both Mael and I went to the center of the circle to invoke the deities. I began by invoking the Great Mother:

“Welcome, Great Mother! We call you by your names of Anu, Blodeuwedd, Brighid, Cerridwen, Druantia! Grant us your presence here today.”

Then I invoked the Great Father:

“Welcome, Great Father! We call you by your names of Bel, Cernunnos, Dylan! Be with us today for this joyful occasion!” Once the deities were invoked, Mael and I took our places on the altar that were representative of the Goddess and God. Mael then addressed our friends in the circle.

“We are here today to celebrate the Handfasting of Michael Donovan and Caolainn. Michael and I these two young beings are making vows to each other and to the Mother and the Father for one year and a day. This will allow them the time they need to decide whether they are soul mates and whether they should become life mates. We thank you all for being with us today to honor this joining.”

“Caolainn and Michael have written their own vows, and they have also decided to write their own vows with a water blessing. I will let them speak their own vows now.” I stood back and watched them.

... 

I turned toward the center of the circle with Michael. We took each other’s hands and looked into each other’s eyes. My heart was pounding and I told myself something that helped me to stay focused on Michael and then recited my vows to him and the Mother and the Father.

Taking the bowl of water from the altar I turned to Michael and said, “To thee, Michael, I vow to love thee.” Then I anointed his forehead with water.

Michael rubbed some of the water from his forehead and said to me, “I vow to support, to trust, to respect, to protect, and most of all to love thee.” He anointed my face after vow.

I took the water from him and said, “I vow to support, to trust, to respect, to protect, and...”
most of all to love thee." I too anointed his face after each vow.

We then said together, "I vow to honor and cherish you at all times, to do my best to help you fulfill your dreams. In sickness, and in health for as long as these vows shall remain valid."

We then kissed to seal our vows. Ma and Father stepped up to us and placed our right hands together. Ma then wrapped the cloth around our hands, physically binding us together, as Father bound our souls to each other. Then they blessed the mead and the bread, and, starting with each other and Michael and me, they passed both around the circle, sharing the ceremonial feast with everyone. We then offered some bread and mead to the Goddess and the God.

Ma then turned to the rest of the circle and said, "I present to you Michael and Caolainn Donovan." There was a mighty cheer from the circle followed by applause. Ma then unbound our hands and went about dismissing the deities and the directions. Then the circle was opened. Everyone walked back to the village where the feast was being laid out. Someone was playing a whistle and several other people were playing bodhrans by the time Michael and I arrived at the festivities. Some of the women were erecting a Maypole in the middle of the village. There was so much happiness going on that no one even noticed the stranger lurking in the back of the crowds.

When Ma and Father arrived, still in ceremonial robes, the stranger stepped forward.

"Are you Sequana McCairbre?" he asked in a booming voice. A chill ran up my spine as I realized who he was. She turned to face him before answering. Her smile faded from her face and fear filled her eyes.

"Yes I am. Who are you?"

"I am a representative of the Duke. You are under arrest for heresy and for practicing witchcraft." As he said this, men on horses came out of nowhere. The men rode up and surrounded Ma before she could even react. They had her bound before she could move. I screamed and tried to get to her, but Michael held me back.

"That won't help her now. You have to be calm or you will be arrested too," he whispered in my ear. Father started towards her as well, but he, too, was restrained by some of the men in the village.

The stranger continued, "You are to be tried tomorrow at the secular court of the Duke. Normally, you would be tried under Church law, but there is not a representative qualified to try you in the immediate vicinity. Will you come along willingly?"
"Bea" she sat at him. Her back was straight and she showed no outward signs of fear as they lead her off like an animal. Tears filled my eyes as I held back just barely. Michael held me until they were out of sight. Then Forbes and I sprung into action. We both raced home to change clothes and get our horses. Michael insisted on coming with me. I think it was just what promised to be a very difficult ordeal for all of us.

I tried to be as brave as I could as I was dragged off from my daughter's Handfasting. I knew I was in serious trouble. I had heard horror stories of how women were horrendously punished before they were burned at the stake. I had also heard that there really was no way to defend yourself against these charges once they were made. I just hoped that Michael and Fenrir would hold out a while.

We rode all night to try to catch up to them. Finally, we had to stop for some rest around dawn. We slept as little as was necessary before desperately riding on again. We arrived at the Drake's castle late the next evening. The whole household was abuzz with the impending trial and execution. By the time we arrived, we were told that I had already been tortured. Dairke and I held each other and tried to stay strong as we got our bearings and tried to figure out what to do next.

They didn't even wait until morning to start the torture. I will not describe what they did to me because no human should even have to hear of their inhuman cruelty. They kept trying to get me to "believe" in their devil worshipping. I did not even believe in their devil, how could I worship him! Of course I refused to admit to something I did not do. I knew that they would probably kill me anyway. So I was determined to at least retain my dignity and honesty. Around noon the next day, they finally returned me to my cell. I quickly dressed and slept until I heard someone open the door to my cell. I opened my eyes. I saw Talaim and Mael come into the cell and rush over to me. I started crying as I realized that I would have to face animan and see him again.

I had to fight hard to contain my shock as I saw Ma for the first time since she had been taken. She was bruised and bleeding. I couldn't believe how much damage they could inflict upon the human body in such a short time. Tears welled up in my eyes as I realized what we had done.
“Ma, my gods! What have these bastards done to you?” I wailed, my composure breaking.

“I’m all right. They won’t break me. You need to be strong for Miach. Don’t let them take you. If anyone asks if you are a healer, deny everything...” She was quickly losing lucidity. I tried to hug her, but the guard prevented it. No one was allowed to touch the prisoner. How I wished that were true! We were told to leave, so we did. Silently, I gave Ma my love and support before being hustled out of the cell by the guard. The trial was scheduled to begin later that day, so Father and I tried to find out where it was to be held. We were told that it would be a public trial and that it would be held in the town square. After finding the town square, we got as close as we could to the platform that had been built for the purpose. Then we settled down to wait.

... 

As soon as Mael and Caolainn left, I physically collapsed. I began praying to the Goddess to help me. I am not ready to die. Time passed slowly. I sit here and wait. All I can do is wait and hope. I can only have faith that the Goddess will help me now when I need her most. As I start to succumb to the massive amounts of pain they had inflicted upon me, I begin to lose my grip on this plane. As I finally lose consciousness, I begin to see visions. A beautiful woman in long white robes comes to me.

“Do not be afraid. Everything will be fine in the end. Strive to find your inner peace to help you through the very difficult and painful times ahead. Do not fear the pain. I will be with you throughout it. Try to meditate when they come for you again. It will help you to retain your spirit. Remember that I will never leave you...” She fades away as the guards come for me again.

“It’s time for your trial, witch,” they say smugly as they roughly grab me from my cell and drag me into the town square. Every peasant in the area is crowded into the square to see the proceedings. As I look into the crowd, I also see several of the people from Ceol scattered throughout the crowd. I am pulled up onto a platform and bound with my hands over my head. Then I see the Duke and the stranger who had arrested me mount the platform and walk toward me.

“Sequana McCairbre, you are being tried for the crime of heresy. First of all, you practiced midwifery without the permission and license of the Church. For that you were excommunicated. Now you have been found in the employ of the devil. Do you confess?” the Duke announces to me
and the crowd.


"I ask you again, do you confess? If you do, you will be put to death immediately. Otherwise, you must suffer for your lies and unrepentance."

"I do not confess."

"So be it. Sequana McCairbre, by the evidence provided to me, I sentence you to be beheaded by the sword and you will bleed. All of the people will look upon you with scorn and hatred as you draw your final breath and go to the Hell you so abominably caused."

With that, the stranger concludes his sentence. The stranger then speaks to the crowd.

"This evil woman will be put to death as she deservest. I am well aware that the people have great respect for this woman, Sequana McCairbre."

With that, I am released from my bounds and dragged back to my cell where the guards begin torturing me again. This time, they seem to be not torturing me because they enjoy it. They do not even ask me anything as they destroy my body, piece by piece. Throughout the ordeal, I hear the Lady in my head, calming me and soothing me down. With her help, I am able to keep the pain from overcoming me. Finally, the guards tire of their games and leave me to myself. I huddle in a corner and am not so close to my death. I know that I will not be alone, but I am still terrified. At last I sleep.

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It took all my strength not to cry out what the Duke sentenced Ma to death. Father and I returned to the room we were renting and held each other in our tears. I lost myself in the Goddess' arms, knowing her to save Ma. Almost desperately, I beg the Father not to let her die. Father and I finally fall into a fitful sleep.

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I am awakened again by the guards. This time, there is a lady with them.

"Sequana, wake up," she says gently. I blink at her. She is holding a baby dressed in her arms. Shivers as I realize how cold it has gotten in the cell.

I finally have the presence of mind to ask, "What is this? What do you want?"

She didn't want more than me, and it was a baby, but she is having many complications. I fear that both she and the baby will die if she doesn't help them."
"Why do you want me to help? I have no license. I have been pronounced evil by her husband."

"I know, but there is no doctor for miles. No one will be able to get here before it is too late to do anything for them. Besides, she asked for you specifically. She has heard of your talents from the peasants here. Please, Sequana. She did not sentence you to death. Don't sentence her to death." I struggle to my feet and get my bearings. As soon as I am standing, she wraps the cloak around my desecrated body. Swiftly, she takes me out of the jail and into the Duchess's private quarters. Her screams greet me before I even enter the room. Even in my weakened state, I can feel her fear and pain as I enter the room. She is lying in the middle of a large, ornate bed with dozens of attendants milling about her. The lady behind me quickly clears the room of everyone but the three of us. Immediately, I go to the Duchess and begin running my hands over her body. Through her fog of pain and panic, she recognizes me. I can feel her fear subside almost instantly. I look between her legs and see that she will be ready to push soon. Another contraction hits her and she screams in agony.

"Lady, you must breath through the pain. I will try to help you." I placed my hands on her belly and began taking the pain from her body and grounding it into the earth. Soon, her muscles relax and the contraction ends. I know the next one is not far away, so I stay where I am. As soon as the next contractions starts, I begin channelling the pain out of her. This time she is able to breath more and have better control over her pain. I continue this process, over and over, until I see that she is ready to push.

"Now, Lady, you must push. It is time for the baby to come out." She nods and grits her teeth as more pain wracks her body. She begins pushing. Soon she must rest. Then she pushes again. The cycle continues until I see the baby's head. She pushes again and the head is free. I support the baby's head while she rests.

"Just a little more, Lady. Soon your baby will be born." Taking a deep breath, she redoubles her efforts. Finally, the baby slides out into my waiting hands. The lady who came to fetch me takes the child from me.

"Push once more for me, Lady." She does and I remove the afterbirth from her. Wrapping it in a blanket, I hand it to the other lady who takes it from the room. Next, I gently wash the indignities of birth from the child and wrap it in a blanket. Then I hand her the baby.
"Congratulations, Lady, you have a beautiful baby boy," I tell her gently. She smiles tiredly at me as she cradles the child against her bosom.

"Thank you so much. I want you to know that I had no part of my husband's judgement against you. I need you to understand that I did not participate in your treatment by the other people."

"I understand, Lady. I do not hold you responsible." With that, she rises to her feet.

"What is that witch doing here?" he roars. Servants scatter. The Duchess leaves me in her child and a fire I have never seen fills her eyes.

"She is here because I wanted her here," she tells him."

"You go against my judgement, wife?"

"I do when your judgements have the intelligence of an animal. Someone in the room that was not and I am tired and still. You will release her and never bother her again." Her tone is hard as stone. She is not at all intimidated by her husband. In fact, she simply isn't intimidated by him. However, he is determined to prove her meanness by making her back down. I have never seen a man make such a mistake as this.

"I will do no such thing."

"Oh yes you will. You will release her tonight and never bother her again or you will never see me again. I will hurt you and you will never find us. Do you understand what I am telling you?" The look in her eyes brooks no argument and he too realizes exactly what kind of anger he is facing. Still, he is not ready to acquiesce.

"One letter from me to my father, the King, and you will not see me for the next month. One word too many. I am a woman, and women are weak. Finally, the Duke realizes that he must submit to her will.

"Sequana, leave tonight. I don't want to ever hear about you again. You will tell no one what happened here tonight, or I will exact your death sentence, regardless of my wife's wishes." I check on the child and the Duchess and the Duke before leaving quietly from the room. The Duke follows me out the door.

"I will send for your family. They will meet you outside the door. Then, she points to a door across the passageway."
“Thank you.” I go into the room and hurriedly dress. The lady disappears down the passageway. A moment later, she returns and leads me out of the castle and to the gate. She waits with me until I see Caolainn, Mael, and Michael approach.

“I wish you luck, Sequana. Both the Duchess and I are grateful for your help this evening. If you ever need anything, get word to the Duchess and she will help in whatever way she can.” She hugs me briefly and then slips into the shadows.

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A strange woman came to us in our room.

“You must come with me. The Duke had granted Sequana pardon as long as she leaves immediately and never speaks of why she was spared. You must go and never ask her what happened tonight. Her life depends on it.” All three of us were awake and out of the room in moments. The woman told us to get on our horses and go to the gate. Ma would be waiting for us there. All of us looked at each other in great confusion and bewilderment, but we didn’t question. When we approached the gate, we saw Ma and another woman standing in the shadows. The woman suddenly hugged Ma and then slipped into the shadows. We hurried to Ma and dismounted. All three of us hugged her tightly until she winced in pain. Father lifts her onto his horse and then mounts behind her. Michael and I mount our horses as well. In silence, we all ride swiftly away from the castle. No one speaks. We all love her and she knows it. Soon, she is asleep in the saddle, cradled against Father. All will be well. I don’t know how I know this, but I do.

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When my family arrives, they hug me tightly, too tightly for my tortured body. Mael gently lifts me onto his horse and then settles behind me. When I feel his arms around me, my fear begins to subside. I know that I will live. Everyone mounts up again and we ride away from the castle as quickly as we can. When we finally get out of sight of that horrible place, my muscles relax. I slip into an exhausted sleep, knowing that I will be home and safe soon.
Bibliography

The following are the sources I used for the research of this novella. Following each entry is a short description of the type of information each source yielded. However, the following list does not even begin to encompass all the sources that I rejected upon closer examination.

I used this book to create the herbal cures and methods Sequana and Caolainn use throughout the story.

This source helped me in creating the relationships between Sequana and her patients.

This source gave me an idea of how women were regarded in Celtic society by showing me how they were regarded in the myths and legends of the time.

I used this book as a source of names for the characters as well as the deities encountered.

From this source I got descriptions of legal issues and agricultural methods. I also got the history of the Church. This also provided me with description of life and dwellings of the time.

This book provided information about the history of the Celts.

This provided me with the history of women in a healing capacity. It also described the beginnings of the persecutions of women healers.

This gave me a list of what was prohibited by the Church as being evil, ie.- amulets, incantations, all herbalism.

This I used for information about the early roles of midwives as well as the early regulations. ie.- the requirement of a license.

Hubert, Henri. The Greatness and Decline of the Celts. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co.,
More description of customs and traditions as well as history. This source gave support to the customs of head-hunting and blood covenants of the Celts. It also described the potlatch boon system.

This gave a more complete history of the Celts.

This source told me that people accused of heresy were executed. Accordingly, the scene in which Sequana is accused and sentenced to death came from this information.

This source gave me the material I needed to flesh out the Duke and the missionary. It is a collection of documents that show the attitudes about witchcraft and "alternative" healing at the time.

This source provided me with most of the names, and their significance, of the characters in the story.

This book gave me the specifics about the license required by the Church to practice midwifery. Frederick II in 1224 required that all licensed midwives have 5 yrs of study after receiving 7yrs of experience.

This provided me with a detailed description of the laws as well as the marriage laws.

This gave me a map of the Celtic lands which helped me to create the village of Ceole. It also includes very detailed descriptions of society and life in the times. This description helped me to develop the relationship between Taliesin and Caolainn and Miach.

This source told me that Wicca was punishable by death in England.

Gave details about how Satan was portrayed in the art of the Middle Ages. Also told me that the burning of heretics started in earnest around the end of the 12th century. Heretics were excommunicated on the first offense and then executed on the second offense.
Torture was used to coerce confessions.

Seamus, Mac Call. *And So Began the Irish Nation*, Longmans, Green and Co.: London. 1931. I got a tremendous amount of information from this book. I got descriptions of Celtic society, arts, crafts, and weaponry. It also has a history of the Celts, the Celtic language, and the Gauls. The religion of the Celts as well as the history of the Christians in Ireland proved especially helpful.
