

Watchers 5: The Rivals



Helen Lerewth

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Foreword by Julie Smythe

This account is different from my other reports to date because it’s ongoing: and there’s no sign of it finishing yet. I’m writing this sitting by the fire, darning socks, while my lover and his male associates sit around the dining table with glasses of something gently alcoholic, discussing the state of the world. I know, this doesn’t sound like me: why am I playing the sweet little woman? The answer is that I’m on a mission to stop disaster breaking out. I began

by keeping an eye on the man over there with the dark curly hair and the sideways smile, to stop him and his big sister blowing up their realm or whatever they call it, and now I'm helping him to keep his realm on an even keel. That's why he's sweet-talking the local potential trouble makers, and I'm sitting here being the sweet innocent wife and feeding him energy to keep up the sweet talk.

How long will this go on? I've promised to stay here until he tells me to go, and he says he'll never do that – so although I'm sure he will eventually get bored of having me here, I'm here for the long haul. At least it keeps me out of more unpleasant 'watching' tasks. We don't get horrible deaths and murders here, just the occasional nasty road traffic accident.

So what follows is straight out of my diary, setting out how it started and how I came to be here. You'll see that I started out in one frame of mind and ended up in quite another. I get Home most nights to see my husband and friends, but the rest of the time I'm here. Living a double life, in fact.

*

Wednesday

'He comes to me in my dreams. He has dark curly hair and bright eyes and his smile when he looks at me is bent sideways, as if he's laughing at me.'

I flicked quickly to the front of the book to double-check the cover. Large letters in thick black marker pen read: 'Heather Watcher, Diary. Strictly Private.'

I flicked back to the page. Strictly private it might be, but I'm a mother as well as a Watcher and 'strictly private' doesn't feature in my dictionary.

'He looks into my eyes. He's so handsome!'

I frowned. I'd been wondering what had got into my youngest over the last few weeks: off her food, off her school work, mooning about like a love-sick maid. She was acting like I had been at her age, when I first met her father. But, remembering the experience, I was determined to ensure my daughter was spared the agonies of being not-quite-eleven and in love with some alien dream-lover. There was plenty of time for that sort of rubbish when she was older.

But who could it be? It obviously wasn't one of our extended family. No one had been able to offer any suggestions when I'd commented the other night on Hethie's current odd behaviour. Her father's only comment had been that we needed to get into her head, which was why I had filched her diary while she was at school and was now reading rapidly through it. Fortunately, Hethie is at an age where her handwriting is still legible.

Ah, here we are. Another mention of the mysterious night-visitor:

'He came again tonight. He sat on my bed and talked for ages about life and living things. He's so fascinating and clever and so easy to listen to.'

(Obviously, I thought, it's a dream-lover. *Incubus* was the old word for them. Some of them are little better than hell-spirits, but the better ones are intelligent creatures; and some of them are descended from the Watchers, from those early days of their first attempts to civilise humans – which ended in such disaster. The *Book of Enoch* gives a prejudiced summary.)

'He says he wants me to help him. He needs my help.'

(The Hell he does! Not with my daughter!)

'He kissed me.'

(Damn!)

‘He asked me my name and I told him, “Heather.” He said, “A lovely flower! So appropriate.” I said, “Everyone calls me ‘Hethie’,” but he said, “That’s a child’s name, and you’re a woman.” Then he kissed me again.’

There followed a line of hearts and then in beautiful curly script: ‘O Gwydion, Gwydion, I love you.’

I uttered another curse, leapt up and ran for the lounge, where I had left my husband and Ra’haah discussing a new galaxy.

Watchers never stop watching this galaxy, but they also plan new ones. Ra’haah, who is the original Earth Mother, or Sky Mother if you prefer, now has plans to try a completely new sort of gravity. She’s been puzzling over it and doing various experiments to get it to work, and she’s dragged most of us into helping her – except the children (who are at school) and those of us who are off Watching. She currently had my husband weaving cat’s cradles of light while she tried to spin granite balls in the threads – anyway, I burst in and interrupted them.

‘Look at this!’ I thrust the diary under my husband’s nose. ‘That’s what’s got our Hethie. A – a – an ancient predatory spirit.’

My husband (I’ll call him Wiroan – he has a lot of names, some not very complimentary) – looked at the diary, nodded, and passed it over to Ra’haah, who read it and frowned. ‘Oh.’

‘Yes, oh,’ I said, sitting down on the floor next to them.

‘I thought – I mean, I didn’t think – I mean, I thought this one was just a human traditional myth. Not an individual with actual influence.’

‘He’s around,’ I said firmly. ‘I came across him myself, before I met Wiroan.’

‘Minor spirit?’ Ra’haah passed the diary back to my husband.

‘No, not according to this. But possibly bound or trapped.’

‘He reaches out,’ I said, ‘to young women and girls. We all see the same thing – at least, Hethie has seen exactly what I saw. But I lost sight of him after I met you.’

‘Hmmm. If he’s asking for help – what does he want help for?’

‘To give him power,’ I said, ‘to break free, from wherever he is. But wherever he is, I’m sure he’s there with good reason, and I think we should leave him there.’

My husband passed the diary back to me. ‘You’d better put that back. Why are you so certain he’s a bad influence?’

‘I – ’ I hesitated. ‘He’s very seductive, but he keeps his distance,’ I said. ‘I don’t think he’s really interested in humans except for what he can get out of them. He wants their emotional energy.’

They both looked thoughtfully at me, and I could see that they didn’t believe me.

‘It’s Hethie!’ I exclaimed. ‘He’s got Hethie! She’s only ten, and he’s got her already! I can’t let some incubus get my little girl – *our* little girl,’ I reminded my husband.

‘You were about that age when I first found you,’ he said, with infuriating calmness. ‘It’s a good age for spiritual encounters: spiritually awake and not yet tied into social *mores*.’

‘This is your own daughter you’re talking about,’ I reminded him.

‘But this needn’t turn out badly,’ Ra’haah put in. ‘This could be her eternal partner.’

‘You haven’t met him,’ I reminded her.

‘You’re very bitter about him,’ she countered. ‘Did you fall out?’

‘Not exactly. He seemed to lose interest. He wandered away. He said he didn’t think commitment was necessary in our relationship.’

‘Perhaps he found you weren’t as pliant as he hoped,’ said Ra’haah thoughtfully. ‘I think we must investigate this – person – and find out what it is and what it’s after.’

‘With Hethie as bait? No, please,’ I protested.

‘Not at all with Hethie as bait,’ said Ra’haah. ‘But she has the contact and she can lead us there.’

I returned Hethie’s diary to her room, taking care to put it back exactly as she had left it, and went to the library to refresh my memory of Gwydion. The main source of information is the so-called fourth branch of the collection of old Welsh tales known as the *Mabinogion*. But I discovered that Hethie had been busy: all the copies of the *Mabinogion* were out. Bother and bother again, I thought, as I remembered that Hethie had mentioned a school project ... That must have been why she’d invited her school friends round two weeks ago: they had borrowed everything on the subject.

I cursed again, and looked up the manuscript on the National Library of Wales website. My husband has enabled me to understand the language, but it still took me ages to work through the story.

For those fortunates who aren’t familiar with the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi* and the story of Math son of Mathonwy and his family, I’ll summarise. The story focusses on the ruling family of the North Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd at some unspecified time in the past. Apparently this is long before the Romans or the coming of Christ, as there is no mention of either, although the characters do swear by ‘God’ – but that could mean anything – and children are baptised, but again that could just be a naming ceremony. The leading character is the king’s nephew, Gwydion. First he and his brother trick the king into a war with the kingdom of Dyfed, so that while the king is distracted the brother can rape the king’s maidservant. Then Gwydion apparently gets his sister Aranrod to produce two sons: one is baptised but turns into a sea-going animal, and the other apparently grows from a foetus into a small child while encased in a box at the foot of Gwydion’s bed. It grows up amazingly quickly, but when Gwydion presents his sister with this wonder-child she rejects it and him. Scholars generally assume that Gwydion was the father, although the story doesn’t state this. Aranrod is determined that the wonder-child should have no name, will never be made a warrior and will never have a wife, but Gwydion tricks her into providing the first two (apparently these are things only the mother can provide). To provide a wife for the boy (his name is Llew Llaw Gyffes) he makes a girl out of flowers. But the girl falls in love with someone else. Apparently Llew can’t be killed, but the girl finds out how he can be incapacitated and her boyfriend follows her instructions. However, Llew doesn’t die; he turns into an eagle and flies away. Gwydion tracks him down, turns him back into a human being and turns the flower-girl into an owl. Llew kills the boyfriend and recovers his property. End of story.

And that’s pretty much all the stories tell us about this highly dysfunctional family. There are some references in other Welsh literature but until we got the internet you had to be a scholar to find them. As a child I fell in love with Gwydion – just as Hethie has apparently done. I can’t say exactly why he’s attractive – there’s something of the rebel in him which appeals to just-pubescent girls – or is it that, despite all his magical powers, there is something vulnerable about him, revealed in his repeated and disastrous attempts to help his brother, his sister, and his nephew? Reading the story again as an adult, a few things struck me which I’d missed as a pre-teen.

First: nowhere does it state that Gwydion is the boy's father, although most modern readers assume that he is. In fact he just adopts the boy Lleu.

Second: Gwydion does not have a positive lasting relationship with any woman. He helps his brother to rape a girl (whom his uncle then marries); his uncle turns him and his brother into a succession of mating pairs of animals as a punishment for the rape, but this sexual experience has no lasting effect on either of them. He suggests that his sister goes to work for their uncle. When the sister turns out to be pregnant, she produces one aquatic creature and Gwydion takes charge of the aborted baby, which survives through his care. Aranrod rejects the children and him, so there's no positive relationship there. He can't find a woman to marry the boy Lleu – do no women trust him because he connived at a rape? Or does he not trust women after his sister rejected her child? So he makes what's intended as the perfect woman for Lleu, and yet she betrays Lleu – so is the message of the story that women are unreliable? Or that Gwydion, having betrayed women, can never have a proper relationship with one?

Third: there are three manufactured humans in the story: the two boys which Aranrod aborted (or were they still births?), one of which the king takes charge of and the other Gwydion raises; and the girl Gwydion made to be Lleu's wife. We don't hear much about the first except that he is aquatic, becomes a hero, and is killed by accident by another of his uncles. The other two are intended to be ideal: Lleu grows up rapidly and is very quick and skilled, and can't be killed, while the girl is an ideal of loveliness and clever too. But none of these manufactured humans work out; their story ends in disaster. It's a sort of Frankenstein's monster story, told centuries before Mary Shelley composed her horror novel.

Fourth, Aranrod (her name is spelt in various ways: this is the simplest version) is a very modern woman. She isn't married, and she has her own castle, which is apparently on the coast as it can be approached on horseback but also has a harbour, and it has a garrison and is big enough to withstand a siege. She clearly lives her own life and is her own woman, as her brother Gwydion didn't know she was pregnant. She is very much the proud lord of her castle, refusing to answer her uncle directly when he asks her to confirm she is a virgin, and not in fear of him or her brothers. She sees no reason to take responsibility for her children, and she has no particular respect for men. I want to know more about her! But there isn't any more.

When was the story written, I wonder? (I'm in 'English Lit student mode' now, remembering the things I had to consider when I was a student writing essays at Birmingham University.) The manuscripts date from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, but it's impossible to tell whether they faithfully reproduce earlier tales or have invented or adjusted old stories. Perhaps the clerics who wrote them down rewrote this story to warn people against 'playing God'? – like the modern debates over genetic modification and 'designer babies'. I did an internet search that pulled up various theories on date and reasons for composition, but these just left me more puzzled as to what was going on.

I wondered again: just what is Gwydion up to? Does he still want women for his genetic experiments? And where is he now? Clearly he's a powerful spirit, of some sort. I was not at all sure that I wanted to find him, but on the other hand I realised that I needed to track him down and face him, if only to protect Hethie.

A commotion came to my ears: the children were back from school. I turned off my internet search and went out to welcome them.

Sue and Lynne were sorting out the disposal of hats, coats and bags and ensuring that homework was brought into the library to be done. Jamie was organising drinks of fruit juice while Hethie poured out news of the day's events; the other children chattered to Sue and Lynne about planned school outings and forthcoming tests and exams. As I came into the kitchen, Hethie broke off her monologue to Jamie, said: 'Mum, there's a letter from school for you,' and handed me a sealed envelope.

'What's it about?' asked Jamie, handing her a glass of orange squash.

Hethie shrugged. 'I think it's about my school project.'

'I noticed you'd borrowed a lot of books from the library,' I remarked, trying to open the sealed envelope tidily.

Was it my imagination, or did Hethie's face grow wary? 'We needed them for our group project,' she said. 'We'll bring them back next week.'

'Good.' I got into the envelope, pulled out the letter and glanced at it.

Jamie saw my expression change and said: 'Anything bad?'

'I'll tell you later.' I thrust it back into the envelope and headed for the library.

Here I found a quiet seat in the corner of a window and read the letter through in peace. Mrs Armstrong was very worried about Hethie's progress and asked please could I come in and have a talk about her after school tomorrow.

O dear. What had Hethie been up to now?

*

Thursday

The following afternoon I went along with Jamie when he went to collect the children from school, and while he walked back with them I stayed to talk to Hethie's teacher.

'I asked you to come in because I'm really worried about Hethie,' she said. 'This term she's gone from being a happy-go-lucky, outward-going little girl to being solemn and withdrawn. She hardly talks to me at all, and she insists I call her "Heather".'

'O dear,' I said. 'She has been quiet at home as well.'

'We're doing a class project this term, and I sent the children away to find a topic. Hethie came back with a book which she said she'd found in your library at home – it's a very strange book. I can't even read it, but Hethie reads it as easily as if it were English.'

'She's very good at languages,' I said weakly. 'She takes after her father.'

'I don't know exactly what they're doing. They won't discuss it with me! They say it will be a surprise. I can't exactly complain – they're showing initiative and effective team working – but I wish I knew what they're up to. I'm worried it might be – illegal, or something.'

She hesitated, clearly embarrassed and fearful, but uncertain how to express her fears. I tried to sound reassuring.

'I don't think it will be illegal,' I said with a confidence that I didn't feel.

'One of the children said something about Hethie's "boyfriend". Has she been seeing an older boy?'

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'I suspect she has.' I know she has. 'I'll look into it.'

'Thank you, Mrs Watcher.' The woman was genuinely grateful, and I felt guilty. After all, I knew jolly well who was behind this, but I couldn't easily do anything about it.

I walked home, thinking furiously. I would have to find Gwydion and ask him to explain himself – and tell him to leave Hethie alone. But I wasn't sure how to get hold of him. He'd

abruptly stopped responding to my calls about the time I first met Wiroan. I needed to go to him, which meant going to North Wales.

When Jamie and Sue came to find me later they discovered me knee-deep in Ordnance Survey maps. ‘What on earth are you doing?’ exclaimed Sue. Then, looking at the maps: ‘Holiday plans? North Wales? Are we going hill walking?’

‘Possibly.’ I passed her the letter. ‘We need to go and track down a bad influence.’

Sue looked at the letter; Jamie read over her shoulder.

‘Hethie? Quiet and withdrawn?’ He looked up at me. ‘That doesn’t sound like our Hethie.’

‘No,’ I said, through gritted teeth as I wrestled with the ‘Snowdon’ map.

‘Day-dreaming? Sudden interest in Welsh?’ Sue looked up. ‘Jules, why on earth should Hethie be interested in learning Welsh? Wiroan can teach her.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘She’s being got at. But I couldn’t tell her teacher that when I saw her this afternoon.’

‘What did she say?’ asked Sue.

I explained, and Sue’s eyes opened wide. ‘She really is being got at, isn’t she?’

That’s why I need to go to North Wales. Fancy a girls’ weekend away?’

‘I’m coming,’ said Jamie, then paused and said: ‘but someone needs to stay with Hethie.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘That’s why you’re staying here with her. You can’t be got at.’

‘Why not?’

‘You’re a boy. He only affects girls.’

‘He?’ Jamie looked at the letter again. ‘Some man is getting at Hethie?’

‘Some incubus. And it’s based in North Wales.’

‘Oh!’ said Sue. ‘Is it Gwydion? He’s *so* sexy.’

‘Not you too?’ We stared at each other for a moment. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘it’s Gwydion.’

‘I’ve a bone to pick with him,’ said Sue cheerfully. ‘I’m coming too. We can take Lynne and make it a proper girls’ outing.’

‘I’m sure that Lynne doesn’t know Gwydion,’ I said. ‘She was always a fan of ancient history, not dark ages.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure,’ said Sue. ‘She had her moments.’

*

Friday

So we arranged our weekend away, on the excuse that we needed a break from Watching, and the children had school work to do so couldn’t spare the time (we said) – promising them a proper holiday later in the summer, when term had finished. We drew up a list of places from the story in the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi*, with some help from the internet to identify where they are. (I won’t list them now; you’ll hear as we go along.) We argued over how to get there – Sue said that we should take the train and then the bus, and Lynne said it would be easier just to drop in as we do when we’re Watching. But I said that as it was a holiday we should act like normal people, so we hired a car.

It was a red car. Caroline insisted on this, because all her friends’ families have red cars. She and Tonja came with us to the hire place to ensure that we hired something ‘cool, and not some old-fashioned thing, Mum. I know what you’re like.’

It’s always heartening to know how much faith my eldest daughter has in me.

Anyway, so we hired a red car and took in turns to drive it. Remember that old joke: ‘How do you get two whales in a mini car? – straight down the A5 or over the Severn Bridge?’ –

Yes, well: as our home base in the here-and-now is in Leicester, we drove along the A5 and along the north coast of Gwynedd (a.k.a. North Wales), then south from Caernarfon. I will not bore you with our comments on the traffic. Anyone who has tried to drive through Caernarfon in the summer knows what the traffic is like.

We managed to take the right turning at the junction so that we were headed south west for Pwllheli rather than south east for Porthmadog, then found the wrong turning to the coast, and eventually – after driving along some hair-raisingly narrow lanes with very high hedges or stone walls down either side and nowhere to reverse to if we did meet a vehicle coming in the opposite direction – we saw a large mound ahead and realised that we had reached our first destination.

‘Dinas Dinlle,’ read Sue, as she drove past the sign at the entrance to the village. ‘Success!’

‘There’s the fort,’ said Lynne. ‘And the caravan site.’

‘Let’s have an ice cream,’ I said, ‘and then we can sort out accommodation.’

‘Is there anywhere to stay here?’ asked Sue, as she swung the car into the beach-front car park. ‘It’s just a tiny place!’

‘Maybe not,’ I said, ‘but let’s have an ice cream anyway.’

It was a lovely afternoon, warm and sunny. We left our overnight bags in the car and walked over to the ice cream shop, then walked up the grassy mound, past the National Trust sign, to admire the ancient coastal fort which features in the story of Math, Gwydion, Aranrod and Lleu as the place where Lleu is brought up.

We paused to read the information board while we finished our ice creams. It informed us in Welsh and English that ‘Dinlle’ means ‘Lleu’s fort’ and that tradition states it belonged to Lleu Llaw Gyffes.

‘“Dinas” means “fort”,’ said Lynne, ‘so it’s called “fort” twice.’

‘It happens,’ I said.

‘So far as I remember,’ said Sue, ‘Gwydion is buried here.’

Lynne and I looked accusingly at her, and she blushed. ‘I went off him a long time ago,’ she said quickly.

‘Let’s go and see,’ I said, and Lynne headed for the gate.

I was the last through, a few paces behind the other two. Two children who had been running about on the lower grassy flanks of the fort came towards the gate as I came through it, and I held the gate open for them without thinking. They glanced up at me as they came past, and I saw dark blue rain-proof jackets and pale skin, triangular faces with dark eyes and red lips, and black hair – almost pixie in their appearance. One said: ‘Thank you’, in a remarkably deep voice – then they were through and gone, and I was standing still, frozen in shock.

‘*Him!*’

I hurried after the other two.

‘Jules? What’s up?’ Sue and Lynne paused to let me catch up.

‘That was him!’ I pointed back down the path. ‘Those two – that was them.’

Sue shook her head. ‘They were children, surely?’

‘I thought so – and then I looked at them.’

‘They’re far too small,’ said Lynne – the pair were now completely out of sight, presumably having vanished into the ice cream shop.

‘They’re shape-changers,’ I said. ‘One spoke – they’re adults.’

‘Forget it,’ said Sue. ‘Lleu has golden hair.’

‘But Gwydion is dark,’ I said. ‘It could have been his brother, or his sister. His sister’s castle is just down the coast.’

We were climbing the path to the top as we argued, and at this point we emerged on to the upper rampart, from where we could see right down the coast to the great mountain called in Welsh Yr Eifl, ‘the Fork’ (because it has three peaks set alongside each other like a great trident) and in English ‘the Rivals’ because (a) it sounds like the Welsh name and (b) the three peaks rival each other. The golden sweep of sand and clear blue sea of the bay was as beautiful as anything you will see anywhere on Earth; but there was no sign of Aranrod’s castle.

‘I assume that’s Gwydion’s grave,’ said Lynne, pointing at a mound which lay within the upper ramparts of the fort.

‘I assume it’s supposed to be,’ said Sue solemnly, ‘but we know he isn’t actually dead.’

We stood for a few minutes, admiring the view. The east side of the ramparts has been eroded away by the sea, but the bulk of the fort is in good repair for a fortification that’s at least two thousand years old. It was very peaceful on top of the fort, in the sunshine; it’s a pleasant, happy place, where a hero could rest in peace. If Llew had ever lived here, it would have been a good home. But:

‘According to the guidebook, we can see Ireland from here on a clear day,’ said Lynne.

‘I can’t,’ said Sue.

‘Supposing the fort is Irish?’ Lynne went on. ‘That would explain why it’s dedicated to an Irish god.’

‘Llew’, of course, is a variant on the Irish ‘Lugh’ – who was/is a much more impressive character than the Welsh version. Lugh never had any wife-trouble (he never even had a wife ...) and he was a stand-alone deity, not dependent in any way on an absent mother or caring uncle.

‘Perhaps this Llew was named after the Irish one,’ I said. ‘Shall we go down to the beach? I fancy a paddle.’

‘Where is this castle of Aranrod’s?’ asked Sue. ‘It’s on the map but I can’t see it.’ She held out the map, which she had folded round to show our current location and the stretch of sea with ‘Caer Arianrhod’ in it. ‘It should be visible at low water, and the tide’s well out.’

‘Let’s go down and look,’ I said. ‘We can walk down the beach and see if we can see it.’

So we ran along the ramparts, down the southern slope of the fort, and scrambled down to the beach, where we strolled along the sands, picking up pretty pebbles and discarding them again, enjoying the sunshine, the sea breeze (more of a howling gale at times), the sound of the waves and the seagulls.

‘We must have walked far enough by now,’ said Sue at last. ‘And I still can’t see anything.’

‘It’s supposed to be a pile of rocks,’ I said.

‘So it’s not really a castle at all,’ said Lynne. ‘Only in imagination – to account for the pile of rocks.’

‘I think it’s all part of the “sunken kingdom” legend,’ I said.

You’ll remember that a few winters ago the storms threw up fossilised trees and tree stumps off the south coast of Cornwall and in Cardigan Bay which showed that these areas were above sea level in not-so-far off prehistoric times. This gave some credence to the old stories of kingdoms sinking beneath the waves as a result of some sin or crime, although in fact they probably sank at the end of the last ice age, before Britain had any kingdoms – or at least any kingdoms bigger than city states.

Sue stopped in her tracks and pointed down the beach. ‘What’s that?’

‘It looks like a life belt,’ I said.

We walked across the sands towards the white inflated ring. As we got closer it became clear that it was some sort of blow-up toy animal that a child could sit on and float in shallow water. Lynne picked it up and turned it over, then laughed aloud.

‘A rainbow unicorn! We can ride it to the fairy castle!’

She held it up so that we could both see the object: it was really a small inflatable dinghy, with a unicorn’s head and a rainbow mane and tail. A child could sit in it, but it was a bit small for three adult women.

‘Perhaps your elves came in it,’ said Sue to me, laughing.

‘Pixies,’ I said, laughing with her. ‘Perhaps Aranrod sent it so that we can sail out to the castle!’

‘Seriously, girls,’ said Lynne, ‘I assume it blew away and some child is trying to find it.’

We looked back up the beach, the way the wind was blowing; but there were no children in sight.

‘We’ll take it back to the car park when we go back,’ said Sue. ‘But one of us should try it!’

‘We don’t have a paddle,’ I said.

‘The water’s quite shallow,’ said Sue. ‘I’ll sit in it, and you two can push!’

So we carried the unicorn dinghy down to the sea’s edge and launched it. (Kids: *don’t* try this at home.) Sue scrambled in, and almost upset it; Lynne and I rolled our trousers up above the knee, resigned ourselves to wet trainers, and pushed it out into the waves, while Sue made a pretence of paddling with her hands. The sea floor was stony and Lynne and I stumbled and let go of the dinghy; for a moment I thought it would come back into shore, but then it drifted slowly out.

‘Be careful!’ I called.

‘Don’t worry,’ Sue called back. ‘I can swim.’

‘The current will bring you into shore further down the coast,’ called Lynne.

‘Aranrod will send me a seal to tow me in!’ retorted Sue.

She went out a hundred yards or so, and then stuck. There was a short pause while she paddled around with her hands, looking down into the water, and then she waved to us and called: ‘It’s here!’

‘Great,’ said Lynne. ‘We can’t get out there unless we walk on water.’

Sue sat up straight in the boat, concentrating hard – she is, after all, a Watcher’s wife, and when she tries she can do some exciting things. After a few moments the wind changed direction, the sea around her swelled, and the dinghy came floating back towards us. When it was about six feet out, Sue clambered out and dragged it in.

‘Well?’ asked Lynne and I together.

‘I wouldn’t swear to it not being a castle,’ said Sue. Then, when we looked at her blankly, she rephrased herself: ‘it might be an ancient fortress, and not just a pile of rocks. Like Dinas Dinlle is a natural mound that’s been built up to be a fort, this might have been too.’

‘And like the sea has eroded Dinas Dinlle partly away, it’s eroded Aranrod’s castle completely,’ I suggested.

‘Wishful thinking, girls,’ said Lynne. ‘Are we going to take that unicorn back? I assume it came from the ice-cream shop,’

We all agreed that the ice-cream shop was probably its home stable, and that we should take it back. We managed to get it out of the sea – it was very wet and slippery all over – and took it in turns to carry it along the beach.

‘Can we have fish and chips for tea?’ asked Sue, as we came in sight of our destination. ‘And then we need somewhere to stay.’

‘There must be a bed and breakfast with vacancies,’ said Lynne. ‘You can have fish and chips if they do something other than fish and pies.’

Obviously Lynne was in a dieting mood. We deposited the unicorn outside the ice-cream shop, weighed it down with a few carefully-chosen rounded stones, and went into the fish and chip shop.

After the meal we took the car back down the lane in search of ‘bed and breakfast’ accommodation, and eventually found a place in a village inland. We spread the map out over the beds and examined the locations we should visit the next day.

‘Nantlle,’ I said. ‘It means “Lleu’s brook” and it’s where Gwydion found Lleu after he turned into an eagle.’

‘There’s Bryn Gwydion,’ said Sue, ‘Gwydion’s hill.’

‘It’s on the way to Nantlle,’ said Lynne. ‘Nantlle seems to be full of quarries. I don’t know if there’ll be anything there to see.’

‘We can go and look,’ I said briskly.

*

Saturday

Bryn Gwydion is a fine, low, grassy hill with good views to the coast; Nantlle is a lovely valley (despite the old quarry workings, which are rapidly disappearing under woodland) and at the little town at the entrance to the valley there is a primary school named after Lleu and a vineyard selling beer named after Lleu, his wife Blodeuwedd the flower-girl, and Gwydion. With some help from a local website on the Nantlle valley we tracked the story as far as Pont Baladeulyn, just north of the village of Nantlle. However, we didn’t find any memorial to the place where Gwydion finds the sick Lleu (after he’s been turned into an eagle) and takes him home; presumably the traditional site is under the quarry. And, unlike the previous day, we didn’t find any particular indication of Gwydion or Aranrod; there were no dark-haired ‘children’, and no unicorn boat.

‘We’ve gone wrong,’ I said. ‘We should go back to the coast.’

‘We haven’t done the whole story yet,’ said Lynne. ‘Where else did they go?’

We got out the maps and traced the places named in the story, across the marshy plain beyond Porthmadog and into the hills north of Trawsfynedd Lake. ‘It’s a day’s drive,’ said Lynne. ‘Perhaps there’s something in those hills.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Sue doubtfully. ‘Gwydion went there to fight Pryderi, but then he came back into Gwynedd. Lleu went to live in the east, but Gwydion only went there at the end, to punish Blodeuwedd for what she did to Lleu.’

‘Yes, what happened to him after that?’ asked Lynne. ‘I don’t remember.’

Ah, so she *had* read the story. I thought she probably had.

‘The story doesn’t say,’ I said. ‘It says that Lleu returned to rule his kingdom, and then he succeeded his great-uncle Math as ruler of Gwynedd – of course Math is his mother’s uncle. It doesn’t say anything else about Gwydion. There’s another story about Gwydion and a

battle of the trees – Gwydion calls the trees out to fight the enemies of Britain. And then there's the story that he's buried at Dinas Dinlle.'

'Perhaps he *is* buried there,' said Lynne.

'No,' said Sue. 'He's still alive, somewhere.'

I was glad she was so emphatic, because it reassured me that I'm not going entirely mad.

The fact we had seen them – or two people who looked like them – was encouraging and frustrating. It was as if they had been testing us out and discovered that we were unobservant but polite (I held the gate open with a smile). As for 'them': one of them was Gwydion, but who was the other? Initially I'd thought it must be his little brother, but on consideration, and remembering that we'd found the unicorn boat, I suspected it was Aranrod.

They'd seen us, and they'd acknowledged us, but now they were keeping their distance.

*

Sunday

The next day we drove south, over the shoulder of the Rivals to the coast road, along the new bypass north of Porthmadog, got stuck in the traffic at Penrhyndeudraeth (everyone does) and then drove around the great area of drained salt marsh where Math's army fought Pryderi's army. We drove alongside the river Dwyryd, with the steam railway on our other side high up on the wooded slopes of the hills; then we crossed the river and drove down to Maen Twrog, where Pryderi is supposed to be buried (there's a power station next to the village now). We parked the car and walked up the track through the trees, through Coed Felinrhyd where Gwydion and Pryderi met in single combat. Gwydion won through strength and skill (as a warrior should), and by using magic (which is cheating).

It was a fine day, but the woods were quiet. We met only one person, a woman jogger with her dog, who answered our greeting cheerfully and went on her way. When we reached the lake at the top of the wood we sat down on some handy rocks to eat our lunch, admire the scenery, and take stock.

'I wouldn't expect to find Gwydion here,' said Sue. 'This isn't his home ground.'

'If he's being held somewhere, then he isn't necessarily on his home ground,' said Lynne. 'And if Jules is right, we've already seen him.'

'He could be trapped but able to show himself in the here-and-now,' said Sue. 'He can't stay anywhere but he can pass through quickly.'

'You're the expert,' I said quickly, before they could start to argue the point. The possibilities whirled through my imagination, leaving me feeling quite giddy. 'Let's go on to Llew's house on the moors – Mur Castell.'

'Tomen y Mur,' said Sue, looking at the map. 'It's a Roman fort with a Norman motte in the middle of it.'

'Sounds romantic,' said Lynne.

It wasn't. As we drove up the moors above Trawsfynydd Lake the clouds blew over the sun, and a cold wind howled across the barren landscape. We parked the car and emerged cautiously into the chilly outdoors just as a squall of horizontal rain blew viciously into our faces. We dived for the boot of the car to pull out our rain-proof jackets, and then looked cautiously across the moor towards the mound of the castle.

'I suppose we ought to go and look, having come so far,' said Sue doubtfully.

Crossing the remains of the Roman fortifications, we waded through marshy reed beds and swamp grass thick with moss to reach the mound, which gave us some sort of overview of the site.

‘If Blodeuwedd was living here, I’m not surprised she got fed up,’ said Lynne, holding her hood upon her head against the wind. ‘I’d run off with the first good-looking man I saw. Which she did.’

‘It’s a nice large fort,’ said Sue. ‘Perhaps they adapted it into a king’s palace?’

‘You’re assuming that these events happened after the Romans,’ I said. ‘If the story is pre-Christian, then the Romans fortified an ancient site.’

‘Or the whole thing is a myth,’ said Lynne. ‘Can we go somewhere warmer?’

So we left the grey skies and gloom of Tomen y Mur and drove north to the valley of the Cynfal, to Bont Newydd, which is in the centre of all the events which came next in the story: the attack on Lleu, and Lleu’s return blow on his attacker. Local tradition is that there used to be a standing stone here with a hole through it where Lleu’s spear went through and killed Goronwy. This is strikingly beautiful countryside, but very remote and lonely. After rescuing Lleu, Gwydion pursued Blodeuwedd and her maidens north-east: the maidens drowned in Llyn Morwynion (which means ‘maidens’ lake’) before they could reach safety, and Gwydion caught the flower-woman Blodeuwedd, his own creation, and turned her into an owl. Looking at the map, I wasn’t sure where Blodeuwedd would have been trying to escape to, because there are no forts in the mountains beyond the lake. Perhaps they were heading up the Sarn Helen to Bryn Castell and took a wrong turning. My companions declined my suggestion that we walk up to the lake, as the rain seemed to have pursued us from Tomen y Mur.

‘I can take a hint,’ said Lynne. ‘Let’s go back to where we started. We’ve missed something.’

‘Shouldn’t we be getting back home?’ wondered Sue.

‘They can cope without us for another day,’ I assured her.

So we returned to the car and drove back to the Bed-and-Breakfast for another night.

We repaired to a local pub for our evening meal, carrying maps, guidebooks and an old copy of the *Mabinogion* that Sue had managed to find misfiled in the library; and plotted our next move. Lynne flicked through the story ‘to remind myself of it.’

‘Where’s Caer Dathal? It’s the central place in the story, but we haven’t been there.’

‘No one knows,’ said Sue.

‘There’s a ruined town on the Rivals,’ I said. ‘It’s called Tre’r Ceiri – it means ‘Giants’ Town.’

‘There were giants on the Earth in those days,’ said Sue. We all recognised the quotation from the Book of Genesis: it’s the chapter which records the Watchers. The ‘giants’ were the children of the Watchers, when they first came to Earth. ‘So Tre’r Ceiri was built by the Watchers’ children?’

‘Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote that giants inhabited Britain before the British came,’ I said (I was back in ‘English Lit’ mode again). ‘But they all died out and the country was empty when the British arrived.’

‘If the giants were descended from the Watchers,’ said Lynne, ‘then they probably did build the giants’ town. When was it built?’

‘No one knows,’ I said.

‘But it’s too far away from everything to be Caer Dathal,’ said Sue. ‘One of the old books in the library suggests it, but then suggests an old fort at the entrance to Nantlle valley: Caer Engan. But if it was there, why did it take Gwydion so long to find Lleu in Nantlle? Another old book says it’s Pen y gaer near Llanbedr y cennin, south of Conwy, but that’s not in Arfon. That website on the Nantlle valley suggests Caer Dathal was on Y Foel.’

(As I’ve now mentioned it twice, I’ll tell you that the website is at: www.nantlle.com/mabinogi-saesneg-places-mentioned-in-the-fourth-branch.htm; we found it very useful.)

Lynne looked at the map. ‘There’s certainly space for a fort up there,’ she said. ‘We should go and look tomorrow.’

‘If the weather holds, we should,’ I said. ‘The views should be marvellous.’

*

Monday

The weather did indeed hold, and we climbed Y Foel. The views were marvellous: we could see across much of the story, so to speak: up Nantlle, and down to Dinas Dinlle, and Bryn Gwydion, and the part of the sea where Caer Arianrhod lies. The black wall of the Rivals barred our view further south. Looking north we could see up the coast to Anglesey, where Gwydion walked on the beach collecting seaweed, and we could see across country in the direction from which Pryderi’s army came, pursuing the stolen pigs, and the way they retreated with the men of Gwynedd in pursuit.

‘It’s a lovely place,’ said Sue. She sat down on the grass and lay back, looking up at the sky. ‘I could sleep here!’

‘I’d love a sun bathe,’ said Lynne. ‘We’ve got nowhere else we have to go. Let’s have a rest before we set out home.’

So we lay down on the grass and soaked up the sun, and dozed.

It’s so peaceful there – I felt I could stay there forever. I thought about all the places we had seen over the last few days ... the rain-swept, God-forsaken hills above Trawsfynydd, the place of Blodeuwedd’s exile, which she had hated, where she had tried to find true love and where she had been destroyed. No, not destroyed – but exiled again. Then I thought of the sunny, warm west coast where the sun danced on the shining waves and the ancient forts stood out of the waves – or under the waves. I thought of the beauty and poverty of Nantlle valley, full of the ruins of the lost industrial age ... but Gwydion and his story were much older than that.

Then I did something that I should have done at the beginning, but it was so long since I last did it that it never occurred to me. I called him.

Gwydion ... where are you?

The warm breeze blew softly, caressing my cheek.

Where are you? Where did you go?

He’s here, he’s here ... but he’s not here. He’s distant, but he’s near. Oh, this is so frustrating!

You haven’t looked everywhere: you’ve looked up to the high places, but you haven’t looked down. You’ve looked in the sea but not under the earth; you’ve watched the birds but you haven’t looked in the trees.

He is in the deer, the wild boar and the wolves. He’s in the trees and the wind, in the sea and the seaweed. But he’s a storyteller, so he tells tales – he deceives, he misrepresents, he is

not what he seems. He used to go out of Gwynedd, but now he is trapped here in Arfon, unable to roam the world. Who trapped him?

I woke up and looked across the countryside to the west, over the fields to the sea. A tall tower rose up from a great church near the sea, and I thought: we need to visit the church before we go home.

Sue and Lynne were a little reluctant to come along, as you never know what you're going to find in a strange church – over the years of Watching we've found some very odd things, but I'll save that story for another time. Anyway, eventually I drove and we managed to get there in one piece. I parked the car by the gate into the churchyard and we went cautiously in – cautiously so as not to disturb anything malicious.

It was quiet, and had an air of peace and of a certain reserve. This was not a church where people would shout and dance in the aisles. We wandered around separately, each exploring alone. Sue sat down in a pew to read the church guidebook; Lynne leafed through the song books. I went to look at the chancel windows.

As I stood staring into the glass I was sure I heard one of the others coming into the chancel behind me, but then the door into the church closed. I looked round. Had the others gone out? – No, they were still where they had been.

'This place gives me the spooks,' I said. 'Let's go and look at the holy well.'

'Where is it?' asked Sue.

'Just down the road. We can walk.'

We walked. The sun was still shining – a good sign, said Lynne. As we approached the well we could see that someone was already sitting within the structure, bent over the water, dressed in plain clothes, a long overshirt and casual trousers. The figure straightened up as we approached and welcomed us with that sideways smile that I remembered so well.

'Is this a delegation?' he asked, and we all stiffened for a moment at the sound of that well-remembered voice.

'Yes,' I said. 'We've been looking for you.'

'You've been a long time finding me,' he said, raising his eyebrows.

I refused to be distracted. 'You've been bothering Hethie. You must leave her alone. She's too young.'

He raised his eyebrows again and looked away, down into the water. There was green scum on the surface, and I wondered fleetingly why no one took the trouble to keep it clean.

Sue found her voice. 'Why did you disappear?' she demanded.

'Disappear? I didn't disappear. You disappeared. You all did.'

'You stopped coming – I couldn't sense you any more.' Sue was clearly still nursing a very deeply-felt injury.

He looked directly at us and I could see those bright, shining eyes, in his pale face, framed with dark curly hair – just the same as ever, as if it were yesterday that I last saw him.

Of course he's a Watcher, I thought. At least, he's related to them – descended from them. His mother was Dôn, the earth mother – is he related to Ra'haah, perhaps?

'She was my grandmother,' he said, as if I'd spoken aloud. 'Why shouldn't I talk to Heather? She's a very intelligent girl, just the person I need.'

'For what?' I demanded. 'Scientific experiments?'

He seemed impressed. 'Yes, well guessed! You *have* been coming along. Clearly his high-and-mightiness has done you some good.'

I'd forgotten how withering he can be. No wonder he drove Aranrod mad!

Lynne had remained silent, keeping her distance. Now she said thoughtfully: ‘You left because we met the Watchers. They drove you out.’

‘Hmm.’ He nodded, and it suddenly occurred to me that he could be hurt too. Of course the Watchers had put their marks on us, and after that we were out of bounds for any other spiritual liaison.

‘But we could have still been friends,’ said Sue, her voice still full of hurt.

‘No,’ he said, ‘we couldn’t. Your friend the high-and-mightiness saw to that!’

‘So you’ve been waiting for one of our children,’ I realised. ‘Why do you need help?’

He shook his head at me. ‘I’m not saying any more. Go and fetch Heather, and then I’ll explain.’

‘But –’

‘Fetch her. I don’t know why you’re so upset about her talking to me. She’s older than you were when we first met.’ He smiled suddenly, his brilliant, lovely smile, and I felt my heart lurch at all the childhood memories it conjured up.

‘Where’s Aranrod?’ asked Lynne suddenly. ‘She was with you the other day, wasn’t she?’

He looked suddenly tired. ‘We don’t agree on a lot of things. I’ll explain to all of you when you bring Heather.’

‘We have to bring her,’ said Sue slowly, ‘because you can’t leave Arfon.’

‘I told you that. I can only reach you in your dreams, and that’s no good now; we need to talk properly. Now go and fetch her.’ He waved us away imperiously, and – as there didn’t seem to be anything else to do – we went.

‘Who won that conversation?’ Sue wondered aloud as we walked back to the car.

‘He did,’ I said, ‘but you know he always does. He has a way with words.’

‘He always spooked me,’ said Lynne. ‘You never quite know what he’s going to do.’

Sue and I looked at each other. We *knew* that Lynne had met Gwydion when she was a girl.

*

We drove back across country, which took hours and made us wish we’d gone the long way round to pick up the fast road. On reaching Home, we were greeted by Jamie – anxious to inform us that Hethie was now refusing to talk to him at all – and my husband, who simply said: ‘I see you found him.’

‘Eventually.’

‘What does he say for himself?’

‘He blames you for disrupting our relationship, and he won’t explain what he’s doing unless we take Hethie along.’

‘It’s some sort of scientific experiment,’ added Sue.

‘He’s descended from Ra’haah,’ said Lynne. ‘Are there records?’

Wiroan nodded. ‘Very ancient records, but no doubt Steve and Colin have gathered them into the library.’

Lynne cheered up at that – she loves ancient records – and she went off to look for Steve. I asked Jamie, ‘Where’s Hethie now?’

‘She says she’s doing her homework. I really do think she’s possessed. Should I run the dousing rod over her?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Gwydion is too powerful for dousing rods. I’ll go and find her.’

‘I’ll come along,’ said Sue, and we went off together.

We eventually found Hethie in her room, bent over her laptop, typing busily. I'd been impressed that she'd taught herself to touch-type over the last six months, but now it occurred to me to ask why she'd decided to do this – had Gwydion prompted her?

I knocked on the door, waited for the mutter on the other side of the door which indicated that she'd acknowledged our presence, and went in.

'We're back, love,' I said.

Hethie looked up briefly. 'Have a good time?' she asked.

'Yes, lovely.'

'We met a friend of yours,' said Sue.

'I know. He told me you were coming.'

Well, at least that's an admission, I thought. 'Did he tell you what we said?' I asked.

'Yes. You don't need to worry about me, Mum. I'm fine.'

'Yes, love, but –'

'We're doing a project together, that's all.'

I've heard that before, I thought. 'A school project?' I asked cautiously.

'It started as a school project, and then he had ideas of how we could improve it.'

'Listen, love,' Sue interrupted, 'you should be careful with Gwydion. He's very –'

'He was very upset when you went off,' said Hethie, reproachfully. 'He says that once you met the Watchers you weren't interested in him anymore.' (Sue gave a cry of protest, but Hethie continued regardless.) 'And he needs help with this project. His big sister was working on it, and then he took over, and then they got stopped by this saint ...'

'That would be the one in the church?' I interrupted. 'Where we met Gwydion by the well?'

'Yes, that one. And he bound them both up so they can't leave Arfon, so now they can't get on with their project. But he can hear me because I have a presence in the spiritual realms –'

'Yes, we all do in this house,' I said. 'Go on.'

'And I started doing this school project and he came to see me in my dreams and said would I help him, so I said yes.'

'This is why the teachers are so worried about the school project,' I said.

Hethie sniffed disdainfully. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

'If Gwydion's behind it, there's everything to worry about,' said Sue hotly. 'It isn't true that I went off him – *he* went off *me*.'

'He says you didn't understand,' retorted Hethie.

Sue opened her mouth to protest, but I interrupted. 'So what is the school project about?'

Hethie frowned over her computer. 'I'm just writing it up now.'

'That doesn't answer my question,' I said.

Hethie pressed 'save' and looked up at me. 'We're going to do a demonstration.'

'You're not doing anything if you don't answer my question.'

Hethie frowned at me (she looks very like Jamie's spouse when she frowns). 'We're going to do a demonstration tomorrow. You can come along if you like.'

The trouble with being mother to a bunch of half demon/angels, or whatever the Watchers are, is that I can't force the children to do anything: they're all stuffed full of attitude and I-know-better-than-you-Mum. Generally I resort to persuasion or blackmail, but this time I just gave in to the inevitable.

'We'd love to come,' I said. 'Wouldn't we, Sue?'

'How many people are involved in this project?' asked Sue.

‘All my class,’ said Hethie. ‘Tomorrow is project report day. Now can you go away and let me finish this?’

So we apologised and slipped out the room, and then wondered whatever happened to parental authority.

*

Tuesday

The presentation of the class summer term projects took place in the school hall the following afternoon. Apparently all the parents had been invited, but Hethie had suppressed the letter of invitation to me and her fathers: ‘In case the project didn’t work. I didn’t want you to feel silly coming to see a failed project.’

‘Very thoughtful, darling,’ I said. ‘So does the project work?’

‘You’ll see,’ said my youngest, firmly but refusing to meet my eye.

I suggested that Wiroan, Haacleh or Jamie would like to come to see what Hethie had been up to, but my husband and Jamie’s spouse said they would rather not see their suspicions confirmed and I could tell them the worst later. Jamie agreed with some trepidation. Sue and Lynne (whose children are older than Hethie) agreed to come to support me, just in case.

There are five classes in the year and Hethie’s class was on last, so we had plenty of time to weigh up the quality of the other projects. The children had produced posters and models, and they also gave a presentation. We were treated to carefully rehearsed speeches about poverty in the developing world and how to resolve it, the evils of the arms race and how this could be halted; an exposition on climate change and what humans can do about it (I felt Jamie’s thought: Do we want to do anything about it? The world is cooler now than it was a thousand years ago); and how to enforce democracy in non-democratic countries. It was all very idealistic and well-intentioned, completely impractical and rather sweet.

We all applauded the democracy project. Then Hethie got up and gestured her class mates to their feet. One of the boys stepped forward to read from a script.

‘From the dawn of human society, humans have dreamed of creating the perfect human. Mary Shelley wrote her novel *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* over two centuries ago, but the artificial creation of humans remains a dream. Genetic modification offers the hope of correcting some of the natural failings of the human body, but objections on moral grounds are a stumbling block.’

A girl came forward to continue. ‘The solution is to create a new creature without genetic manipulation. Frankenstein created his monster using parts of humans, but we wanted to create a creature from scratch.’

There was absolute silence in the hall as the children explained how each of them had taken a piece of living tissue – a scraping from inside their mouth – and put it into a petrie dish with a chemical mixture which they had taken from ‘an old book in Heather Watcher’s home library.’ They explained that the book described an ancient historical attempt to create life, but they didn’t explain which chemicals they had used. They described how the cells had grown and multiplied, ‘but of course this doesn’t make a human, only a collection of cells. The next step was to imprint it with a pattern for it to grow into.’

I looked at my friends. ‘I have a bad feeling about this,’ I said, sotto voce.

‘Surely they can’t have got any results yet,’ whispered Sue.

The children explained that they had artificially impregnated a female mouse with some of the cells they had grown, and the mouse had produced baby mice, ‘but they died soon after birth.’ At the end of the presentation, Hethie stepped forward to sum up the project.

‘We have been very pleased by the success of the project so far, using the ancient formula as a catalyst. The next stage is that we need a suitable artificial womb so that we can check up on the growth day by day, because obviously we can’t see what’s happening inside a mouse. If this process can be perfected then it will eventually be possible to produce babies without needing a male and female and without going through all the risks of pregnancy and childbirth, which cause so much danger to the mother. Every year over three hundred thousand women die in pregnancy or childbirth and thousands more are seriously injured. If children could be produced without genetic defects and without the dangers and pain or childbirth, just think what a benefit it would be to humanity. Thank you for listening.’

There was a long silence when she sat down, and then a short burst of loud, somewhat forced applause. Then the head-of-year teacher came forward to congratulate all the children on their projects and to ask us to applaud them all again (which we did). We were then invited to walk around the hall to read the posters and look at the models which the children had produced.

The louder and more assertive parents immediately headed for the poster and models designed by Hethie’s class, and a babble of troubled and indignant voices arose around it. Realising that we had little chance of getting anywhere near the poster, I turned to find Hethie and saw that Lynne and Jamie had already detained her.

‘What in hell have you been up to?’ demanded Jamie. ‘If you want to create life, you should talk to your dads.’

Hethie’s face set in stubborn denial. ‘We don’t want that sort of creation. We want to do human science – the sort of thing humans can do.’

‘It’s dangerous,’ exclaimed Lynne. ‘You know how much of a mess of it the Watchers made. We spend all our time trying to sort it out.’

‘That’s what Gwydion said,’ retorted Hethie. ‘He said we could sort it out. But we’re starting with a small thing and building up.’

‘Gwydion is just a self-satisfied – ’

‘No, he isn’t. He and his sister were trying to improve humans, but it all went wrong.’

‘It’s very impressive,’ I said, ‘but isn’t it a bit advanced for your age?’

Hethie snorted. ‘What age? Gwydion said I’m the child of the ages.’

‘Gwydion is a self-serving, lying – ’ Lynne was getting quite het-up, but Hethie was unperturbed.

Sue came up to join us. ‘Some of the models are very impressive,’ she said. ‘I like the one of the artificial womb. I could have done with one of those!’

‘Auntie Sue,’ said Hethie firmly. ‘Do you agree that this is a useful project? After all, you nearly died when you had Aaron.’

Sue nodded. ‘It could be.’

‘Good,’ said Hethie, nodding. ‘Then you can come with me and talk to Gwydion and he’ll explain.’

*

Friday

Come with her, indeed! We had to take her – she couldn't get to Arfon by herself. After some discussion we decided to return by car to where we'd met Gwydion before, rather than jumping there Watcher-style, or trying to go by train or bus. The reason for this was largely that Sue, Lynne and I were not sure we believed that Hethie would be able to find Gwydion, and we wanted more freedom of movement than Watcher-jumping would give us.

Hethie insisted that we hire the red car again. When Sue suggested that green would blend into the landscape more effectively, she just snorted in disdain.

So we drove across country – we three women taking it in turn to drive, while Hethie dozed in the back seat. It was a long journey, and the weather began to deteriorate as we reached the north coast of Gwynedd. The traffic became so bad that Sue began to plot us an alternative route across country, and we took the risk of leaving the main road to strike through the hills. It should have been easy enough in good weather, but as it got darker and darker and the rain and wind grew more intense, we began to feel anxious.

'Are you sure this is the right road?' asked Lynne, from the back seat.

'Yes,' said Sue, staring at the map. 'I know where we are.'

'Just as well,' I said, peering through the slashing windscreen wipers and the pouring rain, 'because I can't see a thing.'

We were proceeding slowly along a lane with ditches on either side, flanked by loose-stone walls. The occasional hawthorn bush grew in the shelter of the ditch at the road side. The lane was narrow, but at least there seemed to be no other traffic ...

Whomph! From out of nowhere, a vast dark shape appeared, driving much too fast straight towards us – I spun the wheel, and the car careered off the road and into a hawthorn bush.

The huge black vehicle thundered past and vanished into the storm in a shower of spray.

'What was *that*?' exclaimed Lynne from the back seat.

'Lorry travelling without lights,' said Sue. She folded up the map and looked at me. 'Are you all right, Jules?'

I put the car into neutral, put on the handbrake and turned off the ignition. 'Wait a moment.' I wiped my sweating hands on my lap, pulled a handkerchief out of my coat pocket and blew my nose. 'Let's look at the damage.' I undid my seat belt and climbed out of the car.

Sue and Lynne followed me out into the rain; Hethie, awakened by the commotion, elected to stay in the car. We three women examined the front of the vehicle.

'It seems all right,' said Sue doubtfully. 'Can we get out of the bush and back on the road?'

'I'll start it,' said Lynne. 'You two push.'

I handed her the keys and she got into the car. With a little reverse power and a certain amount of persuasion from us, the car went back up the slope and on to the tarmac. Then we two took refuge in the vehicle – Sue navigating, me in the back – and we proceeded.

'You could have helped push,' I reproached Hethie.

She yawned. 'I knew you'd be OK.' She smiled sleepily. 'That was just a reminder.'

'Of what?' I demanded.

'Gwydion doesn't have to let us in if he doesn't want to.'

'Friendly of him. So now we've been allowed in?'

'Yes.' Hethie snuggled down again and closed her eyes. 'Wake me up when we get there.'

'There being the well?'

'Well?' Hethie opened her eyes and looked directly at me in surprise.

'It's where we met him last time.'

Hethie looked blank for a moment, then nodded. ‘OK. Possibly the well.’ She closed her eyes. ‘See you later.’

‘OK,’ I said to Sue and Lynne, ‘it seems that Hethie has arranged to meet him by the well where we met him last time.’

Before we went there, however, we went in search of a bed-and-breakfast. This could take some time, and we wanted to ensure we had a base. Then we set out for the well.

It was still raining, but the rain was slackening off as we drove into the village, and it was possible to walk to the well with the hoods on our rain-proof jackets down. When we reached the well, however, we found a family there – and no sign of Gwydion. We exchanged greetings and retreated.

‘So, where is he?’ I demanded.

Hethie looked blank for a moment, then said: ‘It’s not raining in the church.’

We went back to the church, and there – sitting in one of the pews – was Gwydion. He got up as we entered, and smiled a welcome. Hethie ran to him and he greeted her with a hug, ‘My flower-maiden!’, and a kiss on the cheek.

‘May we sit down?’ I asked.

He gestured at the pews. ‘Please do.’

‘We’ve seen Hethie’s project,’ said Lynne, as she seated herself in a pew across the aisle from him, ‘and you’re trying to create an artificial womb.’

‘Yes.’

‘Growing babies asexually rather than through sexual reproduction.’

‘Yes.’

‘In the story, you had a box at the foot of your bed where you grew the baby who turned into Lleu,’ said Sue. ‘Was that an artificial womb?’

‘Yes.’

‘But you got the material from your sister.’

‘Yes. It was Aranrod’s project.’

‘I see! That makes sense.’ Sue became animated, waving her arms about excitedly. ‘She was going to produce children asexually – so she *was* a virgin! When your uncle asked her and she said she was a virgin, she wasn’t lying. She *was* a virgin – but she was carrying children.’

‘And I didn’t know,’ said Gwydion. ‘She hadn’t told me about her experiment.’

‘That’s why she was so angry with you, and blamed you for everything, and wouldn’t acknowledge Lleu.’ Sue shook her head ruefully. ‘You would never have suggested that she come to your uncle’s court if you’d known.’

‘You should have kept your uncle out of it,’ said Lynne. ‘He was nothing but trouble.’

Gwydion was regarding us with amusement. ‘You have good memories,’ he said. ‘For women who claim not to care –’

‘*You* broke off communication.’ Lynne brushed his comment aside. ‘So your sister was in the middle of a big scientific experiment, to develop babies asexually, and you tried to get her a place at court and messed up her experiment. And she was furious.’

‘But the first child was successful,’ said Sue. ‘She could have gone on with it.’

‘She said the womb wasn’t safe,’ said Gwydion.

‘So you used an artificial womb for Lleu. And it worked.’

‘Yes, we got a fast-developing human boy who grew twice as fast and learned twice as quickly as a normal child.’

‘But your sister was furious at your interfering and wouldn’t co-operate. She tried to stop your experiment.’

‘She told me the first child was unstable and the second one was unbalanced. The first one had to be terminated early.’

‘His uncle killed him,’ I remembered. ‘The story implies it was an accident.’

Gwydion shook his head. ‘Not entirely an accident.’

‘But Lleu was lovely! A perfect child.’

Gwydion shook his head again. ‘He couldn’t reproduce.’

‘Sterile?’ asked Sue. ‘I thought he had a son.’

‘He could reproduce asexually, but not sexually. The built-in protections – he was designed to be indestructible – meant that he couldn’t produce valid sperm. That was why he couldn’t have a wife.’

‘So you made him one, from flowers,’ Hethie interjected. ‘She was lovely.’

‘But you overdid it,’ I said. ‘You made her too human.’

‘I bet it was your uncle’s fault,’ said Sue. ‘He helped you, didn’t he? Did he have lots of ideas about how to improve her? And the result was that you got a realistic woman who had her own ideas.’

Gwydion smiled. ‘I told you – you’ve improved a lot since I last saw you.’

‘So she was never meant to be a real wife,’ mused Lynne. ‘She was decoration.’

‘A warrior-king has to have a wife,’ I said. ‘So you had to give him one. Then I guess you designed children for him in due course.’

‘Why wouldn’t Aranrod help?’ asked Sue. ‘You’d proved that her idea worked.’

‘She said I was pushing ahead too quickly. Lleu was only a prototype – we should have terminated him. But I was fond of him.’

‘Oh, *Gwydion*,’ said Hethie, and patted his arm.

We all looked at him sympathetically. Poor Gwydion. His experiment had been too successful: he had thought of Lleu as his own child, although he was really a scientific creation. And then everything had got out of hand.

‘You didn’t even terminate Blodeuwedd,’ said Sue. ‘You just changed her so that she couldn’t do any more damage.’

‘Why didn’t Aranrod do any more experiments?’ I asked.

‘She did,’ said her brother. ‘We worked together for a long time.’

‘What happened?’ we all asked.

‘Something went badly wrong.’

‘You didn’t manage to blow the place up?’ I ventured. ‘Destroy the hill-top towns and flood your sister’s castle?’

He was rueful. ‘Something like that. And now we’re trapped here.’

‘Who trapped you?’ asked Sue.

‘In a way – we trapped ourselves.’

We three women exchanged glances. Hethie was looking at Gwydion with worship in her eyes – clearly she hadn’t questioned this, or what Gwydion was still doing in Arfon thousands of years after the events described in the *Mabinogion*.

‘You blew yourselves up in the disaster,’ said Lynne tartly. ‘Because you’re descended from the Watchers you can’t be annihilated, but you can only have physical form in Arfon. Outside Arfon you’re just ghosts.’

‘What were you trying to do?’ demanded Sue.

Gwydion shrugged: 'It doesn't matter now.'

We eyed him sceptically. If his big sister and he had succeeded in flooding a large section of Arfon and wiping out the giants, it was probably better not to think about what they had been trying to do.

'You two killed everyone, but you survived,' I said. 'What have you been doing since then?'

'We've been watching over the land,' he said.

'The Battle of the Trees?'

'That's part of it.'

'And you've been trying to go on with your experiments by persuading people to help you. But you couldn't persuade people.'

'I know,' said Sue, brightly. 'You fell foul of the saints. They bound you up.'

'Not exactly. They restricted what we could do.'

'So you've been waiting for them to lose their power. Which meant waiting for people to stop believing in their power. But people still believe in them.'

'Not so much as they did,' said Gwydion. 'And they believe in science now. So we can press on with our work.'

'Are you trying to recreate the giants?' asked Lynne suspiciously.

'Of course.'

'And the improvements you were trying to make?'

'They're going to make humans much better,' said Hethie. 'Make them taller and stronger and make them live longer – and use artificial wombs and breed out all the defects and allergies and inherited conditions.'

'I'd have thought you'd learned your lesson last time,' I said. 'Are you trying to recreate Lleu and Blodeuwedd?'

'They were physically perfect but emotional cripples,' said Lynne. 'How are you going to get the emotion right?'

'Humans really are better left alone,' said Sue. 'Meddling with the design only causes trouble.'

'That's why we need help,' said Gwydion. 'That's why I asked Heather to help us.'

We three women exchanged glances, and then looked at Hethie, who was exchanging loving glances with Gwydion. I sighed in exasperation.

'We need to talk to your big sister,' I said.

He shot me a look. 'Aranrod prefers to let me do the talking.'

'We need to talk to her,' I said. 'We're not taking this on trust. We want to know what you're up to.'

'Where is Aranrod?' asked Sue.

Gwydion shrugged. 'She'll be down on the beach.'

'You go and look for her,' said Hethie. 'I'll stay here with Gwydion.'

'You're coming with us,' I said.

'She'll be safe with me,' said Gwydion.

I didn't trust him, but – to be honest – what could he do? He's only a semblance, a ghost – not a real being. I got to my feet.

'OK. You two had better be here when we come back.'

'Or else what?' demanded Hethie.

'Or else I'll set your fathers on to you.'

‘Are you sure this is wise?’ demanded Lynne, as we shut the door of the church behind us. ‘No,’ I said, ‘but we need to find out what they’re really up to, and I don’t trust Gwydion.’ ‘I never did,’ said Lynne firmly.

That probably meant that she’d been badly burned. Sue just said, ‘Well, I’ve always wanted to meet his sister. I wonder how we’ll recognise her?’

*

As it turned out, Aranrod was easy enough to find. She was walking on the beach near the church, picking up pebbles. She looked like a young woman with long dark red hair with a slight curl in it, and a strong-featured face; she was wearing a calf-length green dress, belted at the waist, and was barefoot on the sand. She nodded at us as we came up.

Sue was about to break into a formal greeting, but she held up a hand to cut her short. ‘Did you enjoy your voyage to my castle?’ she asked.

Sue smiled. ‘It was lovely.’

‘I thought you would like the unicorn boat.’

‘I’m sorry your castle is a ruin.’

She shrugged. ‘It’s still there, out of time. We can go there, if you want to talk.’

‘We can talk here,’ I said. ‘The beach is quiet enough.’

‘It’s nice to be outdoors in the sunshine,’ added Lynne.

Aranrod shrugged. ‘As you like. What has my no-good brother been telling you?’

‘He wants my daughter to help you with your experiments,’ I said. ‘She’s very keen. I wish he’d leave girls alone.’

She laughed. ‘He’s still looking for the ideal flower-girl. Your daughter is Heather, right?’

I nodded.

‘So she’s a flower. But she’s also clever and inventive, which is what we need.’

‘What are you doing?’ I insisted. ‘I don’t want Hethie tied up in some genetic engineering scheme that’s going to result in world-wide disaster.’

‘You *are* imaginative, aren’t you?’ She laughed at me.

‘No,’ said Sue, coming to my rescue. ‘We’ve read the story. Dylan was genetically engineered, wasn’t he? A sea-going human. But he died – or he was terminated.’

Aranrod stopped laughing at that, and frowned at us. ‘I stopped that line of research.’

‘You had to stop it, because you had no means of obtaining material,’ said Lynne. ‘Once you’d destroyed everything, you had no bodies to use.’

Aranrod tossed her head. ‘Destroyed? What do you mean?’

‘What happened to the giants?’ asked Lynne. ‘The children of the Watchers? Everyone died. The cities on the hills – everyone was killed.’

Aranrod was silent for a moment, then said: ‘There was a natural disaster.’

‘Was it a disease? A tsunami? A nuclear bomb?’

‘Was everyone poisoned with arsenic from the tin mines?’ asked Sue.

‘There was a disease,’ said Aranrod. ‘A poison. It came with the traders from overseas.’ She turned away from us. ‘I tried to find a treatment – an inoculation against it.’

‘And it killed everyone,’ said Lynne.

‘Everyone,’ she said softly. ‘And then the storms came, and washed everything away.’

‘But you survived,’ said Sue.

‘We – survived in a sense,’ said Aranrod.

‘You can’t die,’ I said. ‘You’re the children of the sky-mother.’

‘We had to decontaminate everything,’ said Aranrod, as if she hadn’t heard me. ‘There were just a few of us survivors – we had to clean up everything, so that there was not a trace left. And then the others died – they had no hope to live for. There was just me and my little brother.’

‘And you want to grow them again,’ I said, ‘but you don’t have any material, because you lost your physical bodies. So you need Watchers’ children to provide the material, which means you want Hethie and her brothers and sisters. But what are your experiments going to do to them?’

Aranrod looked me in the eye. ‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘We just want a few cells, a scraping from the inside of their mouth, or a little hair, or a broken fingernail.’

Where had I read that you should never trust a woman who looks you in the eye? ‘And then what happens?’ I asked.

‘We will grow the cells in the incubators that we’ve been working on all these centuries: artificial wombs that will form them into children.’

‘Like Dylan and Llew,’ said Sue.

Aranrod sniffed in disdain. ‘Much better than that.’

‘There’s a catch,’ said Lynne. ‘There’s always a catch.’

Aranrod laughed – madly, merrily. ‘There’s no catch! Why are you so suspicious?’

I thought: because we all know your brother too well, that’s why. I said: ‘Because we’re naturally untrusting. Thanks for the information. We’ll go back and find my daughter now – we need to be getting on.’

I forced myself not to run back to the church, but I needn’t have worried: Hethie and Gwydion were still sitting in the church, talking. It struck me that one of Gwydion’s attractions for my daughter is that he’s an adult who treats her with respect – unlike her parents, or her siblings. Clearly I needed to make her get out more.

‘Hi, Mum,’ said Hethie, pre-empting anything I might have been about to say. ‘We’re just discussing incubators.’

‘We’re not housing anything,’ I said quickly. ‘There are enough experiments going on at home without yours too.’

‘We’ll house it,’ said Gwydion. ‘I just need some genetic material.’

Hethie put her hands to her hair and broke off few strands. ‘Like this,’ she said, handing them to him. Gwydion nodded, and put them away in a pocket.

‘Your hair is dead,’ said Sue. ‘You need living cells, don’t you?’

Gwydion gave her one of his smiles. ‘So, will you contribute?’

‘Surely if you wanted our help you would have asked,’ I said quickly. ‘Come on, Hethie – we need to be getting back.’

‘Back where? I thought we were staying the night?’

This was true, so I amended: ‘We need to go and find something to eat, and talk about this.’

‘You just want to talk me out of it,’ said Hethie.

At this point we were interrupted; the church door opened, and a man entered: wearing a dark suit, with a white dog-collar – clearly the minister.

Lynn immediately went over to greet him with outstretched hand – she’s always ready to talk to the clergy. ‘Good afternoon,’ she said, ‘we’ve been looking round your beautiful church.’

‘Good day to you,’ he replied, shaking her hand. ‘Has my young friend here been showing you around?’ He nodded at Gwydion, adding: ‘Did you find the keys?’

Gwydion smiled: that charming, seductive smile. ‘Yes – they were in the well, of all places. I left them in the bowl in the vestry.’ He gestured towards that room.

‘This young man,’ said the minister to us, ‘is our security officer. He keeps an eye on the church and finds things that go missing – and when we had some trouble with thefts, he found the perpetrators.’

Gwydion smiled, the sort of smile that boded no good for the thieves. I wondered what had happened to them.

Then the minister noticed Hethie standing beside Gwydion, with her hand on his shoulder. ‘Ah: should I know these visitors? Friends of yours?’

Gwydion shook his head briefly. ‘They’re my cousins.’ (I suppose this is true – Ra’haah is his grandmother and sister to two of Hethie’s fathers.) ‘This is Heather – her mother Julie – Sue – Lynne.’ I half expected him to say: ‘Old flames of mine,’ but he didn’t; sparing our blushes – and his own.

The minister smiled warmly and stepped forward to shake Sue’s hand, Hethie’s and mine and then Lynne’s again, one after the other. ‘So *you’re* Gwydion’s cousins! I’m glad to meet you at last. Are you visiting the area?’

‘We came to see Gwydion and his sister,’ I said. ‘We have some catching up to do.’

‘Where are you staying?’

‘In a guest house just down the road,’ said Lynne.

‘The Willow Tree?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mrs Williams will certainly look after you well. Is she giving you tea?’

He meant the evening meal. ‘No,’ I said, ‘we were just going to go and look for it.’

‘Perhaps you’d like to bring your cousins to tea?’ said the minister to Gwydion. ‘We need to discuss that new security system, and your sister promised to bring Beth some of her flower syrup.’

‘Yes,’ said Gwydion, serious now, ‘I’ll remind her about it.’

‘We can’t just drop in at a moment’s notice,’ said Sue quickly.

‘Of course you must come,’ said the minister. ‘Gwydion has told us so much about you! We can’t expect our friends to go wandering around looking for hospitality.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, ‘we’d love to come.’ So now, I realised, we knew how Aranrod and Gwydion had survived all these centuries without their own people; they had made themselves indispensable to the society in which they now lived. And of course Gwydion, as we know from the *Mabinogion*, is the best guest in the world: full of amusing anecdotes and entertaining conversation.

Tea was somewhat surreal. We sat in a stone-built rectory around a solid wooden dining table with a white lace tablecloth, eating bread-and-butter with ham and cheese, and flat fruit griddle cakes (‘Welsh cakes’) followed by cake and fruit tea cake (the Welsh version is called Bara Brith) smothered in real, unsalted butter. We drank tea – even Lynne drank it, although normally she won’t touch the stuff – and Hethie had a glass of milk, which again she normally won’t touch. The conversation was genteel and proper: Aranrod talked to Beth (the Rector’s wife) about gardening and the best way to make her flower syrup, which is good against colds and ‘flu; and Gwydion told light-hearted and amusing anecdotes to entertain Hethie and we three ‘ladies’, as the minister called us. As we sat there, smiling at Gwydion’s anecdotes and listening with half an ear to Beth and Aranrod discussing bees, I thought to myself that we were a long way from Frankenstein’s monster, genetic manipulation or even

Aranrod as warrior woman (lady of the castle) and Gwydion as warrior magician (winning single combats by using magic). It was hardly the atmosphere of the heroic age.

The minister – the Reverend, but he told us to call him Mr Roberts – asked Hethie about her school, and Gwydion turned to me, caught my eye and raised his eyebrows. I felt his thought: ‘You’re looking harassed.’

Harassed? Me? Now, what have I got to be harassed about?

‘You always did over-react,’ he said – in my thoughts, not out loud. ‘You’ve never learnt to take things as they come.’

‘Like blowing up a kingdom?’

‘We didn’t blow it up.’ He was smiling, casual.

‘So, you just poisoned everyone.’

‘No! Jules – you take yourself far too seriously. I would have thought his high-and-mightiness would have cured you of that.’ A pause. ‘On second thoughts – maybe not.’

‘I’m wondering what you are getting Hethie into.’

His smile broadened: his thought said: ‘Nothing,’ – and then we weren’t in the dining room anymore, but on an open hill top, in the wind and the rain.

‘Ouch,’ I said. ‘Couldn’t we go back to the nice warm house?’

He shrugged. ‘We *are* there. But this is more private for talking. Come down here.’ He took my arm and steered me into a hollow in the rocks, out of the wind, and pulled me down to sit next to him on the stones. He put an arm around me; my head rested on his shoulder.

‘That’s better,’ he said, and I felt him relax.

‘You hypocrite,’ I said, but now I was smiling despite myself. ‘You could have done that ages ago.’

‘I can’t compete with his high and mightiness, can I?’ he said, and hugged me a bit closer.

‘If you’d been there when I wanted you, you wouldn’t have had to,’ I said.

‘It was no good,’ he said. ‘He’d already marked you out.’

‘Liar,’ I wanted to say, ‘you’re just making excuses. You never commit to any one person – you can’t bear to be tied down.’ But I couldn’t say it; he always did have that effect on me. I think he has the same effect on all the girls. I closed my eyes and fell asleep, my head on his shoulder and a peaceful smile on my lips.

Of course Hethie would be all right – of course Gwydion wouldn’t harm her – of course he meant no harm – of course nothing could possibly go wrong ...

I opened my eyes. ‘I don’t know why I ever trust you,’ I said sleepily.

‘You don’t,’ he said, cheerfully. ‘But Hethie will be perfectly safe. She’ll make sure of that.’

‘What *are* you doing with her?’ I asked.

‘She’s providing some genetic material – her hair – and her intellect. She’s full of ideas.’

‘How far has this thing gone?’ I wondered.

He pulled me to my feet. ‘Come and see.’

He led me through a narrow crack in the rocks – through a door – and we emerged into a large room, dimly lit, apparently by concealed lighting. There were rows of laboratory benches down the room and on them glass boxes – and in the boxes were small shapes, floating in liquid.

‘An improvement on the box at the end of my bed,’ said Gwydion, smiling at my amazement. ‘And much more efficient than Aranrod trying to grow them inside herself.’

‘Artificial wombs?’

‘Yes! I can see you’re impressed.’ He was obviously very pleased with my reaction.
‘How far gone are they – I mean, when do they hatch? Or whatever they do?’
‘A few months yet.’ He laughed: ‘I haven’t been talking to Hethie for very long, you know.’

‘No – so this is all from her *hair*?’

‘Physical material from the children of Dana.’

He meant the Watchers’ children. ‘Are you growing an army, or something?’

His tone was mocking. ‘Armies are for losers. If you have to fight, you’ve already lost the argument.’

‘So how would you win?’ I asked, but I already knew the answer to that one: ‘By negotiation, deal-making, trickery and magic.’

‘Less of the magic,’ he said. ‘It’s a lot of effort.’

And that would never do, I thought.

He caught the thought: ‘*Unnecessary* effort,’ he corrected himself. ‘And we aren’t fighting a war. We’re only creating improved people.’

‘Giants,’ I said.

‘Not particularly in size – in intellect, yes.’

I walked down the rows looking into the glass tanks, at each little embryo, floating in nutritious fluid. They slept encased in the liquid, smiling a little in their sleep, moving their little limbs. He stood watching me, waiting for me to walk back to him.

‘They’re very sweet,’ I said, as I rejoined him at the head of the room.

‘So may I borrow Heather, to help with the project?’ His tone was teasing.

‘I’d still rather you didn’t.’

‘No?’ Why not?’ His eyes were bright; his expression hurt and yet curious.

‘Stop it,’ I said, ‘you *know* why.’

‘You can’t be jealous,’ he said, putting his arms about me and drawing me into his embrace, ‘because Aranrod and I need our own people’s genetic material for this project, and you’re human – not related to us.’

‘I know. You *know* why.’

‘Silly thing,’ he said, holding me close, ‘you never did trust me.’

‘You didn’t deserve to be trusted. You disappeared – and now I find you were after Lynne and Sue as well ...’

‘But of course. The three of you were very attractive on the spiritual plane. Your spiritual voices were calling – and I answered – but Lynne retreated very quickly. She’s far too afraid of making a fool of herself. And then her god-demon got hold of her – whatever he calls himself...’

‘You upset Sue.’

‘Whatever she says and whatever she believes, she was always more interested in that dog-headed god-demon of hers.’

‘And I ... you disappeared.’

‘I did *not* disappear. You were snatched from me by – well, obviously I couldn’t compete.’

‘No, obviously not.’ I had to grant him that. Wiroan is obviously a *lot* more powerful than Gwydion. But still: ‘You disappeared,’ I persisted.

‘I’m not disappearing now,’ he said, and kissed me.

I really shouldn’t be such a sucker for plausible, sweet-talking spirits. But there it is: that’s how I got sucked in by Wiroan, and why I and my friends are now Watchers-by-marriage and

helping them to watch over Creation forever, rather than living out our lives as respectable humans on Earth.

*

(Sue)

I noticed that Jules and Gwydion had gone, but before I could say anything Beth spoke to Lynne about something – something Church-related, which immediately distracted her attention – Mr Roberts spoke to Hethie about her school, and Aranrod turned to me and said, ‘I need to fetch something – do come with me.’ Before I could object, she had taken my left hand and pulled me up: and we were in another room, a vaulted room, very light and airy, all painted white with just a few flowers decorating the walls and ceiling, and large arched windows overlooking the sea. The sun was shining outside, and I could hear the waves washing and gulls crying. We were in Aranrod’s castle.

I must have been looking around me with my mouth open, because she said, ‘You could have come here before if you’d stepped out of the boat.’

‘I’d left Jules and Lynne on the shore,’ I said. ‘I wanted to get back to them.’

‘They should have come with you, then! I wanted you to come in. I wanted a word with you before you met my brother.’

I wasn’t sure whether I should trust her, so I just said, ‘Well, now I’m here – what was it you wanted to say?’

‘Your friend Jules needn’t worry about her daughter. We just need some of her hair, because it contains the genetic code for our people.’

‘I think Gwydion is doing more than taking hair,’ I said cautiously.

‘Oh, he’s only amusing her,’ said Aranrod, shrugging. ‘He likes children. I know you’ve read all about how he brought up Lleu.’

‘You didn’t like it,’ I ventured.

‘No, of course not. He’d wrecked my experiment and I was done with the whole thing. And now he was trying to take it over. It was a complete non-starter and I just wanted to wipe it all out and start again.’

‘But Lleu was a great success, in the end,’ I ventured again.

‘He was sterile,’ said Aranrod. ‘He was a dead end.’

‘I thought he had a son?’

‘He was named after the Irish god, you know,’ said Aranrod carelessly.

‘I’d guessed that,’ I said.

‘I remember you were rather keen on Lugh?’

‘Did Gwydion tell you that?’ I asked indignantly.

‘Oh, yes! He was rather keen on you. On all three of you, at one time. Of course it didn’t last. You three were snapped up by the great ones – I suppose it was inevitable. But the advantage is that now your children have the physical characteristics of their fathers. We don’t need much of that to reproduce it.’

‘And rebuild the giants.’

‘Exactly! You were always the clever one.’

She was flattering me, and this made me anxious. What was she after? I thought of my husband – Teloan had taught me how to channel spiritual and physical forces. Could I read what Aranrod was trying to do?’

Immediately I realised that we were not in the here-and-now. Aranrod had slipped us into a place and time where her castle has not been washed away under the sea. I could get back to

my own here-and-now, but while I was here the normal physical laws were restricted. I couldn't read her clearly.

I thought of my husband. What would he tell me to do?

Aranrod was watching me, her eyes alert, but she didn't say anything. I wondered what she was calculating.

'Where's Jules?' I asked. 'She went off with Gwydion.'

'He took her to see the laboratory,' said Aranrod. 'She can see what we're doing with the cells Heather gave us.'

'We can't help you,' I said quickly. 'You know we can't take part in your experiments, because we're just normal humans.'

'Jules is particularly fertile,' said Aranrod, thoughtfully.

'Not at the moment,' I said. 'Wiroan locked up her eggs. She said enough children is enough.'

'Did she? How many children do they have?'

'They're not all just Wiroan's,' I said. 'They have more than one father.'

'Yes, that's what I thought,' said Aranrod. 'I tested the first hair sample that Heather gave us. There are at least two different sets of genetic patterning from the Great Ones in there. That's why Julie's children are particularly valuable to us.'

'She isn't going to have any more children. Not for a long time. No matter what Gwydion tries to talk her into. She can't.'

'I wouldn't be so sure,' said Aranrod thoughtfully.

'I'm going back to the tea table,' I said, and went. The room was still just as we'd left it – Mr Roberts was talking to Hethie and his wife was talking to Lynne. Aranrod reappeared a moment after I did, and got up to refill the teapot. But Gwydion and Jules were nowhere to be seen.

Where were they? I was getting worried. Had Gwydion managed to talk Jules into something? She seems so hard-headed, but she's a terrible romantic really. That's how she's got three men running round after her.

*

(Hethie)

I was cross with Mum. She'd been reading my diary (Gwydion told me), and she'd come barging in on my romance, my own little romance, the first one I'd ever had. Gwydion is so lovely, but of course he was still mad on my mum, and the moment he saw she's still interested in him he wanted her back. I could see he still likes me, but he was looking all greedy-eyes at Mum.

Then he said in my mind, 'I'll show your mum the experiment,' and the next moment they were both gone and I had to stay behind and entertain Mr Roberts.

Now, Mr Roberts is very nice and asked lots of intelligent questions, but I wanted to know where Gwydion had gone and what he was doing with Mum. I had an idea it was something they shouldn't. But I couldn't get away. Mr Roberts kept talking and I wished I could twist time like my dads can so I could be in two places at once, but I haven't learnt how to do it yet.

So instead I listened out for Mum. I can usually hear what she's doing if I listen for her (although normally I don't bother because it isn't very interesting). But I couldn't hear her.

Auntie Lynne was talking to Mrs Roberts about Church stuff – she can talk for hours about things to do with the Church – and Auntie Sue disappeared for a moment with Aranrod, and

then they both came back. Auntie Sue was looking worried and Aranrod was looking annoyed.

Then I knew things weren't going quite as planned, so I nudged Mr Roberts to talk to Auntie Sue instead of me, and I tried to hear what Aranrod was thinking. She was wondering where Gwydion had got to and why he hadn't brought Mum back yet. I thought, 'Oh, no – Mum's up to her old tricks again,' like when my dads were fighting over her, and I thought a strong thought at Aranrod that someone needed to go and rescue Gwydion.

I could feel her thinking how silly I was being and that of course her brother wouldn't need rescuing, and I thought back, 'How little you know!'

I could see she didn't want to believe me, but she was getting more and more restless, so I suggested to her that she should just go and look for him and come back quickly. I could see she wasn't very happy with the suggestion, but eventually she nodded and vanished. No one except me noticed because they were all talking and drinking tea.

I already knew that she was going to be very cross indeed when she came back. Mum can be very annoying sometimes.

*

(Jules)

Gwydion kissed me, and the next thing I knew we were horizontal. He'd moved us again, to a bed in a room which I assume is in the fort of Dinas Dinlle in another dimension and time when it is still inhabitable and hasn't been half washed away into the sea.

I thought about struggling, and decided not to bother. I'd been in love with Gwydion once, and although I wasn't in love with him anymore (I told myself), we could make up a bit of lost time. It wasn't as if there was anything serious between us now. So I returned his kiss, perhaps a bit more enthusiastically than he'd expected. He responded, and the temperature went up very quickly. Neither of us said anything, as if we both thought that if we spoke we'd have to make excuses for our behaviour or say something meaningful. We just went with each other's flow.

It was *quite* a flow.

We stopped. We looked at each other.

'No excuses,' he said quickly. 'You didn't stop me.'

I thought for a moment. I decided to be honest. 'No,' I said.

He started to move away, but I grabbed him and pulled him back, so he didn't get far.

Some time later he drew away and said, 'My big sister is calling out for me.'

'She can call,' I said. 'Do you have to answer?'

'I usually do,' he said.

'You're not usually with me,' I said. 'After that performance, don't try telling me that you're indifferent.'

He shook his head. I pulled him back again. He'd avoided me for so long, so now I was going to have my money's worth, so to speak.

I realised after a while that Hethie was trying to find me, so I sent her a 'Don't bother me now, love,' thought and went on with what I was doing.

'That's enough,' he said at last, and rolled off me. 'That's enough. No more.' He lay back on the pillows and closed his eyes.

I propped myself on my elbow and looked down at him. He looked asleep. Possibly he wasn't, but I wasn't going to let him run off immediately.

I pulled the covers up over us, draped myself over him and fell asleep on his shoulder.

I thought: at least he doesn't want to move. He seems peaceful enough here. Perhaps I can keep him away from Hethie.

I slept like a log, but I had my legs around his, to make sure he couldn't run away.

I woke up when I heard him say, 'We'd better get back. Aranrod is fretting,' and I opened my eyes and saw him stretching his arms and propping himself up on his elbows. I managed a sleepy smile, and he returned it and then said, 'We'll have to go before she gets mad.' He sat up. I followed suit and put my arms around him, but after the first kiss he said, 'There's water in the room that way' – pointing behind us, 'and we'd better both wash.'

So I did as he asked, and found my way into what was some sort of bathroom, with water running into a stone bowl, and I washed and dried myself on a large linen sheet that was acting as a towel, and generally made myself comfortable and tidied myself up, and then I went back and put my clothes back on, while he washed. Then he took my hand and we stepped back into the dining room that we had left and sat down in our places, and no one looked up from their conversations – everything went on as if we hadn't left.

After the meal Gwydion and Aranrod left to do some work, they said: but so far as I could see they were going off to have a major discussion or an argument. Mr Roberts told his wife that he would wash up and asked me to 'come and dry', so I helped him carry the plates and cups and so on into the kitchen. His wife, Beth, put away cakes, jam and other things that were left over, while Mr Roberts started the washing up. Beth gave me a thick cotton tea towel, showed me which drawer the fresh tea towels were in, and departed to talk to the others, leaving us to get on with the job.

I asked Mr Roberts about the parish and the church, and kept him talking about his work. He was happy to talk about the joys and problems of providing pastoral care to a large rural parish, and the challenge of keeping an ancient church building going. 'Gwydion and Aranrod are such a help,' he said. 'They do so much of the routine work for us.'

'You said earlier that Gwydion helps with security in the church,' I said.

'Yes, he's invaluable.' He handed me a freshly-washed teacup. 'He's very fond of you; did you know that?'

'Is he? I thought it was all words,' I said, caught unawares.

'He's a good young man,' said Mr Roberts carefully. 'I know he can appear flippant and uncaring, but underneath he has a deeply loving heart. I thought there was something there – some old hurt – then when I saw him looking at you I realised what it must be. You're cousins, he said?'

'Distantly related through in-laws,' I said quickly.

'He's told us about his cousins – and about you. Do you care for him?'

The directness of the question took my breath away. Could I mention at this point that I am already married? I looked into his concerned face and realised that I couldn't.

'Yes,' I said.

'I think you've known each other a long time?'

'We were – friends – a long time ago. But we haven't seen each other for years, until this week.'

He nodded. 'I do think – if you could find it in your heart to say "yes" – he would be an excellent husband to you.'

I managed to bite my tongue. 'Thank you,' I said.

'I mean it. He's deeply in love with you – I know it doesn't look like it, but it's clear to Beth and me. And I would like to see him happy – to see them both happy.'

‘Do you think that Aranrod would approve?’ I asked.

‘Big sisters are always happy to see their little brothers settled.’

I hope so, I thought.

‘Promise me you’ll give it serious consideration.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, and went back to the washing up.

I dried a plate with deep concentration. I could hardly agree to marry Gwydion – whatever would Wiroan say? But surely Gwydion wasn’t interested in marriage!

I thought: we need to get back home. But Hethie was still fretting after Gwydion, and I still had no idea what to do about her. She would be mad at me for seducing Gwydion, and still just as mad over him as ever. So we’d better stay at the bed-and-breakfast tonight, and continue negotiations in the morning.

Something at the back of my mind wanted to spend the night with Gwydion. I told it to shut up.

After we had thanked the Robertses and set off in the car to the bed and breakfast:

‘We could drive up to Dinas Dinlle to watch the sunset,’ said Sue.

‘That would stop Jules moping over Gwydion,’ said Lynne, giving me a knowing smile.

I wanted to deny it, but knew I couldn’t. Hethie scowled at me.

‘You’d forgotten all about him until he came to talk to me,’ she said.

‘I thought he’d forgotten all about me,’ I said.

Hethie said, ‘Huh!’ and was silent. When we got to Dinas Dinlle she jumped out of the car and ran up the slopes of the fort ahead of the rest of us, then stood on the highest point looking out to sea. Sue and Lynne hurried after her, but I found my legs sagging – for some reason I was feeling very tired. It must have been all the emotional trauma of the day. And possibly I was still feeling shaken after the almost car-crash in the hills.

When I got to the top, Hethie was pointing out things on the beach to Sue and Lynne. Suddenly I couldn’t be bothered to join them, and I sat down on the bank and looked down the coast, across the green fields towards the black wall of the Rivals. Hethie was saying something about ‘Gwydion’s land’, and I thought how ridiculous it was to be my daughter’s rival in love. Obviously, I should just have kept out of it and let Hethie fall into Gwydion’s arms.

I felt an arm go round me. ‘Perhaps I’d rather have you,’ said his voice in my ear. His breath was very warm.

I thought about replying, and then just lay back into his embrace. He tightened the arm around me.

There was a short pause while we watched the other three admiring the view and then running across the fort and down the path that led to the beach. I wondered what they’d seen, but couldn’t be bothered to run after them.

We sat for a while longer in silence. I realised that my heart was beating rapidly. I realised that so was his.

‘Mr Roberts said I should marry you,’ I said, trying to say it lightly.

‘Sounds like a good idea.’

‘I didn’t dare break it to him that I’m married already.’

‘Polyandry.’ His lips were very close to my ear.

‘You don’t get married, do you?’ I paused. ‘Welsh marriage laws? – not sure what they are.’

‘They allow for a looser arrangement.’ A pause. ‘But sometimes something closer is what’s needed.’

I nodded. ‘I see.’ I waited to see if he had anything more to say, but he didn’t, so I said: ‘What are you going to do with your army of babies? You don’t have any means of looking after them all.’

I felt his shrug. ‘We’ll cope.’

‘Like you did before? You and Aranrod will go mad! You’ll end up with psychological wrecks – like Lleu and his flower-maiden.’

‘Blodeuwedd.’

‘Yes.’

‘You could help us.’ He was nuzzling my ear.

‘No, I couldn’t.’

‘Your dear husband and his siblings. My grandparents’ family. They could take some responsibility for us, for once. For a change.’

I found myself smiling bitterly. ‘They’re not good at that.’

‘They could have come and helped us. When disaster came, they did nothing for us.’

‘They’ve never understood what they created or how to look after it,’ I said.

He hugged me a bit closer. I moved closer into his embrace. He pulled me gently down beside him on the grass – but now we were not in the grass, we were in his room in his fort, in the fort that existed once-upon-a-time and still exists in his imagination, or outside-time-and-space. I turned to look into his face, and he met my gaze and smiled, a smile of affectionate amusement.

‘Polyandry,’ he said again, and kissed me.

I went with the flow. It was what I wanted to do. Let’s admit it to myself: I used to be wild about Gwydion, and when he broke off contact I was heartbroken. But he has that effect on girls, as I’ve already said.

And he always seems to be utterly genuine. Perhaps he is utterly genuine, but in a way that’s utterly different from what modern society expects. He doesn’t expect to do one-on-one love forever. He expects a girl to move around the men, and a man to move around the girls. He doesn’t expect to keep a girl forever or for her to expect to keep him. It’s a different way of doing relationships. Personally I find it just too free and easy, too uncertain – I don’t do open relationships (says she, with a husband and two other close male friends already). I prefer the certainty of marriage. But that’s not what he expects and I guess, although I wouldn’t know, that Aranrod has the same view.

But he also expects the girl to want the high-status male. So, clearly, once Wiroan turned up and had his mind on me, Gwydion had to move out of the way. I would have appreciated it if he’d let me know. I know Sue and Lynne feel the same.

But when he realised that I’m still interested – we’re all still interested – then everything changes again. Ho, hum!

*

So I did spend the night with Gwydion. It was very pleasant. He’s an excellent host and good company. He made me very welcome; and that’s all I’m going to say about it.

*

Sunday

‘Your husband should be grateful we’re trying to improve human stock for him,’ said Gwydion.

We were having breakfast, sitting on the grass outside his fort. The outer ramparts rose up behind us: stone-built, with crenellations along the top and a walkway behind. There should have been a garrison of armed men to defend it, but we were still outside-time-and-space and had the place to ourselves. I don’t know where the food came from; it was just bread and cheese, and for all I know Gwydion bought it locally.

‘I wish you’d stop going on about my husband,’ I said testily. ‘He and Ra’haah – your grandmother – did the best they could. Humans are tricky.’

‘You should know,’ he said, shrugging, and then giving me his sideways grin.

‘What exactly are you and Aranrod planning?’ I asked. ‘What improvements are you going to make?’ I was being as sarcastic as I could. ‘Your previous efforts weren’t exactly successful.’

He looked at me with big, wounded eyes. ‘Aranrod made a sea-going human. It was just our bad luck that Uncle Math interfered.’

‘And the child died.’

‘He was terminated before he reached adulthood. If Uncle hadn’t interfered – but he didn’t understand what Aranrod was trying to do.’

‘And there was Lleu –’

‘Yes,’ he said firmly, ‘there was Lleu. He was a success – except that Aranrod was so angry – but we’ve been through that before.’

‘He was invulnerable,’ I said musingly, ‘and he grew up very quickly – and he was very quick and skilful, and a fast learner – a real wonder-child. But he didn’t understand Blodeuwedd.’ I paused, and sighed. ‘How long did he live after you rescued him?’

‘A century.’

‘But he couldn’t reproduce sexually. Why didn’t you try again?’

He shrugged. ‘Aranrod was still too angry with me. She was working by herself – and I was angry with her – by the time we started working together, it was almost too late.’

‘Disaster came. So now at last you’re going to try again. What are these new humans going to be like?’

‘I’ve tried to keep Lleu’s speed and intelligence,’ he said. ‘Do you want anything else to eat?’ – holding out the bread dish to me.

I took another slice and bit into it. ‘What about the girls? I assume you’re growing some girls as well as boys – rather than relying on flowers?’

‘Yes. The only flower is Heather.’

It took me a moment to realise that he meant the hair my daughter Heather had given him; then I caught the glint in his eye.

‘If these humans live as long as Lleu, they’ll overpopulate the planet.’ I paused. ‘Unless they can’t breed.’

‘They should breed, but more slowly than humans now do.’

I ate in silence for a moment, while he watched me intently.

‘So you want Wiroan and Ra’haah to take over care of these new humans when they’re born,’ I said. ‘Is that it?’

He just smiled that sideways smile.

‘And if they don’t?’

‘Surely they will – you’ll persuade them.’

‘Will I?’

‘Yes, because you’re so responsible – unlike them. And I’m asking you so nicely. And you’re mad about me, and I – ’

I held up a hand to stop him. ‘Don’t lie on my behalf,’ I said quickly.

‘I won’t,’ he said. ‘I find you irresistible, that’s all.’

I swallowed the final mouthful of bread and made some play of licking my fingers, to avoid looking him in the eye.

‘Anyway,’ he said, grabbing my fingers and holding my hands in his, ‘they’ll have at least one of them to look after.’

I looked him in the eye. My face froze into a frown.

‘Wiroan locked up my eggs,’ I said. ‘I’m not pregnant.’

‘No? We’ll have to see what we can do about that,’ he said, and pulled me into his embrace again.

I should have fought my way out, but I didn’t.

Some time later: ‘You realise it’s Sunday,’ he said.

‘Is it?’

‘The Reverend Roberts expects us in church.’ His tone was mocking, but I detected some genuine respect and affection in his voice.

‘What’s the time?’

‘Here or there?’

I sat up. ‘I suppose there,’ I said, looking around. We were still on the grass outside his fort, in the sunshine – I’d forgotten that we were Somewhere Else and not in the here-and-now.

‘Do we have time to get there?’

‘Jules Smythe,’ he said in tones of one addressing an idiot, ‘I’m the son of the goddess Dôn and you’re married to one of the creators of the universe. Of course we have time. But we’d better get moving.’

So saying, he jumped to his feet, pulled me up by one arm, kissed me very warmly while brushing the grass off my hair, hugged me very close and said, ‘We’ll run,’ and led me at a fast trot in the direction of a path down the cliffs.

Or, at least, where the cliffs would be in the here-and-now: but there were no cliffs. Where the cliffs and the beach are now there were green fields running out towards the sea. The sea was much further away – the fields ran gently down to a wide beach – and in the distance I could see Aranrod’s fortress rising up on the edge of the sea. Beyond that lay the great backdrop of the Rivals, barring the way to the south.

We ran across the grass, heading towards the high tower of the church, and as we ran I saw Aranrod walking across the grass to intercept us, her long hair tied up on her head like a respectable woman.

Now, I’m not a great runner. I can’t run long distances. At school the one hundred metres was more than enough for me. I can just about run for a bus. But with Gwydion I could run – I suppose it was that supernatural power he was referring to. So we ran and ran, until we came up to Aranrod, who greeted us with a smile and a: ‘So there you are at last. I thought you’d forgotten,’ and then we walked up to the church. As we approached it, the world slipped and slid around us until we were in the here-and-now.

And there were Sue and Lynne and Hethie standing outside the church. Sue and Lynne had obviously been giggling over something – probably me; but Hethie’s face looked like

thunder. Before she could say anything, however, I said, ‘Hi – sorry I lost sight of you yesterday.’

‘Yes, where *did* you go?’ asked Sue, with that expression on her face which means she has serious doubts about my sanity.

‘I sat down on the grass and I think I went to sleep.’

‘When we got back to the fort you’d vanished,’ said Hethie accusingly. ‘You ran away.’

‘She didn’t run anywhere. You ran away and left her,’ said Aranrod firmly. ‘Let’s go in.’ She pushed the church door open, and we all went inside.

The church was far from full, but there were a few dozen people there. We slipped into a pew backing on to the entrance aisle. I was next to Gwydion, down by a pillar; Aranrod was on my other side, and then Lynne and Sue with Hethie at the aisle end.

I haven’t been to church for ages, ever since we three went off with Wiroan and the other Watchers, and I fully expected to be bored; but in fact I found I was feeling very rested and content and didn’t mind just sitting quietly, and singing, and praying, and sitting again. I thought vaguely: ‘This weekend away is doing you good.’ But I caught my mind thinking that it was because I was with Gwydion again and everything was all right. Simply not Watching for a few days was relaxing enough; and I realised how much the Watching has been getting to me. A few days away floozing with Gwydion would be good for me ...

Lynne still goes to church sometimes – she’s full of ideas of how to improve established religion – and I could see that she was taking a serious interest in the service. She would probably give Beth Roberts a detailed critical analysis afterwards. Sue, on the other hand, looked as if she had gone to sleep.

We’ve all been working too hard, I thought.

Hethie was obviously in a furious mood. I wondered how I could make it up to her, and then decided that she’d just have to put up with it.

We got to the final blessing and everyone said: ‘Amen’ and stood as the minister and the choir processed out. I sat down to pick up my kneeler and put it back on the seat. As I straightened up Gwydion blew into my ear. I looked round at him, and our lips met.

Everyone else was getting up, picking up coats and bags and pausing to speak to friends before leaving the church. I heard Beth Roberts speak to Hethie and Sue, then Lynne; she exchanged a few words with Aranrod, and I heard Aranrod laugh.

Then she passed behind us, and I felt her put a hand on my shoulder and say, ‘Well done,’ and then, ‘Do come to lunch, won’t you?’ – and then she passed on to speak to someone else.

I managed to disentangle myself from Gwydion. ‘Lunch?’

‘Yes, we’re invited,’ said Aranrod’s voice behind me; ‘don’t be too long, you two, will you?’

I didn’t particularly feel that I wanted to go out to lunch, but Sue and Lynne were making ‘We’d better get moving,’ noises. Gwydion held on firmly to my right hand as we followed them out of the church and headed for the minister’s house.

There were several other guests; apparently it was normal for the minister and his wife to invite members of the congregation to lunch. Gwydion led me out into the garden and we found a quiet corner to kiss in, until the gong summoned us inside.

I was glad to see that Beth Roberts had put us next to each other. Hethie was further down the table, next to a young male member of the congregation. Sue and Lynne were next to other members of the congregation. Aranrod was next to a middle-aged man who had a good deal to say, and took care to interrupt him whenever he threatened to be boring. Gwydion and

I were able to hold hands under the table and I said very little to anyone during the meal – even Gwydion was less sparkling than usual, although he did produce some amusing anecdotes to entertain everyone and lighten the mood when the middle-aged gentleman (Aranrod called him ‘Alan’) was trying to be too serious.

When the meal was finished, Mrs Roberts asked Hethie, Lynne and Aranrod to help her wash up, Hethie’s new friend went along to help, and Mr Roberts took ‘Alan’ into his study to look up some Bible passages. Sue and the other guests went to look around the garden. Gwydion led me by the hand into the sitting room at the front of the house, closed the door firmly, gathered me into his arms and kissed me hungrily.

It was almost half an hour since we’d last kissed, and as I was as hungry as he was I returned his kisses with interest.

We were eventually interrupted by a knock on the door. Gwydion detached himself sufficiently to open the door, while still holding on to my hands.

It was Aranrod. ‘Your friends are leaving,’ she said to me, ‘but I’ve told them you’re staying behind. Mr Roberts wants to talk to you both in his study.’

Who? What? I thought, and then remembered that I’d come to Arfon with my friends and youngest daughter. I knew I wasn’t thinking straight: Gwydion has that effect on me. ‘I can’t just let them go,’ I said.

‘I’ve told them you’ve got business to finish here. They’re just going.’

I pulled Gwydion out after me into the hall, where Sue, Lynne and Hethie were putting on their coats. ‘Oh, there you are,’ said Sue. ‘Aranrod says you’re following on later.’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t eat him, will you?’ Lynne nodded at Gwydion.

I managed a smile. ‘I’ll try not to.’

I tried to catch Hethie’s eye, but she studiously ignored me. Sue and Lynne waved cheerful farewells and Hethie preceded them out. I was wondering whether I should run after them and go home before it was too late, but Mr Roberts put his head out of a door further down the hall and said, ‘Gwydion – Julie – do come in,’ and Gwydion put his arm about me and pulled me down the hall and into his study.

‘Do sit down.’ The minister gestured at a faded sofa flanked by piles of books. Gwydion drew me after him and we sat side by side, Gwydion’s right arm round me and his left hand holding mine.

Mr Roberts sat behind his desk and smiled kindly at us. ‘I’m so glad,’ he said. ‘This has made Beth and me so happy. You know I’ve long wished to see you settled’ (clearly he meant Gwydion) ‘and this is such happy news.’ He turned his attention to me. ‘Gwydion has told me so much about you. He’s always spoken of you with such affection and praise; I’m sure you’ll be very happy.’ He looked back at Gwydion. ‘I’ve called you in now so we can fix the happy day before it gets lost. Were you thinking of an autumn wedding?’

I wasn’t thinking of a wedding at all, and I opened my mouth to say so, but Gwydion raised a warning finger. ‘Something quiet,’ he said. ‘It won’t be a white wedding. Something low-key. Don’t you have some time next week?’

‘There’s next Saturday morning at 9am – there’s been a postponement.’ Mr Roberts looked up from his diary at us. ‘The mother of the bride is ill. A very sad case.’

‘She’ll recover,’ said Gwydion. ‘8 o’clock?’

‘That’s very early. The congregation will want to come – you know you have so many well-wishers in the parish.’

‘They can get up early. The summer mornings are beautiful.’

‘But isn’t it very short notice?’

‘Hardly that.’ Gwydion held my hands tightly and held me more closely to him, as if afraid I’d wriggle out and run away.

‘Surely you have family and friends to invite from further away.’

This isn’t happening, I thought. In no way is this going to happen.

‘No,’ said Gwydion. ‘Jules has friends to invite, but they can get here quickly enough.’
And a husband.

‘Well, if you’re both sure – next Saturday, 8 am.’ He smiled at us. ‘How happy everyone will be when they hear the news.’

Gwydion thanked him, lifted me to my feet, gave our farewells and led me out. I wanted to protest – why couldn’t I protest? – and say that the wedding was impossible, but words wouldn’t come out of my mouth. In the hall Aranrod was waiting for us with Mrs Roberts, who wanted to shake my hand and kiss me on the cheek and tell me how pleased she was for us. Somehow Gwydion extricated me and we got out of the house and down the path to the road, out on to the road, away down the road ...

I found my voice at last: it burst out of me like a stream in flood. ‘You know I can’t marry you! I’m married already!’

‘Polyandry,’ he said. ‘Is it a problem?’

‘I have to speak to Wiroan! This isn’t going to happen!’

‘Do you have to bring your husband into this?’

‘Of course I do!’

He stopped in mid stride and looked me in the eye. ‘It hasn’t bothered you so far,’ he said.

I felt my face grow warm under his gaze. ‘You know – you said – I’m mad about you and you find me irresistible. But that doesn’t mean we get married, especially as I’m already married.’

‘It means a lot to the minister,’ he said soberly. ‘He and his wife have been very kind to Aranrod and me. Most of the religious ministers haven’t been nearly as welcoming. They’ve given us a place in the community. They’ve allowed us to play a role in human society.’

I took a deep breath. ‘Do they know who you are?’

‘No.’

‘So who do they think you are?’

‘An orphaned brother and sister who live in the parish and do good works. But I did tell them about you.’

‘Me?’

‘Beth wanted to know if there had ever been anyone. Of course there has, but no one serious, not for centuries, until you and your friends. I knew that Sue and Lynne wouldn’t come back, but I always hoped about you. So I told them about you.’

‘Oh.’ I felt humbled, touched to the heart. ‘What did you say?’

‘I told them you married someone else.’

‘So – do they think I’m a widow? Or divorced?’

‘I assume they think you’re a widow. Hethie never talks about her father, only her mother.’

‘Oh. What do they think about Hethie?’

‘I assume Beth thinks she’s the typical unhappy orphan child who’s resentful of her mother’s boyfriend.’

‘Little does she know,’ I said. ‘But I can’t marry you. What would Wiroan say?’

‘Why don’t you ask him?’

‘Then I will – when we get back–’

Get back where? Where were we going?

‘Here,’ he said, and kissed me where we stood, there on the pavement by one of the busiest roads in North Wales; and the drivers tooted at us as they drove past, and cheered at us out of their car windows.

At last he let me go and we stood staring into each other eyes.

Do you really want me to call Wiroan here? Won’t it be too much for you?

‘Let’s go back to my fort,’ he said, and led me on down the road, and then over a stile and across the fields. As we walked, the world slipped and slid around us, until we were back in the ‘way-back-when’ or wherever Gwydion usually lives, outside the view of mortals.

We walked through the gateway of his fort and I sat down on a stone bench just inside. ‘I’ll call Wiroan,’ I said. ‘Would you like to move away? This might be alarming.’

‘No,’ he said, and he sat down on the bench next to me and held my hands.

I called ...

... the call echoed through eternity, across the crystal spheres of the heavens and beyond time and space. The world seemed to shudder ... and slip sideways ...

‘Are you really my grandchild?’ asked Ra’haah. ‘There *is* a family resemblance.’

‘He has your hair and eyes,’ said Wiroan. ‘You can let go of Julie,’ he added. ‘I won’t snatch her away.’

Gwydion’s eyes smouldered, and he loosened his grip, but he didn’t let go.

We two sat on the bench and over us stood my husband and his sister Ra’haah. They were human-sized but *glowed* with power. Gwydion’s own divine power was nothing next to it, and of course I’m just a simple human woman. On the other hand, I’m used to it, but Gwydion was clearly not happy about having his patch invaded, particularly as he’d just re-asserted his power over me. On the other hand again, he *had* said that I should call my husband.

Then Gwydion seemed to recollect himself, and he scrambled to his feet and pulled me up, and faced his relatives.

‘Welcome to my humble abode,’ he said, in ironic tones. ‘How gracious of you to visit me at last.’

Ra’haah laughed. ‘Now, grandson, I’m sure your divine mother wouldn’t like to hear you speak to me like that. We’ve come to see this project of yours. Hethie is most eloquent about it. Apparently it’s going to correct all the problems we had creating humans.’

‘By integrating our physical forms into the human pattern, Hethie says,’ added Wiroan. ‘But have you solved the problem of sterility?’

‘Not yet,’ said Gwydion, and shot a glance at me.

‘He and Aranrod are planning to keep producing new ones in the lab,’ I said.

‘Or use you as an incubator,’ said my husband, giving me a sympathetic smile. ‘Darling, is he really worth encouraging? I know you’re fond of him, but he and his sister have a poor success record in developing humans.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said desperately.

‘You realise that while you have Jules with you I can keep an eye on you and stop some of your wilder schemes,’ said Wiroan. ‘Such as preventing a repetition of your blowing up Arfon.’

‘No more flower-girls without a proper emotion circuit,’ said Ra’haah. ‘That was so irresponsible. Whatever were you thinking of?’

‘Without your divine presence,’ said Gwydion sarcastically, ‘how could we have true wisdom? We had to invent our own, as best as we could.’

‘Let’s see these incubators of yours,’ said Wiroan drily.

Gwydion did something – raised a finger, or twitched a hand – and we were back in the laboratory where the incubators stood, each with its little form growing within it. Wiroan and Ra’haah walked along the rows, looking each little creature over carefully. Sometimes they stopped to converse over one of the little tanks, and then moved on.

Gwydion turned to me and kissed my lips, but I pushed him gently back before he could get too hungry. ‘Watch what they’re doing.’

‘I know what they’re doing,’ he said bitterly, and at that moment Ra’haah looked up at us and said, ‘You’ve used a lot of dead material.’

‘Yes,’ said Gwydion. ‘It was all we had, initially.’

‘How long has this one been here?’

‘They’ve been growing at different speeds,’ said Gwydion, warily.

‘You’ve combined different animals – not all of this is human.’

‘Aranrod – ’

‘Yes, I remember she experimented with making an aquatic human. She put in some seal, so far as I remember.’

‘Yes. Many humans in this country have a large seal content,’ said Gwydion.

‘You’ve done this *before*?’ I asked, startled.

He shrugged. ‘Initially humans found these islands uninhabitable. They had to be adjusted to cope with the climate. You know the old stories of seal women and seal men.’

I nodded, dumbstruck.

‘Aranrod was only continuing those old breeding programmes. She thought if we increased the seal content even more, humans would be able to survive even if a greater inundation came. But you know the story: Dylan’s growth was interrupted, and he was killed.’

‘So what other animals have you used?’

‘Obviously: wolf, boar and deer. You’ve read the story. My brother and I produced them.’

I nodded again.

‘And this time we put in some hawk – there are no eagles here now, so we couldn’t use them. We also found some goat. They have to be wild animals,’ he added.

‘You’ll certainly get some interesting results,’ said Ra’haah, looking intently into one tank.

‘What difference will it make?’ I asked.

‘It speeds up growth and speed; they learn more quickly and mature younger; and it makes them resistant to most disease and very hard to kill. But it affects their fertility.’

‘Not surprisingly, if they’re cross-breeds,’ I said.

‘Some of these are not going to work,’ said Ra’haah. ‘You know that, don’t you?’

Gwydion didn’t reply, but his eyes spoke volumes.

‘I assume Aranrod wants to terminate them,’ Ra’haah added.

‘But you don’t,’ I said.

Gwydion shook his head, but didn’t speak.

‘We can take them back to the house with us,’ said Wiroan, who was bending over another tank, ‘and adjust them to make them feasible.’ He looked up at Gwydion. ‘That’s what you

wanted us to do, isn't it? You can't save them yourself.' He paused, waiting for Gwydion's response, then continued when Gwydion didn't answer. 'I know you hate killing things.'

I squeezed his right hand in mine, and he nodded.

'This one and this one' – Wiroan gestured to two tanks near where he stood – 'are growing correctly. They have Hethie's hair in them, don't they? The rest will need some work.' He walked back towards us. 'Don't scowl at me, grand-nephew! I know that's why you wanted us here.'

'So why wait until Jules came?' asked Gwydion. 'You could have come at any time.'

'We only get involved now if someone calls us,' said Ra'haah. 'We've learned the hard way that our creation doesn't appreciate our interference.'

'So you didn't know that you were needed here?'

'We knew we were needed, but not wanted.'

'So now you can take over our attempt to improve humanity, and complete the work you failed to complete before.'

'I hope so, if that's possible.' Ra'haah looked at me. 'Jules, are you happy to keep an eye on him? I think it would be wise.'

'You can come back whenever you need to,' added my husband. 'But it would be useful to have you here until the remaining foetuses are ready.'

'What do you think I'm going to do?' asked Gwydion sneeringly.

'I'm more worried about your sister killing them before they're ready. But I also need to know if they start to deform, like these others here. You should have called us in a long time ago,' said my husband severely.

'I would hardly do that, when you had already cornered Jules; and I knew you'd take anything of any value.'

'I'll stay,' I said hastily. 'I'll Watch over everything.'

Gwydion pulled me closer to him. 'Take what you want, but leave me Jules.'

'Don't take it like that,' said Ra'haah, in gentle exasperation. 'We want to save your project, not destroy it.'

Then the world seemed to shrug and turn in on itself; and when everything settled down around us they had gone, and most of the laboratory tanks had gone too. There were just half a dozen left in the middle of the room, where the tiny babies slept peacefully in the artificial amniotic fluid.

Gwydion hurried over to look at them, then turned to me with a smile on his face. 'They've taken those that were ailing, and left those I made with Heather's hair,' he said. 'So we have the best, and they have the faulty ones; and they will repair them, and make them well.'

So now the moody face had gone and he was all smiles! It was all an act, I thought, this angry face of his, to provoke my husband and Ra'haah into doing what he wanted. And was all this talk of marriage just an act to get me to call them, and to get me to stay with him?

'No,' he said, and was at my side in an instant, 'it's not an act.' Then he kissed me quickly, before I could argue any more.

God, he's so infuriating! Why do I find him so fascinating?

I felt suddenly and horribly homesick. I wanted to step away and leave him, to go back Home to my husband and family, to make it up with Hethie and be with my friends. I wanted to curl up with a book in my favourite chair in the library, to walk round the garden and see how the fruit bushes were coming along, and to walk down to the lake with Jamie to feed the swans. Instead, here I was Watching over this – this divine or semi-divine disruptive person

who dabbled Frankenstein-like with making human life, and whose past behaviour towards myself and my friends – and present behaviour towards Hethie – made him appear scheming, manipulative and heartless.

I wanted him to apologise to Wiroan and Ra’haah. I wanted him to apologise to Hethie, and my friends, and to me. Why was I letting him kiss me? Why was I kissing him back?

He drew away and looked into my eyes. He didn’t say anything – he could see my smouldering anger and resentment. We stared at each other for several minutes, without saying a word. I thought: ‘I should tell him what I want him to do,’ but something held me back, so I said nothing.

At last I said, ‘What will you do with the children when you have them?’

He said, ‘We can repopulate the high towns and recover the land from the sea.’

‘But how can they live alongside the people who live here now?’

‘Why not? Aranrod and I live here with them.’

‘I don’t think you can recover the land. The sea level is rising, not falling.’

‘We’ll make the land rise,’ he said, and he really seemed to believe it.

‘Gwydion, you can’t. It was all so long ago – those days are all gone. There are so many humans in the world now – you can’t change them all. And you can’t go back to change the past – I’ve tried it, and you can’t.’

In answer, he reached out a hand and touched my cheek tenderly. ‘But you changed the past, because you came back.’

‘That doesn’t mean that we can change anything else.’

‘The marriage of heaven and earth – the bride of the light-bearer comes to me. The lady of the sky-blue dragon stepped down from the heavens and came into my arms.’

‘Is that supposed to be poetry?’

‘Not really. I could make it into poetry.’

‘Romance is all very well,’ I said carefully, ‘but just now I’m just hungry. Any chance of some food?’

‘Food, then. And then romance. And I will make a verse about you, but you needn’t listen when I sing it.’

*

The evening meal was bread and cheese, with fruit to follow: wild strawberries, which someone must have picked – but I didn’t know who, or when. Then we sat in Gwydion’s bed chamber, on his bed – as if it were a settee – and Gwydion pulled a harp out from the chest at the foot of his bed and tuned it, and sat playing it quietly and singing snatches of old songs. Then he started singing *ex tempore*, songs about the countryside and the trees, the hills and the animals that live there, the sea and the creatures that swim in it, and the ships that sail over the waves. It was pleasant to listen to – as I’ve observed, he’s an excellent host when he wants to be.

I relaxed again, lying back on the pillow and dozing while he sang. After a while the words changed again to be about things I don’t know, strange names and patterns of words. I could understand him before because Wiroan gave me the ability – as he’s the inventor of language – but now Gwydion’s words changed so quickly that I couldn’t follow what he was singing. Gradually I realised that it was probably about me, and that made me anxious.

‘Don’t sing about that,’ I said sleepily. ‘Sing about something else – sing about Aranrod.’

‘My sister? Why would I do that?’ His mouth twisted in ironic humour. ‘She can sing for herself.’

‘What are you singing, then? It’s difficult to follow.’

He smiled, and continued singing. He’s not going to tell me, I realised, because I indicated that I’m not interested in his singing about me. So I concentrated hard and tried to decipher the imagery – Celtic poetry is stuffed rigid with imagery, which makes it the very devil to translate into any other language.

It went something like this: the oak bowed its head and shed its flowers into Gwydion’s lap, and the heather sweetened his lips (I frowned, wondering if this was about my daughter), and the May blossom scattered a snow shower across his heart, but the June sun melted it to joy and fulfilment (I decided that this probably wasn’t about my daughter). Then there was some discussion of the trees which lined his path and beckoned him onwards, each bowing and offering its particular power, and he walked up the stairway created by the shadows of their branches, into the glorious sun. The next part was about the bright sunshine of dark eyes, the warmth of red lips and the coolness of the clear waters in the cavern of his desire, and how he slaked his thirst there and found refreshment. Then there was something about bathing in the waters of life in the fountain of the fulfilment of desire, and the desert of longing growing fertile with fresh growth through the spring rain and the warmth of the sun. The last part was about the spring rain watering the hard heart of the sun, which had drawn him in and burned him with its heat, but now he longed for the relief of its soft caresses and healing of his wounds.

It sounded wonderful, and I guessed I knew what it all meant, but I thought I should keep quiet and pretend to be asleep.

‘I know you’re listening,’ he said, and set the harp down gently on the chest at the foot of his bed.

‘You sing very beautifully,’ I said drowsily.

‘Singing makes me thirsty,’ he said, lying down beside me. ‘Now I need to drink at that fountain,’ – and he kissed me.

I thought about fighting him off, but I didn’t.

*

Monday

I woke up in the middle of the night, aching and thirsty, and paradoxically also needing the bathroom. For a moment I wondered where I was, and then realised with a jolt of relief that I was at Home in my own bed, just where I had longed to be, and next to my dear darling husband.

I rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom, then tottered back to find Wiroan sitting up, awake, and waiting for me with a hug and a warm kiss.

‘Thank you for getting me back,’ I said, when we drew apart for breath.

‘I could hear you being very stressed,’ he said. ‘How is the boy?’

I realised he meant Gwydion. ‘He’s now acting as if he’s personally defeated you and captured me,’ I said. ‘He says he’s tricked you into taking away the faulty foetuses and he’s singing erotic love poetry over me. He’s just too pleased with himself.’

‘Some of those foetuses are in a very poor state,’ said Wiroan. ‘He should have discarded them and started again.’

‘He’s like you – he hates destroying things.’

‘A family trait. So what are his plans for the others?’

‘I’m not entirely sure. I’m not sure he knows himself. He’s talking about re-populating the mountain cities, but I don’t think anyone can live up there now: it’s too exposed and inhospitable. He seems to think that he can make the land rise or the sea fall and recover the land that was flooded nine thousand years ago. He was talking about replacing humans with his re-engineered humans, but now he seems to intend his new humans to live alongside the original ones. I can’t tell when he’s being serious and when he’s just talking big, trying to impress me.’

‘Sue and Lynne reported that he and his sister killed everyone by mistake trying to protect them against an epidemic, and then there was a natural disaster which flooded the land.’

‘Yes, that’s what Aranrod told us.’

‘But when Frideh looked at the seismic records of the planet, she found that they themselves set off the earthquake that triggered the flood, in their attempts to purify the land.’

‘Really?’ For a moment I was amazed, and then I realised that those two are quite capable of wrecking whatever they try to help: after all, just look at their record in child-rearing. ‘It must have been like the Battle of the Trees,’ I said slowly. ‘Gwydion called up the trees to protect Gwynedd from invaders, but it’s not clear from the poem what the result was. He and Aranrod must have called up the land and sea to destroy the invading disease, and then they couldn’t control it.’ I thought for another moment. ‘So that’s what happened to the giants,’ I said, ‘and all the people who lived in the hill towns – they died when the land went crazy.’

‘Do you mind horribly Watching them?’ asked my husband. ‘I think they need to be Watched. If it’s too much, I’ll send someone else.’

I sighed deeply. ‘No, I’ll go back,’ I said. ‘Gwydion sort of respects me. He does pay me some sort of attention, if only because I’m his trophy-woman, at least for the moment. He thinks he won me off you.’ I paused. ‘Can you bring me back each night? Otherwise I think I’ll go mad. He and his sister are enough to drive anyone crazy: they’re so patronising and completely convinced of their own self-righteousness.’

‘Caroline is dying to go and help you,’ said my husband. ‘She wants to avenge you and Hethie.’

‘I think she’d better not,’ I said. ‘This needs tact.’

*

But tact is not so easy when you really don’t want to be in a place. I agreed to going back, but I wasn’t at all happy about it. Having started off this adventure still half in love with Gwydion, a hang-over from my pre-teenage years, now I’d seen him as a sulky and boastful young adult I was realising that the moody, exciting young man I’d admired as a pre-teen was actually rather a pain now that I’m a responsible grown-up.

I guess I should be flattered that he’s still interested in me. After all, he doesn’t apparently get any older and appears to be stuck in his late twenties or early thirties; Aranrod appears slightly younger, even though she’s actually his older sister. In fact they must have been much older than that when they managed to blow themselves and everyone else in Arfon up; but they’re children of the goddess Dôn, so appearance is not a good guide to age.

I, on the other hand, am around fifty in actual human years now, although I still look the age I was when Wiroan and his brothers and sisters came back for myself and my friends: around thirty-five. As my eldest daughter, Caroline, is now sixteen, you can work out how old I must be.

So I should be flattered that the youthful and very handsome Gwydion is still attracted. But I suspect he's more interested in the fact I'm Wiroan's wife. After all, I've never had a pretty face. Wiroan wants my eternal spirit, not my face.

Gwydion woke me with kisses that morning, and made it very clear that he wanted to make love, so I went along with it – he's very satisfactory in that department, and I wanted to keep him happy. Eventually we 'got up', washed ourselves and dressed, and sat outside in the sunshine on the grass to eat some breakfast. I didn't try to make conversation. Gwydion wanted to kiss and fondle, and he was making up erotic poetic couplets and triads to amuse himself and impress me, but he wasn't interested in talking.

He put his hand on my stomach, under my top, caressing my skin, and smiled in amusement when my skin shuddered at his touch. He leaned very close to me and his lips brushed mine, his tongue gently entering my mouth and then withdrawing. 'How many children have you borne?' he asked softly, turning towards me so that his leg moved between my thighs.

'Four,' I said. 'I thought you knew?'

'Yes, I've been following you. I wanted to know what he was doing with you.' His lips ran across my face and then back to my mouth. 'You make me so hungry,' and he fastened his lips on to mine, plunged his tongue into my mouth and pushed me on to my back.

'Four for him, but none for me – but you loved me first.' His body was very hot and his face was fixed and intent – suddenly I felt alarmed. 'None for me – but there must be a way.' So he'd realised that I wasn't joking when I told him that Wiroan had locked up my eggs? He was holding me down more vigorously than he'd done so far, and I thought: what is he going to do? 'This is going to work,' he said, and suddenly he spat into my mouth, so strongly that he made me cough. 'Swallow it,' – but I'd swallowed it involuntarily even before he said it. 'This is going to work,' he said again, and pushed himself into me.

What are you doing? – I wanted to say, but I couldn't talk when his tongue was half way down my throat. *You can't get a woman pregnant like that* – at least, not outside an Irish epic. But perhaps it works in Welsh epics too.

We were both hot and panting, and soaking wet with sweat and his seed. He lay across me, in my arms, kissing me as if he was dying for the taste of my mouth.

At last he drew away, drew in a deep breath like a man about to dive deep into water, and then kissed my stomach and groin, licking around my vagina and thighs, and then kissing my stomach again. I didn't know what to do to respond, so I caressed his curly black hair, my fingers wound into his silky locks.

He surfaced. He kissed my mouth again, and licked my forehead. He rolled off me and sat up, running a hand over my stomach.

'You can't make me pregnant just by wanting to,' I said.

'I made an egg because yours are out of reach.'

'It doesn't work like that.'

He laughed at me. 'Aranrod made her own sperm for her children. She provided both sperm and egg.'

So that was how she had children but was still a virgin.

'But you already have all the children growing in your workshop,' I said, 'and the ones you sent away with my husband and your grandmother.'

'I want yours too,' he said, and bent and kissed me hungrily.

Greedy, greedy.

‘You said you would raise up the land out of the sea,’ I said, as lightly as I could, as if it didn’t matter. ‘How will you do that?’

‘We’ll move the land. We’ve done it before.’

‘But won’t it damage the land, and kill the animals and plants?’

‘No, not at all. Why should it?’

Because it did before. ‘It sounds very risky. You might reactivate the volcanoes.’

He gave me a puzzled look. ‘Why should that happen? They’ve been dead for a long time.’

‘If there is a child in here,’ I said, tapping my stomach, ‘I don’t want to bring it out into a world which you might carelessly blow up at any moment. I want to know it’s going to be safe.’

He looked at me, his expression grave. ‘But we’ll recover the land. There will be more land for everyone – and this was land that belonged to Aranrod and me. It was our good arable land, land for my child, land he should have.’ He caressed my stomach again with tender fingers, then bent and kissed me.

‘But you might not,’ I said. ‘It might all go wrong again.’

‘We know what we did wrong before,’ he said. ‘It won’t happen again.’

He always appears to be so sure of himself, and he’s so convincing that if I didn’t know his record and hadn’t had experience of being brushed aside and forgotten by him, I’d have believed him without question. As it was, I just tried to smile and returned his hungry kisses, making out I believed him, that I trusted him, that I was happy to rest in his embraces.

It’s not easy living with a person whom you know is capable of wiping out the local population with a blink of his eyelids or a flick of his hands. But I needn’t have worried: he was so cock-a-hoop at ‘winning’ me (as he thought) from Wiroan that his only thought was to make the most of his victory before Wiroan had second thoughts. All I had to do was welcome his caresses and his play; and I listened to his poetry, which grew more obscure and more erotic at each new attempt. He is a very fine harp-player, however, and pleasant to listen to, even when he’s fantasising aloud about what he’s going to do to me in bed.

We didn’t spend all our time in bed. Over the next few days he led me round Arfon, showing off his domain and introducing me to the land as its lady. I wondered how Aranrod felt about this, and then realised that she’s lady of the sea rather than the land. In the story she stays at her castle on the coast: apart from her journey to Caer Dathal when Uncle Math called her to his court, she doesn’t go further afield. And all the time that I and my friends had been in Arfon I’d never seen her go further from the sea than the church. She belongs on the coast. Gwydion, on the other hand, has his fort on the coast and in the story he walks along the beach, but he also wanders inland, into Nantlle, and travels as far as Dyfed.

Neither of them ever went into what is now England. When I went Home that night I looked up the ancient history of the area in the library and found some books that said that the lowlands were unimportant in those ancient days, because they didn’t have any valuable minerals: no copper, tin, iron or gold. So the powerful kingdoms were in the western highlands where these natural resources were easily accessible: in Cornwall and Wales. As these resources were worked out, and transport links and trading patterns changed, the power centres shifted eastwards and Arfon went from being a wealthy region to peripheral. But then other books pointed out that there are the valuable prehistoric hoards that the metal-detectors find in East Anglia, which make it clear that in fact the Midlands and the East were very wealthy too, much more wealthy than Wales. So I think that the reason Gwydion and Aranrod don’t go East is that they don’t have any power there.

Anyway, Gwydion introduced me to the land of Arfon. Of course I know that the land reacts to those who live in it – I learned that very quickly from Wiroan and Ra’haah. It has its own energies, produced and channelled by the rock formations and the water content of the ground, and the living organisms that live in and on it either thrive in those energies or are damaged by them. Some plants won’t grow in certain areas, even though the soil and climate might appear to be right; but there’s a low level of radiation in the rock (for example) which stunts their growth; but those same conditions might encourage other types of plant. Humans who move around find that they feel well in some parts of the country and out of place in others. I’ve always lived in the Midlands of England, and for most of my life I’ve lived on the heavy clays of Leicestershire, so Arfon was a shock to my body, because its soils are thin and the underlying granite and metamorphic rock is close to the surface. The sea is close by and the tides move in and out twice a day, moving the water table with them. The rhythms of the ground are quite different from Leicestershire: I felt more light-headed and reckless, which might explain my behaviour with Gwydion.

Gwydion walked with me around Arfon. As we crossed the fields, climbed the hills and paused to admire the view, he would pull me down to sit or kneel next to him on the ground. He would run his hands over the grass or the rock around us and tell me to do the same, and let its energies flow through us. Then he told me to close my eyes and imagine that I was sinking down into the earth, travelling down the roots of the plants, the flowers and trees, deep into the rock, and embracing it and letting it hold me: ‘You are the rock, and the rock holds you.’ I should breathe deeply and let the rock absorb me, and then gradually flow back to the surface, ‘like a flower returning to the sun in spring.’ When my imagination returned me to the surface and I opened my eyes, his hot lips greeted mine, his tongue plunged into my mouth, and he wrapped his body around mine in passionate embrace ... then gently released me and pulled me to my feet, saying: ‘The land salutes its queen,’ and then he would laugh and lead me onwards around his domain.

When we walked through the woods, he would stop and place a hand against a tree trunk, and then tell me to place mine next to his and listen to the tree, and then greet it formally. ‘The trees must know their queen, as the land does.’ When we came to a stream he would bend and scoop up water in his hands and pour it over mine, saying, ‘This is yours, and you serve it.’ His lordship of the land, I realised, was the old-fashioned lordship which serves the land and the people, protecting and guiding, rather than dominating and exploiting. It is a sort of Watching, but getting actively involved in a way Watchers aren’t able to.

‘So when you called up the trees to protect the land,’ I said, ‘did they all hear you? Did they pull up their roots and walk?’

He laughed and didn’t reply. But when we came to the top of a hill, he pointed out across the landscape towards the sea and said: ‘See the road? The trees shelter it.’

‘Yes. The trees run along both sides of the road.’

‘If it was necessary to block the road, the trees need only drop a few branches. Some might sacrifice themselves, falling over the road. Some might move a little. It doesn’t take much to block the road completely, and then no one can travel anywhere.’

‘I see. But how would they know to do that?’

‘The wind, the water and the rock would carry the message.’ His eyes were bright with – amusement? Excitement? Affection? It occurred to me that by simply asking the question I was identifying myself with his concerns.

‘And you’d send the message if the land was in mortal danger?’

‘Yes. I did. Just the once, when the enemy was too great for humans to repel.’

‘You didn’t call the trees out against the Vikings and the Normans?’

‘The princes of Gwynedd didn’t want my help. After that it was a different kind of enemy, the sort you can’t repel with force.’

‘Disease?’

‘Yes; and people who came in peace, but brought change with them: such as traders, and missionaries, and settlers, and tourists.’

‘They’re not enemies,’ I objected.

‘They change society. It’s a slower change than an invasion and no one dies, but they change it nevertheless.’

As the week wore on, he became more assertive and – I thought – more edgy, as if something was worrying him. I caught him looking at me oddly, with a considering look on his face, as if he was trying to weigh me up. His kisses were as hungry as ever and his grip on me even more forceful – he held on to my hand almost everywhere we went, as if afraid that I’d run away. Of course if I’d wanted to run I could have ‘jumped out’ at any moment I liked, but I’d told Wiroan that I’d stay put and so I did.

I went Home at nights to see my husband and get fresh clothes. I was living in jeans and tee shirts – simple and hardwearing clothing that can cope with getting covered in mud or soaked in sea water. Wiroan was keeping an eye on me during the day, and at nights I’d give him an update on what Gwydion was doing, but there was nothing significant to report all week.

*

Friday

On Friday we walked south down the coast and met Aranrod, who was collecting pebbles on the beach. She greeted us both cheerfully and invited us into her castle for a meal.

Gwydion accepted for us both and we walked alongside her across the causeway to her fortress and up through the gate. ‘So, are you ready for tomorrow?’ she asked as we entered the courtyard.

‘What is there to prepare?’ I asked.

She looked me up and down. ‘Surely you’re not getting married in those clothes.’

I laughed: ‘I don’t have any others here.’

‘I can lend you a dress.’

Gwydion interrupted: ‘I’ll make one for you this afternoon.’

‘Out of flowers?’ I couldn’t resist the ironic dig at him, but he shook his head.

‘Leaves.’

‘I’ll provide the flowers,’ said Aranrod, leading us into her hall.

Like Gwydion’s fort, she has her castle to herself. All the servants are gone – she arranges everything herself now. There is food and drink, and everything appears clean and tidy, but there is no one else there. Everyone died; all the ghosts have gone, and all that is left is the lady of the castle who lingers on, guarding her ancient domain.

Why did they stay? Why didn’t they fade away like the others? What are they waiting for? I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to ask in case I didn’t like the reply – or in case they refused to give me a straight answer.

I had the distinct impression during the meal that Aranrod wanted to say something to me, but was holding back because her brother was there. Twice she tried to get him to leave the hall on some pretext or other, but he refused to leave me alone with her. Only as we were

leaving did she manage to slide close to me and whisper in my ear, ‘Are you really going ahead with this?’

I nodded.

‘Thank you.’ She squeezed my right hand, and then let go before her brother noticed.

I was silent as Gwydion and I walked back north up the coast after the meal. He gripped my hand as tightly as ever as we walked, but didn’t ask me what was bothering me. Instead, he led me into the woodland and stood me under a tree.

‘I’ll dress you,’ he said, kissing my mouth and then stepping back away from me. ‘Take off those clothes so that the trees can see you.’

I laughed at him, because trees have no eyes. I know that the trees can sense our presence through our footsteps on the ground, the water vapour and carbon dioxide that we exhale, and insofar as we interrupt the flow of sunlight to their leaves. I suspect that they can also sense our electro-magnetic fields: the energy field that every living thing produces. But they can’t see in the same way that we can.

‘You know what I mean,’ he said, waving a dismissive hand at me. ‘Get undressed.’

‘What, in public?’

‘No humans will come this way while we’re here, and the trees don’t care. Do what I tell you.’

I shrugged and pulled off my clothes.

‘Trainers and socks too.’

I complied, adding: ‘Don’t be too long about this: I know it’s June but it’s not that warm.’

‘Stand up straight,’ was his only response, and then he clicked his fingers and dead leaves swirled towards me – a few from the ground, but most spiralling down from above, as if every tree around us was donating a few used leaves. They billowed around in a great cloud, and then settled all over me with surprising softness, forming a calf-length dress of overlapping leaves adhered loosely together. Gwydion looked at me with his head first on one side and then on the other, moved a hand – the leaves swirled up and then resettled – nodded and clicked his fingers once more. The leaves flickered and fused into a sort of cloth, as light as thistledown, but as warm as a thin cotton jersey. Leaves covered my feet to form lightweight shoes, in a material that was something between cloth, leather and bark.

‘Perfect,’ he said, smiling at me.

I looked down at it. ‘Lovely,’ I said, thinking anxiously that I’d never get through the day without tearing it. But – fearing he would be hurt if I didn’t appear sufficiently grateful – I stepped forward and kissed him tenderly on the mouth. ‘It’s beautiful,’ I said.

His bright eyes looked into mine – for a moment I thought he was going to speak, but then he embraced me instead, holding my head close to his and caressing my hair as his tongue plunged deep into my mouth.

‘Don’t,’ I said, pulling away from him at last, ‘we’ll tear it. The dress, I mean. I’ll take it off until tomorrow.’

‘It won’t tear easily,’ he said, but I was already easing myself out of it and putting my old clothes back on. He carried the cloth over his arm and we walked hand in hand back to his fort.

He was especially passionate that evening – as if he feared I was about to run off and leave him. He fell asleep lying over me so that I couldn’t easily escape; but Wiroan can make him sleep and pull me out easily enough. In any case, I didn’t run away and leave him.

*

Saturday

Early next morning we were up, washed and dressed – I in the dress and shoes of leaves, he in over-shirt belted on hips, trousers and sturdy shoes. We walked across the fields to the church, travelling much more quickly than normal walking would allow.

I expected the church to be empty, but as we approached I became aware of many voices outside, and then the door opened and Aranrod came out, followed by a group of smartly-dressed children. She smiled in greeting, and placed a circlet of flowers on my head.

‘Perfect,’ she said, kissing my cheek sister-fashion.

‘Who are the children?’ I asked.

‘They’re your guard of honour. They volunteered.’ Then, at my bewildered expression: ‘They want to help you, because you’re marrying Gwydion; and they all love him and are very happy you’re marrying him.’

The children smiled up at me; there were two boys and two girls. ‘Do tell me your names,’ I said, and they all spoke at once, holding out little bunches of flowers in their hands, flowers they’d brought for me to carry.

It was all so emotional that I could hardly bear it. I gathered the flowers into a bunch with thanks and smiles, trying not to weep from the simple sentiment of it. Gwydion held my right hand; the children and Aranrod walked behind us into the church.

The church was full. All these people, none of whom I’d ever met before, had come to see me marry a demi-god who should have been dead and buried thousands of years ago. Except that they saw him as a young man who helped around the church and around the area generally and generally helped people. A sort of curate-person, I supposed. Did they think I was going to be some sort of curate-wife? Please, no!

Courage, girl! I told myself. My marriage to Wiroan had been a quiet affair – no ceremony, no honeymoon – so I supposed this supplementary service sort of made up for it. I squared my shoulders, fixed my smile on my face and walked up the aisle.

The service was the standard church marriage service – I’ve been to a few weddings and there was nothing notable this time. Gwydion produced a ring from somewhere. Hymns were sung, which I learned later the congregation had chosen for us. We walked out of the church into a billow of rice and flower-petals. Lots of people wanted to shake Gwydion’s hand and kiss me, but Gwydion made sure that no one gave me any more than a quick kiss on the cheek. He was being very protective: having won his prize, his trophy wife, he wasn’t going to let anyone else get too close to me. I was glad of that.

There was a genuine wedding breakfast at the minister’s house. A huge crowd of people were there – it seemed to me that everyone from the parish must have come. Aranrod steered us through the crowd into the conservatory at the back of the house and made sure that we were sat down at a table with food in front of us. The children who had been our guard of honour sat with us and supervised our meal while eating their own: ‘My ma made that bread for you. It’s my ma’s special bread.’ ‘My pa makes marmalade. Do you like it?’ ‘My ma says too much butter spoils the bread. Don’t put on too much.’ ‘You can’t have any cake until you’ve eaten up your bread.’

Gwydion laughed affectionately at them; I tried not to cry. It was all so touching, so emotional. They all loved him, and wanted the best for him, and I knew that he was dangerous and could wipe them all out with one slip of his fingers.

‘Smile,’ he said in my ear, ‘a queen must smile before her people, even though she’s weeping for them.’

‘They all trust you and love you so much,’ I whispered back, wiping away a tear.

‘I’m their good lord, and they know it. Now, smile.’ He touched my lips, moving them into a smile, and when I managed to respond he kissed me, then returned to the meal.

The Reverend Roberts and his wife also ate breakfast but at a different table, and there were other members of the congregation seated at other tables in the conservatory – it was all a bit cramped – while others hurried around serving people, and taking food on trays outside to people in the garden. Aranrod served us and then sat at the table and ate breakfast herself. There was no alcohol, because it was still early morning, but there were some speeches: Mr Roberts got to his feet and said a few words, praising Gwydion and wishing us both well, and then Aranrod got up and said a few words in praise of me, which was kind of her, as she hardly knows me. We drank coffee and tea rather than champagne, and mercifully quickly we had to break it all up because Mr Roberts had to go off to preside over the next wedding. We helped to clear away, and then Aranrod shoo’ed us out of the door and told us to go and visit our friends while she and Beth made sure that the washing up was done.

I was still wearing the circlet of flowers she’d given me, but when I went to take it off she stayed my hand. ‘Wear it today! Today everyone needs to remember you’re their queen.’ She grinned at me, but there was iron in her smile, and I nodded and left the flowers on my head.

Gwydion led me by the hand down the lane, heading back towards Dinas Dinlle. As we walked through the village, an old woman came out of her cottage and called to Gwydion: ‘You haven’t been to see me this week. My garden needs you. It’s in such a mess.’ Gwydion answered, ‘I’ve been getting married, Mrs Evans: have you met Jules?’ – gesturing to me; but the old woman ignored me and fastened on him, as old women sometimes fasten on young men and exclude young women.

‘It’s very thoughtless of you. You haven’t been to see my garden all week. You know I rely on you.’

As she held him in conversation at the gate, I slipped my hand out of Gwydion’s and walked into the garden in question. The flowers appeared remarkably limp and unhappy for the time of year, and the grass was ragged. I crouched down and laid my hand on the ground.

What’s wrong here?

The sycamore tree in the corner of the garden swayed in the breeze.

She needs to sweep up the leaves, and the tree needs pruning so that it doesn’t overshadow the garden so badly. But surely Gwydion would have done that?

He fixed everything, but she unfixed it again so that he would have to come back.

So, we need to put it back. What would he have done?

I concentrated on the tree, and told it to move its branches out of the way. I called for a breeze to sweep the leaves away into the hedge. I told the water to drain away down the roots of the plants and down into the subsoil, leaving the soil only damp rather than waterlogged.

When it was done, I opened my eyes. The sun was still shining and the garden felt warm, but I felt exhausted. I rose unsteadily to my feet and walked back to the garden gate.

Mrs Evans ignored me; she was talking hard at Gwydion, who put out an arm to hold me around my waist as I reappeared.

‘The garden’s fine now,’ I said to him. ‘I need to sit down.’

Gwydion raised a hand to stop Mrs Evans in full flow.

‘Your garden is repaired,’ he said. ‘Don’t let it fall into disrepair again, will you?’

She stopped in mid-sentence and stared at him, then turned to look at the garden – and we made our escape.

‘The garden told me that she had deliberately counter-acted all you’ve done, to make you come back,’ I said.

‘I won’t,’ he said. ‘You shouldn’t have poured yourself out like that. You need to draw power in as you send it out.’

‘I know, but I don’t know how.’

‘I’ll show you’ – and then he was distracted by the sight of another woman, standing outside her house holding a baby in her arms. ‘This is Mrs Watkins. Her husband is in London most of the time.’

The woman gave us a weak smile as we approached. ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t come to your wedding. Lewis isn’t due back until Wednesday now, and Baby is teething –’

‘Can we come in?’ Gwydion held out his arms and took the baby from her. ‘Jules will make you a cup of tea and you can sit down.’

This was clearly a ploy to get us both to sit down. Mrs Watkins fluttered and then acquiesced, leading us into her back room, a kitchen-dining room. She was about to make the tea herself, but Gwydion called her to sit down at the table and show him something, so I put the kettle on.

‘Is there any cake in that tin?’ He gestured at a cake tin on the dresser.

‘Oh, I made a cake for Lewis, for when he gets back –’

‘But you said he won’t be back until Wednesday. It’ll be stale by then.’

‘He said he’d be back today, but then he called this morning and said he had to stay on.’

‘Bring out the cake, Jules.’ I started looking for plates and a knife.

‘Oh, I don’t think so –’ Mrs Watkins began to flutter again.

‘I do,’ I said, putting a plate full of cake in front of her, followed by a cup of tea. ‘It will do you good.’

‘Baby will want some.’

‘No, he doesn’t,’ said Gwydion. ‘Baby wants a song,’ and he began to sing one.

*

‘Are all the women in this village such leeches?’ I asked him later, as we walked back across the fields.

‘Mrs Watkins was a strong woman once – it’s being alone with the child that’s worn her down. Mrs Evans needs a boyfriend.’

‘Are you going to make her one?’

‘I considered it, but it’s easier to tempt someone down from the north coast. I’m sure we can find her a man to keep her occupied.’

‘And look after her garden.’

‘Yes.’

‘You don’t have time to be married,’ I said. ‘You’re constantly busy looking after them. And Aranrod is busy too.’

‘They’re my people.’

‘But you’re not their slave. You have your own wants and needs, and your own interests to pursue. When you go off on your own business they fall apart.’

‘I need more like you, to help me.’ He kissed my ear, and hugged me close as we walked. But I didn’t reply.

At least, I thought, if he’s running round after the people of the area he isn’t progressing with his plans to drive back the sea and restore the hill towns. But that’s not enough to ensure that he’s under control.

Gwydion led me by the hand, as usual – but rather than walking along the coast he led me inland and up Bryn Gwydion, from where we could see up and down the countryside for many miles.

I looked at him to ask why we had come this way. ‘We can see most of Arfon from here,’ he said. ‘You can see your land and it can see you.’

‘Yes,’ I said thoughtfully. See and be seen, of course. That’s very important for rulers. Gwydion makes sure that not only the people but also the countryside see that he’s won me as his trophy-bride. Perhaps he’s hoping that some of my husband’s glory will rub off on him. But I didn’t want to say it, so I said nothing more.

We got back to Dinas Dinlle eventually and ate a simple meal of bread and cheese with milk to drink. But we didn’t kiss or talk. Now that the thing was done, now that we had gone through the marriage service, we didn’t know what more to say to each other. I realised that neither of us had thought far beyond the marriage; neither of us had really believed that the other one would go through with it. What were we going to do now?

In Gwydion’s bedchamber – which was our shared bedchamber now – I lay back on the pillows while he sat on the end of the bed and sang to his harp. He sang songs about his ravenous hunger for my kisses and the white-skinned dragon that drew him into her dark caves of desire and swallowed him up in passionate outpouring. He sang of rivers and fountains, of hunger and thirst, death and desire. He sang, but he hardly looked at me – it was as if he was afraid to look. Wrapped up in his songs of destruction, he seemed to have built a wall about himself. Meanwhile I curled up into myself, too scared to look at him from fear of what the passion he described might do to me. Altogether we were a sorry pair. I told myself that no newly-wed innocents ever regarded each other with such fear as we were doing that evening, and that we should know better. But then I looked at my dark-haired, tempestuous lover as he bent over his harp and I wished I was safely at Home in my own bed.

*

(Hethie)

I was really cross with Mum. She’d been away all week and Dad said that she wasn’t coming back quickly because she had to Watch Gwydion. I didn’t see why. He’d been fine with me, and everything had been fine until Mum came along and interfered. I missed Gwydion a lot – he was my special friend until Mum interfered.

So when it got to the weekend and she still didn’t come back, I lost my temper with her. I went down to the library and looked at the table where Auntie Sue lays out the Watching stuff and looked for the information about where Mum was. Then I put it in the middle of the table and said aloud, ‘Wherever Mum is, I will be too,’ and I Jumped.

And there I was in Gwydion’s home. I’ve been there before, so I know what it’s like. Mum was sitting at one end of his bed, and he was at the other. Mum was looking really worried – she’s a dreadful worrier – and Gwydion was playing his harp and frowning with concentration. But neither of them was looking at the other. It was as if either they’d had a row, or they were about to have a row.

I walked up to them and sat down on the bed. I said, ‘Mum, when are you coming Home?’

Mum jumped as if she hadn’t seen me until I spoke. But before she could say anything, Gwydion said, ‘Your Mum is staying with me a while, Heather.’

‘Why?’ I said. ‘I want her to come Home. And I want you to come and see me.’

‘I’ll come, but first we have some things to do here.’

‘Can’t you come now?’

‘No, not just now.’

‘You used to come all the time, but you don’t come now that you have Mum.’

‘Well’ – he looked up at my mum, and then looked away quickly, ‘we have some things to sort out.’

‘Have you had a quarrel?’ I asked. ‘You both look really fed up.’

‘No,’ said Gwydion and Mum together.

‘I think you’re really silly, sitting here looking cross when you could be doing something nice.’

Mum opened her mouth to speak, but Gwydion got in first and said: ‘It’s late and you need to get some sleep. I’ll take you back,’ and before I could object, he’d put down his harp in its box and picked me up. And the next thing I knew I was at Home, and he was putting me down on my bed and saying, ‘Now you get some sleep and stop bothering your mum.’

‘Kiss me first,’ I said.

He gave me a kiss on the forehead and then he disappeared. I was really cross again, but somehow I was so tired suddenly that I just got ready for bed and went to sleep really quickly.

*

(Jules)

Gwydion disappeared with Hethie, and I cursed myself. Why was I just sitting here, saying nothing? I should be trying to talk to him – trying to find out what he was planning to do now he had me with him.

But a moment later he was back. He bent to pick up the harp again, but I sat up, put out my hand and touched his arm. He looked at me.

‘Don’t sing any more,’ I said quickly. ‘Your singing is beautiful but there are other things to do.’

He looked at me for longer, then kissed me.

We should have talked. I should have made him talk! Instead I lay back and opened my legs, and he fell into my embrace.

*

Sunday

It was a lot later; it was early in the morning when he pulled his body away from mine and sat up with a sigh – I wasn’t sure whether it was a sigh of satisfaction, exhaustion or regret.

I looked up at him as he sat astride me and I tried to smile, but it must have been more of a grimace. I thought: what a sight I must look. A middle-aged woman, covered in sweat and my hair everywhere. Whereas he looks young (it comes from being a child of Dôn) and handsome, cool and collected. He gave me a sideways smile, but didn’t speak.

I thought: this is ridiculous. We must have something meaningful to say to each other! I thought of saying ‘We must talk,’ but it was so obviously true that it seemed pointless. So I said, ‘When you sing you describe me as a monster which devours you, but it feels more as if you’re devouring me.’

He bent and kissed my lips – his mouth is so tender! His tongue tantalised mine.

I put my hands to his hair – his dark, curling hair. His body squirmed against mine again – I braced myself to start lovemaking again – and then all at once he sat up and shook himself.

‘Such a game,’ he said. ‘Tell me, then. How long have you been told to stay with me?’
When I stared back at him, shocked at the suddenness of his change of tone, he said: ‘I know you’re only still here because he told you to keep an eye on me.’

‘I – not exactly.’

‘I don’t ask for exactly. But it would be good to know.’

‘I don’t know. I – I mean, what are you planning to do to the world? I’m afraid of what you’re planning.’

‘You’re here to keep me quiet? To charm me with your powers?’

‘I don’t have any powers. You know that.’

‘So why are you here? Why haven’t you run away yet? I was sure he wouldn’t let me keep you, but he went away and left you here. So it must be because he’s told you to keep an eye on me.’

I sighed so deeply that it hurt. ‘Would you like me to go away?’

‘Do you want to go?’ – a quick counter-thrust, exactly where it hurts.

‘I just promised to stay with you,’ I said, knowing how weak it sounded.

‘Yes, I heard you. I was surprised. Aranrod thought perhaps you meant it, but I don’t believe in dreams come true; so tell me what you’re really doing.’

‘I’m amusing you,’ I said. ‘Tell me if I’m not.’

That sideways smile again. ‘You are. You most certainly are.’

‘And I – if you’re happy, perhaps you won’t try to destroy anything, or anyone. Perhaps I can persuade you not to try to drive the sea back, for example.’

‘Moral blackmail?’

‘No – distraction.’

He put his head on one side. ‘Just distraction? You’re an addiction, a monomania, an infection of the heart – you’re the dragon who’s devouring my soul. Come here.’ He pulled me up and kissed my mouth, nose, forehead ... ‘but if I let myself be devoured by you, and you fly away and abandon me, dragon woman, what will be left of my heart to rule my people? That’s why I ask you how long you’re planning to stay.’

‘I don’t know. As long as you want to have me here. Until you get bored.’

‘Until *I* get bored? What about you?’

‘I’m expecting you to get bored before I do.’

He gave a brief laugh. ‘What do you take me for? I sing to you of eternal yearning and you expect me to be bored within a week?’

‘I don’t know. You got tired of me before.’

‘I didn’t. Your husband pushed me off.’ He kissed my nose. ‘So you’re planning to stay?’

‘Until you throw me out.’ I thought of something: an ancient legend. ‘Like the seal-woman who stayed until her husband struck her three times, and then left him and went back to the sea.’

‘Then you’ll be here forever’ (in triumph), ‘because I’ll never tell you to leave.’ His smile was wider, more relaxed; he seemed suddenly happy. ‘I’ll keep you until you tell me you want to leave me, and then I’ll let you go.’

‘Agreed.’

‘But you must learn to sing. I’m getting tired of singing to myself. I want you to sing with me.’

I laughed. ‘I can’t sing!’

‘You’ll learn.’ He kissed my nose again. ‘I’ll teach you what singing can do.’

He got off me, pulled me up and led me into the next room to wash. We threw water over each other and cooled down. We dried ourselves and dressed. We sat outside on the grass and ate bread and cheese. Then he said, 'Let's go for a walk,' and we carried the remains of the meal inside and tidied up, and then put on shoes for walking and set out across the fields. Apparently we weren't expected to turn up in church on the day after our wedding, which was a relief.

Gwydion led the way, as usual, inland and up towards Bryn Gwydion. We halted at the top of the rise and looked across Arfon: to the north to Anglesey, to the south to the Rivals, then inland to the great mountains and towards the coast, to the blue sparkling sea.

'Now, watch,' he said, and he sang one of the songs he'd been singing to me in the evenings. As he sang I felt the air about me shimmer, and first the wind died down and then blew more strongly. I thought we must have slipped back out of the here-and-now to Gwydion's way-back-when time, because the sea slipped away from us and the green fields stretched away into the west; and up on the hills to the north and south, where in the here-and-now there are only ruined hill forts, I could see the glitter of house tops and flag poles, and the figures of people moving about. On the lowland there were more houses than usual, and more animals in the fields. When I looked way down south to the Rivals I realised with a jolt of shock that the broken slopes of the western-most Rival, where the great quarries had eaten away the mountain, were smooth and healed, covered in trees and green meadow, and sheep were grazing on them. I could see people moving on the road which climbs the mountain and goes over the col between the western and the middle Rival – in the here-and-now it is no more than a rough track, but now I saw a well-made road.

Gwydion's song ended, and he stood in silence, surveying the land. Then he grasped my hand in his, pulled me closer to him and put an arm about me, holding me close to his side.

'Let the queen survey her domain,' he said. 'You asked what I plan to do; now you can see it.'

'The sea has retreated and the hill towns are towns again,' I said. 'And the mountain is healed.'

'Is this so harmful? Does it frighten you? No one's died.'

I knew he was mocking me, but I refused to be mocked. 'You're very good at creating illusions. Won't it vanish the moment you want it to?'

'Of course. But the point is – you can see what I want to do, and no one dies. I will rebuild – not destroy.'

'Are you planning to do this overnight?' I asked cautiously. 'Or are you going to do it slowly so that people think it's natural?'

'I'd like to do it overnight.' His grave eyes looked into mine and he added, 'I realise that your husband won't allow it.'

'I think it would cause alarm and confusion. If you change it slowly, people will think it's natural.'

'They'll blame it on global warming caused by human action, but I agree they'll be more likely to accept it.'

'Yes. I agree.'

'So will you let me do this, O my dragon-queen? Will your all-powerful husband let me continue with my plans?'

'How can I stop you? But, yes, I'll let you continue. Wiroan won't interfere.'

'And I'll never send you away, so you will never leave me.'

I laughed at him. ‘I don’t believe you.’
‘Let me prove it to you,’ – and he kissed me.

*

Monday

It was dull and cloudy the following morning. Gwydion was uncharacteristically restless: he hurried me through breakfast, produced a coat for each of us and robust, waterproof footwear, and led me out into the drizzle and a cold wind.

‘Typical Welsh June weather,’ I said ruefully as the rain blew into my face. He shot me a glance and said, ‘It’s the first rain you’ve seen since you’ve been here.’

‘It rained when we went to Tomen-y-Mur.’

‘That was your own fault for going out of section.’

I knew that, so I made no further comment, but only gritted my teeth and strode alongside him, hand-in-hand.

Was there any point in asking about our intended destination? I decided I would like to be informed.

‘So where are we going?’

He hardly glanced at me. ‘Caer-n-arfon.’

‘Ah.’ I paused. We hadn’t been there before – it’s a town, and therefore outside his usual realm of authority. Gwydion is a nature god, as you can tell from his connection with wolves, boar, deer, trees and flowers, and he is out of place in towns. ‘So, what will we do there?’

‘There are some people who want to see me. And I told you we need to find a man for Mrs Evans.’

‘Of course.’ I’d forgotten. I wondered what ‘finding’ would involve, and whether I was needed for anything other than display as his trophy wife.

As I’ve mentioned before in this chronicle, we travelled more quickly together than would be normal for two people walking, and we reached Caernarfon by lunch time. Gwydion led me through the narrow streets, crowded with locals and tourists, into a public house.

The ceiling was quite low and the bar area was only dimly lit. As we walked in, I became aware that I was the only woman in the place: this was one of those traditional men’s haunts where women may not enter. A dozen men were sitting at four tables and at the bar, intent on drinking and talking in low voices. As we entered, one looked up and greeted Gwydion by name; and I realised that it was a Welsh bar, so that I was doubly out of place.

I can understand Gwydion when he speaks his own language because he and Wiroan have enabled me, but I had some trouble following the other men in the room. They made Gwydion welcome and gestured him to a seat by the bar; the barman pulled him a drink and passed it to him. Then they all became aware that I was there too, and that I’m a woman. Puzzled looks were cast at me.

‘This is my woman,’ said Gwydion calmly. ‘She fights dragons and overcomes them.’

I managed a nervous smile.

The men nodded and relaxed. Clearly I was not a danger to them: one of their number vouched for me, and I wasn’t barging in: a good woman knows when to be quiet. Gwydion gestured to me to sit down next to him, but no-one pulled me a drink – presumably they don’t know what women drink, or think that we don’t need sustenance. I decided to make myself a small lemonade just to spite them. I’ve lived with Wiroan long enough to learn how to pull

energy out of space and create small things, so I did so and sat sipping it while Gwydion talked to the men around me.

After a few minutes one of them pulled something out of a backpack lying at his feet: a little harp, like Gwydion's but battered and smaller. He passed it to Gwydion, saying something on the lines of: 'You promised us a song.'

Gwydion nodded, put down his drink and took the harp in his hands. He spent a few moments adjusting the tuning, and then held it on his knees and sounded a few notes. Everyone relaxed; a few sighed deeply; most of them smiled. Gwydion gave them one of his sideways smiles and began to play.

I thought of the Irish story in the *Second Battle of Moytura* when Lugh arrives and plays the harp to the children of Dana: he makes them laugh, he makes them cry, he sends them to sleep and wakes them up again. Gwydion was doing the same now: everyone sat enchanted while he sang. He was singing about the old days of Wales, when the country was peaceful and the kings were wealthy and successful and the people were happy. I suspect that they are actually much better fed and healthy now than then, but people love a myth.

We sat there for ages while he sang; everyone forgot to drink or move, even the bartender. No one else came into the bar; it was as if we were cut off from the rest of the world. Only I sipped my lemonade. It was a good lemonade, though I say it myself.

At long last, the songs came to an end. Gwydion played a final chord which woke everyone up and broke the enchantment. He handed the harp back to its owner and thanked him for the loan. Everyone began to talk again, but quietly and, I thought, sadly, as if they regretted what they had lost. But whereas when we came in there had been an edge of suspicion and anger in the air, now there was only peace and gentle regret.

Gwydion had brushed away their anger and left them peaceful and calm.

I was just thinking that this must be why we'd come – to calm the revolutionaries – when one of the older men in the room came over and said something to Gwydion on the lines of: 'Won't you introduce me to your wife?'

'This is Jules,' said Gwydion. 'Jules, this is Dai Williams.'

'Pleased to meet you,' I said, holding out a hand.

I said it in English, but he heard it in Welsh (thanks to Gwydion), and shook my hand warmly.

'You should come down and visit us,' said Gwydion. 'You know where my home is. I've invited you often enough, but you never come.'

'Now I can expect decent hospitality I may come and pay you a visit,' came the reply.

Aha, I thought, so is this the man for Mrs Evans? He might well suit her.

It was late afternoon before we set off back to Gwydion's fort. I was feeling very much in need of food, and dragged him into a sandwich shop to buy something to eat. We set off down the street eating egg-and-cess sandwiches.

'Is Mr Williams really going to come to your fort?' I asked.

Gwydion shook his head between mouthfuls. 'No. He thinks my house is on the main road to Pwllheli.'

'So how is he going to find it?'

'You know it's got more than one entrance. There's an entrance on the main road.'

'You mean – it's in more than one location at once?'

'Of course.'

Of course. That was how we could get there from the minister's house, and how it linked to the laboratory, which is underground somewhere up in the mountains.

'Will he see a house, or your fort?'

'He'll see what he expects: a house.'

Gwydion is an expert at supplying what people expect to see. His semblances don't necessarily last very long, but a few hours would be enough to entertain a visitor.

'So what does it look like?'

'All the other houses!'

... And all the houses are similar. Mr Williams would see another white-washed stone house with a slate roof and dormer windows, and a stone chimney stack.

'Are there hollyhocks in the garden?'

'If you want them.' He shrugged. 'I let visitors imagine their own garden.'

... because it isn't really there.

We got back to Gwydion's home – whether it be house or fort – and sat outside on the grass to eat some supper. The sun hung over the clear blue sea, sparkling on the waves; to the south the Rivals rose up like a green wall in the evening light; to the north the fair island of Anglesey lay across the horizon. I watched the gulls wheeling over the water and listened to their cries.

'Are there seals and porpoises?' I asked, only half-seriously.

'They can be arranged,' he said.

We were sitting next to each other; he put an arm about my waist, and I leaned my head on his shoulder.

'You didn't really need me there today,' I said.

'I did.'

'It was a men's thing. Women shouldn't go into men's pubs.'

His lips touched my hair. 'I needed you there.'

I turned to meet his kiss. There was obviously no point in arguing.

*

Tuesday

'Are you enjoying floozing with your new boyfriend?' asked Frideh.

I can never tell whether she's being sarcastic or not. 'He's a difficult character,' I said.

'Over-sensitive and moody.'

'Like Haacleh?'

Like all of you, really. 'He's a grandson of Ra'haah's. His mother was Dôn.'

'Dana, I think,' said Frideh in that superior way of hers. I suppressed the urge to kick her.

'She's called Dôn in Wales,' I said carefully.

'So many languages! I wonder how that happened. We left them with just the one.'

I decided not to get into a linguistic discussion. Of all of us humans who joined the Watchers, only Steve is able to 'get on' with Frideh.

'So what are you doing with that boy?' continued Frideh.

'Keeping him quiet and keeping an eye on him.'

'And he's happy with that?'

I hesitated. 'He doesn't like being spied on. But he reckons that Wiroan stole me and my friends from him, so he's glad to have me back. He says he'll keep me forever.'

Frideh laughed merrily. 'Of course not.'

‘No,’ I agreed.

‘I suppose we should gather the old children in,’ Frideh went on, as Wiroan came up to interrupt our conversation and rescue me from her. ‘Don’t you think so, brother? The children from the beginnings of humanity – demi-gods, I think they call them. As if we were the gods.’

‘What should I think?’ asked Wiroan, putting an arm about me.

‘We should gather the old children in, rather than leaving them in the world. It must have been very difficult for them, for all these thousands of years. I’m surprised that any have survived.’

‘Just a few,’ said my husband offhandedly. ‘They’re well entrenched in their localities. It could be difficult to pull them out.’

‘But it would be kind.’

‘Would it? I don’t think we can pull this one out – he and his sister are the bedrock of the region. The problem is that they have disruptive plans.’ Wiroan started to edge me out of Frideh’s immediate zone. He obviously didn’t want me to have to deal with her bright ideas.

‘Then we could absorb them, couldn’t we? Surely their power can just be drawn back in.’

‘Not really. It could cause more harm than good.’

‘What good are they doing?’

‘Helping people to keep going,’ I said quickly. ‘In fact I’ll need to get back soon.’ I gave Wiroan a longing glance that said, ‘I was hoping for a cuddle before I have to go back.’

He led me away rapidly. ‘We’ve a few things to do before you go,’ he said – and we left Frideh behind us. She was looking thoughtful, but I hoped she wouldn’t try to interfere.

*

Gwydion still appeared to be asleep when I slipped back into bed, but as my head hit the pillow he rolled over and took me in his arms. For a moment I thought he was going to reproach me for disappearing, but his lips found first my ear and then my mouth, so I relaxed into his embrace.

We were still canoodling some while later when a knock came at the outer door. Gwydion pulled himself off me, pulled an overshirt on over his head and a pair of trousers over his legs, and went to find out who was there.

He came back a few minutes later. ‘Dai’s here,’ he said. ‘Get up when you’re ready.’

He combed his hair – he never shaved, but I expect he didn’t need to. The semi-divine Watchers and their relations only have body hair on the top of their heads. Their human appearance is only ever an appearance, not their only or even their primary form. In the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi* Gwydion turned into variously a wolf, a deer and a wild boar; and when Lleu died as a human he became an eagle, as if that were his basic form.

I crawled out of bed, sore and tired, and went to relieve myself and wash. It was at least half an hour later when, clean and tidy, I emerged into what was usually a dining hall and had now changed into a tidy sitting room with a dining table at one end. Gwydion and Dai Williams were seated at it, discussing something vehemently, with a pot of tea and a plate of buttered toast between them. Gwydion looked up as I came in and gestured me to join them.

Dai Williams rose and I greeted him politely with an outstretched hand and an apology for not being up when he arrived.

‘The fault’s all mine, ma’am,’ he said. ‘I shouldn’t call so early in the morning.’

I wondered what the time was – I'd left my watch at Home – but since yesterday evening a clock had mysteriously appeared on the wall, which told me that it was 10am. It was certainly a little early for unannounced social calls.

Gwydion gestured to me to sit down at the table and passed me the teapot and the toast. While the two men continued arguing I sat and ate breakfast, admiring the embroidered white linen tablecloth and cork tablemats that were laid out on the table. I wondered where Gwydion had got the image for this room – perhaps from one of the many dining rooms he had been in over the last century. Yesterday this had been an old Welsh hall with just a plain wooden table, benches and a central hearth. It had been empty and austere, whereas this imagined room was crowded with old furniture, obviously intended to mimic the old village cottage that this should be. Dai Williams had walked in with his mind already set on what he expected to see, and so that was what he saw. I assumed it would all vanish again when he had gone.

Now, however, they were discussing gardening. Gwydion was telling Dai about Mrs Evans's garden, which reverted to wilderness when he didn't visit her for a few days, 'as if she destroys it to ensure I come back again.' Dai was incredulous, saying that Gwydion obviously didn't know how to fix a garden and get it into order. Gwydion challenged him to come and look, and they both got up from the table and made ready to go out. Gwydion threw a glance at me, and I took the hint and went to fetch a coat and shoes.

Outside it was a pleasant day, but a cool breeze cut through the sunshine. Gwydion's home had mysteriously moved to the main road, a quarter of a mile or so north of the village and so within walking distance of Mrs Evans's house. I trotted along behind the men, who were still discussing gardening. At present I had no apparent function apart from acting as observer, but I assumed that Gwydion needed me there to observe.

We came within sight of Mrs Evans's house. She was in the front garden, apparently cutting back roses, but not to any great effect. When she saw Gwydion she brightened up and hurried to her front gate to greet him – and, I assume, to summon him into her garden. But Dai got there first.

'Good morning, Mrs Evans! I've been hearing about your garden.' He held out his right hand. 'Dai Williams.'

She eyed him suspiciously. 'Good morning.'

'This could be a nice garden, but you've let it go to pieces.' He pushed the gate open and strode into the garden. 'Just let me have those a moment,' and he swept the secateurs out of her hand and began to attack the roses.

Mrs Evans uttered a cry and tried to get the cutters back, but he fended her off with an elbow. 'You've been doing this the wrong way,' he told her. 'This is how you have to deal with roses ...' and while she harangued him and scolded, he set about correcting all the disruption she had introduced since I had tried to sort out the garden on Saturday.

Gwydion moved to stand alongside me, a safe distance from the gate. He put an arm around my waist and kissed my lips tenderly.

I raised my eyebrows at him. 'Will he –'

'Let's walk up to the church,' he said, and led me in that direction, arm still about my waist. As we got out of hearing range of the garden: 'Yes, he'll keep her in order, and the garden. He'll scold her and she'll nag him and they will keep each other amused.'

More of a mother-and-son relationship than a friendship, I thought, but perhaps that was what they both needed?

I realised that Mrs Watkins was walking towards us, carrying her baby on her hip. She must have been out to see the minister and was now walking home. She looked utterly drained, wretched and hopeless, but she brightened when she saw us and her lips opened in a welcome.

I smiled in return and was about to speak in greeting when I became aware of a noise – a rumbling, as if far away or far underground – as if a volcano were about to erupt. The air around me quivered, my sight blurred, and for a moment I thought that the air was filled with buzzing insects. Something was coming up the road behind us, something huge, horrible and deadly ... I heard Mrs Watkins cry out in alarm, and Gwydion let go of me, pushing me in her direction with a sharp: ‘Get back!’

I leapt towards Mrs Watkins, turned to see what was coming; and saw – nothing. But the air was quivering like water, a horrible high-pitched squeal filled my ears and my head, and my heart was racing in terror. The baby was wailing in distress and Mrs Watkins was crying out: ‘What is it? What’s happening?’

Gwydion stood still, between us and whatever was coming, his back straight and his arms at his sides, but his attitude tense as a warrior about to leap into action. For of course he is a warrior as well as a poet and a scientist.

Then a black dot appeared in the air, opened like a mouth opening, very fast, and a figure leapt through: a silver dragon with black edges to its wings and a black tip on its tail. It twisted in the air, spun and knotted itself together and – became a lovely woman with the palest skin and long black hair. Frideh.

She was dressed in a long, white, pleated robe, and carried a golden rod in one hand – she had come as her divine self. I heard Mrs Watkins whisper: ‘Isis.’

I moved closer to her. ‘Not really,’ I said quietly.

‘Oh, but–’

‘Shhh.’

Frideh faced Gwydion and held out her right hand with a sweet smile. ‘Dear great-nephew,’ she said, ‘how glad I am to see you again! It is many eons of eons since we last met.’

‘Indeed, great aunt, I don’t recall ever having set eyes on you before,’ Gwydion replied.

‘You were only a little child. Let me see you.’ She leaned closer to him. ‘You have your mother’s eyes. What a lovely child she was.’

‘How kind of you to say so.’

‘How long you and your sister have been here all alone! But now I have come to invite you to come Home. You need no longer dwell here on the outskirts of eternity – you can live in comfort in our house, with your relatives, in peace.’

‘You are very kind,’ replied Gwydion, ‘and on behalf of my elder sister and myself I thank you. But we were given responsibility for caring for this land and its people, and we still carry that responsibility, and we must continue to discharge it. So we must decline your kind invitation and remain here among our people.’

‘Let me put it differently, then,’ said Frideh, her gentle smile still as sweet as ever. ‘You and your sister will return with me. I have spoken with my sisters and brothers and it is not our will that you remain here any longer.’

‘I have not spoken with my elder sister, but I know it is our will to remain here.’

‘I’m not giving you the choice.’

‘I’m not asking you to give it; it is not yours to give.’

‘I will put it yet another way,’ said Frideh, still smiling sweetly. ‘Your sister and yourself have become too troublesome, dear great-nephew. You have interfered with creation before now and we have let it go. But you continue to interfere and you have expressed the intention of doing more, and acting more dangerously. You are going too far. We will terminate you,’ and she raised her hands, holding the rod up as if she would lay its tip on Gwydion’s arm.

I wanted to cry out, to protest, or to jump forward to stop her – but I found that I couldn’t move or speak. Mrs Watkins was obviously dying to intervene but couldn’t. Even the baby couldn’t scream. We could only stand and watch in horror.

For a terrible moment I thought that Frideh was going to disintegrate my lover. And then he stepped easily backwards and raised his own hands. In that moment I remembered that he had defeated the great king Pryderi, through arms and through magic: and then Frideh’s rod split in two and fell to the ground, and she herself leapt back as if she’d been burned.

She shouted in anger and threw up her hands as if to strike Gwydion, but he spoke – no, he sang, words of poetry which said something about ‘the land will not hold you or the sea receive you, the trees and the grass reject you, the winds repel you, the birds of the air drive you away’ – and I saw Frideh trying to push back against him as if she was pushing on an invisible wall, but Gwydion was standing on his own land and drawing his strength from it, and he could not be repelled.

Instead, a great wind leapt up around us and whistled about our heads, and the ground itself appeared to leap under our feet; Frideh shouted again, and then twisted around, leapt into the air – and we saw the silver-and-black dragon appear, twirl around itself and vanish back into a black hole in the air, which dwindled to a dot and vanished. She was gone.

Everything was quiet. The air was still. Even the birds were silent. Then, very cautiously, a blackbird began to sing. Gwydion lowered his arms and turned to face us. I ran to him and threw my arms round his neck.

‘Are you all right?’

He nodded, and kissed my mouth rather more hungrily than he usually does in public. Then he drew away, took a few deep breaths and said, ‘That’s better.’

‘What was that – woman?’ asked Mrs Watkins, approaching cautiously, jiggling her baby on her hip to calm it.

‘Something malevolent.’

‘I should have warned you,’ I said. ‘Last night she said–’

He brushed that aside. ‘She’d forgotten Aranrod and me until I spoke to Heather. Now she’s remembered that we exist she wants to gather all the power back into her hands. But we will not be gathered. We belong here.’

‘There are local spiritual powers everywhere on Earth,’ I said.

‘Yes, and none of us are willing to be gathered in.’

‘You’d better come and have a cup of tea,’ said Mrs Watkins. ‘You look as if you need it.’

‘Thank you.’ Gwydion took my hand and we followed her back to her house.

*

In a power-position, as the nurturing hostess, Mrs Watkins became a stronger, more commanding person. She made Gwydion sit down in her sitting room and told me to sit by him and hold his hand. She put the baby in his own bouncy chair to amuse himself, and then fetched a wooden box from the sideboard, saying, ‘I wanted to show you this and ask you how to mend it – as you’re here, you can look at it while I make the tea.’ She handed the box to Gwydion, and then went into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

The box was wide and shallow, fastened with a brass clasp. Gwydion opened it with care and drew out the contents: a small harp, somewhat like his own in that it was designed to be held on the knee, but smaller, not so beautifully made or cared for, and with a broken string. He ran a finger gently over the strings, shook his head and began to carefully tune it.

‘Will it play?’ I asked softly.

He shook his head. ‘Not well, with a string broken.’

‘Can it be mended?’

‘Yes.’ He ran his fingers across it again, nodded and began to play a simple melody. After a few chords he began to sing softly, in very old Welsh which I could understand only because my husband has enabled me. Something like this:

‘The pale white dragon threatens me, but I repel her through the power of the land, through the love of my own shining white dragon who gives me her life’s blood.

‘I plunge my spear into her, I pour my power into her, she swallows me up and sustains me, she offers me death in her embraces and her life-giving waters invigorate me.

‘She devours my body and I devour her soul; she offers up her body for me to consume, and my life is sustained through her flesh.

‘Her blood strengthens the land and with her power I will drive back the enemy who threatens my people.’

‘That’s beautiful,’ said Mrs Watkins, setting the tea tray down on the coffee table before us. ‘Is it a love song?’

‘Yes.’ Gwydion kissed my nose, set the harp back into its box and closed the lid. I wondered whether Mrs Watkins would notice that the broken string was no longer broken. I’d watched the two ends curl back together while Gwydion played.

‘Whose harp is it?’ Gwydion asked.

Mrs Watkins looked up from pouring the tea. ‘It was my father’s. No one’s played it for years.’ She passed him a full cup. ‘I never learned how to play.’

‘That’s a man’s harp,’ said Gwydion. ‘Your son should learn.’

‘Is there a difference?’

He nodded. ‘That one needs a strong hand. Keep it for your son.’

‘Will you teach him?’

A short laugh. ‘When he’s old enough!’

Mrs Watkins passed me a cup of tea and sat down herself, facing us. ‘He was enjoying your playing.’ She nodded towards the Baby, who was sitting still in his chair, watching us intently. Realising that all eyes were on him, he banged his hands on the bar of his chair and crowed, then made a singing noise and crowed again.

‘He wants you to sing again,’ I said quietly to Gwydion.

He raised his eyebrows at me. ‘Shall I?’

I managed a smile. ‘Something less blood thirsty, please!’

He nodded, put down his tea cup and reached again for the box with the harp.

This time the song was sweeter: a happy song about the birds singing in the woodland, while a brook burred along its rocky bed. Somewhere in the background sheep were bleating. Mrs Watkins sat back on her chair with her eyes half shut, smiling happily: perhaps she was dreaming of her courting days. Baby sat alert and listening, banging the bar of his chair at intervals and crowing. I leaned back and watched Gwydion’s hands. My husband plays the lyre when he can be coaxed into it, and I was interested in watching how the technique differed. Needless to say, I can’t play a musical instrument. I don’t have the fine

motor co-ordination. Lynne can play the piano and Sue can play the recorder, but the main musician among us human spouses is Tim on his guitar.

Creator-spirits play music. Some humans even believe that the universe was created through music, although my husband says it wasn't.

Gwydion stopped singing, and Baby at once began to sing himself, waving his arms and banging the bar of his chair. I thought I should do something, so I began to sing: 'Baa baa black sheep,' which I used to sing to my own children when they were little, and Baby sang 'Baa, baa.'

Mrs Watkins smiled and fell asleep.

Gwydion and I exchanged glances, and I went on singing: 'Rock a bye Baby, on the tree top.' Gwydion then sang something which must have been an old Welsh lullaby, and then I sang 'The wheels on the bus.'

We must have sung for an hour, until at last Mrs Watkins opened her eyes and said, 'That was lovely.'

'Would you like us to take Baby out for a walk?' I asked. 'He's full of energy, and I'm sure you could use the rest.'

She smiled sleepily. 'Thank you. That would be lovely.'

Her baby buggy was broken – that's why she carries Baby everywhere – but even I could fix it. It only needed a screw putting back in. Baby was happy for Gwydion to put him into it and directed us as Gwydion pushed him down the garden path, waving his arms and shouting.

'We're going to the children's playground,' said Gwydion, and turned the buggy that way.

Of course Baby was too young to play on the play equipment, but he could sit in his buggy and watch the other children play. I tried lifting him out of the buggy and sitting him into one of the baby swings, and for a few moments he was happy, but then he began to panic, kicking his legs and squealing, so I lifted him out and put him back in the buggy. Gwydion and I sat on a bench, holding hands and watching the children, while Gwydion moved the buggy back and forth, and Baby fell asleep. Eventually we walked him back to Mrs Watkins's house, where Gwydion let us in – he persuaded the door lock to open – and we found Mrs Watkins sleeping peacefully on the sofa. Gwydion sent me off to make us all something to eat, while he laid Baby down in his cot to sleep and finished fixing the buggy to ensure it would stay fixed.

At some point, I thought, Baby is going to need his nappy changed – and I'm not volunteering for that job. When at last Hethie had been potty-trained I'd promised myself that I'd never change another nappy. But I suspected that Gwydion had done something to stop that emergency occurring until after we'd gone.

And in fact Baby slept right through lunch and (we heard later) most of the afternoon. And he went on to sleep all through the following night. Mrs Watkins said that it must have been all the music and singing, and she bought some recordings of Welsh harp music to soothe Baby and encourage him to sleep, which apparently worked wonderfully. But I run ahead.

After helping to wash up lunch, Gwydion and I said our goodbyes and walked on up the road, hand in hand. I found I was humming one of Gwydion's tunes.

'You can sing when you try,' he said.

'I used to sing hymns and I sing lullabies,' I said. 'That's hardly singing.'

'I'll teach you some real songs.'

'Will they call the land up out of the sea?'

He shot me a sideways smile. 'Perhaps.'

‘And the people back to the hill towns? Can we go and look at the hill towns? We haven’t been up there yet.’

‘The larger hill towns aren’t in Arfon,’ he said. ‘They’re in Lleyrn.’

‘Is that a problem?’

‘When Beuno bound Aranrod and me to remain in Arfon, he told us we could leave the area only to fetch aid in time of mortal peril. I can travel into spiritual realms—’

‘—So you could visit Hethie in my Home.’

‘Yes. But I can’t go into Lleyrn.’

‘So no more raiding pigs!’

A rueful grin. ‘No.’

‘But isn’t Beuno’s power weakening now? Who believes in him now?’

‘The parishioners. And the other side of the binding was that if we did stay here and help the people, then he would help to sustain us, so we would not fade away and die as the rest of our people had done. We couldn’t have survived so long without that power to draw on.’ He pulled me closer to him and put his arm about my waist. ‘Even with your power to help us, I still need his.’

I assume ‘my power’ is really Wiroan’s power. Anyway:

‘I thought the Rivals are in Arfon. Don’t they have a hill town?’

‘Yr Eifl, woman! Enough of your Saesneg vulgarities.’ He kissed my hair.

‘I think “the Rivals” is a far more appropriate name than “the Fork”.’

We both looked up at the huge mountain before us. It towers over the south part of Arfon, barring the way to Lleyrn like a dark wall, its three mighty peaks like a hand of doom. From the north side it looks far more ominous than from the south, because the north flank (of course) is never fully lit by the sun.

‘Isn’t Giant’s Town on the frontier of Arfon? Can’t we walk up there from this side?’

‘Tre’r Ceiri *is* on the frontier, and there *is* a path up there. Whether you can walk up there remains to be seen, arrogant Saesneg.’ He laughed as he said it, amused by my confidence in my ability to scale the slopes of the great mountain.

He wasn’t joking, either. I can climb mountains; Sue, Lynne and I used to go hill walking together and I’ve climbed mountains on holidays with them and the children. We’ve been up Snowdon and Cadair Idris. But I’d not climbed a mountain with a man who’s determined to prove that he’s fitter and more able than I am. Gwydion, as I’ve mentioned before, can be a most infuriating male of the showing-off type.

However, he did pause from time to time to allow me to catch up, and he did agree to allow me to stop to look at the view occasionally, and he did help me up the final path to the main gate of the ancient hill-town, where the stones that have fallen from the walls and the collapsed gate towers lie strewn down the slope as a slithering, treacherous trap for unwary feet. He even picked me up in his arms, struggling, giggling and protesting, and bore me over the threshold into the town’s interior, then put me down on the heather and kissed me hotly, while I was still struggling for breath from the climb.

At last he let me go and gestured around us. ‘So, now we are here. Come and look around the town.’

It is the most amazing place. The foundations of stone buildings lie scattered across the hill top, with paths and streets between them and with heather and bilberry bushes growing around. There are, Gwydion told me, a hundred buildings up here: some were dwellings, some were workshops and places for selling and trade, some were built for storage. Then

there was one building where people met to discuss business and government and to debate and settle legal arguments, and where religious rites took place. He didn't explain what the religious rites were and I didn't ask: I'm well aware that, before Christ, religious rites frequently involved killing people.

As my husband frequently laments, humans are incomprehensible. Why did they think that the gods, who had given them life, would be pleased by them taking life away from some human? Surely they should have realised that it was a form of blasphemy? But – I won't get into that now.

'Did you ever live up here?' I asked Gwydion.

'No. Aranrod and I lived on the coast, as we do now. Her fortress was a port and mine was inland.'

'Who did live up here?'

'People, and their animals.'

We walked up to the highest point of the site. Like most hills in that part of the world, it has an ancient burial cairn on it.

Mosquitoes, flies and bees buzzed around my head as we walked – I brushed them away.

'It's very insecty up here,' I said. 'Not very pleasant.'

'When the climate was warmer and trees grew on the hill slopes, it was much more pleasant here. The lowlands were humid and marshy – only the coast was attractive, with cooling breezes from the sea.'

We reached the top and looked out across the countryside into Snowdonia: the great mountains to the east. The air was clear and, unusually in summer, the summit of Snowdon was clear of cloud. To the south (into Lleyon) and the north (Arfon) we looked across rolling green countryside to the sea.

'It's beautiful,' I said. How come we'd never been up here before? Despite the insects, there was a tranquillity here, a feeling of having come home.

Gwydion put his arm around my waist, kissed my hair, but did not comment. I reciprocated the arm, thinking to myself that he was acting as if he owned me. But as my instructions were to keep an eye on him and keep him out of trouble, I wasn't going to object.

'It looks so peaceful down there,' I added.

'A kind of peace. Once this land was wealthy, but now the people are very poor. They're afraid that they're losing their identity, and they fear change.'

'But what is their identity?'

He shrugged. 'Their language. Their way of life. Their traditions. Aranrod and I carry some of their identity.'

'But if they don't go forward into the modern world—'

'Their young people will leave, and their society will die. I know.'

'How would – driving back the sea and repopulating the hill towns help?'

'The land needs investment, to stop people leaving.'

'People are coming in from outside,' I said. 'But then they bring in their own culture and the old culture dies.'

He nodded. 'I want to bring people in from inside.'

'You can't turn back the clock,' I said. 'You can only go forward in time, not back.'

He kissed my hair. I smiled at him, then cursed and swatted a mosquito which had bitten the back of my hand.

‘We’ll go down now, before the mosquitoes eat you alive,’ he said, took my hand and led me down the mound, through the north gate and back down the great mountain.

*

(Sue)

‘So, when are you coming back?’ I asked Jules.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, blushing furiously. ‘I promised to stay until he tells me to go.’

Steve, who was busy on the other side of the library and pretending not to listen, burst out laughing. Jules and I ignored him.

‘Is Wiroan OK with that?’

‘Yes, perfectly. He says someone needs to keep an eye on him and Aranrod.’

‘Ye-es,’ I agreed. ‘She scared me.’

‘She is pretty scary. But I don’t see much of her. I don’t know what she’s up to in her castle – probably devising more sea-going humans.’

‘Did Wiroan tell you about the ones Ra’haah and he brought back? Half of them are mostly animal. Seal people, and wolf people—’

‘Yes, he showed me.’ Jules looked very tired. ‘Aranrod and Gwydion thought humans could only survive if they evolved into animals! But they made those babies a long time ago. The laboratory is – it’s outside time. It’s waiting for the right moment to bring the babies back into the here-and-now.’

‘What about the ones that are left?’

‘They’re more normal. They’ve got some of Hethie’s hair, and something from me, and they’re blending those with other material. Gwydion wants to breed people who can live in the hill towns.’

‘And live off heather and mosquitoes?’

‘Pretty much. He says it’s important to repopulate the area from the inside, so that it doesn’t lose its culture and identity.’

‘Don’t you get bored? What are you doing all day?’

She blushed and laughed. ‘Not a lot, but we don’t get bored.’

‘After Gwydion just cast us off, I didn’t think he’d want any of us back.’

‘Are you jealous?’ asked Jules quickly. ‘If you want to come—’

‘Certainly not! As soon as I saw him again I wondered how I could ever have fallen for him.’

Jules shook her head at me. ‘I don’t believe you! If you change your mind, you should come and visit. You know Gwydion has different ideas about relationships. He assumes that if you want to sleep with him, you’ll tell him. If you don’t say anything, he assumes you don’t. He assumes I’ll walk out on him eventually and go back to Wiroan, but at the moment I’m his trophy-woman he’s coaxed away from the high king – Wiroan, I mean. He pretends to himself that he stole me, although he knows Wiroan has sent me to keep an eye on him. And so he works really hard to convince me that he’s a better man and a better lover than Wiroan is. But I know he’ll get bored eventually, and then I’ll come Home.’

‘In the meantime, you’re leading a double life,’ I said.

‘There isn’t any time here,’ remarked Lynne, walking up to join us. ‘So you can be in two places at once.’

‘A real double life,’ said Jules.

‘Surely you can fit in your Watching rota around Gwydion?’ said Lynne.

We knew she was teasing. ‘I’m too exhausted to try,’ said Jules. ‘I’m a middle-aged woman, and he treats me like a teenager!’

Steve gave up pretending that he wasn’t listening and came over. ‘We need to sort this out properly,’ he said. ‘You keep reporting he’s said this or that, but he’s changing his story every day. We need to figure it out.’ He sat down at the central desk and unfolded his work pad, tapping in his password. ‘Right: so what do we know about him?’

We all gathered round. ‘His mother was one of Ra’haah’s children from the first manifestation,’ said Lynne.

‘*Genesis Six*,’ said Steve, typing busily. He always prefers finger- to voice-input; it gives him more control.

I reflected as he typed that the *Book of Genesis* implies that the Watchers and the Giants were all male: it comes of its being a product of a Patriarchal society. The Watchers really have no gender – they are angels or demons who fell out of the Oneness because they wanted to seek knowledge – but they take on a gendered appearance when dealing with humans and we all see them as one gender or the other – with the exception of Jamie’s spouse, who keeps swapping about. Their children by humans, however, all have gender. I wondered who Gwydion’s father was; the story doesn’t name him. Perhaps he didn’t have a father – perhaps, like Aranrod, Dôn could produce children without needing a man.

‘He’s associated with nature,’ said Jules. ‘Trees, flowers, wolves, wild boar, deer, and the eagle.’

‘He’s a shape-changer and a trickster,’ I said.

‘He can make people see what they expect to see,’ amended Jules. ‘He’s very entertaining; he sings and composes poetry. He knows how to win people over and how to change their emotions.’

‘He’s a warrior but he doesn’t fight fair,’ I said. ‘He uses magic.’

‘He makes children but he doesn’t engender them himself,’ said Lynne. ‘At least, not when he’s human.’

‘He has a big sister, and he used to have a little brother and an uncle,’ said Jules. ‘The uncle died – I think the little brother went away to Anglesey. I haven’t met him. And there was Dylan’s uncle who killed Dylan – I assume he was another brother, but he’s also disappeared. There might be other brothers too.’

‘He’s tied to Arfon,’ said Lynne. ‘St Beuno bound him and Aranrod to remain there.’

‘He championed Gwynedd against Dyfed,’ added Jules. ‘Does he represent Gwynedd’s supremacy over the whole of Wales?’

‘Now you’re getting all English Lit,’ I said quickly. ‘You’re in danger of mixing up your stories.’

Jules gave me a harassed look. ‘I suspect the story is mixed up,’ she said. ‘I think the story in the *Mabinogion* reflects the situation a long time after he and Aranrod were free beings, when Gwynedd and Dyfed were competing for supremacy over Wales. The stories tell how Dyfed rose to power, but then Pryderi is challenged by Gwydion. Gwydion – that is, Gwynedd – won, but only through trickery and cheating. And it did Gwynedd no good, because the leaders of Gwynedd couldn’t create true heirs to their power; only sterile misbegotten children whose lineage led nowhere.’

Steve stopped typing and looked up at her. ‘Let’s keep to the subject, shall we? So far, we have a semi-divine spirit who can control the forces of nature and has great powers of persuasion, and who’s tied to a particular geographic region.’

‘He lived a long time ago, when pigs first came into Wales,’ said Jules.

‘When Aranrod’s castle was on dry land and Dinas Dinlle was a complete fortress,’ I said. ‘Aranrod’s castle dates from before the Irish Sea expanded – that would be at least before 3,000 BC. And the second *Mabinogi* story ends with the death of Branwen, and her grave on Anglesey dates at least from the Bronze Age, from around 1500 BC.’ (I’ve been looking all these dates up.) ‘And the story about his stealing the pigs when they had first come into Wales suggests a story from the very beginning of animal husbandry in Wales, so that’s Neolithic times, when people first came into Wales after the end of the last Ice Age.’

‘When the giants lived in the hill towns,’ said Jules. ‘That’s not in the *Mabinogion*, but it’s what he and Aranrod tell us.’

‘The giants were the Watchers’ children, so that makes sense,’ added Lynne.

Steve continued typing for a few moments, then looked up. ‘Degenerate Watchers,’ he said, ‘watching over the land, and creating new and improved life forms from the life forms that are already there. But they were unable to prevent the disaster that wiped out their people. Whatever killed most of the people who lived in the ancient hill towns happened at about the time that the Irish Sea flooded West Wales and cut Ireland off from Britain. Their new improved life forms didn’t work, or were wiped out too. Later new migrations from the continent of Europe re-populated the hill towns but no one knew anything about the people who lived there before. There were only these two and perhaps a few others, watching over the land and the sea.’

‘And later on,’ Lynne cut in, ‘when new kingdoms developed, people half-remembered about them – perhaps they heard them sing about their own history. So they built up muddled stories.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Jules. She looked very tired, but she managed to smile. ‘I think I’ll get some sleep,’ she continued. ‘I seem to be exhausted all the time!’

‘You need to take better care of yourself,’ said Steve, logging out and closing his tablet. ‘It’s too much for one person to do. One of us should come over to help.’

‘No, no, it’s fine. I’ll be fine.’ Jules shook her head and managed another smile. ‘One of us is enough; any more and we’ll scare them. Gwydion is suspicious enough of us already.’

‘Well, be careful,’ I said. ‘Shout for us if you need us.’

She nodded, and waved us goodbye – we watched her go, anxious about what she had got into.

*

(Jules)

It had come to me in a flash: in the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi* Gwydion is the sly and immoral trickster who represents the new Wales, the degenerate Wales, that had defeated the noble and honourable King Pryderi of Dyfed but had nothing to put in his place. Whoever wrote the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi* had no good opinion of Gwydion or Aranrod: he was a immoral, shape-changing trickster and she was an immoral, lying, unnatural mother. But the image is inconsistent. In the story Aranrod is also self-confident and determined, while Gwydion is resourceful and is a good brother, and he tries to be a good father-protector to Lleu. The Gwydion I know is sarcastic and detached on the outside, but is deeply loyal and cares passionately about his land, people and family. He is the Gwydion of the story, but so much more than that.

But did this information help me? I still didn’t know what Gwydion and Aranrod are actually trying to achieve. I wasn’t sure that they know themselves. I transferred myself back

from Home to Gwydion's side a moment after I'd left him and hoped he hadn't noticed me go, but he rolled over and put his arms around me, so I knew he'd noticed. After a few minutes of passionate embrace, he said, 'So how is his high-and-mightiness?'

'He's fine, but I didn't go to see him. I went to catch up with Sue and Lynne.'

He laughed briefly. 'Women's gossip. So are they telling you to leave me?'

'They're jealous,' I said.

He believed that. I felt him relax: he laughed and kissed me again.

'So what are your instructions?' he asked. 'What marching orders have they given you?'

'Do stop it,' I said, exasperated at his constant doubts over my commitment, 'I promised to stay until you throw me out. You know I'm mad about you and you find me irresistible. So stop needling me.'

'I should throw you out,' he said, offhandedly. 'What am I doing, sleeping with the high king's wife? – and she a Saesneg?'

'You're enjoying yourself,' I said, stroking his chest, 'and what are you doing, worrying about the Saes? You come from long before the time of those wars.'

He took my stroking hand and kissed it. 'True enough.'

'Just relax and enjoy having me here,' I said, as sweetly as I could. I put my other hand to his cheek and stroked it.

'I wish I could believe that you're not going to run away,' he said, kissing that hand too.

'I'm not going to run away, darling.'

I hadn't used an affectionate term of address to him before and I wondered how he'd take it. As it happened, he took it very well, pulling me into his arms and kissing me so hungrily that I thought I'd never breathe again. Then he rolled me under him and neither of us said anything for a few minutes.

I dared another endearment when he'd finished. He responded with something on the lines of: 'My dragon-queen.'

There were a few more minutes of hot embraces. Then:

'I wish I hadn't let him take the children as hostages. I shouldn't have let him take them. I have you, but he has them to remind me of his power over me and you.'

'*Darling*,' I said again, 'you *wanted* him to take them. He and your grandmother only took those which were ill, which weren't growing properly. They've made them well. They're growing well now – they'll soon be ready to be born. I've seen them. They're safe and well and where better for them to be growing up than with their great-grandmother? Isn't that best for them?'

I felt him take a deep breath, then: 'Yes. I was forgetting. Their great-grandmother won't allow any harm to come to them.'

'So stop worrying. Why can't you stop worrying?'

I felt him shake himself, as if he were trying to shake off the dark clouds of doubt. He muttered something that might have been: 'Too much joy to be real,' and fell to kissing me again.

We did get some sleep eventually, but no wonder I'm constantly exhausted – he wears me out.

*

Wednesday

'Do you think I should take in guests again this summer?' asked Mrs Watkins.

We'd stopped by her house to see how she and Baby were getting on, on our way to see the minister and his wife; and she'd invited us in for a cup of tea. Baby was sitting in his chair, singing to himself and waving his arms about.

'Do you think you'll have time, with Baby?' asked Gwydion.

'Well, last summer I enjoyed it. It brought in extra money and gave me something to do while Lewis is away.'

'It exhausted you,' said Gwydion. 'I don't remember your enjoying it.'

'No, I did enjoy having guests. I really did.'

'Is Baby sleeping through the night?' I asked.

Mrs Watkins frowned. 'Well, he does sometimes.'

'He'll keep the guests awake,' I said. 'You don't want people to complain on Trip Advisor.'

'They'll love Baby,' said Mrs Watkins, but I could see that I'd unsettled her.

'I think you'll find it too tiring this year,' said Gwydion, in the tone of an older sibling advising an inexperienced younger one. 'You'll need all your energy to be a hostess.'

'Are you going to take in guests?' asked Mrs Watkins.

'No. I never do.'

'I mean, now you have a wife – you'll need the extra income—'

'No. We don't have the space.'

'You could come and help me out, then.'

Gwydion put down his empty cup and got to his feet. 'No. I have other things to do. You know that.'

'Jules could come and help me.'

Gwydion put out a hand to help me up. 'No. I have plenty of things for Jules to help me with.' He put out a hand to pat Baby's head, and turned to our hostess, who hadn't got up but was looking up at us with a stubborn expression on her face.

'I was thinking,' she said, 'you could help me do up the back bedroom.'

'No,' said Gwydion again. 'Ask Lewis to do it. He should do something around the house.'

'Isn't he due home today?' I asked.

Mrs Watkins shrugged. 'He said so, but I don't know.'

She got reluctantly to her feet and escorted us to the door. 'I could get new bedlinen,' she said. 'The back bedroom could look really nice, if you'd help me with it.'

'Ask Lewis,' said Gwydion, and led me out of the door.

'See you,' I said, 'thanks for the tea,' and smiled; but she didn't smile. She stood in the doorway watching us go with an angry face, as if we had insulted her.

'Guests?' I asked, as we walked on up the road.

'Tourists.'

'Does she do bed and breakfast?'

'She did last year, when she was newly married. She didn't get on very well with it. Mr Roberts and I had to step in to sort out her unhappy guests. She's very disorganised, her house doesn't have enough space, and the guests have nowhere to park; of course they all have cars.'

'Of course. Wouldn't it be easier if she moved to London with her husband?'

'Yes. They both say that they don't want to move, but they can't carry on as they are.'

'Do a lot of tourists come?'

'The local population doubles.' He grinned at me. 'Just for eight weeks of the summer – we'll hide out in the hills and woods.'

‘Hethie will want to come on holiday.’

‘Then I’ll give her some work to do in the laboratory.’

I nodded. That was the obvious solution. ‘Sue and Lynne and the children may want to come too.’

‘They can sit on a beach.’ He pulled me to him and kissed my hair.

‘Will it be sunny?’

‘Aranrod and I can fix the weather for most of the time. When we can’t, they’ll have to spend a day visiting castles or museums or take a train trip.’

I pondered. ‘I haven’t been on the new train yet.’

Gwydion shook his head. ‘I’m not taking you. If you want to go, you can take Heather.’

‘Steam trains aren’t your thing?’ – But I know that motorised vehicles of any kind are not his ‘thing’. Gwydion will ride a horse if he absolutely has to cover ground in a hurry, but generally he goes about on his own two feet.

‘If you want to see Aberglaslyn you can walk.’ Gwydion was referring to *the* beauty spot on the stream railway through the great mountains of Eryri.

‘Is it in Arfon?’

‘Yes. And it’s best seen on foot.’

I laughed and hugged him sideways. I’m learning to predict his reactions. ‘Then we should go for a walk. I’ve never been there.’

‘You have. You drove through on a school trip around forty years ago.’

‘And you were watching us?’

‘I was watching you and your friends.’ He kissed my hair again.

‘How? Why? We’d hardly even heard of you then.’

‘I told you – you three are very attractive on the spiritual plane. You exude a sweetness that entices spiritual powers. I called to you.’

‘Did we hear you?’ I wondered aloud.

‘Yes. I felt your reaction.’

I tried to think back through my memories of my first awareness of Gwydion. I suppose that it was that year that I first became aware of him. But then Sue, Lynne and I encountered the Watchers and we were otherwise occupied – and Gwydion seemed to forget us. But he’d explained that. I suppose that I believe him: Wiroan is very powerful, and he could easily have kept Gwydion off me.

‘He couldn’t stop me watching you from afar.’

‘And making sure it rained every time we came to North Wales.’

A sideways, rueful smile. ‘I was hurt by your forgetfulness.’

‘I *didn’t* forget you.’ I hugged him again. ‘Take me for a walk to Aberglaslyn, then. Let’s go and look at it before it’s full of tourists.’

We were walking up to the minister’s house by this point, so we dropped the subject. But that afternoon Gwydion packed up a few things in a bag, and we set off for a walk over the hills to Nantlle and on to Aberglaslyn.

It was time I saw the rest of the country. We stayed in the here-and-now, but moved more quickly than normal mortal beings: people didn’t see us unless we wanted to be seen. We travelled across country, pausing to eat a meal (carried in the bag) on the hills above Nantlle, and then dropping down to walk up the narrowing valley and over the pass into the valley which lies beneath Yr Wyddfa, also known as Snowdon. We then went south, following the

stream – Nant Colwyn – along the mountain flanks and through the woods until we came to the little town called Beddgelert.

Beddgelert is associated with the greyhound Nodens, here called Gelert. I have no idea how Nodens (who is also known in France as Guinefort), came to be in North Wales. He obviously gets around. These days he sometimes comes out with us Watchers – he and Hethie are particularly good friends. Anyway:

I wondered whether we were going to spend the night at Beddgelert – we don't have any money, but Gwydion is known for making fakes – but he led me into the woods, to a ruined stone building under the trees, which when we reached it turned into a respectable hall with a fire burning (it was chilly under the trees) and pork roasting on a spit, and a warm bed in the corner with clean blankets. So we had a meal and a good night's sleep.

Thursday

Gwydion shook me out of bed early in the morning, before the sun had penetrated into the deep valley. After a wash in cold spring water and a breakfast of bread and cheese, I staggered out into a chilly summer's morning with the dew still thick on the ground. We scrambled down into the gloomy valley and made our way down beside the river, between the high crags, as the sun's rays slowly crept down the opposite hill.

As we rounded a crag the sun's light leapt off the tumbling waters of the river, an almost unbearable brightness of white against the green woods and the blue sky. I halted, dumbstruck by the beauty of the scene, while my lover stood by smiling at my amazement, as if he himself were responsible for its splendour.

The crags soared over our heads, white and grey, curtained with greenery hanging down in leafy cascades. Birch trees crowded the valley floor, their slim silver and black trunks luminous in the sunlight, their brilliant green leaves dancing in the breeze. Between them the river leapt down the valley from rock to rock, cascade to cascade, in a constant roar of white foam and spray. Above it all, sweet bird song delighted our ears; song birds flew from tree to tree, singing their joy to the day.

Hand in hand, we made our way slowly down the valley. I craned my neck this way and that, drinking in the loveliness of the morning and the scenery all around us, while Gwydion laughed fondly at me.

As we scrambled around a tall rock, we met a check. There was a presence in the valley – dark and foreboding – which did not back off as we approached. I'm used to dark presences getting out of my way, so this was a surprise; and it was even more of a surprise when Gwydion seized my arm, jerked me back, and placed himself firmly between the whatever-it-was and me.

We all stood still, looking at each other. Then the presence spoke – a cold wind that made my body shiver. Gwydion answered with a fluid rush of notes that could have been a song, a poem or a chant. The presence shivered and vanished. The valley grew warm again; the birds were singing and the river tumbling down its course as before. I breathed normally.

'What was *that*?' I asked.

'Nothing good,' came the reply. 'I should come down here more often to tidy up, but there has been nothing particular to bring me this way.'

'But what *is* it? It didn't run away from me.'

‘It’s probably never seen anything like you before.’ He led me on, without answering my question.

‘So you’ve been neglecting the housekeeping?’ I was teasing with a serious purpose; I wanted to know more about the dark presence. What was it? Why was it here? But he only shrugged and gave me one of his sideways smiles.

Ahead of us, the valley opened out on to a wide green plain. We began to trot quickly down the path towards the level area. A figure was walking towards us, out of the brightly-lit field; it was difficult to see whether it was a man or a woman. I was about to greet it, when it held up its arms and Gwydion came to a halt.

‘No further,’ said the figure (now I realised it’s a man) ‘this is the end of Arfon. No further.’

‘Arfon goes as far as it goes,’ said Gwydion lightly; but I noticed he did not move.

‘I bound you and your sister not to leave Arfon, and I have not lifted that binding; so you may not go further.’

I screwed up my eyes, trying to see his face – but with the light behind him, his face was unreadable. I squeezed Gwydion’s hand. ‘I can go further,’ I said. ‘Can’t he come with me?’

‘Lady Julia, I understand that your task is to keep your eye on him,’ said the other. ‘So you shouldn’t leave his side. I should make my apologies for not introducing myself at once, but my first task was to curb this young troublemaker.’ He paused, looking at Gwydion, then turned back to me. ‘I am Beuno, God’s servant, and when I was in the body I had the care of this cantref on Our Lord’s behalf. Now I have gone on from the body I still have the spiritual care of this land and its people, and I watch over them, as you watch this young firebrand. He needs watching.’

‘What has he done?’ I asked.

‘When I came to this land the people were worshipping him and his sister, although they are only fallen angels and certainly not worthy of worship. They and theirs have destroyed this land once with all its people and will do the same again if given half a chance. My binding has kept them under control for many years, but the times grow godless and my power is not what it once was. For Our Lord’s sake and love of the people, keep him under your eye.’ Then he turned to Gwydion. ‘And you, young firebrand. You did well to turn back the destroying angel, but my binding still remains on you. You stay in Arfon and you don’t leave it.’

With these words, he turned on his heel and walked away from us.

I looked up at Gwydion. ‘Shall we go back up the valley?’ I asked.

‘He hasn’t given us much choice.’ My lover took my hand and led me back up the path.

‘The destroying angel was that darkness we saw?’

‘It was that sister of your husband we saw yesterday.’

‘Frideh.’ I thought for a moment. ‘She goes under other names too.’

‘Whatever she calls herself, she doesn’t belong here.’

I squeezed his hand. ‘You drove her away. We could go and climb a mountain, before all the tourists get here.’

He pulled me up Snowdon. I’ve climbed it many times and it’s always raining and foggy when I get to the top. This time was no different. We sheltered in the café at the summit and drank hot chocolate while we watched the other visitors come and go. A group of mountain cyclists came in, wearing the latest kit. I pondered that mountain bikes are now so sophisticated that the cyclist hardly needs to do any work.

‘I suppose they erode the mountain tracks,’ I said aloud.

Gwydion, of course, can read my mind. ‘The mountain is already eroded,’ he said. ‘It has great wounds on its flanks where the quarries have been worked.’

‘People forget that it’s a post-industrial site,’ I said.

‘The whole of Arfon has been broken open by people looking for treasure,’ said Gwydion.

I guess the treasure has changed with the years. Once they came for flint, then copper and tin, then gold, then slate and road stone. And now they come to admire the broken landscape that the quarrymen have left behind.

‘It’s still very beautiful,’ I ventured.

He shrugged and got up. ‘We should go and look at the laboratory.’

We clambered down the mountain paths and Gwydion led me behind a rock, into a crag – we were inside the mountain, and back inside the laboratory.

We walked down the row of growing foetuses, Gwydion with his arm around my waist. The foetuses had grown tremendously since I last saw them, so much that they were now recognisably babies, perfectly formed but still small. I wondered where they had got the energy to grow so fast, and remembered first Lleu – who had grown twice as fast as any normal child – and then that Gwydion had been getting energy out of me for the last few days. Perhaps he was channelling his increased power into the laboratory.

‘They’re growing well,’ I said aloud. ‘When do you expect them to be born?’

‘Aranrod and I need to arrange post-natal care first,’ he said.

‘Not wet nurses,’ I said. ‘No one does wet nursing now.’

He held me closer to him. ‘Aranrod will have plans. Seals, perhaps.’

‘Perhaps.’ These babies already had a large seal content; were Gwydion and Aranrod making more sea-going humans like Dylan?

‘You’re worrying,’ he said.

‘I’m wondering what sort of world they’re coming into,’ I said quickly.

He kissed my hair. ‘It will be a better one. Let’s go home.’

He led me through the cave and out of a door; we came out on the coast, in his fort at Dinas Dinlle, in the bright summer sunshine. I could see his hall like a faint mirage against the green grass, invisible to normal people.

He led me straight into the hall, which became a solid, real place as we entered; and sat me down on a bench by the fire, and fetched me bread and bacon to eat, and mulled wine to drink. ‘You’re looking very pale,’ he said. ‘You need to rest.’

I managed to smile at him. ‘Sometimes I feel my age.’

He laughed at that. ‘Eat up,’ he said. ‘We’ve been walking all day. Then we can rest.’

His rests are not very restful, but perhaps I should try harder to coax him into sleep? I smiled at him, and began to eat.

*

Friday

The following morning was warm, and Gwydion took me out into the garden that his home has when it’s being a house on the Pwllheli Road rather than an ancient fort. There were hollyhocks (as I’d requested), and fruit bushes, as all good gardens should have, with gooseberries and raspberries ripening. There were some lupins, roses, and gladioli, a wild cherry, and a rowan tree laden with ripening fruit. I wandered over to look at it, reaching up

to cradle a bunch of the yellow berries in my hands; Gwydion came after me as if unwilling to let me get more than few paces away from him.

I turned and smiled at him. 'How come you have one of these? I thought they were supposed to keep witches away.'

He returned the smile. 'Then how come *you* can approach it?' He took the bunch out of my hands and cradled them in his own; even as I watched, the berries ripened to a scarlet plumpness. He broke off the bunch and held them over my head like a charm: 'So, do you feel the power of the rowan, witch-of-my-heart?'

I laughed at him and tried to grab the berries, but he held them up, out of my reach.

'You're the magician, not me!'

'You're the bewitcher.' He lowered the bunch, then – as I reached out for them – snatched them away and kissed me.

'Well, pretty lovebirds,' said a voice from the gate, 'what sort of gardening do you call this?'

We separated, still giggling. 'Spooning,' said Gwydion, and gestured to Dai Williams to come into the garden.

'I saw a friend of yours as I was cycling over,' he said, 'Lewis Watkins.'

'So he's back at last? His wife will be glad to see him.' Gwydion appeared to be giving his attention to his friend, but when I tried to grab the rowan berries he flicked them out of my reach. I retaliated by tickling his hip – he grabbed my hand and held it firmly.

'He was looking pained. Mind you, he always does when he sees me coming. Then he ignored me as usual.'

I deduced that Lewis Watkins was not well liked locally.

'Business in London isn't so good,' said Gwydion. 'And his wife will have told him that it isn't so good here either.'

'Why, aren't the visitors coming this year?'

'I refused to help her cheat them this year.'

Dai nodded. 'Fair play: that house of hers is too small for visitors. Now, if she could do something with the old storage at the back – she could convert it into one of those camping barns.'

'Storage?' I didn't remember seeing any storage at the back of the Watkins' house.

Gwydion nodded. 'It's covered in ivy and it's falling down.'

'If it was in a fit state, my friends could come and stay there,' I suggested.

'Are you suggesting we rebuild it for them?'

I nodded. 'Would it really be such a big job?'

'We'll go and look,' said Dai. 'Chances are if we get the ivy off we'll find the stonework's in reasonable condition.'

Mrs Watkins opened the door to us with Baby on her hip. 'Lewis is here,' she said at once, as if she couldn't let us in when her husband was at home.

'We've just come to take a look at your old storeroom, Missus,' said Dai. 'We understand you want the extra space for visitors.'

She stared at us blankly for a moment, then nodded. 'All right. Come round to the side gate.'

The back garden turned out to be larger than it looked from the road, but very overgrown. At the far end of the garden was a stone building, larger than a garage but much smaller than the average barn. The wooden doors were locked with a metal padlock that had rusted almost

through; the walls were covered in ivy. Dai Williams looked up at the walls and laughed. 'Perfect! Just right for those London tourists.'

'If the ivy were roses,' said Gwydion, gesturing widely to encompass the whole of the building, 'and the nettles were hollyhocks –'

'No,' I said, knowing that he's perfectly capable of making everyone see roses and hollyhocks in place of ivy and nettles, 'it needs proper repair, not just your imagination.'

He gave me a quick glance, and nodded. 'How much would you estimate for renovation, Dai?'

'Let's have a look.' Dai took hold of the padlock in one hand, snapped it off and pushed the doors open.

Inside was dark because the ivy completely obliterated the windows, but when our eyes had adjusted to the lack of light we could all see that the floor was stone-flagged and sound, and that the roof was obviously also sound because the interior was dry. The place was very dusty, but empty apart from some old packing cases in one corner.

'Well, now,' said Dai, 'I think what we need is –' he began to stride around, pressing on the walls to test the construction, kicking at the floor, poking into corners with a stick he had picked up from the ground outside, and tapping on the window glass to check its condition. He turned to discuss a few points with Gwydion – he was talking in Welsh, and getting quite technical, so I didn't try to follow it. They paused by a drain grill in one corner and discussed at some length what a bunk house would need in terms of drainage and sewerage. Dai turned to Mrs Watkins and asked her a few questions about water supply and how far she would provide catering (not a lot, I gathered), and then back to Gwydion to discuss further points. He said, 'I reckon you could get four bunks in here, so that will hold eight.'

'Two rooms,' said Gwydion, 'and a wash-house outside.'

Dai pulled a calculator out of his back trouser pocket, did some quick calculations and held the calculator out to Mrs Watkins, who paled and said, 'I can't afford that.'

Dai and Gwydion exchanged glances.

'Make the bunks triple level,' said Dai, 'then that's twelve. You'll get your money back quickly.'

Mrs Watkins shook her head; her mouth was set in that familiar stubborn line.

'How about if we bought it and put in the investment?' asked Dai. 'It's a shame to have a good building like this standing empty when it could be earning money.'

'I'll have to discuss it with Lewis.'

'Fair play,' said Dai, 'you could use the money.'

'I'll have to discuss it with Lewis,' said Mrs Watkins again.

'Is he in this afternoon?' asked Dai. 'Then we'll be back to discuss it with him later.'

So we went out and left her to tell Lewis all about it. But as we walked up the road towards the church, I said: 'You know she won't agree to it.'

'Mr Roberts will talk Lewis into it,' said Gwydion quietly. 'We can use it to house school groups in winter and tourists in summer. It will encourage people to come to the village and stay here.'

Dai began to talk about the possibilities. I realised that he has considerable experience in such developments – he's a builder by trade, and he loves a challenge. He saw this project as an opportunity both to earn some money and to put something into his community, to develop a resource that would benefit everyone. I had no idea how Gwydion intended to pay for it, other than creating false money from leaves.

‘Aranrod and I have investments,’ he said, when I asked him later. ‘I don’t need to create money when the finance houses will do it for me.’

Playing the money markets? Well, it’s an interesting variation on magic.

‘Where did you get the investments?’ I asked.

‘When the industrialists began to destroy the mountain’ – he gestured towards the western-most Rival – ‘we couldn’t stop them, so we set out to profit from it. Money flowed, and we decided we should make the most of it while we could. We bought shares and we used the dividends to buy stocks. Now the mine has gone we’ll rebuild the mountain, as I showed you.’

‘Where did you get the money for shares?’

He gave me a sideways smile. ‘We’ve saved money over the years.’

I assume that the money he and Aranrod have saved began as enchanted leaves and has been exchanged for real coin at some point, and so converted into paper money, a bank account, and now considerable assets with no existence except figures on a bank’s computer database – but that’s what constitutes wealth nowadays.

That conversation was later. Now we three walked past the rectory, Gwydion with his right arm firmly around my waist while he and Dai discussed what could be done with the disused storage building. As we approached the rectory gate, Mrs Roberts was saying goodbye to a group of local women who were coming out. Seeing us as we walked past, they called out in greeting and waved, and Mrs Roberts gestured to me to come in; but Gwydion held firmly on to me and shook his head. Obviously I was needed to witness whatever discussion the men were about to have in the church. So I waved back and we all three returned their greetings and went on to the church, where we found Mr Roberts with a man I’d seen at the wedding, who Gwydion told me silently was the Sexton.

The two men were bent over the wooden shelves which held the prayer and hymn books, examining a small hole at floor-level. They straightened up as we entered and greeted us with relief, as if we were the answer to their problems.

Gwydion stepped forward – still holding me close. ‘Mice, is it?’

‘Yes, mice again.’ The Sexton gestured at the hole. ‘They’ve been at the hymn books.’

‘What’s the cat thinking of?’ wondered Dai, leaning over to look.

‘Cream and cat food. You’ve let the cat get too fat.’ Gwydion’s tone was gently mocking.

‘We’ve tried traps and poison,’ said Mr Roberts to me, ‘but nothing keeps them out.’

I glanced at the church door – it fitted closely to the floor, but mice are very small. It was unlikely that anything could keep them out, unless they could be repelled from coming in.

‘You need a mouse repellent,’ I said without thinking.

‘And where would we get that?’ asked the Sexton, in a tone which suggested I was talking rubbish.

‘I thought Gwydion could make you one,’ I said quickly, ‘or his sister could.’

‘Surely you have a recipe,’ he said, quietly in my ear.

‘Me???’

‘Yes, O witch of my heart – surely you have a library of enchantments? Heather told me.’ We were talking in silence now, directly to each other’s minds.

I cuffed him gently. ‘I know you can make one.’

‘And better if I don’t. You tell them which herbs to mix – or better still, bring some mixture tomorrow.’

I said aloud: 'I'm sure there's a recipe. I'll find it later,' and both the Sexton and Rector nodded, as if they were convinced that I – the newcomer, Gwydion's old sweetheart – could solve their problem for them.

Gwydion straightened up and stepped back from the mousehole, remarking: 'Speaking of old problems, Lewis Watkins is home.'

'I saw him this morning,' said the Sexton. 'Still the same smiling face.'

'Yes, he gave me a kind greeting when I met him on the way,' said Dai.

'He's such a sorrowful man, yet he has a good career and a lovely wife and child,' said Mr Roberts.

'He's a man that good fortune makes sorry,' said the Sexton.

'His wife is hoping to entertain guests again this summer,' said Gwydion to the Rector. 'You and I know how that is likely to turn out. So I've been talking to Dai' – he gestured to his friend – 'about converting the old storage barn at the back of her house.'

Dai cut in. 'It's dry and sound and would make good accommodation. But she's anxious about the cost.'

The Rector nodded and began to lead us out of the church, heading for the rectory, discussing the matter with Dai as he went. The Sexton joined in; Gwydion and I lagged behind, Gwydion with his arm around my waist again.

'Are we needed here?' I mouthed at him. When he nodded: 'because if we go to the rectory, Mrs Roberts wants to nab me and lecture me about babies.'

He laughed. 'I'll hold you close and stop her.'

And he did hold me close, at one point literally holding Beth Roberts at arm's length, until she got the hint and went away to get on with parish administration. I wasn't particularly following the men's conversation – building conversions are not an area of interest of mine – but at least I didn't get dragged into talking about babies. Meanwhile, the men reached an agreement that the parish would support the conversion project and use the building for accommodating school groups, pilgrims (there are quite a few), and church groups, out of the tourist season. Gwydion and Aranrod would put in some money and the Rector was confident that some other local people would support it. And I said that I could guarantee their first letting, because my friends and their children wanted to come and visit the area.

So it was all settled. We declined an offer to stay for dinner on an excuse of other work to do, and walked back down the road with Dai, whom Gwydion invited in for dinner – he was going back later to talk to Lewis Watkins. I got the job of serving the food, but Gwydion supplied it. I opened the kitchen cupboards not knowing what I should expect to find there – whatever Dai expected, but what would that be? As it turned out, it was tinned soup and crusty bread followed by warm apple pie and custard.

Dai tucked in with gusto and spent the entire meal talking construction with Gwydion. I was inclined to go and hide in the kitchen – thinking I could call Sue on my mobile phone and have some reasonable conversation – but Gwydion threw me a glance which froze me to my place. For some reason I couldn't fathom it was important that I remain there and witness this; as I had no choice in the matter, I stayed.

Only when everything was eaten did Dai remark: 'A cup of tea would just finish that off lovely,' and I was released to the kitchen to fetch one. At least, I poured out three mugs of something hot: Dai got tea, mine (when I sipped it) was coffee, and I assume Gwydion drank whatever he usually drinks.

Dai insisted on doing the washing up, which was decent of him – Gwydion and I dried. Dai continued to talk throughout, and then hurried us all out of the house to ‘catch Lewis Watkins before he can sneak off, the slippery Londoner that he is.’

‘His wife will have accused us to him already,’ remarked Gwydion.

‘But does he trust her?’ I asked, before I could stop myself.

‘Fair play,’ said Dai, ‘I wouldn’t trust her myself. She’s been after you, though you’ve never noticed,’ he added to Gwydion.

Gwydion laughed and said, ‘I’m not blind.’

‘But you pretend to be!’ Dai laughed in turn, then looked at me. ‘Fair play,’ he said again, ‘I can see now why you ignored her,’ and he gave me a friendly grin.

Gwydion hugged me closer to him, and I suddenly felt a flood of genuine affection from him, which was welcome. As you’ll have noticed, I’ve never been able to believe that he really has any affection for me: I might be his trophy woman, but that doesn’t mean he actually cares about me. I also realised that having me there made Gwydion a more reliable person in Dai’s eyes: he had wondered why such a personable young man was unattached, but now I’d turned up everything was (he thought) explained.

Lewis Watkins, however, was not so easily mollified. He obviously didn’t trust us – I wondered what his wife had told him. At the same time, from his attitude towards his wife I guessed that he didn’t trust her, either. In fact, he is the typical London businessman: overworked, overstressed, highly paid but not enough to make up for the impossibly long hours and stress levels of his work. He clearly adores his wife and baby, misses them terribly while he’s away, but can’t cope with the emotional turmoil of being with them. Clearly he suspected Gwydion of being interested in his wife, but I was there too and it was obvious that Gwydion and I are very much in love (Gwydion never let go of me all the time we were there, and I hung on to him too), so he was at a loss as to what was actually going on.

So he greeted us curtly and kept us standing on the doorstep for several minutes while Dai and Gwydion explained that Mrs Watkins had asked us to help her prepare the house to let in guests that summer. He summoned his wife to endorse this story, which she did, albeit reluctantly. Dai then told him that the house wasn’t suitable for lodging guests because it didn’t meet fire regulations, but the old storage barn in the back garden could be converted.

Mrs Watkins then interrupted: ‘We can’t afford it.’

‘The Church will meet part of the cost,’ said Gwydion. ‘We’ve discussed it with the Rector. The payoff will be that out of season other groups will use it. Of course, they will pay.’

At this point, Lewis Watkins stepped back from the door and let us in. We all went into the sitting room and sat down while Dai explained the plan. Discussions went on for ages, and Mrs Watkins became restless. She got up and went out of the room, then came back and gestured to me to join her – but Gwydion kept tight hold of me, turning to kiss my ear to emphasise that I was not going anywhere. Eventually Mrs Watkins gave up and went out, apparently to see to Baby, but in fact Baby was having his nap. I expected her to return with tea for everyone, and glanced at Gwydion to indicate that I’d go and help her, but he gave me a mental shake of the head. So I stayed, and tried not to fall asleep.

At last matters were agreed. Dai would draw up plans and a quotation, and Lewis Watkins would talk to his bank manager. We all shook hands on it and we three went out, without seeing Mrs Watkins to say ‘goodbye’ – or even ‘Ta-ra’.

Dai was delighted with the outcome, but gave Gwydion credit for talking Lewis Watkins around. Gwydion laughed, and I said, ‘He’s the most persuasive person in the world.’

‘That’s true!’ Dai laughed merrily. ‘That barn will be a great asset to the community,’ he went on. ‘We can even have the children stay there.’

I was puzzled; but before I could ask which children, Gwydion said: ‘It’s for the Church to use first, as they’re putting the first money into it.’

‘But they won’t be using it all the time.’

‘Perhaps they won’t, or perhaps they will. You have to get the work done first.’

‘That won’t take long,’ said Dai. ‘The lads’ll rally round at once, when they hear what we’re doing.’

Dai came back to the house for tea and he and Gwydion sat for a long time into the evening, drawing plans on paper and discussing details. I wished I had a book to hand or something to do with my hands – but Gwydion kept an arm around my waist for most of the time and if ever I tried to move away I found I was frozen to the spot. He needed me there, but I didn’t understand why.

... until Dai left, riding his bicycle away down the road, with just an hour left until sunset. Gwydion and I waved him off from the gate and went back indoors.

‘He’s got a long way to cycle and the sun’s nearly gone,’ I said.

Gwydion shrugged. ‘He’ll get back sooner than he expects.’

‘What was that about children?’ I asked.

He gave me a sideways smile. ‘The sons of Glyndŵr.’

‘Oh.’ I felt my stomach contract. ‘Are they still burning down holiday cottages?’

‘There’s some talk of it.’ We walked back into the house; it had returned to being Gwydion’s ancient hall, with a fire on the hearth and a table and benches, and beyond that a bedchamber, into which we wandered and sat down side by side. He kissed me.

I was determined to get a few things straight before this went any further. ‘Are they a revolutionary group?’

‘They have plans. At present I’m keeping them quiet. I’m channelling their energy into improvement projects rather than destruction. Their hearts are in the right place but their minds are misdirected – to violence rather than re-construction.’

‘You want them to help you reconstruct Arfon.’

‘And the whole of Gwynedd. Yes.’

‘And they want to rebel against – who?’ I was puzzled. Much of the government in Wales is devolved to an assembly government in Cardiff. ‘What are they going to rebel against?’

‘Any form of authority – and that will bring more trouble on this little cantref of ours. So I’m working to lead them in a more constructive direction.’ He kissed me again. ‘And you’re going to help me, witch-of-my-heart.’

I managed to detach my mouth from his. ‘How?’

His mouth twisted in exasperation at my question. ‘By being there and doing what I tell you. You’ve already bewitched Dai, as you should have noticed today.’

‘Have I?’

He sighed in an exaggerated fashion, got up and fetched his harp from its case, and sat down on the bed with his back to the bed head, adjusting the tuning. ‘Listen,’ he said, and began to sing softly, accompanying himself with a flow of liquid melody that must have enchanted every living thing within earshot. I’m sure even the woodlice in the walls settled down to listen with sighs of pleasure.

This song was not about dragons, for a change, but about the brown-haired witch of Caerlŷr who had enchanted him and whose magic would empower him to tame the wild boar of

Arfon. I would have pointed out that I'm not actually from Caerlŷr but from a village to the south east of it, but I didn't want to interrupt. Gwydion's singing is so beautiful – if he sang forever I would listen forever, and so would the whole of creation if they could hear him.

The song was amusing as well as beautiful, as Gwydion described the wild boar: strong and eager, lovable and loving, but very destructive. 'When they've destroyed all that is lovely / they turn and tell me / that they did it out of history / to glorify our land' – I'm translating very roughly there.

So the herd of wild boar must be coaxed into using their strength 'to build up tall ramparts / to guard our land against marauders / and all who would destroy it / or carry away its treasures' – again, a rough translation.

The witch and her squire (Gwydion's description of himself in the song – a literary fiction) would enchant the wild boar to be constructive rather than destructive. The end of the song described the beauties of the land that they would create or, rather, recreate – a sort of heaven on earth, in Gwydion's imagination. The song faded away into silence. Gwydion set his harp carefully aside and looked at me.

'That answers your question.'

'You look different,' I said, tilting my head to see him in the fading sunlight slanting through the windows. It was getting very dark in the room, but I thought he was glowing – looking more like my husband's people and less human than earlier. And after all, he *is* one of my husband's people; he's Dana's son, Ra'haah's grandson.

'That's your doing.' He reached out an arm to me, and I moved into it, and his kisses.

*

(Sue)

I was feeling quite at a loss without Jules, as if I was only half there. Of course Lynne was there, and she and I are good friends, but Jules and I have been pretty much inseparable since primary school. She came back most evenings, but I was missing her badly during the day.

I was particularly uneasy because she was with Gwydion. Now, at one time I had been keen on Gwydion, but I'd liked Lugh better. Gwydion is so unscrupulous, and I never could trust him. Then, of course, he disappeared – and only recently had we found out why: he wasn't prepared to compete with the Watchers. It was flattering to realise that he and his big sister hadn't forgotten us, and to be told by Aranrod that I was the clever one of us three. But I knew she was only flattering me. Truly, that family are completely untrustworthy.

Anyway, because I was anxious about Jules I decided to do a proper trawl through the library. After all, we have so many books and pamphlets here – we must have more material on Gwydion. We even have writings that haven't survived in the real world, the here-and-now; but the problem is finding any specific piece of information in them. And remember that a lot of information is never written down, so couldn't be in any library.

I was searching anxiously through the catalogue when Caroline came in with her best buddy Tonja. They were chattering about their homework, then pulled up short when they saw me.

'What's up, Auntie Sue?' asked Caroline, all concern.

'Your mum's not back yet,' I said. 'I'm worried about what she's got herself into. I'm doing some more research.'

'Oh, into Hethie's friend,' said Caroline, now all airs and teenage assurance. 'Yes, he's a dark horse. We did some research last week.'

‘He’s a star-god,’ said Tonja. ‘The Welsh name for the Milky Way is “Caer Gwydion”, which means “Gwydion’s fortress”.’

I thought back to our tour of North Wales. ‘So that’s why none of the hillforts are named after him,’ I said. ‘His fort is in the sky.’

‘One of the webpages we found said that he’s the Swan constellation and the Lyre constellation is his lyre, and the Eagle and the Perseus figure both represent the boy Lleu, when he was trying to find him,’ said Caroline. ‘But there’s no owl in the stars, so I don’t think that can be correct. Because at the end of the story he chased the boy’s wife and turned her into an owl, so there should be an owl there too.’

I realised that, as usual, the children were several steps in front of me. ‘So how is it that he’s stuck in Arfon? If he’s a sky god?’

‘He came down from the sky and got stuck,’ said Tonja. ‘Then we found some books by a Welsh author before the war – a Kenneth Morris – re-writing the stories – I can’t pronounce their title ...’

‘The *Mabinogion*,’ I said.

‘Yes. And he describes Gwydion as being a tall, handsome young man with long black hair and sparkling blue eyes, which Hethie says is correct. He also has mocking laughter, and Hethie says that’s also true. So we think he must have seen Gwydion himself. He describes him playing his harp and charming everyone, but that’s in the story so perhaps he just read it. But he also describes him being hard-hearted when he thinks it’s necessary, and Hethie says that’s right too.’

‘So we think he must have known Gwydion quite well,’ said Caroline. ‘But he’s dead now and hardly anyone reads his books. Hethie didn’t find them, but we did.’

‘Hethie’s not very experienced at using the library,’ said Tonja.

‘And we looked up Gwydion in the poems of Taliesin,’ Caroline went on. ‘Tonja can’t read Welsh, so I had to translate for her.’

‘He’s in the song about the battle of the trees, and the chair of Cerridwen, and the song before the sons of Llyr,’ said Tonja.

‘You’d better fill me in,’ I said.

‘There’s not much to say,’ said Caroline, shrugging. ‘Taliesin says that Gwydion saves the Britons. He makes the trees march to defend the Britons, but the poem doesn’t really explain what’s going on. We read a lot of webpages which suggested that the trees were fighting the forces of the underworld or the giants, but it’s not clear.’

Tonja continued. ‘In “The Chair of Cerridwen”, Taliesin just repeats the story of Gwydion making a woman out of flowers, bringing the pigs from the south and making a cavalcade of horses with saddles out of twigs and plants. And there’s something about Gwydion fighting the bird of wrath, but that doesn’t make sense: perhaps he means the owl.’

‘In the “Song before the sons of Llyr” he refers to Gwydion and the battle of the trees,’ said Caroline. ‘All he does is keep referring to the same stories again and again.’

‘He mentions his sister once in the “Chair of Cerridwen”, said Tonja. ‘Something about her being praiseworthy and serene and sending a protective rainbow around the court, but it’s not at all clear. He tried to make his poems beautiful rather than making sense.’

‘He was just showing off his knowledge of the stories,’ added Caroline.

‘Hmmm.’ I thought about this. ‘That suggests that he didn’t know any other stories; those are the only stories.’

‘There must have been other stories,’ said Tonja, ‘to make sense of those stories. The stories in the *Mabinogion* are far too short – they must have been summarised when they were written down. Sioned Davies says that they would just have been memory prompts for the poet to expand when he or she told the story. But now we don’t know what the parts that were left out were, except that they might have had something about Gwydion chasing the eagle across heaven.’

‘Kenneth Morris tried to fill the stories out,’ said Caroline, ‘but he died before he could rewrite them all.’

‘Or he just gave up,’ added Tonja.

Caroline began another tack. ‘There’s another version of the battle of the trees story, which is really short and says the battle was fought over a white roebuck and a whelp. Gwydion’s brother Amathaon brought them from the underworld and fought with Arawn king of the underworld: I guess he wanted them back. On each side there was a person whose name the other side had to guess so as to win the battle: a man on Arawn’s side and a woman on Amatheon’s side. Gwydion guessed the name of the man so Amatheon’s side won.’ Caroline paused. ‘They were fighting on horseback,’ she said, ‘because Gwydion sang two englyns solving the riddle and saying he was riding a sure-hoofed steed. I thought that was interesting because lots of scholars say the Welsh always fought on foot.’

Sometimes Caroline is just too know-it-all for words. ‘Let’s stick to the point, shall we?’ I said. ‘From what you tell me, it seems that Gwydion is a protector.’

The girls nodded, a little doubtfully.

‘When your mum comes this evening you can tell her all about it,’ I added.

‘We’re going out this evening,’ said Caroline. ‘You can tell her.’ Then she and Tonja hurried away, heading for the music section of the library. Presumably they were going out to someone’s party. I sighed, and began to write up what they’d just told me – so far as I could remember it.

When Jules arrived that evening, she was rather stressed. ‘He’s getting very protective,’ she said. ‘I had trouble getting away, and I don’t think I’d better stay long.’

‘We’re coming over to see you,’ I said firmly. ‘You shouldn’t have to do this all by yourself.’

She managed a grin. ‘We’re working on that’ – and she explained about the accommodation she and Gwydion are organising. I was very pleased to hear it, and we had a laugh over the order for mouse repellent. ‘I’m sure Steve and Jamie can come up with something,’ I said.

But I stopped laughing when she explained about the sons of Glyndŵr.

‘I thought they’d disbanded,’ I said.

‘So did I – but apparently not.’

‘So Gwydion is trying to control them?’

‘He says he wants to get them to construct rather than destroy.’

‘That sort of fits what Caroline and Tonja were telling me,’ I said, and I told her what they’d found out. Jules listened with interest.

‘I love the idea of the Milky Way being his road across the sky,’ she said when I’d finished, ‘but I don’t see how it can be a fortress. A caer is a fort, isn’t it? – not a road.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I checked what the girls said, and they’re right – but a caer is certainly a fort.’

‘The stories seem so mixed up. I wonder if he’ll explain if I ask him.’ Jules looked thoughtful.

‘He’s not very communicative, is he?’

‘Only when he wants to be. He’s improving.’ She suddenly shook herself vigorously. ‘I’d better go back. He’s noticed I’m not there.’ She gave me a quick hug. ‘I’ll try to give you a call later!’ – and she was gone.

I was very annoyed – I’d been looking forward to our chat, and there were other things I needed to tell her. I went to find my husband, to tell him that we really needed to get Jules back.

*

Saturday

(Jules)

When I materialised in Gwydion’s bed, at his side, he immediately grabbed me and kissed me hard. When he let me go, he said, ‘Don’t do that again.’

I bit back my immediate reaction (‘why not?’) and said, ‘I needed to have a chat with Sue.’

He laughed. ‘Why doesn’t she come here if you want to talk?’

‘She’s looking after the children.’

‘They don’t need looking after – they’re old enough to look after themselves. What did she have to say to you?’

‘She and the girls have been reading about you. What is Caer Gwydion?’

‘Long ago Aranrod and I could travel through the realms of space. But we can’t get there now.’

‘Beuno trapped you here.’

‘When we’ve restored the kingdom of Gwynedd, perhaps he’ll let us go.’ His tone was mocking, and I wasn’t sure whether to take him seriously.

‘What were you fighting when you roused up the trees to protect the land?’

‘The enemies of humanity. Death and destruction.’

‘Caroline and Tonja found a story where each side was using symbols of the trees – and you were fighting the forces of the otherworld.’

‘We *were* fighting the otherworld.’

‘Did you win?’

He just smiled. ‘You tell me, witch-of-my-heart.’

I sighed heavily. ‘I think – you lost. The land was destroyed. But you saved something.’

He put his arms around me. ‘We can recreate it,’ he said. ‘Aranrod and I, with your help, and your friends and those high-and-mighty ones, can restore the land.’ He kissed me warmly on the mouth. ‘Now lie down and sleep, and don’t run away again. This is your place now.’

For the moment at least, I thought to myself, and I lay down with him and slept.

But while I slept, Gwydion did something. I don’t have his account of it, because he’s a private person and he doesn’t tell me things, but Hethie talked to him later and she says it went like this (she wrote up this next part):

(Hethie’s account)

Gwydion sat up and looked down at Julia as she slept. His eyes travelled over her sweetly curving body, still fit and young in appearance even though she had borne many children. He let his gaze rest on her fruitful hips; there must be a way, he thought, to break through the

spell laid on them by the all-mighty demiurge, so that she could bear his child. Aranrod would know, if she would agree to tell him; but Aranrod was always unwilling to share the secrets of women with him. That was, after all, how all the trouble had begun over Dylan and Lleu.

He shook his head, shaking that dark stream of thought out of his mind. He looked at her fair skin and her voluminous brown hair, a great torrent of tumbling abundance sweeping over her shoulders and down her back. He did not see what she saw when she looked in the mirror; he did not see the creases or the laughter lines in her face or the sagging skin around her throat, for all these things were nothing to him, the illusion of physicality. He saw her pure spirit and clear mind, that focussed love and power on him and enabled him to focus his power in the world.

He still could not fully believe that she had come to him at last or that the all-mighty demiurge had allowed her to come. He still suspected a trick and that suddenly she would be withdrawn from him. But she had given him her word, and he knew she could not lie, so if there was a trick it was outside her knowledge. He had her now, and she had enhanced his power so far that he could bar any outsiders from getting at her.

So, as he sat watching her sleep, he wove a barrier around them both, so that no one could break in and disturb them. Then he lay down to sleep, with his arms around her. That night, he vowed to himself, she would not leave him to go to the all-mighty demiurge but would stay with him.

But he did not remember that Julia's children also wanted to speak to their mother. I wanted to tell her that my class had won a prize for the school project; and I wanted to tell Gwydion too. But when I tried to get through to them I couldn't, because of Gwydion's barrier.

I was determined not to be thwarted. It was very late at night, but I couldn't sleep because I wanted to talk to Mum and Gwydion. So I got dressed and went down to the library, to the table where we set out to go Watching, as I did once before. Then I adjusted things so I would get somewhere near to where they were, I thought, and I Jumped.

But I must have got something wrong, because I didn't land anywhere near them. I came out in a city centre. There were lots of people about, walking around in groups, wearing party clothes and laughing and talking. A group of young men – boys, really – saw me standing there looking bewildered and came over to me.

'Are you OK?' they said.

I was very cross that my Jump hadn't worked and I didn't want to tell them I was lost so I said yes, I was OK.

'You're looking a bit ill,' they said. 'You'd better come along with us. We're just going home.'

They seemed very friendly and I didn't know what else to do so I went with them. Two of them held my hands and we walked along through the city until we came to a block of apartments, where they tapped a number into a door and led me upstairs to their flat. Then they let me into their flat and asked me if I'd like to lie down on a bed so I said I would, and they showed me into one of their bedrooms.

I lay down (I didn't get undressed) and I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew I felt someone on top of me. I opened my eyes and it was one of the boys. In fact it was two of them. In fact it was all of them!

They said, 'Don't be upset, it's OK,' and they were trying to get my clothes off!

I was mad. Mum always says we mustn't blast people because it isn't fair to blast people who can't blast back, but I was so frightened and angry that I blasted them a little bit – I threw them across the room. There was an awful crash and a lot of screaming, but I didn't stop to see what I'd done. I jumped up and I ran out of the flat and downstairs and outside and I didn't stop running until I was a long way away.

Then I realised that I was completely lost, and I didn't know how to get Home, or how to contact Mum or Gwydion or anyone, and I was afraid those horrible boys would come after me, or someone worse. So I hid behind some bins and cried.

(Jules)

It was my mobile phone that woke me. I normally leave it turned off, but I'd turned it on the previous day when I was going to call Sue and I'd forgotten to turn it off again. Its ringing gradually penetrated the fog of my sleep and jarred me to wakefulness. I pushed Gwydion off (he woke up more slowly), crawled out of bed, found my bag and pulled out my phone.

It was Sue. 'Jules! Is Hethie there with you?'

'No. Why?'

'She isn't here and I can't find her. I think she went out looking for you. Are you sure she hasn't got there?'

I listened out with all my senses – I couldn't feel her. Behind me, Gwydion's voice said: 'No one's here. I barred the way.'

'Can you look for her? I'm worried something's happened to her.' Sue was clearly panicking.

I reacted instinctively, to soothe and calm. 'Yes, we'll find her. Don't worry.' I ended the call, and turned to Gwydion.

'What do you mean, you barred the way?' I demanded.

He seized my hand. 'I'll explain later. We must look for your daughter.'

I was glad he remembered that she's my daughter. 'But you can't go out of Arfon. She could be anywhere!'

'Now I have you here, my witch, we can go further' – he seized my hand, and pulled me up – and we went up.

With dizzying speed, we flew up and out, over the land, straight up into the early morning sky, like white birds climbing up into the heavens. The sky grew dark around us – I could see the whole of Britain laid out below us, and Ireland to the west, and the islands, and the continent of Europe beyond. I could see forests, fields, hills and rivers, the dark stain of towns and cities sprawling across Britain's green landscape like wounds. As I looked, I could see more than simply objects – I could see colours swirling, expanding and contracting, some like bright lights, others misty like clouds. I realised that I was seeing the energy fields of living things, and that the energy fields altered according to health, activity and emotion.

To my inexperienced eyes it was one great blur of colours and confusion, but Gwydion could see in more detail than I could – for him, this was normal sight. His eyes scanned the view below, and then he said, 'There she is,' and we were falling again like a stone, sweeping down so fast that I didn't even have enough breath to scream.

We landed in a city backstreet, Gwydion's right arm firmly about my waist, in front of a group of bins. As we landed, I felt Hethie's emotion and heard her sobbing – I leapt forward, dragging my lover behind me, dodged around the bins and threw my arms about my daughter.

'Hethie! What happened?'

‘Mum! Mum, where have you *been*? I wanted to tell you – but I couldn’t reach you—’

Gwydion put his arms around both of us and lifted us up – and we went back up, and across the sky like the white jetstream of a plane, back to – where exactly *were* we?

All about us was brightness, but we weren’t exactly anywhere. I had some vague impression of grass, trees, sunshine and flowers, and a bench by a pool of crystal-clear water. I sat down with Hethie in my arms and let her cry on my shoulder. Gwydion was on her other side.

‘We’ve won a prize,’ Hethie managed to say at last. ‘Our project won a prize today, and I wanted to tell you, and you didn’t come, and I couldn’t reach you.’

I looked up at Gwydion. ‘I did come, but Gwydion called me back.’

‘I’m sorry I barred your way,’ said my lover, with uncharacteristic humility. ‘Your mum and I are busy, and I wanted to prevent anyone disturbing us. But I should have been listening out for you.’

‘Yes, you should.’ Hethie was still in tears, but there was as much anger as grief in her voice. ‘I tried to get to you and I ended up somewhere else. And there were these horrible boys there.’

I saw the ragged tear in her energy field and my heart missed a beat. ‘Hethie! What happened?’

‘I had to blast them. I didn’t mean to, but I had to.’

It took a few minutes’ questioning to ascertain what had happened. I was all for rushing back to make sure that the boys were not badly hurt, but Gwydion just said, ‘Sue and Lynne can go,’ and handed me my mobile phone, which I was sure I’d left behind on the bed.

I called my friends, told them that we’d found Hethie and asked them to go and check up on the devastation Hethie had left behind her. Meanwhile, Gwydion was talking Hethie through the procedure she should use to contact him, and promised that in future he would be listening.

‘You were too busy admiring my mum!’ retorted Hethie.

‘Of course.’

‘Are you pleased about the prize? You told us how to do it.’

‘Yes, and now we can develop the project further.’

‘Will your sister help us now?’

Gwydion shook his head. ‘I doubt it, but you can ask her.’

‘I will. When can we go and see her?’

I interrupted. ‘Where are we? This isn’t Arfon.’

That sideways smile. ‘This is Caer Gwydion.’

‘But Beuno said you mustn’t leave Arfon!’

The smile broadened. ‘I can leave to go to the aid of a child or a virgin, or to do justice. And you’ve increased my power, my witch, so that I can reach beyond the physical realms – out of Beuno’s power.’

‘Will you be in trouble?’ asked Hethie, anxiously. ‘I’ll tell him that you came to rescue me.’

‘He knows that.’ Gwydion kissed her hair. ‘Don’t worry, my flower-maiden. Beuno won’t be angry, and now we can get on more quickly than before.’ He got up from whatever we were seated on, and added: ‘We’ll go back to Dinas Dinlle and you can go in search of my sister.’

Hethie's face lit up; she jumped up and took his left hand. He held out his right to me, pulled me to him and kissed my lips, and then we slipped or flew or fell out of that brightness, through the air or the sky and back down into Gwydion's earthly hall, the once-upon-a-time hall at Dinas Dinlle.

*

Aranrod greeted Hethie kindly, listened to her description of her school project and was properly appreciative of her group winning a prize. She took Hethie for a tour of the laboratory and discussed with her how the project could develop. But she didn't allow Gwydion or me to go with them. 'This is Heather's project, not yours,' she told her brother firmly.

'I need to talk to you about—' Gwydion began, but she interrupted him.

'No, and no. Don't you ever listen? No, you never do. The answer is no.' She turned her back on him and walked away, leading Hethie by the hand and saying, 'I'll show you my latest experiment—' as they moved out of earshot.

Gwydion and I looked at each other. 'What's this about?' I asked, wondering whether he would tell me.

He wouldn't. He just said: 'We'd progress a hundred times more quickly if she'd tell me what she's doing.'

'Big sisters don't trust their little brothers,' I said. 'I never trust mine.'

He looked at me, a wry smile on his lips. 'You have a little brother? I didn't know. But I didn't look.'

'Little brothers break things and get in the way,' I said, smiling at him.

He sighed. 'I certainly did, but I didn't intend it – if only she'd let me know what she was doing.'

I put my arms about him. 'So, son-of-Dôn, what is this you need to talk about with your sister?'

He put his arms about my waist and kissed me. After a while, he said, 'Witch-of-my-heart, when will your husband come to reclaim you again?'

'Are you still worrying about that? Don't.'

'But he will want you back. No high king would let his wife leave him for long, and he knowing where she is and who has her.'

'You don't understand him. I'm here with you but I'm not away from him – he knows where I am and he wants me to be here, looking after you.' I put a hand to his cheek. 'You do need looking after.'

'That creature that called itself my great aunt had other ideas.'

'You banished her. She won't come back.'

'If he comes for you, I'll banish him too.' He kissed me then, so I didn't bother to tell him that Wiroan would not be coming for me, because if he wanted to get me back for anything urgent he would simply pull me out. But for the present this is my mission and here I stay.

I didn't know at that point what it was that Gwydion wanted to discuss with his sister, otherwise I might have been more concerned.

Aranrod and Hethie were a long time going around her laboratories, so we left them to it and went for a walk along the beach. The sun was shining but the wind was blowing a gale, and we held tightly on to each other as we walked.

'Dai and his friends will be coming after noon,' said Gwydion at last, 'we should be at our home to greet them.' (I was interested that he said *our* home). 'I'll tell Aranrod and Heather

where we're going,' and he paused for a moment, looking back down the beach towards Caer Arianrhod, standing on its rock on the edge of the sea, as it was in that once-upon-a-time. Was there a quiver in the air? Did the sunlight flicker off the waves of the sea in a certain pattern? I looked and listened, but I didn't see or hear anything – yet later Hethie said that Aranrod had known that we'd gone back to Dinas Dinlle.

I was impressed at Dai's speed of work. 'Has Dai already finalised his building plans?'

He tightened his arm around my waist. 'He wants to prove to you that he can work fast.'

We had something to eat when we got back to the hall – bread and cheese, and milk to drink – and it tidied itself away just as Dai arrived with a group of his friends. As they all came in, greeting me respectfully with 'Good day, missus,' and 'How are you, missus?' the hall changed itself around us so we were back in the house they expected to see. They crowded into the back room and sat around the table, unrolling plans and setting up a computer tablet to show further plans and calculations. At a nod from Gwydion, I went to put the kettle on, but left the kitchen door ajar so that I could hear what everyone was saying.

It was all in Welsh, but if I concentrate hard I can follow their conversation.

They had planned out the conversion very thoroughly, and priced it up. Between them they had the skills to carry through the work, with an architect (Dai), electrician, plumber, bricklayer and roofer, and decorator. Their plan was that the barn would accommodate 'guests from London' in summer (they were convinced that all outsiders come from London) and their fellow sons of Glyndŵr in winter. They carried on talking even as I brought in and handed around the tea, pausing only to say: 'Thanks, missus'; clearly they have decided that I'm not a security risk to them.

After much discussion and some small adjustments to the plans, we set off up the road to present the plans to Lewis Watkins. Gwydion insisted that I come too – we left the washing up to do itself.

*

To cut a long story short: Lewis Watkins eventually accepted the plans on the basis that most of the expense would be met by the Church; the Reverend Roberts accepted the plans on the basis that Gwydion and Aranrod would meet part of the cost; and Dai and his group went back into town to submit the plans to the Council.

When they'd gone, Gwydion got out his harp and began to sing about healing the sores on the land and rebuilding the mountains, restoring the green land of Arfon. I sat by his side, head on his shoulder, listening to him sing and wondering how he could bring this reconstruction about. Then we heard a scratching sound at the door – and it opened, revealing Hethie and Aranrod, carrying a baby's woven 'Moses-basket' between them.

'Look, Mum!' cried Hethie. 'We've made a baby!'

Gwydion at once laid down his harp, leapt up and seized the basket from her, looking inside; I could see from where I sat that there was indeed a baby in it. Gwydion set the basket gently on the floor and knelt beside it, exclaiming over the baby, stroking its head and counting its fingers. I stepped forward to look – it was larger than a 'normal' baby and lay quietly in its basket, smiling up at us – not at all like a 'normal' baby, I thought, as they usually keep their eyes closed for the first few days and spend a lot of time screaming. This one looked much more developed than a new-born. I glanced at Aranrod, who came over to stand by my side.

'Are you impressed?'

‘It looks very developed,’ I said. ‘Much bigger than when I last saw it – is it one of the babies from the laboratory?’

She nodded. ‘This was the most developed one. It just needed a little more: Heather added a little of her saliva to bring it to full growth. And then we could detach it from the feeding tubes and we brought it over to show you.’

‘How are you going to feed it? Does it need a wet-nurse?’

‘I’ll find a woman in the town.’ I guessed she meant Caernarfon.

I watched Gwydion and Hethie fussing and laughing joyfully over the baby, and suddenly felt a jolt of something go through my body. What was that? *Jealousy*? Now, why should I feel jealous? Gwydion is only a quick fling, not my love-of-the-life. I certainly don’t want to be pregnant again – being pregnant is about the worst experience I’ve ever had, and I’ve had it several times. I always feel so ill, and giving birth to my last, Hethie, almost killed me. No more, no more – that’s why Wiroan locked up my eggs.

But I remembered that Gwydion had tried to get me pregnant with spittle – as if saliva could provide the basic genetic codes for a baby. So far as I knew, it hadn’t; not that I can ever tell until I’m a few weeks gone, and there hadn’t yet been time. In any case, why should he want a child from me? I don’t have the necessary genetic material to re-create ‘the giants’, the children of Dôn, the gods; whereas Hethie, as a child of Wiroan and Haacleh, does have that genetic code within her body.

‘He loves children,’ said Aranrod in my ear, ‘as you can see! He thinks that if you had his child he could keep it, when your husband takes you away.’ I looked accusingly at her and she smiled, half-apologetically. ‘We’re both sure that he will take you away, eventually.’

‘So that’s what you think? I’m just a passive object to be fought over by the men? I don’t have any say in this myself – or what I think is irrelevant?’

She smiled again. ‘You’re a human – the gods can over-rule you, and you can’t do anything about it. They certainly over-ruled us.’

‘I see.’ I watched Gwydion lift the baby tenderly from its basket and kiss its nose; it giggled and laughed. ‘That baby is very advanced – as if it’s three or four months old rather than an hour or two.’

‘You know that human babies are born underdeveloped,’ said Aranrod. ‘They can’t stay longer in the womb because they’ll overgrow the womb and won’t be able to be born, but then they need another three months to adjust to life outside the womb. Using the artificial womb means that we can keep them there until they are completely developed and ready to be born. And the artificial womb means we can regulate the speed of growth: bring them on very quickly or slow them down.’

I nodded, watching Gwydion cuddling the baby, while Hethie hovered over him, pointing out this and that, and lecturing him on how to hold it and what to do. I should have laughed at the pair of them, but instead I felt excluded, cut out of this part of their world, with the terrible gnawing pain in my groin that said *That should have been my baby ...* This is completely stupid, I thought: I don’t want the agony of another pregnancy, feeling ill all the time, losing another two years of my life ...

‘You wouldn’t have to carry it yourself,’ said Aranrod in my ear. ‘We could move it to our laboratory. It would just have some of your amniotic fluid and blood – my brother’s already provided the basic genetic material.’

I looked accusingly at her and she laughed quickly. ‘It’s in your body, but it can’t grow because the all-mighty demiurge has shut up your womb.’

‘How would you get it out?’ I asked, between clenched teeth.

‘That’s easy; a variation on what Uncle Math did to me, but much more sophisticated.’ Another laugh. ‘He was *such* an amateur. I’d use a pessary to open the womb and give you a honey drink with extracts of rue and raspberry.’

Both abortifacients, I thought.

‘And then put the foetus – well, it’s just a ball of cells at the moment – into an artificial womb and feed it your genetic material – saliva is fine – and the mix of chemicals we used for Baby over there, and let it grow. At our current achieved rate of growth I’d estimate we could have a baby ready for release within’ (she paused to count on her fingers) ‘six weeks?’

Now it was my turn to laugh. Aranrod shrugged.

‘You don’t believe me? Come along with me now while those two are fussing over Baby – I’ve named her New Dawn, but she’ll be just Baby for a while – and I’ll show you.’

She took my right hand in her left, and led me out of the door. I went along with her, partly because I was intrigued and partly so I wouldn’t have to watch my lover and daughter being silly over someone else’s child.

We stepped out of the door and into Aranrod’s castle, into a bright, sunlit room with tall windows and a high, vaulted ceiling. There were only a few items of furniture: a wooden chest, a long wooden table with clean glassware (jugs, measuring flasks, glass rods for stirring), and a long padded couch. She told me to sit on the last and opened her chest, saying: ‘Take off those dreadful clothes and put this on.’

‘This’ was a wrap-around dressing gown, made of multi-coloured woven silk. I pulled off my jeans, tee-shirt, underwear, socks and trainers and put on the gown. Aranrod handed me a glass of something warm and yellow, smelling strongly of flowers.

‘Drink that and lie down. It will put you to sleep and numb any cramps you might feel.’

I did as I was told. The room was very light and airy ... I could hear songbirds singing sweetly ...

‘Jules? Do you feel all right?’

I opened my eyes. The room was still airy, but the quality of the light had changed; it had gone from being late afternoon to evening. I blinked and looked up into Aranrod’s concerned face.

‘You were deeply asleep. Doesn’t my brother let you get any rest?’

‘Not much.’ I managed a brisk laugh and tried to sit up, but she put a hand on my right shoulder.

‘Don’t jump up. You may feel a little dizzy for a while. I don’t think there will be any blood, but take things easy, just in case.’

I sat up slowly – she was right: I did feel dizzy.

‘What did you do?’

‘I’ve got the foetus out – it came quite easily – and I’ve put it into the fluid. When you can stand, I’ll show you. But don’t get up just yet.’ She was watching me anxiously. ‘I may have overdone the dose. It took me a long time to wake you up.’

I tried to brush off her concern. ‘Perhaps I’m just a bit run down.’ I took a few deep breaths and got to my feet, holding on to the couch. ‘OK. Where is this baby – this foetus?’

‘We’ll go this way.’ She took my right hand in hers and steadied me with her left. ‘Don’t rush.’

She led me through a doorway – and we were in the laboratory under the mountain. The rows of incubators with the babies growing in them now included a new one with a tiny child

floating in clear liquid. I bent over it, intrigued. Was I really seeing it growing as I watched? I could swear that it was getting bigger ...

‘That’s yours. It’s doubled in size since I put it in,’ said Aranrod.

‘How can it grow so fast?’

She shrugged. ‘It’s not really fast, because we are outside normal time here. You could say that time is speeded up.’

I watched it for a few moments, as the tiny arms became more distinct and the tiny tail grew and then withered; and then Aranrod said, ‘You’re tired. We’d better get back,’ and she led me back through the door and into her castle; but now we were in a different room, with chests and a bed and padded chairs, and window seats in each of the tall windows.

‘You need some different clothes,’ said my hostess firmly. ‘Those clothes you’re wearing are ridiculous. Let me lend you something – and I’ll tidy up your hair.’

So when we went back to find my lover and daughter, still playing delightedly with the baby, I was dressed in a grass-green dress with my hair tied back in a bronze-coloured clasp, and clean leather shoes on my feet. Hethie looked up and nodded, then went back to fussing over the baby; but Gwydion left the baby with her and came over to kiss me and embrace me round the hips.

‘I’ve dealt with your problem, brother,’ said Aranrod.

Gwydion kissed me again, and said to me, ‘Are you well? Did she hurt you?’

I was touched that he was concerned about my health, for a change. ‘I’m feeling a bit dizzy, but I’m fine.’

He rubbed a hand over my stomach. ‘We’ll go and look at it later. You need to sit down now. Come and look at New Dawn; then you’ll know what to expect when our child is born.’

Our child. Why did that make my blood race with joy? Jules Smythe, what a soft-hearted romantic you are! But Aranrod was smiling proudly and I told myself that I could be glad to have made my hosts happy.

Gwydion half led, half-carried me to the bed and made me lie down on it, then turned to exchange words with his sister. I heard him say: ‘Thank you,’ and her answer: ‘This time you gave me time to sort it out,’ and then they dropped into another language, which I rapidly realised wasn’t Welsh. It must be their own original tongue, I thought to myself, and wondered what it was – it must be something like the language that Wiroan and his sisters and brothers speak, but perhaps with a local dialect. I should be able to understand it, if I listened carefully and concentrated. I closed my eyes.

‘Mum,’ said Hethie’s voice in my ear, ‘look at the baby.’

I opened my eyes blearily. Hethie was sitting next to me on the bed, holding the baby in her arms. It – she – was gurgling and giggling and waving her arms around, trying to catch hold of Hethie’s fingers.

‘You need to look at her,’ Hethie was saying. ‘She’s already able to focus her eyes. Look, she can grab my fingers.’

I managed to prop myself up on my left elbow.

‘They grow at twice the speed of a human baby,’ my daughter was saying. ‘She’ll soon be weaned and she’ll be walking and talking in a few months.’

‘Heavens,’ I said, ‘who’s going to look after her? Not me!’

‘No, no, don’t worry, Mum. Auntie Aranrod says she knows women who can look after her.’

Auntie Aranrod, is it now? ‘How’s she going to explain the rate of growth?’

‘She’ll just tell them that she’s very advanced for her age.’

‘Right.’ I lay down again. Why did I feel so exhausted?

‘Heather,’ came Aranrod’s voice, ‘we’ll leave your mother to rest. Let’s take New Dawn back to my castle and show her round.’

‘Coming.’ Hethie handed the baby to Aranrod, who held her up for Gwydion to kiss once more and then laid her back in her Moses-basket. ‘See you tomorrow, Mum.’

‘She’s staying with me for a few days to help me with the project,’ said Aranrod to me, but I was scarcely listening – exhaustion had settled over me, and I closed my eyes again.

I woke to the sound of Gwydion’s harp, and tried to sit up. He at once stopped playing and said, ‘At last! Aranrod certainly gave you too large a dose.’

‘What happened?’ I asked, shaking my head to clear it.

‘My sister has forgotten how weak humans are.’ He put his harp down. ‘She gave you the dose she would use on herself.’ He stroked my hair. ‘You’d better eat something before we go to the laboratory.’

‘OK.’ I managed to sit up this time. He took my left hand in his. ‘You must take things gently – you’re very valuable. You bring me luck, witch-of-my-heart. Since you came back to me, I’ve been able to manipulate the children of Glyndŵr, placate the parishioners, please the rector and Aranrod has created a successful baby.’

‘Good,’ I said weakly. ‘But I’ll have tea before we do any more. Being lucky seems to take it out of me.’

‘Supper,’ he said, and got up to go in search of food.

*

We had a larger meal than usual, including roast pork and root vegetables, a much larger meal than I’d had there since arriving. I noticed that Gwydion has not integrated potatoes into his cooking but uses bread instead. Despite living among modern humans, he only takes on their eating habits when eating with them.

After supper, we went for a walk. I still felt disconcertingly light-headed and was glad that Gwydion kept his arm about me and walked slowly. We went to the laboratory the quick way, as if stepping between rooms, and looked at the little creature growing in its incubator. Its rate of progress had now slowed, but it was bigger than when I first saw it and had an obvious face with eyes, nose and mouth.

Gwydion was clearly delighted with it and stood for ages just watching it moving slowly in the fluid, its little limbs quivering, turning it back and forth. His face was alight with fascination, like a young child watching a toy train layout or a Scalextric car set in action. I wondered then whether he has ever had a child in human form that was so clearly his own. Those that Wiroan and Ra’haah had taken away were made from other animals, genetically modified by Aranrod. The baby New Dawn was made from Hethie’s hair and saliva. But this one was made from his own body, modified by mine. There was no egg of mine in it, but its cells had been shaped within my body and it floated in my amniotic fluid and blood – which would explain why I was feeling so exhausted. It was like having a miscarriage (I have had a few of those), but less emotionally traumatic because there would be a live baby at the end of it.

For Gwydion, who loves children and cannot sit by and let even a miscarried baby die, who has created children from animals and flowers but never through his own humanoid body, this little bundle of cells was a dream come true at last. I wondered whether he could even bear to wait six weeks for it to be ready for birth, but told myself that he would have to

be like every other parent and be patient. Even Frankenstein's monsters take time to come together. And, frankly, that was pretty much what this child would be: an artificial creation, made by the children of Dôn rather than a scientist, but in both cases playing at being Almighty God.

Eventually I persuaded my lover to stop watching his offspring and come back home to bed. I was worn out, physically and emotionally. Being divine, of course, Gwydion doesn't get tired, and he showed no great desire to sleep, but instead sat and played his harp, singing of creation and re-creation, while I went to sleep.

The next part is by Hethie.

*

(What Hethie heard later)

Gwydion watched Julia sleeping and thought again how lovely she looked, how pure and clear-hearted and yet how vulnerable. Like a perfect crystal or a precious gemstone her aura glowed clear in the dim interior of the moonlit hall. Yet, despite all her power, she did not know how to use it; she needed his power to protect her. He vowed to himself that the all-mighty demiurge would never get her back; he would keep her, queen and enchanter of his own heart. He continued to play his harp, the melodious strains of song enchanting the very air of the hall to guard against all predatory intruders or any who wished to harm him and his precious lady. While he played, Julia slept soundly, and he hoped dreamlessly.

He knew that the demiurge could get her back whenever he wanted to, but he thought that he would only try to do that when he, Gwydion, was asleep. So he would stay awake and keep vigil.

Long he sat there, playing sweet music and watching her, the lady of his heart. Then he heard or felt a slight noise and a quiver in the air, and a figure stood there, all bright in the dark of the hall.

Gwydion did not stop his playing, but he acknowledged its appearance with a nod.

'Good day to you,' said the figure. 'I greet you, my great-nephew.'

'Good day to you,' said Gwydion. 'I have never seen you before and do not know whether you are my relative or not; tell me your name.'

'I am the brother of your grandmother the sky-creator,' said the figure, 'and I have many names. I guard the road for those who walk the path of the dead and I guide them to safety.'

'Then you have no place here,' said Gwydion, 'for no one here is dead.' And he continued to play.

'They may yet be if you continue on your present path,' said the figure. 'I beg you, great-nephew, abandon your plans and let Jules come Home. You can never recreate the mountains or bring back the giants, and you may destroy Arfon in attempting to do so.'

'Jules stays with me of her own free will,' said Gwydion. 'I will not give her up to any one on their request alone. As for my plans, my sister and I have planned these things for many millennia and will not abandon our hopes and dreams now.'

'You are making children,' said the figure, 'and that is not permitted, except by the normal physical means or by God.'

'We have the means of making children now to restore those we lost,' said Gwydion, 'and you will not prevent our doing so by words alone.'

'Your children will turn against you,' said the figure. 'Remember why your brother killed Dylan; he acted in self-defence.'

‘We will cherish our children, and they will love us,’ said Gwydion. ‘We will not allow them to be turned against us. We will teach them how to live in the greater land that we will make for them, and they will flourish and make the land fruitful.’

‘I beg of you, great nephew, do not do this,’ said the figure again. ‘You cannot raise the land from the sea without death and destruction.’

‘We know how to do this safely, and we will do it for our people,’ said Gwydion. ‘You will not prevent our doing it, either through your promises or through your threats.’

Then the figure bowed and disappeared; and Gwydion went on playing, troubled in his soul because he saw that his struggles against the great gods were not yet over.

*

(Jules)

I didn’t physically go Home that night, but I saw Wiroan in my dreams. I told him about the baby-manufacture, and he told me that Frideh was now sure that Aranrod and Gwydion were planning to move the land – literally move it, upwards.

‘Can you find out how they’re going to do it?’ he asked me. ‘If you can find out we should be able to stop them.’

‘Hethie’s talking to Aranrod,’ I said. ‘She might be able to do something.’

‘Try to tell her,’ said my husband, ‘and I’ll try to get a message through.’ Then he left me to sleep in peace.

Sunday

In the morning, however, everything was peaceful; the sun was shining, the song birds were singing, the bees were buzzing and my fears of the night seemed ridiculous. Gwydion was affectionate and cheerful; he told me amusing stories over breakfast rather than sitting in a brooding silence as usual. Dai Williams turned up to talk about purchasing the Watkins’ storage building so that he could get started on the work, and we walked up the road to see Mr Roberts before the church service to discuss the legal details. This time Beth Roberts did succeed in cornering me to talk about babies, but Gwydion remained close by and when she said, ‘So, have you thought about starting a family?’ he put his arms about my waist and said, ‘We already have.’ This made her giggle, then she patted my shoulder and said, ‘When you want to talk about it, dear, you know where I am.’

In mid-afternoon we set out to walk to Caer Arianrhod, and met Hethie and Aranrod walking to meet us. Hethie was full of excited ideas and chattered incessantly; Aranrod summarised in a few words. They were progressing well, she said; the six remaining babies were all growing strongly and the next one should be ready for birth tomorrow. Mine, of course, would be another six weeks. Hethie told us that she was looking after New Dawn, feeding her on baby milk in a bottle and changing her nappy, ‘but she won’t need it for long.’ She added that she was staying with ‘Auntie Aranrod’ all weekend ‘to help with the babies,’ and the two hurried away back to the laboratory.

Gwydion and I walked back home along the beach, arms about each other. ‘I think, when our baby is ready, we should look after it,’ I said. ‘It needs a secure home.’

‘Of course,’ he said, and kissed my hair.

‘It will need a cot to sleep in, and clothes, and feeding bottles and sterilisers—’

He kissed me again. ‘This is a different sort of baby,’ he said. ‘It won’t need so much caring for as a human child.’

I tried to imagine what a child like New Dawn would need. ‘It will need constant attention and stimulation,’ I said. ‘We’ll need to play with it and take it out for walks.’

‘That won’t be a problem. The parish children will want to take it for walks, and the ladies will want to help – Mrs Roberts is longing to lecture you on how to look after a baby.’

‘I’ve had a few of my own!’

‘I’ve told her that, but she’s forgotten.’

Back at Gwydion’s hall, we sat in the sunshine and ate an evening meal of cheese, salad and bread. It was warm and peaceful, and I found that I was half-doing in the sun.

Gwydion looked down at me with a sideways smile. ‘I’ll sing to you; that will either send you to sleep or wake you up.’

I shook my head, trying to clear it. ‘I don’t know why I’m so sleepy.’

‘You’re still recovering from Aranrod’s dose.’ He kissed me, and I went with the kiss ...

O help – am I falling in love? That would be really careless: to fall in love with the person I’m supposed to be Watching ...

‘Witch,’ he said, laughing, ‘your witchcraft has rebounded on you!’

‘You’re the enchanter – you’ve enchanted me...’

‘I cast my spell many years ago – but only now has it had its effect.’

Does this mean that Wiroan isn’t watching over me anymore? But I could feel him still there, so that wasn’t it.

‘Your power has enabled me to enchant you, witch-of-my-heart.’

I had no words – I couldn’t think of anything to say. I put my arms about him and let him fall into them.

*

(Sue)

When Jules didn’t come that night, I was even more worried than ever, and I went to find my husband and ask him what we should do. He went off to reason with Gwydion, but came back sadly, saying that Gwydion wouldn’t listen to him.

‘Frideh worked out that they know how to adjust the land level by moving the rock strata. They have a means of literally making the Earth move, although we don’t yet know how they can do it.’

‘You mean they could cause an earthquake?’

‘Frideh thinks that’s what they’re planning to do. We need to stop them, but to do that we need to win their trust – and they don’t trust us.’

‘You could just crush them.’

‘That would cause further problems. We need to persuade them to be reasonable.’

‘I could go over there,’ I said.

‘I don’t want to lose you, too!’ said my husband. ‘It’s bad enough having Jules out of circulation – we don’t want two of you effectively trapped.’ Of course, Jules isn’t trapped, but it’s now clear that if we pull her out forcibly it could precipitate the disaster.

‘Can we get a message to Jules? Tell her she needs to get out of it?’

‘I expect she already knows,’ said my husband. ‘But she knows she can’t simply jump out – she needs to settle things first. And I don’t know what to advise. None of us do.’

[Over a few weeks]

(Jules)

The days passed with little to report. The Watkins' old storage building was purchased and Dai Williams and his team began work. Hethie went back to school on Monday but came over the next weekend, and the next, 'to help Auntie Aranrod', and she brought a recipe for mouse-repellent that she and her school friends had worked up from the books in the library at Home. The babies in the laboratory came to fruition one after the other, and Caer Arianrhod filled up with babies. Rather than send them out to childminders, Aranrod was apparently caring for them herself during the week, with Hethie's help at weekends. When I asked her about this she shrugged and said, 'They don't need much looking after.'

Clearly, these were wonder-children.

Gwydion and I wandered around Arfon in a sort of happy daze, doing various things around the parish, getting involved in the building and helping Aranrod with the babies, but mostly staring into each other's eyes and falling into bed. Having been successful once, Gwydion was determined to get another child started in me, and after a few weeks Aranrod called me over to Caer Arianrhod 'for another extraction'. This time she adjusted the dose and I didn't feel so ill afterwards. I had a sort of idea that I shouldn't be encouraging them, but I was so far gone that I couldn't remember why not.

Everyone said what a lovely couple Gwydion and I were, and how happy we were together, and wished us every happiness. Even Aranrod seemed happy and came to visit her brother regularly. They talked together in their own language, which I was gradually getting to understand – it was rather like Wiroan's own language but with different inflexions and word order. I didn't tell Gwydion that I could understand them – not because I didn't want him to know but because it never occurred to me to mention it.

*

Saturday

After the sixth of the original babies had been 'released', Aranrod and Hethie brought it over to Dinas Dinlle for a celebration. There were already another six new babies growing – two of mine and four that Hethie had put together with Aranrod's help – and prospects looked very good. New Dawn was already crawling around, was eating porridge and rusk and was beginning to be potty trained, could say a few words, such as: 'Hello', 'Mama', and 'Papa', and she seemed to understand almost everything that was said to her. Not bad for a month-old child!

We sat in the hall and Gwydion played his harp and sang, while Aranrod played the flute and Hethie danced. I watched and applauded, but felt disinclined to dance. I might have danced with Gwydion, in the absence of my husband or Jamie, but I don't like dancing alone (unlike Lynne and Sue, for example). Then Hethie borrowed Aranrod's flute and played a tune, while Gwydion sang and Aranrod danced. The baby in the moses-basket laughed and waved its arms and legs in time to the music. I wondered, again, what sort of Frankenstein's monsters we were raising.

At last everyone was tired; Hethie and I sat dozing side by side on a bench by the wall, padded up with cushions, while Gwydion played his harp quietly and Aranrod sang. After a while I realised that she was talking, not singing.

'We have the children, now we need the land,' she said.

‘We can raise the land,’ he said.

‘We can raise the land, but can we keep it raised?’

‘We can raise it and keep it raised. We can sweep back the sea and smooth the waves and currents so that the sun shines warmly on the land.’

‘Will you need blood to do this?’ she asked, as if casually.

Gwydion shot her a penetrating, accusing glance. ‘No.’

She didn’t meet his eye. ‘I only wondered.’

‘I never need blood – I never seek it or ask for it. You know that very well.’

She shrugged. ‘Just checking.’

‘I won’t ask whose blood you were thinking of,’ said my lover quietly, ‘because if you told me I would drown you and your castle again.’

‘Only flowers,’ she said, as if idly, ‘you only ever need flowers.’

Gwydion put down his harp. ‘It is night, and the journey home for you is long,’ he said formally, ‘so I would advise you to begin the journey now. You may take the child, but Heather may sleep here tonight.’

Aranrod opened her eyes wide. ‘Brother, what has prompted this?’

‘My doubts about your morality, sister,’ said my lover, ‘as I have said before, no one should ever trust you! Now – your journey is long, and you are needed at home.’

Aranrod got to her feet, tossed her cloak about her shoulders, picked up the Moses-basket and gave us two humans a glance – but Hethie was asleep, and I was pretending to be asleep. Then she marched out, without a further word to her brother.

Gwydion picked up his harp again and played it for at least ten minutes, before waking us two and suggesting that it was time to sleep in bed rather than in the hall. Hethie was put to bed in another room – which had never been there before, but he conjured it up as required – and he and I went to bed as usual.

As he put his arms about me and kissed my lips, I murmured: ‘I was awake.’

He looked into my eyes. ‘What did you hear?’

‘I heard everything. I don’t think Hethie should go back to Aranrod’s castle by herself.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I agree.’

Then we went to sleep, and slept the sleep of the exhausted.

*

Sunday

In the morning, Hethie was full of energy and ready to rush off to help Aranrod, but Gwydion invited her to come with us to look at the babies in the laboratory, and then (when we had checked on them), to walk up into the village with us to see how the barn conversion was progressing. She was a little reluctant, but I told her that she could tell Caroline, Simon and Steven all about it before they’d even seen it, and then she agreed.

The barn (if I may call it that) was unrecognisable. The ivy and brambles had been removed and the walls cleaned. The windows had been replaced and the floors cleaned and sealed. A new external door had been installed, with a modern lock. A small area had been fenced off around it, to separate it from the Watkins’s garden and the house next door, and to give access from the road. There was parking for two cars.

Inside, the open roof timbers had been retained but layers of insulation had been fitted under the roof tiles for greater warmth. There was an entry area with a table and chairs, where food could be eaten (but not cooked; there were no cooking facilities, because of the fire risk)

and there were two sleeping rooms, one at each end of the barn. Each contained sleeping for six on bunk beds, and a chest of drawers and cupboard for storage. Outside was a lean-to building with washing and toilet facilities. The whole was clean and airy, but basic: walls were painted, but not plastered; there were no mats on the floor and the doors were bare wood. There was electric light, but currently no heating: discussion was going on as to the best method of heating it.

Hethie chattered to the builders (Dai and his friends) while Gwydion and I went around checking everything was going according to plan. So far as I could see, it was nearly ready.

Dai caught my eye and remarked, 'We'll have your friends in here by next Saturday, missus.'

'Is it really that nearly ready? Doesn't it need an inspector to check it?'

'Of course it does, fair play, but he only lives just down the road. We'll get him to drop in on Wednesday sometime.'

'Great!' I thought to myself that it would be wonderful to see Sue and Lynne again, as well as the children – although the children can be exhausting. At least Tonja would be coming with Caroline, and they could amuse each other.

We eventually dragged Hethie away on the excuse that the builders needed to get on with their work, and went to look in the church, where we found the flower circle ladies setting up flowers for the evening service. They tried to get me to help them, but Hethie cried, 'Gwydion knows all about flowers,' and dragged him in to help. The ladies, baffled by the idea that a man might be interested in making things with flowers, shoo'd us away and we walked on to the rectory.

Here Mrs Roberts insisted that we sit down in the sitting room, drink tea (she gave Hethie milk instead) and talked about parish business and how well Hethie's recipe for mouse-repellent is working, then about the children in the Sunday school. She then looked at me and said, 'So, how is it?'

'I'm fine,' I said, 'but I'm a bit worried about Gwydion's sister.'

'Aranrod? She's such a dear.'

'Dear' isn't the word that immediately comes to my mind when I think of Aranrod: 'warrior maiden' is more like it. 'She's agitated,' I said. 'The whole idea of children is unsettling her.'

'Do you think she's jealous?'

'Not exactly. More: possessive. She wants to control everything, and she has big plans.'

'We all have big plans,' said Gwydion softly.

'Aranrod's are bigger,' I said, and then looked Mrs Roberts in the eye. 'Will you pray?' I said. 'I think we need prayer in this situation.'

'Of course, dear – you always have our prayers.'

'I meant for Aranrod.'

'Of course. You all do.'

'Well: particularly Aranrod, then. I think she needs comfort and guidance more than the rest of us just now.'

Beth Roberts shook her head at me and changed the subject. Clearly she didn't see why a maiden lady should need prayers more than a supposedly pregnant woman.

Hethie, however, realised that something was up. As we walked back to Dinas Dinlle, she demanded: 'What did you mean about Aranrod?'

‘She wants to move the land and the sea so that the new babies have somewhere to live,’ I said. ‘She’s talking about destroying things in order to do it.’

‘Oh, yes! She said to me that sometimes there has to be death so there can be more life. I told her that was rubbish and my dads never kill anything; they just make more life. She said that couldn’t be right because the Earth wouldn’t hold everything and there has to be exchange, and I said there are other places and other worlds where life could go and there’s no excuse for wasting life. Then she said, “Oh yes, like they took the damaged foetuses away instead of terminating them. So like my brother,” and I said it was like Gwydion because they’re his great-uncles. Then she looked at me very oddly and I said, “And I’m their daughter and that makes me your first cousin once removed!” I thought it was funny, but she didn’t look pleased, so I said, “But I’ll call you ‘Auntie’ instead,” and then she was happier.’

So that’s where the ‘Auntie’ came from. ‘She’s just realised that you could be her equal in power,’ I said. ‘Perhaps she doesn’t want the competition.’

‘She doesn’t, but it doesn’t matter,’ said Hethie. ‘Once the next lot of babies are ready, I’m going back to look after the ones Dad and Auntie Ra’haah took away. She won’t need me anymore then.’

Gwydion had listened to all this in silence. I squeezed his hand. ‘We could both go and look at them,’ I said. ‘They haven’t been released yet. Wiroan and Ra’haah are checking them over.’

He nodded. ‘I’m more concerned about those we have here,’ he said. ‘I want to find out what Aranrod is planning.’

‘Can she move the earth and sea without your help?’ I asked.

‘Yes, but the effort might destroy her. She would do better with my help.’

‘But your semblances are only ever temporary,’ I said. ‘How can you change Arfon for ever?’

‘We did it before – and did more than we meant to do. Now we know what we did wrong, we can do it correctly.’

‘Does she need to take life?’

‘No, but perhaps she thinks that taking life will strengthen the new bonds. If she can’t have you or Heather, she may use the babies that are still growing. I hope that even Aranrod wouldn’t use the babies that have already been born – but remember that she wanted to terminate Lleu.’

‘What would she do?’ I asked, feeling sick at the thought.

‘I don’t know.’

‘I don’t think she can do anything,’ Hethie broke in, ‘because she’s a sea-goddess. She can draw the sea in – she can’t push it away.’

‘She has a wheel made of the waves,’ said Gwydion, ‘and she will make it represent the sea and the land, and turn it so that the sea and the land go back to how they were before. Then she will fix it in place. But as for how she will fix it, there are many ways, and I don’t know which method she will use. If it lay with me I would simply sing it to sleep, and it will remain there until I wake it. But if it lay with me I would not use the wheel of waves: I would sing the land and the sea to movement, and move them as I wished. If we do this together, that is what we will do. But I think she intends to use the wheel.’

‘Where is it?’ asked Hethie.

He smiled at her – a fond smile rather than the familiar sideways, half-sardonic smile. ‘The way there is lost in time. The cavern where it lies was drowned when the sea came in, but it still exists as it was out-of-time, and only she knows the way.’

We had got back to Dinas Dinlle by now, and stepped over the threshold into the great hall. ‘Darling,’ I said to him, ‘grant me a wish.’

He took me into his arms and kissed me tenderly. Hethie looked away.

‘What have I granted you?’

‘Don’t move the land and sea now. Move them very slowly – don’t move them quickly.’

He kissed me again and said, ‘Why not, witch-of-my-heart?’

‘I feel in my bones that if you move the land and sea it will mean disaster,’ I said. ‘Please, do it very slowly, as slowly as a stalactite grows.’

He kissed me again. I took a deep breath. ‘And if you do this for me, I’ll bear you children. Your own children. In my own womb. I promise.’

He hugged me very tightly and then said: ‘By my profession to God, I promise.’

Hethie clapped her hands, and I breathed again. ‘Thank you.’

*

Mum,’ said Hethie later, ‘that was a very big promise.’

‘I know,’ I said, ‘but it’s worth it.’

She gave me a hug, which I returned. ‘I know you don’t want to have any more children. So why did you say it?’

I sighed. ‘Poor Gwydion. He loves children.’

‘You do love him, don’t you?’

I nodded.

‘As much as Dad?’

‘No! But I love him.’

Hethie sighed heavily. ‘I know. So do I.’ (Sigh.) ‘I wish we could do something to help him. He’s very worried about Auntie Aranrod. She doesn’t tell us things – she just does them, and sometimes they’re catastrophic.’ (Another sigh.) ‘She doesn’t trust anyone, and yet everyone wants to help her.’ (A shrug.) ‘Could we find this wave-wheel of hers and stop her turning it? I really think she wants to turn it.’

‘We could find it,’ I said. ‘We could go Home and Jump there from the Library. But Gwydion would know we’ve gone and he’d be upset. So we need to find a way there from here.’

‘I’ll go back tonight,’ said Hethie. ‘I’ve got to go back anyway, for school.’ She shrugged. ‘So I’ll look in the library and see what I can find. OK?’

I nodded. ‘OK.’

*

Hethie left soon after the evening meal, saying that she had homework to finish. She ‘jumped’ out – one moment she was there, and the next she was gone – and I felt a terrible pang: I always do when I say goodbye to my children, even if only for a few hours. To make myself feel better, I made myself a broom out of thin air and swept the hall. Gwydion laughed at me, and went into the bedchamber to tune and polish his harp.

When I rejoined him, he was picking out a tune on three strings. Without looking up, he patted the bed at his side – I went and sat by him. He went on playing; I rested my head on his shoulder and listened, watching his long fingers move smoothly across the strings, while the fluid, lovely music flowed through me.

Gwydion's voice whispered in my ear – but it was not an endearment. 'Why do you think that Heather will find the wheel of waves more easily from your library?'

'We don't. It's just a desperate measure.' I sighed. 'Would you mind not reading our minds?'

'Witch-of-my-heart, fair white dragon of mine, you know you're as pure and transparent as crystal: I don't have to read your mind. It shouts out at me.'

'What would you suggest we do instead?'

'Stop trying to get yourselves killed tackling my sister.' His music suddenly became very dark and ominous. 'She did try to kill Lleu; she may try to kill you. I'm not joking.'

'Why? I mean, why should she try to kill us?'

'Because she won't let anyone stand in her way; she's determined to put right what she put wrong.'

'But she didn't – I mean,' I tried to correct myself, 'the sea came in about nine thousand years ago, but that wasn't because of your magic. It came in everywhere. It flooded the North Sea and all around Cornwall–'

'The Irish Sea was much smaller. We made it much larger than it should have been.'

'What did you mean about drowning her castle?' I asked.

'After the disaster I lost my temper with her.' The music became regretful, and I felt the sorrow of the years flood through me.

'You could just forgive her, and she could just agree that what's done is done.'

'Do you think that she'll agree to that?'

I sighed. 'No.'

He handed his harp to me – I took it, surprised that he should allow me to touch it, as it is so much part of himself – then he put his right arm about me, took the harp back into his own hands and continued to play it, across my body and his own, encircling me with his embrace and his music. I was encompassed, engulfed; as if he were weaving a glorious spell that enshrouded and immersed me in its beauty. I leaned back against him and let him bewitch me, resting in his sorcery. I was tired of the struggle – I had said my part and done all that I could. If we couldn't stop Aranrod, then there was nothing more I could do.

'I didn't say we can't stop her,' he said.

'How can she be stopped? If she has the wave-wheel and we can't get at it–'

'Don't weep, my sweet dragon. I won't let her turn it.'

At the sound of his voice – so gentle and loving – I found the tears were rolling down my cheeks, as if a dam had burst.

'Don't weep,' he said softly in my ear, 'this is my land, and I stand on it with you at my side, my dragon-queen, to give me strength. She rules the sea, but she does not rule the land; she cannot touch my land. I promise you, by my profession to God.'

It was his old oath, the one he uses in the *Mabinogion* – his most solemn vow. I sighed and turned my face to his; he smiled and kissed me lightly, then continued to play, while I rested in his arms.

'Close your eyes and rest, my dragon-queen,' he said, 'and dream of our child as a bright dragon in the stars.'

I closed my eyes, thinking how much gentler and affectionate he had become since Hethie and Aranrod produced the first of the designer babies; and even more so since I'd promised to bear him a child, as if he were at last convinced of my commitment to him. And of course our child would be a dragon, as he is descended from the Watchers, whose first physical form

was a dragon. Not that my children have ever tried to turn into dragons, but I assume that Caroline could if she wanted to. She certainly has a fiery temper.

The music ran through me, and I let myself be engulfed by it. I felt as if I were being carried away by a torrent of sweet, crystal clear water, down the flanks of the mountains, over the great ridges of Snowdon (or Wyddfa, if you prefer), down into the deep valleys scored through Eryri, across the green plain, through the woods and fields to the glistening sea. I sensed the sweet aroma of grass and meadow flower and heard the lovely song of the skylark. I felt the sheep moving on the hillside and the cool breeze in my hair. I thought I was part of the land, sinking into the earth with the water, soaking into the dark, peaty earth and being swallowed up by the land, into the cool darkness of rock.

Then the music carried me out of the rock and into the woods, to hear the leaves rustle on the branches and see the sunlight flicker across the woodland floor, to inhale the damp mustiness of moss and lichen and watch the squirrels run along tree branches, the birds hop and insects buzz in search of sweet nectar. The music carried me beyond the woods, into the sunlit meadow, to sink down among the tall grasses, swaying in the breeze, and inhale the soft aroma of flowering grasses. I remembered Gwydion's words to me: 'the land is yours, and you serve it. You are the land – you are one with the land, and it is one with you.'

This is my land, and I stand on it with you at my side, to give me strength.

The land will move, the land will be healed, but this will not be at once, it will be slowly, as a wounded warrior comes slowly to recovery and regains health.

Our strength rebuilds the land.

I sink into the earth and the earth receives me. I am one with the earth and the earth is one with me. I stretch through the earth, it is me and I am the earth.

The earth is well, the earth is strong; the earth was wounded but now the earth is healed.

The music stopped; I blinked and tried to wake up, shaking my head to clear the spell out. Gwydion kissed my ear, making me giggle.

'It's time for supper,' he said, and moved his arms so that I could get up. I struggled to my feet.

'I was going to sleep,' I said, yawning and covering the yawn with a hand.

Gwydion put his harp away. 'You need to eat,' he said, 'as you are eating for two.'

I knew that Aranrod would not take this one away. Since I made my promise to Gwydion my womb had opened again, and a child was growing there.

*

Gwydion set out plates and cups on the table and I was carrying a tray laden with food into the hall when there was a heavy knock on the door, which swung opened to reveal Dai Williams and his colleagues standing on the doorstep. Gwydion at once called them in – it would have been unacceptable to the laws of hospitality to turn them away – but for a moment I panicked: we only had enough food for the two of us! Of course this was ridiculous, because Gwydion simply multiplied the food.

As soon as the men came in, the hall altered to the house they expected to see, the little stone-built house on the main road from Caernarfon to Pwllheli. They left coats and equipment in the hall and crowded into the dining room, sat down at the table at hardly a gesture from Gwydion, and began to regale us with descriptions of the converted storage barn, which apparently was now finished, and ready for the inspector, who would come tomorrow. So much I heard as I hurried back and forth with Gwydion, bringing out extra plates and cups of tea, and what had been a simple meal of bread and soup became a meat

stew with dumplings and turnip with great hunks of bread and butter, followed by apple pie and custard. This was devoured by our unexpected guests as they filled the room with their laughter and anecdotes about the building work and the various incidents and near-accidents that had occurred, such as when Lewis Watkins had turned up without warning and walked through the door, startling one of the builders, Euan Trefor, so much that he almost fell off his ladder on to Lewis Watkins's head.

As I listened to their roar of conversation and watched the food and cups of tea vanish down their throats I thought to myself that this was the nearest that the hall had experienced in many a long year to an ancient heroic feast. My thought was reinforced when another of the men began to recite an off-the-cuff satirical poem about the Watkins, whose attitude throughout had been (apparently) that they were the men's employers, whereas of course the Rector, Gwydion and Aranrod had bought the property and were paying for the conversion.

When everyone had eaten enough, Gwydion gave me a nod, and I fetched his harp and then cleared away the plates, bringing a fresh pot of tea to refill everyone's cups. Gwydion played some requests, hymns and the popular melodies of their childhoods, and then played some of his own compositions; and they all sat back and relaxed, smiles of contentment on their faces, and nodded or sang along to the music. If they expected me to disappear to do the washing up, they were disappointed: I left it to do itself.

It must have been near ten o'clock by the time they departed, setting off into the dark with cheery waves and shouts to catch the last bus as it made its way up the main road towards Caernarfon. I realised that Gwydion has carefully positioned his house near the bus stop. We watched them board the bus and then watched it disappear down the road, into the shadows of late evening: as it was late June there was still some light in the sky. We went back into the house, I yawning, and Gwydion closed the door behind us.

'No more guests tonight,' I said, yawning again.

'They came to tell you so that you can tell your friends to come next weekend,' said Gwydion.

'They didn't say that,' I said, 'but I guessed.'

He laughed and hugged me to him. 'So you had better call Sue – and then we have work to do.'

We shared a kiss, and then I went to find my mobile phone, called Sue and gave her the news.

'Can I come over tonight?' asked Sue. 'We need to talk.'

Gwydion leant over the handset. 'No,' he said. 'Jules and I have to go and look for something. We will see you on Friday evening.'

'Look for what?' asked Sue sharply. 'Not what I want to talk you to about? – I need to tell you, be very careful—'

'We will be,' I said. 'I'd better go now. I'll give you a ring tomorrow,' and I hung up and put the phone away.

'Where are we going?' I asked, as if I hadn't already guessed; but Gwydion told me anyway.

'To look for Aranrod's wave-wheel.' He put his harp under one arm and stretched out the other to take my hand. 'If we go at once, she may not be expecting us.'

'I'll just put my coat on,' I said.

'You won't need one,' he said, 'we'll be under cover,' but I put a coat on anyway, while he put his harp into a leather bag which he slung across his back. I took his hand and he led

me out through the door, into the outside world: but it was not the outside we had seen a few moments ago when we waved goodbye to Dai Williams and his friends.

The sky arched over us, clear and star-studded. The Milky Way or *Caer Gwydion* hung like a white road through the myriad constellations. The beauty of it, with the cool of the night air, took my breath away; but *Gwydion* allowed me only a moment to take it in. In a moment we were running across the grass towards the sea, across empty meadows that had not been there when we closed the door a few minutes ago. There was no coast road, no hedged fields, nothing but grassy meadows stretching down to the sea – and the grass ran down in a gentle slope to the beach rather than dropping suddenly off a cliff. The sea was far away, and I could see *Caer Arianrhod* away to our left, its towers complete and glittering in the star light.

We came to the beach, and a boat was waiting for us: a coracle with a simple sail and a single oar. *Gwydion* lifted me in, pushed off and jumped in himself. The current caught us and we sailed down the coast towards *Caer Arianrhod*. I could see the rock-built harbour wall below the castle, enclosing a safe haven where boats could shelter from the violence of the sea in storms. It ran far out into the bay, into deep water.

But we did not go into the harbour – our little boat sailed past it, and on towards the great black wall of *Yr Eifl*, the *Rivals*, blocking out the night sky to the south. Now there is a small town at the foot of the mountain, *Trefor*, with a harbour from which the granite from the mountain's quarries was exported to the world. But in this long-ago-time in which we sailed there was no harbour, no town, no quarries; we landed on the beach and pulled the coracle up out of the water.

Gwydion led me quickly up the beach and scrambled up the grassy slope which led up towards the mountain. We came up to a rock face, with no obvious path: he reached out his hand and struck the rock, and a doorway opened. He led me inside, and the doorway closed behind us.

My lover raised his hand again and I saw he held a lighted lantern, which illuminated the way ahead of us. We were in a passage smoothly cut through the rock. There was no sign of chisel or explosive; the rock was cut as smoothly as if it were moulded in plastic. The floor ahead of us was smooth, without pebbles or cracks. Hand in hand we hurried on.

The pathway spiralled gently downwards through the rock. From time to time another passageway opened off it, sometimes a door; but *Gwydion* ignored them and continued on the main way. Sometimes there were sections of decoration on the smooth wall, carvings or paintings; they were stylised curvatures which could have been meant for animals or plants, water or wind. *Gwydion* didn't stop to allow me to look at them. We were obviously in a hurry.

At last the path straightened out and ran up to a door, beautifully carved in the strange curving designs and coloured in blue and silver, like the sea. *Gwydion* touched it with his hand, and it opened. We walked through into a vast hall, with a high vaulted ceiling, lit with a diffuse, muted, gently flowing light as if sunlight were filtering down to us through the sea. The ceiling was supported on slender white pillars, as translucent and gleaming as white mother of pearl. I had the strange impression that I was inside a huge sea shell.

The place was so vast that at first I could not take it in, but as my eyes and mind focussed I saw in the centre of the hall, on a stone platform and surrounded by a ring of fire, a rolling, tumbling mass of water, like a great dome. It was waves in motion, a swirl of glittering white, roaring and crashing and turning, in a halo of spray. *Gwydion* hurried me towards it.

As we approached, I realised that there was someone else there – but the figure was too small for Aranrod. Then it looked up and gestured desperately at us.

‘Mum! Gwydion!’ cried Hethie. ‘I can’t get through the fire!’

*

Monday

I could have asked Hethie what she was doing there, but I already knew the answer to that question. I wasn’t really surprised to see her – I knew she wanted to be involved, and obviously she’d been talking to Sue. Gwydion, on the other hand, was genuinely shaken. His face showed alarm; his mouth set in a rigid line. Anxious for her welfare, he reacted by being angry.

‘Heather! You shouldn’t be here. It’s dangerous! Go back!’

‘No,’ said my youngest, in her most determined voice and with her stubbornest expression on her face, ‘I came to help you and Mum and I’m not leaving you here.’

We had come up to her now – I gave her a quick kiss. Gwydion was clearly at a loss.

‘You could die,’ he told her. ‘If the waves rise–’

She shook her head. ‘I’m only half human. Not like Mum – and you brought Mum with you.’

He put his arm about me. ‘I’m protecting her. She’s here to help magnify my power.’

‘Well, you can protect me too, and I can do magnification as well.’

He gave it up – clearly we had very little time, and he couldn’t waste any more. ‘All right. On your own life be it – let’s get going.’ He raised a hand, and the fire in front of us died down to the floor. Hethie leapt through; Gwydion and I followed, and the fire blazed up behind us.

Gwydion looked at the tumbling, rolling dome of water, white with spray, as if to weigh it up. Hethie was about to touch it, but he pulled her back.

‘Wait.’ He walked around it, examining it. ‘Don’t touch.’ He pulled us both to one side.

‘Now, listen, and concentrate on calming the waves.’ He pulled out his harp and began to play. The serene music surrounded us, spreading out like a veil, like a sweet mist through the whole hall; and the thunder of the water grew less.

Hethie held out her arms towards the waves, as if willing them to go down – I stretched out my left hand and caught her right, while between us Gwydion played on, and sang – a lovely, lilting song. The waves bowed themselves down and sank slowly, until at last they lay flat with just a little ripple, as if they were listening to the music. Now we could see that the water was rimmed by a circle of grey stone, but the water seemed to be a bottomless pool that opened out into the sea.

–And then suddenly the whole hall seemed to erupt in a cacophony of noise, and Aranrod was there.

She took in the whole scene at a glance – Hethie, me, her little brother still playing – stepped up to the water, and touched it. The waves did not rise; the water only rippled gently.

‘Brother, what have you done?’

Gwydion let the final notes from his harp die away before responding. ‘I’ve tied up your wheel.’

‘Then you can just untie it. I have work to do.’

Gwydion lowered his harp and looked his big sister in the eye. ‘I have thought long and hard, sister, and my decision is that we will not move the land now. We will let it rise slowly. There is too much danger to our people in moving it all at once.’

‘When did I ask for your opinion?’ demanded his sister. ‘I moved the sea, and now I will move it back again.’ She stepped back and held her hands over the water. ‘Release my wheel of waves, brother.’

‘No.’

‘Release it. You know I can make you release it.’

‘You can’t make me do anything,’ retorted her brother.

‘You know I can. I can prevent your doing anything that’s against my wishes – and I will not allow you to stand in my way. You will release the waves.’

‘No. To move the land will do more harm than good. The gods will punish us for our presumption; the land will erupt and the people will die, as they did before.’

‘I don’t need to move the land. I will move the sea.’ Aranrod’s hands moved across the water. ‘Release my waves, brother, or I’ll force you.’

‘No.’

Hethie and I were watching this exchange with hearts in mouths. We were pretty sure that Gwydion’s magic was more powerful than his sister’s; but as she said that she could prevent him doing anything against her wishes I remembered that he hadn’t been able to reverse her curses on Lleu. He’d had to work around them, but he couldn’t undo them. Now it occurred to me that Aranrod, as a sea-goddess, could probably move the sea even if Gwydion prevented her from moving the land. What would she do?

She flung up her hand, and the water rose to engulf her fingers, in a great wave. The whole hall turned around us – if the waves couldn’t turn against the hall, then the hall would turn against the waves! There was a crash and the sound of rushing water as water rushed upwards in huge plume like a waterspout, fountaining back from the ceiling, and then the ceiling above us parted, and blue water poured down on us. Gwydion uttered a word, grabbed my hand, pulled Hethie to him and jerked us both out of the hall and into darkness.

The ground around us was rumbling and we could hear crashing and thunder all about us, but we couldn’t see a thing. ‘Where are we?’ asked Hethie’s voice, very small.

‘Inside the mountain.’

‘*When* are we?’ I asked.

‘No-when.’

‘Will Auntie Aranrod drown?’ asked Hethie.

There was a short pause, then Gwydion let out a long breath. ‘No,’ he said. ‘She can’t drown. She’s in her element.’

‘Oh.’

‘We’d better get moving. She’s trying to drown us, and we’re below the waterline.’

‘Won’t the land protect us?’ I asked, as Gwydion led us both forward into the dark.

‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘But we’ll give it some assistance.’

We went upwards, up a long dark passageway through the rock. I think the rock simply opened in front of us and closed behind us. We walked on and on until my legs were exhausted and Hethie was crying that we would never get out. We heard thundering above and around us, and sometimes the rock around us was wet with flowing water, but the tunnel itself was no more than damp. After a long climb we got above the water table and thereafter

made our way more slowly upwards, until at last the rock opened before us like a door and we were looking out over the moonlit countryside to the south.

‘We’re on the south side of the Rivals,’ I said. ‘Does that mean we’re outside Arfon?’

‘Yes,’ said Gwydion.

‘So are you free?’

‘Apparently so, for the moment.’

We all looked out at the view in the moonlight. ‘Has the sea gone?’ asked Hethie.

‘Yes.’ It had; the rim of the glistening waters was far away in the distance. The lost landscape under Cardigan Bay was revealed in its entirety.

‘The lost *cantrefi*,’ I said.

‘Ynys Teithi Hen and Maes Maichgen,’ said Gwydion. ‘It was excellent, fertile farmland and fair woodland and forest. It was sadness for my people when the sea swallowed it.’

‘It’s like a very low tide,’ said Hethie, in wonder.

‘For the moment. But now we must make the tide come back in.’

‘Why? Can’t we leave it like that?’

‘Not now. It will only do harm if we do.’

I laughed. ‘Could it be such a bad thing?’

‘Yes.’ He kissed me. ‘I promised you by my profession to God that I would make the change gradual rather than sudden. The land is just sea bed at present, mile upon mile of it, infertile sands. It will take time to recover. We need to put it back under the sea for now and then remove the sea slowly, so that the land can grow fertile again as it gradually emerges from the water.’

‘Where has the sea gone?’ asked Hethie.

‘You saw it – underground.’

‘Won’t that cause earthquakes? My teacher said that when you pump water underground it causes earthquakes.’

We all stood still and listened. Far beneath our feet, the earth rumbled and shuddered.

‘Yes,’ we all said.

Gwydion grabbed our hands again, Hethie in his left and me in his right, and stepped into space. We stepped across the starry road across the heavens, into that bright place where he had taken us once before. And then:

‘Oh, we’re in my room!’ cried Hethie.

‘I need to use your building bricks,’ said Gwydion.

Hethie dived into a cupboard and we heard her moving boxes around vigorously. She emerged clutching a battered red-and-yellow cardboard box. ‘Here’s them!’

Gwydion took them from her; and we were in the kitchen.

‘You have a pair of scales,’ said my lover.

I did; I’d bought them from an antique shop and never used them. They were genuine old-fashioned balancing scales, with dishes suspended on either side, the weights to go in one dish and the item to be weighed in the other. I’d stored them in one of the drawers of the kitchen dresser. Hethie helped me to empty the drawer, pull out the scales and set them up on the kitchen table.

‘Now, watch.’ We were back in that bright, light place; and Gwydion was bending over the scales, carefully putting blue bricks into one dish and green ones into the other.

‘Blue is sea and green is land,’ said Hethie. ‘Do you need to enchant the bricks or do they just do it?’

‘They just do it.’ Gwydion had balanced the scales, and stepped back from the table. He pulled his harp out of the bag over his shoulder, and began to play it, at first softly and slowly, then with increasing tempo. The scales wobbled, moved up and down, and then settled with the ‘water’ slightly lower than the ‘land’. Gwydion sang quietly to it as he played, and both Hethie and I found we were humming along with him. At last the song faded away and we were looking at the scales standing firm and unmoving, as if fixed in place.

‘That will hold it for long enough,’ said Gwydion.

‘How long is enough?’ asked Hethie.

‘Overnight, isn’t it?’ I was remembering Gwydion’s various phantasmagorias in the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi*.

‘But what’s a night?’ persisted my daughter.

Gwydion made a ‘brushing aside’ gesture. ‘The sea will find its own place again, and then it will stay there. We’ll go back and find Aranrod – wherever she’s got herself to.’

It was back across the starry road and down ... and we landed back on the flanks of Yr Eifl, this time looking north. The sea lay sparkling in its bay, where it should be; and Caer Arianrhod was just a shadow under the waves, scarcely visible in the starlight.

Hethie cried, ‘It worked!’

Gwydion put a calming hand on her shoulder. ‘What you see is always a semblance of reality; your mind interprets what your eye sees. What you can see now is what you want to see; whether it’s what is really there is another matter.’

‘Are we all seeing the same thing?’ demanded Hethie.

‘Yes, but that only means my semblance is working.’

‘So where’s Auntie Aranrod?’

‘Down there somewhere. Let’s go down and find her.’

As we ran down the hillside hand in hand, I wondered whether Aranrod herself could create a phantasy to fool our eyes. Gwydion soothed my unspoken worries: ‘Aranrod isn’t an enchanter. She can play with time, but she can’t make you see things that aren’t there.’

We halted at the sea’s edge, and I wondered where our coracle had gone – presumably we’d left it behind in that other-time-and-place. Gwydion held out a hand and a path appeared over the water; so we walked across it, towards Caer Arianrhod. As the waves rippled under my feet, I wondered whether this would stop working if I stopped believing in it, but clearly my belief didn’t have any effect because we reached the rocks of Caer Arianrhod safely, and stepped through into the other-time-and-place where Aranrod lives.

‘Sister!’ called Gwydion as we entered. ‘Come and wish us good day.’

She came walking towards us, across the floor of her hall, leaving a trail of water behind her. Her hair was dripping wet, and her eyes were full of water – either sea water, or tears of anger and grief.

‘You left me to drown,’ she said, accusingly.

‘You tried to drown us,’ her brother retorted.

‘I was only playing with you – I wouldn’t have drowned you.’

‘No? Well, that is good news.’ Gwydion was brisk. ‘So, let’s make our peace, sister. Neither of us can overcome the other, so we should negotiate and be friends.’

‘You – you – you always try to mess up everything I do,’ his sister retorted. ‘And then when I try to correct it, you won’t let me. And for some reason it is always my fault!’

Gwydion was laughing. ‘We have to accept our mistakes and move on,’ he said. ‘We can’t change things back, so we must change our plans.’

‘We can change things back, but I need your co-operation. You said you were going to help me, but now you’ve changed your mind. Why?’

Gwydion didn’t reply, and Aranrod looked from him to Hethie and me. ‘They talked you out of it? You let these two humans persuade you to give up our eternal plan? The plan we’ve had for thousands of years, to restore the sea and land to what they were? What are you thinking of?’

Gwydion was still smiling, but there was steel in the smile. ‘They didn’t talk me anywhere. I sang the land and I saw the danger. If we move the land and sea quickly, there will be disaster: the land will be desert and there will be earthquakes. So we have to move them slowly. But if we do that, we can restore the sea and the land together.’

They faced each other across the floor of Aranrod’s castle. I thought, with sinking heart: *she’ll never agree. She’ll fight forever, as she did over Lleu.* But then we were interrupted by a cry: a baby’s cry.

‘Mummy! Mama!’

Aranrod’s expression changed from anger to concern – she turned around and hurried away in the direction of the call. One of the newly-created children was calling for her.

We three looked at each other.

‘Do we wait?’ I asked.

Gwydion nodded. ‘She won’t want any of us with her now, but if we wait until she comes back she may be ready to talk.’

So we sat down on the cushions in the window seat and waited. ‘Tell us a story,’ said Hethie, ‘you tell great stories.’

Gwydion gave her a sideways smile, lifted up his harp and ran his fingers across it. ‘Which story would you like?’

‘Anything!’ cried Hethie, but I said: ‘Tell us about the drowned cantrefi.’

‘Ynys Teithi Hen lay between Ireland and the land of St Davids,’ said Gwydion. ‘It was fair green country, low lying and fertile. Many was the herd that fed on that rich pasture land and fortunate the farmers that farmed it; well-fed and satisfied were the pigs that wandered its woods and the boar and the deer that frequented its forests ...’

His fingers plucked as if idly at the strings of his harp as he talked, his voice rising and falling, half-singing, half-chanting the old story. I knew from my ‘English lit’ university days that he had not memorised the story word-for-word; he would know the outline of the story and certain key incidents, and the rest he improvised as he went along. It was his own skill as a storyteller far more than the content of the story that made the tale absolutely irresistible.

We listened on the edges of our seats as Gwydion described how the sea swept in to Teithi Hen’s kingdom, sweeping away everything in its path, and how the priests and the priestesses stood in the path of the water and tried to hold it back, calling on the names of the gods to save them and to spare the people, but all in vain. Teithi Hen, ‘a fair young warrior for all his name of “old”, a brave warrior and a just king’, leapt on to his swiftest war horse, which could run like the wind or the lightning in the storm, and tried to outrun the torrent to seek help. But fast as he galloped, faster the sea came; the swifter they flew, even swifter did the waves pursue them, until at last they must have been swallowed up by the waves, but the east wind came to their aid. Strongly it blew and bitterly, so bitterly that the waves stood up on

their very heads and could not advance; and Teithi Hen and his horse reached the higher ground of Pembrokeshire and collapsed, utterly spent, on the hillside above the sea.

‘When those two heroes could breathe again, they staggered to their feet and looked back,’ said Gwydion, ‘back over where the green fields had lain, the wide woodlands and fair forests. But they saw nothing of their fair land, their sweet homeland, their happy habitation; they saw only the devouring grey waves rolling over the land which had once been their home.’

Hethie and I listened with tears coursing down our faces as Gwydion told how they had limped down from the headland to the holy place in the valley (where St Davids now stands) and the holy men and women had cared for them. Then Teithi Hen had gone east, towards the home of the wind which had saved him and his horse, until he came to the king of Britain, and he remained all the remainder of his life at his court and in his service. ‘But for the remainder of his life he shook constantly, full of fear that the wrath of the sea would come against him again,’ said Gwydion. ‘Never did he know why or understand that terrible doom had fallen upon him and his land. They had done no evil more than other men and women. They had angered no gods and they had always offered hospitality and aid to those in need. Never did he understand, and he went to his end not understanding.’

He stopped, and looked at us, waiting for our comments.

‘Is that all true?’ asked Hethie.

Gwydion laughed. ‘Some is true, and some could be true, and perhaps some should be true. Does it matter, so long as the tale is told?’

Hethie scowled at him. ‘I wanted a true story.’

‘Ynys Teithi Hen was true, although perhaps I’ve exaggerated its wonders.’ Gwydion was unapologetic.

‘What were the other lost cantrefi?’ I asked.

‘The Maes Gwydneu, to the north of St Davids and the south of Aberystwyth. Five of the king’s sons became saints after the sea took their land; they could not become kings, because their land had been swallowed up. Then there was the land of Maes Maichgen, which lay further north, between Llŷn and Aberdovey. Then there was Aranrod’s land, adjacent to Arfon. Further north, adjacent to the land of Rheged, was the kingdom of Rhedfoe, Rheged’s son. Then there was further land adjacent to Alban’s west coast – it’s now called Scotland.’

‘Did you deliberately flood all of it?’ demanded Hethie.

‘No, and it did not all flood at once. One flood followed another. We brought the sea in over the bay of Arfon to cut off the people of Môn, who threatened our land, and to wipe out disease in Arfon that had been brought in by outsiders. And then we could not make the sea go back.’

‘We could drain the bays,’ mused Hethie. ‘It would be easy.’

‘Stop interfering with nature, you evil little scientist,’ I chided her, only half seriously.

‘I’m not interfering,’ said Hethie crossly. ‘My dads made it, didn’t they? Them and Auntie Ra’haah and Auntie Athelrehn. So I’m just helping.’

‘Well, don’t do anything without asking for permission first.’

Hethie rolled her eyes. ‘I won’t.’ Her tone said: ‘Honestly, what do you take me for? Some kind of idiot?’

‘Now we’ve stopped the sea moving, for the moment,’ I said to Gwydion, ‘what happens next? You were talking about healing the land.’

‘Yes.’ He jumped to his feet. ‘Is Aranrod there?’ He walked over to the door, opened it and looked through. A gust of cold wind blew through, and the sound of waves crashing at sea. Gwydion closed the door and walked back to us.

‘She’s in no mood to talk,’ he said. ‘Let’s go for a walk.’

We walked hand-in-hand out of the castle, and found that the sun had risen and it was a bright, fresh summer’s morning outside. Our coracle had reappeared in the harbour of Caer Arianrhod; we stepped into it (Hethie and I very cautiously) and it carried us back to the shore.

‘Oh, look!’ cried Hethie, turning to look south, towards Yr Eifl, and flinging out an arm to point. ‘Look at the mountain!’

‘Careful!’ cried two voices ‘—you’ll have us over!’ The coracle rocked dangerously, and Hethie nearly fell over the side.

Hethie sat on her hands. ‘But, look,’ she muttered.

I looked; Gwydion merely looked smug. ‘The mountain road,’ I said. ‘It’s back. You showed me before, but it’s back again.’

‘And look at the quarries,’ said Gwydion.

‘The rocks – the rocks are vanishing under grass, and bushes. And the mountain doesn’t look so eaten away, as if someone had smoothed it out.’

Gwydion nodded. ‘It’s grown a lot overnight.’

The coracle reached the beach at this point and we scrambled out and pulled it up the shingle, away from the reach of the tide. ‘Can we go up the road?’ asked Hethie. ‘I want to see.’

‘I don’t know whether you can,’ came the reply, ‘but I’m going that way – you may follow as well as you can.’ He accompanied this retort with a sideways smile, which made Hethie laugh. Then he took our hands in his – me on his right, and Hethie on his left – and we began to walk.

It was a long climb, and I was very tired – we hadn’t had any sleep that night! But the road was smoother than I had expected, and despite my tiredness my legs seemed to be carrying me up almost without my thinking about it. Even Hethie, who has never been good on hills, seemed to be keeping up with no difficulty. It must be Gwydion’s influence.

We climbed up through the little town, up the narrow lane between green hedges and then stone walls. The lane used to deteriorate into marsh, but now it continued clear and well-made with stone. We went up through the fields and past where the quarry had been, but now had vanished under grass, gorse and hawthorn. Higher and higher we went, up to the mountain pastures where sheep and goats graze and the crows fly low over the hills.

Up and up we went, with the great blue swathe of Arfon bay behind us, and the low-lying sands, woods and fields of Anglesey beyond it, all silver in the dawn light. Up and up we went; and when we crossed through the last wall on to the open moor the lane continued, clear and stone-paved, whereas before it had vanished into the marsh. Now it was flanked with foxgloves and campion, and climbed straight and true up to the pass. A great bird of prey swept across the lane before us – for a moment I thought it was an eagle, then realised that it was probably a kite. The bird distracted Hethie and me – we stopped to watch it swoop on across the moors – and when we turned back and rejoined Gwydion to continue the ascent we realised that there were cottages ahead, at the head of the pass.

‘Who lives there?’ asked Hethie.

I was about to say ‘Quarry workers,’ then remembered that the quarries are closed and that the former quarry workers’ cottages are on the other side of the pass.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Come and see,’ said Gwydion, striding ahead of us and gesturing to us to follow. We ran after him as best as we could, feeling short of breath now that our goal was finally so close. As we reached the cottages, a front door opened and a woman stood there with a baby in her arms and a young child standing by her side. It was Aranrod.

‘How did she get here first?’ Hethie hissed at me.

‘Good morning,’ called Aranrod to us. ‘Come and see our new homes for the children.’

She stepped to one side, and Gwydion gestured us in. Hethie and I exchanged doubtful glances, but then I led the way and Hethie followed, with Gwydion bringing up the rear. When we stepped across the threshold, we found ourselves in a bright, light, vaulted room: clearly part of Caer Arianrhod. Hethie looked around defiantly, and then shrugged.

The children were playing around the room. The older ones – who now appeared to be two or three years old – were playing with building blocks and other construction puzzles, which looked far too old for them; but they were managing to build or unravel or fit together as the puzzle required. Those in the middle, so to speak, were putting large zigsaw pieces together, pouring liquids from jugs into bowls, or pushing or pulling wheeled toys around. The babies were sitting in baby rockers, playing with coloured shapes on wire, or watching mobiles above their heads, or shaking rattles or bells. Gwydion bent down to see what the children were doing – again I realised how fond he is of children, like a true creator-god. Aranrod stood over him, proudly pointing out what the children were learning and how quickly they were advancing.

Hethie looked up at me and mouthed, ‘The ones at Home aren’t growing as fast as this.’

‘Clearly Aranrod is in a hurry,’ I thought back at her.

Hethie looked doubtfully at them. ‘They were only babies last week!’

‘Are the ones at Home going to hatch?’ I asked. ‘I mean, be born?’

Hethie shrugged. ‘Auntie Ra’haah is holding them back. She’s doing checks on them.’

Aranrod came over to us. ‘Are you impressed?’ she asked.

‘Very,’ I said, before Hethie could say anything. ‘They’re developing very fast. What are they eating?’

She pealed with laughter. ‘I have a special formula for them. But of course they’re developing fast; they’re supposed to.’ She looked down at the children for a moment, then said to me: ‘Your first one will be ready in a few weeks. Are you going to leave her with me, or do you want to take care of her?’

‘I think Gwydion would prefer to take care of her,’ I said. ‘It’s a girl, then, is it?’

‘Yes, I thought that we need girls this time – the boys were so much trouble.’ Aranrod looked at the children again ‘You’ll see that two thirds of them are girls. We do have some boys, but for the moment I’m concentrating on getting the numbers up.’

We watched the children for a little longer, then Hethie said: ‘I must get back Home – I’ve got school.’

Gwydion got to his feet. ‘And we have to go and see some people. We’ll see you later,’ – this to his sister, who nodded, waved a hand at us, and moved away to pick up some bricks that one of the children had knocked over.

Gwydion led us out of the nearest door – and we were back in his hall at Dinas Dinlle.

‘Right,’ said Hethie, ‘I’ll give you a call later, Mum. ‘Bye, Gwydion’ – she stretched up her face to him for a kiss, and he kissed her cheek. ‘Bye, Mum’ – she let me kiss her forehead; ‘See you later,’ and she vanished.

I quashed the qualm I always feel when I say goodbye to any of the children for any length of time, and turned to Gwydion. ‘I think I need a rest,’ I said.

‘Bed,’ he said, ‘and then breakfast – and then we need to walk over to Caernarfon. But sleep first.’

He led me into the bedchamber, and I fell on the bed fully dressed and closed my eyes. Gwydion lay down beside me, arms and legs over mine – but I fell asleep before he could do anything.

I awoke to the sound of lovely, liquid music – Gwydion was sitting on the bed beside me, playing his harp; and a blackbird outside the window was joining his song to the harp music. I blinked and rolled over.

‘What time is it?’ Silly question, because his immediate response was to smile, put his harp aside and say, ‘Time to get up.’

So I got up, stripped off my clothes of earlier and went into the washing room to wash and relieve myself. When I got back, Gwydion had laid out the dress and shoes that Aranrod had loaned me; he was wearing a smarter overshirt and trousers than usual, with soft leather shoes. ‘Are we going somewhere posh?’ I asked.

‘You need to look respectable.’ He gestured to me to turn my back; then picked up a comb and combed out my hair.

We had something to eat before we set out – bread and cheese, and some raspberries which might be growing outside or which Gwydion had conjured up from somewhere. Then we went outside, into the way-back-when where Gwydion’s hall and Caer Arianrhod are, where the green meadows are empty and there are no cliffs. We walked hand in hand through the grass and down to the beach, where the coracle was waiting for us again.

‘What, aren’t we walking?’ I asked.

He shrugged. ‘I thought this would make a change.’

So we got in, and the little boat drifted away across the waves – but much more quickly than if we had tried to paddle it. It drifted quickly up the coast, around into the Menai, and into the river mouth at Caernarfon, where we drifted – apparently unseen by passing water traffic, as no one commented on our passing – up to the quayside on the north side of the river, just below the castle, and stopped.

Gwydion put out a hand, grappled one of the mooring loops and tied us to it (I didn’t see where he got the rope). Then he leapt up on to the quayside and held out the same hand to help me ashore. I scrambled up, and we walked into the town hand in hand.

Gwydion led me along the narrow streets to the same pub as we had visited before. Walking into the dim interior from the bright daylight, it was a few moments before I could make out the crowd inside. There were far more men there than before, and they all looked up as we walked in and greeted Gwydion with raised hands and various words of welcome. As before, I passed without notice, but when we reached the bar and the barman handed Gwydion a drink, he raised an eyebrow, Gwydion nodded, and the barman pulled me a glass of lemonade. I gave him a smile of thanks, but he only grunted and looked away.

Gwydion put an arm about my waist and steered me on to a bench by the wall near the bar, where there was also a low table where we could put our glasses down. He swung his harp off his back – he was carrying it slung over his back in a leather bag – and sat down with it in

his hands, adjusting the tuning, while the men around continued their conversation. As before, I couldn't make their discussion out exactly, but I could get the general gist: they were talking about the authority that others claimed over them, and how no outsider had any right to rule them. I sipped my drink, and put down my glass.

Gwydion put his right hand on my left and laid my hand on his knee. I looked up at him, query in my eyes; he nodded, and I felt his thought: he wanted my hand there, so that I could channel his power and radiate it throughout the room. I smiled, and laid my head on his shoulder, as if I was going to sleep there.

As I closed my eyes, I heard a voice tell Gwydion to sing: 'What do you think you're here for, bard? We pay you to sing.'

'You pay me in drinks,' said Gwydion, 'so here is a song about wine,' and he sang a light-hearted song that made them all laugh. Then he sang a love song, and then a song about the countryside, which he had sung before to me and to Hethie. Then someone requested a favourite folksong, and then another. I began to doze.

I was startled awake by a harsh voice that said (in Welsh, but I understood him): 'Sing us a song of Taliesin.'

Gwydion immediately began a song so lovely that everyone in the pub fell silent at once to listen. The song was long, weaving among many themes and images, building song-castles in the air; I imagined beautiful colours dancing in the sky. When he had finished, the same voice said, 'Sing us another.'

So Gwydion sang another, again a lovely, wistful, dreamlike song which lulled me away to sleep. As it ended, everyone sighed in regret at its ending, and Gwydion reached for his drink. As he sipped it, the harsh voice broke in again: 'Sing us *Cad Goddeu*.'

Now, that is 'The Battle of the Trees', and it's about Gwydion, and Blodeuwedd; part of it is Blodeuwedd singing about how she was created. I opened my eyes and looked at the man who was asking for the song.

'That's a long song,' said Gwydion offhandedly, sipping his drink. 'Do you have all day to listen?'

'I'd like to hear it,' said the other. He was thin and muscular, dark haired as many Welsh are, with an air of steely determination about him.

'Do sing it yourself,' responded Gwydion.

'You're the bard,' said the other. 'We're employing you to sing.'

'You're not employing me,' said Gwydion. 'I sing because I like to sing; you simply show your appreciation.' He put down the glass. 'Do you all want to hear it? I warn you, you won't be doing anything else this afternoon.'

'We've got all day,' said the other.

'You won't have by the time you've heard it. Very well!' He paused to tune up, and I moved back close again and laid my head on his shoulder and my hand on his thigh. I could feel the energy coursing through him and knew that this song would be an enchantment on them, but if they wanted it ... he began to sing.

I don't remember the exact words. Taliesin wrote poetry, not fact. His words flow and fly like the waves of the sea, the waters of the rushing river or a bird on the wing. His words sing themselves as the blackbird sings, fresh and pure as if they were composed yesterday, not however-long-it-was-ago – fifteen hundred years? Who can say?

My lover sang. In his mouth the words were true: Taliesin sang that he was in Caer Nevenhir, where the grass and the trees marched; the minstrels were singing, they marched to

battles – but Gwydion had been there, and now Gwydion was singing it. Taliesin sang that he had seen Gwydion help the Britons, calling on the Lord from need, that the Lord who created them should deliver them, and then the trees rose up and marched like an army. Then the song changes: Taliesin imagines himself like Blodeuwedd the flower-girl, being created from flowers, from fruits, from the blossom of trees and woods, from earth and the substance of the earth, from nettle-flowers and the water of the ninth wave. (So far as I remember from a childhood poem, it's the ninth wave that will carry you away.) What is the song about? It's about Taliesin seeing visions of beauty, of Gwydion raising up the trees and creating life, and perhaps he was saying that he himself had been raised to life, recreated as a new being, and inspired to sing by Gwydion.

Had he? I must remember to ask my lover. From the passion and poetry he was putting into the song, I guessed he had inspired the poet.

The story most of us know about Taliesin is his tale about being a poor, weak thing who was recreated into the world's most wonderful poet through the cauldron of Cerridwen. Whatever that meant, he was depicting himself as having been divinely recreated and inspired to sing. So this was a song of inspiration and re-creation, and everyone who heard it sat as if enchanted, hardly moving or breathing, allowing the music to flow through them as if they were just dolls without motivation of their own. Even the man who had demanded the song sat like one in a trance, his face completely blank, as if trapped in my lover's spell.

At last, at long last, Gwydion laid down his harp and picked up his drink. He drained it and handed me the empty glass – I put it on the bar, at which the barman woke up from his trance and refilled it. I handed it to my lover, who drained it again and handed it back to be refilled again. Meanwhile, I drank my own lemonade. It wasn't bad, but the one I'd made for myself last time we came was better.

The audience came slowly to themselves, blinking and shaking their heads, rubbing their eyes, coughing and shuffling their feet. For a few minutes no one spoke; then they began to exchange words in low voices, so low that at first they were all but inaudible. I gathered that they were impressed.

Having half-drained his glass, Gwydion sat down again, gestured to me to join him, and picked up his harp. 'There is time for one more song, if you want to hear any more this afternoon,' he said.

'No,' said the thin, dark-haired man who had asked for *Cad Goddeu*, 'anything after that would be an anti-climax.' His whole air had changed from aggression to a humble peacefulness, as if some anger within him had surrendered to the music.

'Did you find what you wanted there?' asked Gwydion.

The other shook his head. 'Something better.' Everyone looked at him, and he coughed – embarrassed at admitting his emotions. 'I thought it would tell how we could raise the whole land to fight against the Saesneg and their minions in Caerdydd. But instead' – he hesitated for a moment as if in wonder, and then continued: 'it spoke of light, and recreation, and truth within the soul. I feel – I think I've seen heavenly places and bathed in divine light.'

No one laughed. I think some nodded, but I wasn't looking at them. I was watching the dark-haired man, embarrassed yet earnest in his testimony.

Gwydion only nodded. 'It has that peculiarity,' he said, using the old Welsh word for a magical aspect of an object that could do harm or bring fulfilment to whoever encountered it. He put his harp back in its leather bag. 'If you have heard enough today, my friends, my

woman and I will bid you farewell in God's name, until we meet again.' He got up, swung his bag on to his back and held out his arm to me.

The others also rose, and came to shake Gwydion's hand and thank him. None of them spoke to me except Dai Williams and his building friends, who merely nodded and smiled and said, 'Are you well, Missus?' But the dark-haired man, as he turned away from shaking Gwydion's hand and thanking him again, said to me: 'You're his wife?'

I nodded and smiled.

'I've seen you walking with a girl. Your daughter? You don't look old enough.'

'Heather? She's nearly eleven.'

'You don't look old enough,' he said again, as if bewildered, like a man who is still half-enchanted and doesn't think he can trust his senses.

'I assure you, I am,' I said, smiling brightly.

'I hadn't seen you until a few weeks ago,' he said.

'Gwydion and I have only recently got back together,' I said.

'Ah – yes, fair play, he did mention you – yes.' Suddenly he was embarrassed. 'I'm sorry, I've misjudged – I didn't realise – I'd forgotten.' His face was red; I wondered what was wrong, then he said: 'you're his dragon maiden – his – you – you overcome dragons.' He held out his hand suddenly, still covered in confusion, so I shook it; at which he bobbed his head in a kind of awkward bow, and withdrew.

Gwydion looked at me – I nodded, and he led me out of the pub.

'What was that about?' I asked, as we walked down the street, arms around each other's waists.

'Geraint is a true seeker of truth,' said Gwydion, with his sideways smile, 'he believes in druidism and Celtic magic.'

'You're much older than druids or the Celts,' I remarked.

'Don't tell him,' he said, and kissed my hair.

We strolled back to the quayside by way of a baker's shop, where we bought sausage rolls in a paper bag, and ate them – shedding crumbs everywhere – as we walked along the quay. Our little coracle was waiting for us – Gwydion showed me how to get cautiously into it, so that I didn't overturn it – then he released the rope tying us to the quay, and we moved away down the river and out to sea. Neither of us was using the oar – the coracle moved itself.

We moved smoothly across the waves, the sea rippling around us as the seagulls flew overhead, shrieking their mournful cries. It was warm in the late afternoon sun – we snuggled up to each other in the coracle and watched the coast move past us.

I thought about asking Gwydion about the men in the pub, then decided not to disturb the golden moment, then decided I should ask.

'I told you before: they're planning a rebellion,' he said, before I could say anything. OK, so he reads my mind.

'But I thought you were distracting them with the building project?'

'They've finished the first part of the building now, and the hotter heads are restless. Their problem is that there is no obvious object to attack. If they try to blow anything up in Gwynedd, they'll harm local people and have no effect on the government. As you heard, they've decided that their biggest enemy is the government in Caerdydd – Llundain is too far away, and Caerdydd just does what Llundain tells it. So they want to attack the Senedd in Caerdydd, but they are still trying to decide how to go about it. My intention today was to

calm them down, which I've done, so the danger is averted for the moment. But I will have to find some way of reconciling them – I can't keep them drugged on magic forever.'

'The man who wanted you to sing the *Cad Goddeu* – Geraint – is he the ringleader?'

'They don't have a leader – they're Cymri! The Cymri have never accepted authority – they work together for as long as it suits them, and then they fall out and attack each other, and so they end by destroying whatever they set out to do. But they do themselves and those around them a great deal of damage in the process, and I want to prevent that.'

'I thought Dai was the leader,' I said.

'They all respect Dai, and at the moment they're following his lead. But eventually they'll decide his ideas aren't sufficiently challenging or forward-thinking, and then they'll look for a new leader. When that moment comes, Geraint will probably step into the breach. He's been waiting on the sidelines and he's full of devoted idealism but he has no original imagination. So he'll feed them mashed up ideals and dreams and lead them into disaster. He's quite capable of trying to blow up the Senedd on the grounds that it's a symbol of Saesneg colonialism.'

'I thought the Welsh voted for it,' I said.

'Not exactly – the Cymreig pressure groups wanted it, and a few of the Cymri voted, and slightly more than half of those who voted, voted in favour. So Geraint is correct – it *is* an imposition that the Cymri cannot afford – but not for the reasons he believes.'

We'd arrived back at our home beach now, and Gwydion got out of the coracle and helped me out as he said this; he then dragged the coracle up the beach and tethered it to a rock. Then he brushed the sand off his hands, put his right arm about my waist and kissed me, turned to look back along the sweep of the great bay, the water all glittering in the sun, and kissed me again. I put both my arms about his waist.

'Are we now or then?' I asked.

That sideways smile. 'Now *is* then. Why do you ask, O witch-of-my-heart?'

'It's a beautiful evening. Do we have it to ourselves?'

He kissed me instead of replying, and we forgot about the children of Glyndŵr for a while. The sands of the beach were warm, and then there was the crystal clear sea to roll and romp in ...

Completely covered in sand and dripping wet, we eventually made our way across the green pastures of that way-back-when time to Gwydion's fortress, to tidy ourselves, have something to eat and continue our game in bed.

*

Tuesday

I was woken by Gwydion kissing my ear and whispering: 'Get up, witch-of-my-heart; the waters and woods await you,' but when I opened my eyes he immediately kissed me and rolled me across the bed. It was several minutes before he lifted me off the bed and dragged me out of the door – we were both giggling madly – normally this door would lead into the washing room, but today we emerged into a sun-filled clearing in a leafy wood, where a white torrent of a mountain stream plunged down rocks into a clear mountain pool. Before I could protest, my lover pulled me into the pool and ducked me right under the water before I could scream – the water was freezing!

I emerged, spluttering and yelping with the cold, but he pulled me under again. We chased each other all round the pool and under the waterfall, finally emerging dripping wet but much cleaner.

‘Stand there and let the trees and water see you,’ said my lover. I stood as requested on the mossy bank, shivering slightly in the early morning sunshine. Gwydion stepped back and addressed the clearing in words I did not understand and which I’m sure were neither Welsh nor the language that Wiroan and his sisters and brothers speak. But through the earth beneath my feet, the trees above my head and the waters running off my chilly body, I gathered that he was calling the land of Arfon to witness that I was his woman, who had come to him willingly and with the begrudging acceptance of my kin, and that I was carrying his child. (As he said this last part I’d swear I felt the child kick within my womb, although it was far too early in pregnancy for it to have any legs.) As he is lord of the land this makes me its lady, and through my kindred the land is now allied with the almighty demiurge, who may therefore show us his generosity and protect us from our enemies. So let the land rejoice and honour its lady, and clothe her in its light and joy.

And then leaves fluttered down from the trees above, and flowers sprang up around my feet, and I found I was clothed in a dress of leaves and flowers, as I’d been for the wedding day. There was something bright in my hair (which I could only see out of the corner of my eye) and shoes of something that resembled leather but was probably leaves or bark on my feet. I looked around me and said ‘Thank you,’ and I wondered what else I should say, but there was no opportunity because Gwydion kissed me, and I’d swear I heard the trees, the water and the earth applauding.

We ate a breakfast of berries and drank fresh water, until Gwydion remarked: ‘Geraint is coming to visit us – we should be ready to greet him,’ pulled me to my feet, and led me back into his hall, now transformed back into the house on the Pwllheli road, and then out into the garden. I was still wearing the dress of leaves, which looked to the casual eye like a cotton summer dress (and isn’t cotton called ‘tree-wool’ in German?), and looked unusually smart, but Gwydion’s appearance was more and more that of the demi-god rather than the slightly shabby young man whom my friends and I had met a month or two ago. His overshirt and trousers glistened, as if the shirt was of silk and the trousers were a silk-wool mix, and his shoes gleamed as if they were the finest leather. His curly black hair glistened with health and bounced off his shoulders with natural volume, and his pale skin glowed with inner warmth. In no way did he look like the young man who just did unofficial curate’s work around the parish or entertained the local political agitators in the pub; he looked like a young lord, and of course that’s what he is. But, from what followed, I guess other people don’t see him in the same way that I do.

I paused by the hollyhocks, to admire the huge blooms: in cerise, cream, and a deep purple that was almost black. Gwydion stood alongside me, shielded by the hollyhocks from the road. I stepped away to look at some campanulas, and then realised that the man named Geraint was standing at the garden gate, wearing his bicycle helmet and holding his bicycle by its handlebars.

‘Good morning,’ I said, smiling a welcome, as I do to all guests. ‘How are you?’

He appeared nervous, even furtive. ‘Good morning. Is your husband here?’

I felt a strong mental nudge from Gwydion, and said: ‘He’s indoors. Shall I call him?’

‘No – wait a moment.’ Geraint propped his bicycle against the hedge, opened the gate, wheeled in the bicycle and shut the gate behind him. Then he took off his helmet and hung it

from his handlebars, then moved the bike so that it was leaning on the back wall of the house, away from the gate and passers-by. 'I wanted to have a word with you first.' He looked all around, and somehow did not see Gwydion behind the hollyhocks – I assume because he did not wish to be seen. 'Is he an official bard? I mean, is he a member of the Gorsedd? I'm asking for a serious reason.'

'He *is* a bard,' I said, 'and the members of the Gorsedd know him, but he's not a member.'

He clucked his tongue in exasperation. 'If he were – it would be so useful to the children. He's the best I ever heard – why isn't he a member?'

'He doesn't want to be a member of an institution,' I said.

He nodded regretfully. 'That makes sense.' (A pause.) 'It's that – well, we need to get access to the Senedd, and I thought he would have contacts there.'

I shook my head. 'Not so far as I know. He doesn't go out of Arfon.'

'That's a nuisance.' He shook his head, and then stood up straight, decisively. 'Well, there are other ways.' He turned back to his bicycle, picked up his helmet and began to fiddle with the buckles preparatory to putting it back on, but Gwydion stepped out from behind the hollyhocks. 'Good morning to you,' he said.

Geraint jumped, and laughed nervously. 'Good morning! I was just speaking to your wife. This is a lovely garden you have here.' One hand gestured around the flower beds.

Gwydion nodded at me. 'Jules is responsible for it. Would you like a cup of tea?'

Now, it would be against the laws of hospitality to refuse a cup of tea once offered, so Geraint had to accept; and while he and Gwydion exchanged polite pleasantries, I went to put the kettle on.

Geraint sat in the back room at the dining table, talking earnestly with Gwydion, while I poured out the tea and tried to unravel what they were talking about. The conversation was leaping about from the past to the future, then back to the present, and then to the past. Geraint was talking about the actions of the 'Mabion Glyndŵr' movement in the 1970s and 1980s, when the members were burning down houses owned by people from outside the area – they claimed only to burn down houses owned by the English, but in fact some of the houses destroyed were owned by people from south Wales – but then he went on to refer to 'future action', and then he spoke of the converted barn behind the Watkins's house as if Gwydion was planning to give it to 'the children'. Gwydion opened his mouth to interrupt him, at which Geraint back-tracked and said, 'Fair play, you didn't say as much but I guess that's what you're doing, as a loyal member of the movement,' and then he added: 'You'll be helping us with the next action. We're just getting it off the ground now.'

I was sitting by Gwydion, wondering when I could legitimately escape into the garden – this intense conversation was exhausting me – but he put a hand on my elbow to hold me where I was, and said: 'You didn't say anything about this yesterday.'

'We were still discussing it,' said Geraint.

'So what have you decided?'

Geraint looked him in the eye. 'We're going to strike at the Senedd.'

Gwydion's upper lip curled. 'To what purpose?'

'We won't have those puppets in Caerdydd frittering away our money on their nepotistic schemes. Giving money to their friends and propping up dead businesses, that's what they're doing, pouring good money after bad; doesn't matter what it is, as long as it's in south Wales. There's nothing for us in the north.'

'That's true,' Gwydion conceded.

‘We need our own assembly, making our own decisions on our own money. Not some bunch of bureaucrats in Caerdydd – takes all day to get there, we might as well have them in Lerpwl; at least that’s close by.’

I nodded; Liverpool is, of course, a largely Welsh city, for all that it’s on the English side of the border. Some even joke that it’s the largest Welsh city, even though it’s not in Wales. Cardiff is not so large and is a long way from Gwynedd – a good day’s drive down the A470 road or along the north coast into England, down the Marches and back into Wales. There is also a train, which takes five to six hours to travel from Holyhead to Cardiff. There used to be an air service, but it didn’t generate enough traffic to be commercially viable. The simple fact is that North Wales’s links are with Lerpwl and Caer – Liverpool and Chester – while south Wales is linked to Bristol (Bryste) down the M4 corridor to London (Llundain). Mid-Wales is linked to Shrewsbury (Amwythig) and Birmingham. The ancient route was down the coast, either by sea or along the coast road, but this last requires ferries to cross the river estuaries or long diversions inland.

Gwydion, however, is trapped in Arfon and so connections to Cardiff don’t particularly worry him. His concern was what the troublemakers might get into. ‘So you’re planning to go all the way to Caerdydd to visit the Senedd. Are you going to get up a petition?’

Geraint was indignant. ‘What would be the point in that? We need to strike at them, hit them where it hurts. We need to do them some real damage.’

‘There’s a lot of security at the Senedd,’ I said quickly – I don’t know Cardiff well, but even I know that much. ‘You’ll be arrested before you get in.’

‘Those bureaucrats are all overworked,’ said Gwydion. ‘If we can convince them that we can do things better on the spot, they’ll be only too glad to pass on responsibility.’

‘You could go and sing to them, and persuade them,’ I said, only half joking.

Gwydion gave me a sideways smile. ‘I might.’

Geraint brushed this aside, but he could not contradict me outright because that would insult his host and hostess.

At this point there was a knock at the front door, followed by Dai Williams striding in with a shout: ‘Good morning! Good news for you!’ – and thrusting a piece of paper on to the table in front of Gwydion and me.

Gwydion picked it up – I read it over his arm. It was the signed inspection certificate to say that the converted storage barn was fit for human habitation. ‘That’s great!’ I said, at which Dai declared: ‘Ta-da!’ and produced a second piece of paper, which he thrust after the first – the fire inspection certificate.

I applauded, and Gwydion smiled broadly and said: ‘Thanks – that’s saved us a lot of time.’

‘We just need the public liability insurance,’ said Dai. ‘I’ll pop in the broker’s when I get back into town.’

‘You’ll need–’ Gwydion dug in his back pocket, but Dai gestured him aside. ‘Forget it. It’s all on the bill, fair play.’

Gwydion turned to me. ‘You can call your friends and tell them they can come at the weekend.’

‘Yes!’ I found I could get up; I jumped to my feet. ‘Now, where’s my phone?’

Gwydion handed it to me – he apparently teleports it to me whenever I need it. ‘Thanks’ – and I hurried out into the garden.

Hiding behind the hollyhocks to avoid the eyes of passers-by, I called Sue, who seemed vastly relieved to hear from me.

‘Jules! Are you OK?’

‘Yes, I’m fine. The barn conversion is ready. You can come over at the weekend if you like.’

I heard Sue let out a long sigh of released tension. ‘That would be lovely. The kids are breaking up from school tomorrow. It’s going to be a madhouse here. I’ll tell Lynne. Can I ring you back when I’ve got details?’

‘You can try, if I’m within range; if not, text me.’

‘Will do. But, Jules, what’s he up to now? Hethie had some story about flooding?’

There was a commotion at the back door – Geraint was coming out. I ducked down behind the hollyhocks, and said, ‘Enemy sighted. I’d better sign off. Speak to you later,’ and pressed the ‘off’ button.

Geraint hesitated on the threshold, looking around – presumably for me – but not seeing me. I preferred to remain invisible, and stayed crouched down out of sight.

I had a clear impression that the hollyhocks were actively shielding me, covering me with their leaves and shadows so that I vanished into the shade. In any case, Geraint didn’t spot me, and he wheeled his bicycle out through the gate and set off cycling up the road.

When I got back indoors, Dai was talking about the heating system in the barn. As soon as he saw me, he began to lecture me on how the system worked, ‘So you can tell your friends,’ but Gwydion stopped him with a raised hand and said, ‘We’ll need a notice by the heaters with instructions.’ Dai at once subsided, wrote something in his notebook, and began to talk about drainage. Gwydion held out his arm to me and I sat down next to him again. Clearly this was going to be a long morning.

Hethie came over in the afternoon, after school. She ‘jumped’ into the hall, where as it happened Gwydion was showing me how to play a chord on his harp. Fortunately she didn’t find us *in flagrante delicto*.

‘Mum! Steven and Simon want to come over tomorrow.’

I put the harp down carefully and turned to face her. ‘Sue said you’d all come on Saturday.’

‘We’d rather come tomorrow. It’s boring at Home.’

Her face was set in that familiar stubborn expression which means that she’s not going to give in to reasoned argument. I glanced at Gwydion, then back at Hethie. ‘You can’t stay in the barn by yourselves. You’ll need an adult with you.’

‘Caroline and Tonja are coming.’

‘I said an adult.’

‘We could stay here.’

‘You could,’ said Gwydion, ‘and you could get up at dawn and go to bed at sunset, but I doubt you’ll want to.’

Hethie snorted. ‘You just want to keep Mum to yourself.’

That sideways smile, with a triumphant twist of the lips. ‘Yes.’

Hethie scowled. ‘I’ll tell Auntie Sue and then she’ll come.’

‘I assume that Aaron and Lizzie and little Tim are coming,’ I said. These are Sue’s, Lynne’s and (big) Tim’s children – the children of us human Watchers and our Watcher spouses. For reasons I have never understood, Tim and Ra’haah named their first child after its father, so now we have Big Tim and Little Tim. I counted rapidly in my head: three human

watchers (Sue, Lynne, Tim), plus their three children is six, plus my four and Tonja is eleven. (Jamie isn't coming: he says that someone needs to hold the fort at Home in case some big problem comes up.) The barn holds twelve, so they will just all fit. 'If you have an adult with you, you can come tomorrow.'

'OK.' Hethie sat down on a bench and looked around the hall in disgust. 'Why can't you make this place more comfortable? Have a sofa and some chairs.'

Gwydion smiled, but this time it was the smile of an indulgent big brother. 'I like it simple.'

'Aranrod at least painted the walls!'

'These were painted once – I just never repainted them.'

'It looks better when it's a little house. You could leave it as a little house.'

Gwydion was almost laughing. 'You have to imagine it for yourself.'

'OK. So if I imagine a palace it will turn into a palace?'

'No – you have to expect it in your imagination, and then that will be what you see.'

She sighed. 'I didn't expect anything. So I got this.' She looked around her again in resigned disgust. 'Can I have a drink? I just got back from school and rushed over to tell you about Simon and Steven.'

'Fetch your own,' said my lover, gesturing towards the kitchen. Hethie gave an exaggerated sigh of exasperation and went. As soon as her back was turned, Gwydion kissed me.

Hethie's voice rose from the kitchen doorway: 'Leave my mum alone!' at which Gwydion swung me up into his arms, swung me round and kissed me, then set me gently down on the floor, as we both laughed madly.

Hethie came back into the hall. 'Stop messing about. You do look silly when you mess about.'

'Shall we walk over to look at the barn?' I suggested. 'Then you can tell the others what they need to bring with them.'

Hethie brightened up at once. 'Yes, that would be good.' She drained her cup and put it down on the table. 'Let's go!'

So we walked up the road to the barn, and Hethie was sent back Home with a list of things that visitors would need to bring, including bedding, towels, tea towels and dish cloths, washing up liquid and salt, drinks (coffee, tea, soft drinks) cutlery and a tin opener. On my phone to Sue that evening, I emphasised that they should bring warm clothing and night clothes, and torches.

'Lynne and I are coming by car again,' said Sue. 'Caroline and Tonja are coming with us. Tim is bringing the others by train.'

'The train only comes as far as Bangor,' I said. 'They'll have to get the bus from there.'

'Simon's already planning it all, don't worry,' said Sue. 'He's been downloading timetables and plotting a precise itinerary.'

The children don't usually get the opportunity to travel by bus, so clearly Simon was making the most of it.

*

Wednesday

(Simon)

We had a really great journey across to Bangor. I had my camera phone and I took pictures of everything and sent them to my mates, who were all dead jealous that I was going away for the summer. And I was away from my dads, who are such a bunch of bosses. I can't do a thing at home without it's 'Don't do that' and 'do this', so it was really great to get away.

So. I had the timetables and I could show the others where to go. Uncle Tim was all ready to boss us – he's such a worrier, he's worse than Mum – but I told him to cool it and we were all sorted and no probs, so he calmed down and let me get on with it. We had to change trains twice, at Nuneaton and Crewe. Nuneaton is a really fabulous modern station and Crewe is so historic it's unreal. It's just so LNWR you could imagine any moment some great Scottish express coming in, pouring out smoke and steam.

It's such a great journey. We managed to get seats pretty much all together, and I had the Pre-Grouping Railway Atlas so I could see where all the closed stations were and all the old junctions. I pointed some of them out to the others, when they asked me, but mostly they're not interested so I didn't tell them. There was a group of lads on the train who were taking down loco numbers, so I said 'Hi' and we exchanged a few words, but I didn't want to talk for too long because I had to keep an eye on my group.

The run along the north coast of Wales is stunning. I can see why Mum likes the area so much. It's really amazing. We went through tunnels and then out into the bright sunshine and there was just acres of blue sea and sky and great green mountains going up to the clouds. Fantastic.

We got into Bangor bang on time and got ourselves off with all the luggage, and crossed the footbridge, and then Uncle Tim took Hethie and Aaron down to the station buffet to buy us some sandwiches and left me, Steve, Liz and Little Tim to wait on platform 1 with the luggage. There were a couple of men standing nearby talking. They were talking in a funny sort of Welsh, very old fashioned, but of course I can understand it because my main dad invented language. Steve was listening too, and we looked at each other in amazement, because these two men were talking about wrecking the express from Holyhead.

So we nudged Liz and Little Tim to listen, and then the others came back, and we all went off to find the bus to Caernarfon. We four didn't say anything because we didn't know who might be listening at this point.

At Caernarfon we changed on to another bus down the coast to Pwllheli and then we had to get off at the right stop, but Hethie knew where to get off so we didn't have any problems. The place where Mum's staying is right by the bus stop, so we could just carry the luggage straight in.

Mum was there, sitting at a table, and standing behind her was a man I knew at once must be Gwydion because he looks so much like little Tim, but he's not as tall and he's more muscular and looks more grown up and a bit mean, whereas little Tim is just a kid like me.

So we put down all the bags and Mum hugged us all and said how glad she was to see us, and Uncle Tim shook hands with Gwydion – I could see he'd noticed the likeness to Auntie Ra'haah and Little Tim – and said 'Hi' to Mum. Then Mum asked if we'd like something to drink and Hethie said she and Lizzie would make it, so they went off to the kitchen, and for a bit it was all grown-ups' talk of 'how was the journey' and Mum said that Sue and Lynne were already up at the barn and we could walk over when we were ready.

We drank our drinks and used the bathroom – it was all a bit old-fashioned but clean – and then Hethie said she'd show us the way to the barn, but Steven, Lizzie and Little Tim & I exchanged glances and I said, 'You go on ahead – there's something we four need to discuss with Mum.'

Hethie was going to argue, but Gwydion told her to go ahead and said we'd bring the luggage along in a minute, and Uncle Tim asked her to show him and Aaron the way, so they went off up the road.

When they'd gone, Mum said to me, 'So what's up, duck?' I wish she wouldn't call me 'duck', but she's from Leicester so she can't help it. I said, 'We four overheard two blokes saying they're going to blow up the Holyhead Express.'

Then I told Mum and Gwydion what we'd heard. Mum went very white, and Gwydion was grim-faced. He said, 'We must go and check the line before the evening train goes through.'

I was glad he said, 'we'. I said, 'We four are coming too.'

He nodded. Mum said, 'What will you do if you find something? Will you hand them over to the law?'

Gwydion gave a funny smile – sort of sideways – and said, 'Not for a first offence.'

Little Tim said, 'If we have a dog it could sniff it out – shall I call Nodens?'

So then we had to explain to Gwydion who Nodens is. I got the impression that he doesn't like dogs (or cats, I found out later), because he's a wild-animal person. But he said we could bring Nodens, because if we met anyone it would just look as if we were walking the dog.

So little Tim whistled for Nodens, and he came really quickly because he likes coming out with us. Then Gwydion led us to the door, and when we followed him we found we weren't on the road side but in a green meadow stretching down to the sea. We must have slipped in time.

Gwydion led the way, holding Mum's hand in his right and mine in his left. I held Steve's hand in my left and Mum held Lizzie's in her right, then Little Tim was on her right, and Nodens ran along beside Little Tim, barking. We ran across the meadow, but I didn't get tired, which was strange because normally I can't run very far without getting tired.

Then – all at once – we were alongside the railway line as it runs along the coast from Bangor towards the bridge over the Menai Straits. Nodens ran ahead and then stopped and barked at something by the tracks.

We all went up and looked, and wondered what it could be. It looked like a little box attached to the rails by wires. For a moment I thought it was an axle counter, but then Gwydion knelt down, detached it and lifted it away from the rails while Nodens barked triumphantly.

'Won't it explode?' asked Lizzie, all anxious.

'Not now,' said Gwydion. 'I've deactivated it. Let's go back.' So we all turned and went back the way we'd come. Gwydion explained who the men were that we'd seen and why they wanted to blow up the train, and thanked us for overhearing them.

'We're Watchers,' said Little Tim, 'but we listen, too.'

Gwydion laughed. He said we shouldn't mention this to anyone else, but to go to the barn and if we saw either of the two men again we should let him or our Mum know at once, by just thinking to them.

Then he said, 'Your dog can't stay in the barn. No pets.'

We all started to object – we were back at his house by this time – when we saw a lady was waiting at the door. When she saw Gwydion and Mum she said, ‘Oh, there you are! I thought you’d gone out. Are these your visitors?’

‘Yes,’ I said quickly. ‘We’re staying in the barn. But there’s nowhere for the dog.’ I gestured at Nodens, who whimpered on cue.

‘Oh, dear,’ she said. ‘Well, he must come and stay with us. He’ll get on well with our corgi, I’m sure. I’m Mrs Roberts, by the way,’ and she held out her hand to me, and I shook it.

Nodens barked in thanks. I’m not so sure Gwydion was pleased, but I didn’t look at him.

*

(Jules)

Of course, as a deity of deer, boars and wolves, Gwydion is not fond of dogs. He isn’t fond of cats, either – he says they’re too lazy and don’t catch enough mice.

However, he was pleased with the resolution of this problem. Once we’d taken the children and their luggage up to the barn and promised to give them a meal if they came to the house around six pm, we left them to themselves and went for a walk along the beach.

Nodens came with us for a while, then saw some children and rushed off to play with them. We walked on.

‘What are we going to do about Geraint?’ I asked. ‘And who was the other man?’

‘Euan,’ said my lover. ‘They’ll know by now that their attempt has failed, and they’ll be wondering what went wrong.’

‘Can we find them?’

‘Easily. They’re leaving a trail of anger and hatred. But let them finish blaming each other for the failure and begin thinking about what to do next. Then we can interrupt them.’

‘How can we stop them doing it again?’

‘We can trap them. They already suspect us of not being whole-hearted in the fight, so we wait for them to come and accuse us. And then we’ll show them why we don’t deal in blood. But I don’t expect them to come until after dark, so we’ll begin by entertaining our guests.’

The hall had scarcely held such feasting for a thousand years, I thought to myself that evening. Gwydion converted the house back to an early Welsh hall and slipped it into way-back-when so that we didn’t disturb the neighbours. There was a lot of laughter, shouting and singing, despite the lack of alcohol (children were present). Games were played and prizes won. Gwydion told amusing stories and got everyone singing together. Everyone was very relaxed and we fooled around like a bunch of kids – even we adults.

At last it was so late that it was about to be tomorrow, and I sent them all back to the barn to sleep. Then Gwydion and I sat down on our bed and he played his harp to me, whiling away the time until our night-guests should arrive.

*

Thursday

It was well past midnight when there was a hammering on the front door. Gwydion raised a hand and the door swung open, to reveal the man whom Simon had described talking to Geraint at Bangor railway station: Euan. He was temporarily taken aback by the door opening of its own accord, but then leapt into the hall way and strode into the back room, where we were now seated at the table, waiting for him. The front door closed itself behind him.

‘So we were betrayed,’ he cried, ‘and by those we trusted most!’

Gwydion put down his harp. ‘You were betrayed by your own tongues, *bach*,’ (it means ‘little one,’ and can be a term of endearment, but now it sounded more like contempt).

Euan’s mouth dropped open. ‘Our own tongues?’

‘You were overheard boasting of your deeds, by four children at the railway station.’

‘That’s impossible. We were speaking the bardic language.’

‘Is it not given to babes and innocent children to know the language of God?’

Euan was temporarily stumped, as he tried to reconcile Gwydion’s words with his own world-view – and failed.

‘That’s impossible,’ he said at last. ‘How would you know, in any case?’

‘I was there,’ said Gwydion, smiling his sideways smile. He touched the strings of his harp, filling the room with a sweet chime of sound. ‘I was at the beginning – I was in the garden of Eden – I heard the snake talk to the woman. I was in the first forests – I was in the wolf and the boar–’

Euan cut him short: ‘Yes, yes, I know Taliesin. You’re not Taliesin, skilled as you are.’

‘How do you know what Taliesin was or yet might be?’ Gwydion’s fingers plucked gently on the harp strings. ‘I was there and heard you speak to each other, and saw the children had heard you, and watched them seek out what you had hidden ...’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ cried Euan, goaded by the sweet music and Gwydion’s gentle tones into an outburst of fury. Did he realise that he was being enchanted? ‘They couldn’t have disconnected the charge without it going off.’

‘I do not deal in violence or war; we will not seek destruction, we will build up, we will recreate. Arfon will rise from the sea, the woods and meadows will flourish, its birds and beasts will multiply and its people will rejoice–’

‘That’s not Taliesin,’ growled Euan.

‘No.’ Gwydion looked him in the eyes. ‘This is I myself and none other, who taught Taliesin, and I disconnected the charge, and I saved the people you would have killed. Your crime is revealed and your sentence is fixed: you will be exiled from this land until you have made peace three times, in retribution for the peace you tried to destroy. Now, go!’ – his hand raked the strings in a liquid, melodic cry of grief; and Euan’s face suddenly altered from fury to terror – and he vanished with a clap like thunder. The whole room shook – I held on to the table until it stopped shaking.

‘Is he dead?’ I managed to stutter.

‘No,’ said my lover, ‘I’ve sent him to Manchester. He can learn what the wider world is like. When he’s learned to make peace rather than war, he can come home.’

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. He gave me a grin and said, ‘Fetch yourself a drink from the kitchen. We still await Geraint.’

I got up and went into the kitchen. It was cold – the back door was open. I stepped forward to close it, and realised there was a man there, standing beside the open door: Geraint.

I said: ‘The door was locked.’

‘I undid the lock,’ he said – his voice was hoarse, as if he was very excited or had been talking a lot. ‘I’m a bard – I used the bardic language. I commanded it and it opened.’

... or Gwydion had let him in. I stepped backwards, holding up my hands to ward him off. He started to move towards me, then realised he couldn’t get close – I had an invisible barrier around me.

‘You’re his awen, his power,’ he said, in a hoarse whisper – I could scarcely hear him. ‘He relies on you. Who *are* you? I saw you with your daughter. You were on the mountain top, the night the sea went back. I saw the sea go back.’

I kept my hands raised against him.

‘You all three came out of the mountain; I saw you. I was on the mountain performing my druidic rituals – I saw you, all three of you. I saw the sea go back, I saw the lost cantrefi, I heard you speaking the old bardic tongue, so old I couldn’t understand it. Who *are* you? Your daughter has the look of demons – lovely demons.’

So he really does know something, I thought, but still I said nothing and kept my hands up to ward him off.

‘What do I have to do to win your favour? How can I get that inspiration to sing as he sings? O Cerridwen, let me drink from your cauldron!’

This is getting ridiculous, I thought. ‘I’m *not* Cerridwen,’ I said testily, ‘I’m Sophia, come from the demiurge to help you rebuild your land and stop you from blowing it up.’

‘We will purify the land,’ he retorted, ‘and kill the foreigners and those who surrender, to them – we’ll restore the true faith of these islands, we’ll restore druidic lore!’ Then he surged towards me and tried to grab my hands; but I pushed him away, but in the ensuing confusion we fell through time and space and emerged standing on the south flank of Yr Eifl, the Rivals, looking south across Lleyn.

Geraint fell on his knees. ‘You’re a goddess,’ he cried. ‘I knew it. Cerridwen, Cerridwen, let me drink from your cauldron and endow me with your inspiration! My heart is pure, my heart is pure!’

‘Your heart is the heart of a murderer,’ said Gwydion, becoming visible beside me and putting his arm around my waist (I knew he was there all the time, but I wished he’d appeared earlier) ‘and you forfeited all rights to bardism when you fixed these to destroy the Caerdydd Express.’ Then he held out the box we’d found by the railway track, with its wires hanging.

Geraint was dumbstruck – then he whispered: ‘How did you find it?’

‘I followed the scent of hatred,’ said Gwydion.

‘We only meant to serve Arfon,’ whispered Geraint.

‘The time for killing and destruction is long past,’ said Gwydion. ‘This time is for building up and creating.’

‘I only want to serve Cymru and save her culture and people,’ whispered Geraint.

‘The people of Cymru are those who live here,’ said Gwydion, ‘not one race or another. So many races have lived here, and so many live here now.’

‘I seek purity,’ whispered Geraint. ‘I heard your singing. When I heard you sing *Cad Goddeu* I thought I’d never heard anything more lovely. I want that purity and beauty – I want to lose myself in it, to be one with it.’

‘Then you shall,’ said Gwydion, and he bent and touched Geraint’s shoulder. ‘Be a mountain flower until the frost. When the frost comes, you’ll be a man again.’

For a moment, I saw Geraint’s face change to utter horror and terror, as he realised what was happening to him – and then he had gone and a tiny pink blossom bloomed at our feet.

I shrieked with the shock of it; I couldn’t help myself. ‘What happens if something eats him?’ I cried.

‘The sheep don’t come up here,’ was the careless reply. ‘He needs to relax and learn what being one with nature means.’ He took my right hand in his and kissed me, then drew me

through the air, or space, or rock – back to our bed in Dinas Dinlle, where he laid me down and laid himself on top of me.

‘Stop worrying about them,’ he said. ‘They have a better fate than if the police had caught them.’

This is true. I tried to stop worrying and shift my attention to my lover, and he certainly did all he could to distract me.

*

The rest of ‘the children’ simply assumed that, when their attempt had failed, Geraint and Euan had fled the area. Dai received a note from Euan a week later, saying he was in Manchester, staying in a hostel, and looking for work. No one heard from Geraint, but it was generally assumed that he was hiding in another town.

Of course he was hiding, but not as they thought.

*

Everyone came down to Gwydion’s house for breakfast (bread and cheese with apples to follow) and then dispersed. Lynne and Big Tim went to talk to the Robertses about the Church and how our group might contribute to the Church while they were there; Hethie and Lizzie went off with Nodens (who sat outside during breakfast, basking in the sun and chasing insects) to explore the beach; Little Tim and Simon took a map and went off to walk the Cambrian coast path; Caroline and Tonja took a map and a packed lunch and headed for the hills; Aaron and Steve went off to explore the village. They found their way to the playground, where they fell in with the local children and baffled them first by speaking Welsh and then correcting the local children’s own pronunciation and grammar. Eventually they ended up playing football and honour was restored.

This left Sue, who helped me to clear the table while Gwydion polished his harp and carefully tuned it. ‘I need to have a word with you,’ she said.

Gwydion looked up. ‘With both of us.’

Sue flushed. ‘I wanted to discuss it with Jules first.’

‘You can discuss it with us both,’ said Gwydion. ‘First, because it concerns me primarily; second, because I don’t trust you – you’ll try to coax my sweet dragon princess away, and that I won’t allow.’

Sue was embarrassed and angry both at once. ‘You left us alone for long enough. I just want five minutes with Jules. You never let her out of your sight.’

‘With good reason,’ came the reply, ‘because she is my inspiration and strength – she enables me to draw power from the heavens and channel it into the land. As for my leaving you alone, your divine spouses forbid me from approaching you. But now Jules has returned to me, I won’t let her out of my sight except when she is there’ – he gestured towards the wash room – ‘and then I never lose sight of her mind. In any case I know what you want to say to her.’

Sue snapped back: ‘What?’

‘You want to tell her that you’ve worked out the story you both know and say that I’ve lied to you – but I never lied. Shall I tell you the story you have, or will you tell it, sweet Sue? – this last with a mocking smile.’

‘I’ll tell it.’ Sue was defiant.

‘Then let all be seated’ -- Gwydion gestured around the room – ‘and you may begin.’

Up to this point, the room had been in the little stone house on the Pwllheli Road, with dining table and chairs all round – but now this scene melted before our eyes, and we were

once again in Gwydion's old Welsh hall, with benches and a long wooden table, a hearth in the centre (but no fire burned there), and the only light the sunlight slanting in through wooden windows covered in thin vellum to keep out the weather. We were all seated around the table, Gwydion and I on one side and Sue on the other. Sue put her elbows on the table, leaning forward earnestly, and began.

'I've been looking at some really old books in our library at home and reading all the old Welsh poetry I can find,' she said. 'Are you in the poem called "The Spoils of Annwn"?'

'No,' said my lover.

'One of the books said you were Gweir, who's a prisoner in the poem and learns bardism.'

'No,' said Gwydion again 'If you read the Triads of Britain, you will see that Gweir was another person. He's called "son of Gweiroedd". Your informant did not know the Triads. And remember the Gweir who became Pryderi, who was held prisoner by Llwyd ap Cilcoed in the story of Pryderi and Manawyddan.'

Sue nodded. 'OK. So the Gweir who was a prisoner was the same as Pryderi – OK. But you were at the battle of the trees.'

'Yes.'

'You and your brother Amaethon stole a deer, a dog and a pig from the land of the dead or the otherworld or the underworld and then their forces came to attack you but you defeated them by guessing the name of their nameless warrior.'

'That's the story.'

'Was that the only time you roused the trees to fight?'

'No.' Gwydion shook his head and ran a finger over the strings of his harp – the whole hall rang with that alluring sound. 'Is that all the story you want to tell us?'

'The story is,' said Sue, rallying her thoughts with a clear effort, 'that you didn't steal the pigs from Pryderi – you got them from the otherworld, and then roused up the trees to help stop them being taken back. So you provided food and the means of getting food – the hunting dog – for Britain. And in another poem you herd cattle.'

Gwydion nodded and ran another finger over the harp. 'And why do you want to tell Jules and me this story?'

'The story in the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi* makes you look like a scheming villain, but actually Jules is right – it's a mash-up of stories which originally made you a hero who helped the Britons. And why is the story called "Math son of Mathonwy"? It should be named after you, or Lleu.'

Gwydion shrugged. 'The title is modern. The branches are modern, so far as Aranrod and I are concerned. All these tales are just echoes of what we did, not what actually happened.'

'What was Pryderi? An invader? From where?'

'Anxiety,' I said, with sudden realisation. 'Gwydion slew anxiety and brought his people peace.'

'Lleu had a horse,' said Sue, 'called "Melyngan Mangre", the pale yellow stallion. But why didn't your horse have a name?'

'He usually walks,' I said.

'Lleu died in Arllechwedd and is buried under the sea, like his brother Dylan. The poems say he gave right to no one and he invited attack. Does that mean he was an oppressor? Or that he never conceded anything to his enemies?'

'The second,' said Gwydion.

‘And he had a son called Mynawg, who was kindly. Did Lleu know magic, like you? Was he a bard? Or are the story mixed up between you and him? One story says that your son’s name was Huan, not Lleu. Was it all about Huan originally, not Lleu?’

Gwydion looked at her, and for a moment I thought I saw sympathy in his eyes – he knows that Sue is fond of Lugh, the Irish god after whom Lleu was named.

‘Blodeuwedd deceived Lleu and I turned her into an owl,’ he said. ‘Owls are now called “Tylluan”, which could mean “to deceive Lleu”, but could become “to deceive Huan”. So Lleu became Huan.’

‘Twyll means “deceit”?’ I said. He nodded.

‘Is it true that the Welsh call you king of the fairy people?’ asked Sue. ‘And you have a wife called Gwenhidw, and you live under the sea.’

‘No. You’re confusing me with Gwynn son of Nudd. Gwenhidw is a memory of Gwenhyfar, Arthur’s queen, and Aranrod lives in the sea; I rule the land.’

Sue got out a handkerchief and blew her nose. ‘I only wanted to discuss this with Jules,’ she said defensively. ‘I wanted to get it straight before discussing it with you.’

‘You still haven’t told me what your new story is.’

Sue took a deep breath. ‘Is Lleu really dead? Or is he still living, under the sea?’

‘Lleu is dead – I wish he wasn’t. Please stop asking me. These are difficult memories.’

‘Can we get him back? Like you got the animals from the otherworld?’

So that was what this was all about. Sue had got it into her head that if Gwydion could go to the otherworld and bring things back, he could get Lleu back. But of course, if that were true, Gwydion would have done so long ago. Now he let his fingers run sharply across the harp, producing a discordant cry of sorrow that echoed round the hall and made Sue cry out.

‘No,’ he said.

‘But you went there. You brought domestic animals to Britain. You could go again.’

‘When humans first populated Britain,’ said Gwydion, ‘the people you call the giants, I and my brothers and sister brought everything they needed for them, even though we had to fight death-dealing powers to get them. Your divine husbands had left us by then. We were forced to look after the people as best we could.’

‘Amaethon was the farmer,’ I said, ‘and you are the “wisdom of the trees”. Govannon taught humans how to work metal. Aranrod controlled the seas.’

‘The old texts say that you were a big family,’ said Sue, wiping her eyes. ‘I’ve made a list.’ She pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket. (We Watchers always prefer to use paper when we’re out Watching because it doesn’t need to be recharged.) She handed it to Gwydion, who read it and handed it back.

‘Those are the names,’ he said. ‘But only Aranrod and I are left. I’ve travelled the path of the stars and I have been to the otherworld in search of Lleu, and I can’t get him back again. Why don’t you talk to your husband? He told me he guides the spirits of the dead – why doesn’t he guide Lleu back, if he can?’

‘I’ll ask him,’ said Sue, folding up her piece of paper again. ‘I’ll go and ask him now.’ She smiled at me, and then said to Gwydion, ‘I did like you a lot, you know – and then Teloan came.’

‘I know,’ he said, and made a brushing away gesture. ‘Don’t remind me – just go and talk to him.’

Sue nodded, and hurried out.

Gwydion watched her go, and then banged a fist on the table, shook his head as if to clear it, and picked up his harp.

‘I thought you were all as clear as crystal and pure water,’ he said, ‘but Lynne is a religious maniac and Sue is fixated on that dog-headed psychopomp of hers.’

A psychopomp is a divine being who leads the spirits of the dead to the otherworld. ‘She was fond of Lleu,’ I said.

‘So – let her travel the road to the otherworld and seek him out. I’ve searched for him, and he is not there.’

‘But, darling – you did get him back, didn’t you? Is the story that true? When Blodeuwedd and Goronw killed him?’

‘They killed him, but I brought him back then. When he was killed in battle, defending his people, I couldn’t bring him back again.’

I put my arms about him and rested my head on his shoulder, in comfort for his grief. For a few moments we sat there in silence, and then he began to pick out a gentle, sad tune on his harp. I stayed where I was and listened.

‘The waves will not give up my child;

The rock of the earth enfolds him.

He came from the earth and to earth he is returned.’

I listened until the song faded away into a soft, mournful silence. Then I said, ‘It’s a lovely day. Let’s go and look at the mountains and let them look at us.’

He put down his harp and kissed me. After a while we did as I suggested and went out.

We walked rapidly over the hills into the lower mountains and skirt the south side of Arfon. From here we could see into Eryri to the east and far across the sea to the west: on a clear summer’s evening (they say) you can see Wicklow. All was peaceful; and as we ran across the open moor together, hand in hand, my lover began to relax again, to laugh and tease and romp as we usually did. I was relieved, because I was starting to think that it had been a mistake to invite my friend and children to Arfon. Gwydion is so brittle and insecure, and Sue is clearly wavering between her sense of duty, her sense of justice, her old crush on Lugh, her common sense and any other sense that afflicts her. Also I feared that a row was brewing between the Tims (Ra’haah’s husband and son) and Gwydion (her grandson). Nothing had been said, but something was in the air.

Then as we approached a peak – as usual for these parts, it was crowned with a burial cairn – we became aware of a dark patch of conflict ahead of us, just down the slope.

‘O dear,’ I said, ‘Caroline – and Tonja.’

My eldest and her bosom friend had encountered some local young men and were shouting at them to go away. I hurried down the hill towards them, my lover on my heels.

One of the young men looked up. ‘It’s Gwydion and Jules,’ he said (in Welsh). ‘Hiya.’

‘Mum!’ exclaimed Caroline (in our own language), ‘will you tell these wankers to go away?’

I wondered how best to translate this, but Gwydion intervened. ‘Tomas, are you welcoming our guests, then?’

‘We’re trying,’ answered the young man, ‘but they’re not very appreciative of our welcome.’

‘Are they from Poland?’ asked one of the other lads, whom I know as Sion. ‘They speak a foreign language.’

I glanced appealingly at Gwydion: should I tell these young men that one of these two was my daughter? But he pretended to ignore me and carried on the conversation as if I wasn't there. I know this is his way of asserting himself, and I'm getting used to it now, so I let him get on with it.

'They're from Caerlŷr and they're friends of Jules's,' he said. 'So don't offend them, will you? What did you say to upset them so much?'

'We just offered to show them the sights,' said the third of the group, known as Llion. The other two grinned.

'Well, that could be taken two ways,' said Gwydion, smiling his sideways smile, 'and perhaps the maidens of Caerlŷr aren't used to our hospitality and assume you mean it the unfriendly way.'

'We'd never be unfriendly to our guests,' said the three one after the other. Caroline and Tonja muttered to each other and scowled.

'Now, the question that occurs to me is,' said Gwydion, 'if these maidens refuse your escort, will they meet other young men on the mountain who are less hospitable and want to do them harm?'

'Almost certainly they will,' said Sion, and all three solemnly agreed.

'But if they accept their escort, you must promise not to come closer to them than two arms' lengths, because the maidens of Caerlŷr throw a mighty punch, and I would not wish you to come to any danger.'

'One arm's length,' said Llion, 'or else we won't be able to help them over the streams.'

'We don't need your help,' said Tonja.

'You haven't seen the streams yet,' said Gwydion. 'Perhaps these young men will be able to help you more than you think.'

'I doubt it,' snorted Caroline.

'One arm's length,' said Gwydion. 'And they will stop all other comers from troubling you; and you must all promise to return with the rest of the party undamaged by sundown this evening.'

'Undamaged?' repeated Tomas.

'In all and any respect,' said Gwydion solemnly. 'And the maidens must promise that too.'

'No blasting, darlings,' I said to Caroline and Tonja – in our own language.

The girls were very annoyed, but they could see Gwydion's point: if they got rid of these three lads they could meet worse further on. So at last they agreed, and the group set off together. We watched them trot away across the moor.

'Should we follow?' I wondered aloud.

'No,' said Gwydion. 'We'll hear soon enough if they run into any trouble.' He took my left hand in his right. 'We'll go a different way.'

We set off into the higher hills. Gwydion walked in silence for a while – I didn't interrupt him. Then he said: 'We should look at the children,' and led me abruptly towards a pile of rocks. The moors are littered with piles of rocks, some natural, some heaped up by humans long ago – I don't know which this was, but my lover led me to a tall rock, around the rock and into a cavern – and we were in the laboratory with the remaining incubators, each with its little foetus growing, except that they were all large now and near 'hatching'.

'We haven't seen the babies with Aranrod recently,' I ventured, as Gwydion walked along the row, looking long and hard at each child.

'She has the care of them and doesn't want our involvement,' came the response.

‘They’re all growing properly, aren’t they?’ I ventured again.

‘Yes.’ He paused by one – it was one of my two, which started in me and then was transferred here.

I moved up to stand alongside him and put an arm about his waist. I waited for him to speak. He was watching the baby lying in the fluid, moving its limbs slowly, moving in the fluid ...

I waited.

‘Our baby,’ I said softly, and kissed his ear.

He put an arm about my shoulders and held me tightly.

‘They will be giants among humans, and they will be perfect,’ he said, so softly I hardly heard him.

‘Darling – did your Uncle Math want to stop Aranrod’s projecgt? Is that why you hid Lleu?’

Long silence.

At last he kissed me on the hair. ‘It was all so long ago,’ he said.

‘Our babies are now,’ I said.

He kissed me. I think there were tears on his cheeks, but I didn’t look – I shut my eyes.

I sent a mental message to Hethie: ‘Auntie Sue has been upsetting Gwydion. We may be late back. Can you ask Beth Roberts to organise everyone to fetch a takeaway for the evening meal? I’ll pay her back.’

There was a silence in my head for a moment, then an exasperated sigh. ‘Oh, bother Auntie Sue. She *has* to be *so* conscientious. Why does she need to know *everything*? OK, Mum, I’ll have a word with Auntie Beth.’

At least Hethie knows what Gwydion’s like, I thought. She understands; Sue doesn’t.

Sue, however, kept her promise. She went to find Teloan and asked him about Lleu. Could a spirit survive so long after death? Could it be brought back?

‘No,’ said Teloan, ‘the spirit either transmigrates – some do, some don’t – or goes to the pleroma, the ultimate light, or waits in limbo or in the otherworld until the end of all things. It depends on its expectations and what it did in life.’

‘So if it’s in limbo, can we get it back? Gwydion went to the otherworld to get pigs – and you go there.’

‘We can’t bring people back when they’ve been there so long. They change. Lleu has been gone too long.’ He looked piercingly at Sue. ‘You’re not to go back looking for him, darling.’

Sue gave him a big smile and said nothing, which left Teloan uncertain about what she intended to do. But then she kissed him and said she needed to get back to our group, and she came back in time to organise everyone up to the rectory and then to drive off with Lizzie and Hethie in the red car to fetch fish and chips for everyone.

Gwydion and I arrived back much later to find everyone back safely, even Caroline and Tonja, although their male escort had given up and gone home. Aranrod dropped in during the evening to greet Hethie, Sue and Lynne and to be introduced to the others. The boys were wary – Lizzie was impressed.

‘She’s very clever,’ she said later.

‘She’s *too* clever,’ said Little Tim.

I enjoyed the family party, but too many semi-divine people in a room can get exhausting: all those stormy moods clashing against each other. I was very glad to get to bed that night. It had been a long day, and already I was tired out with entertaining.

*

Friday

Gwydion and I overslept, but fortunately Hethie realised this and she organised breakfast at the barn rather than bringing everyone down to our house for breakfast. Then the group broke up to go their separate ways for the day.

Gwydion and I set off for the woods, where we sat under the trees and Gwydion played his harp and sang to the trees, the birds and animals, and me; and then he put the harp into my hands and encouraged me to play a chord or two and sing. The birds all sang loudly to cover up my failings.

Sue, on the other hand, went exploring. She knew she had upset Gwydion and she wanted to make amends. She also wanted to know what had happened to her childhood hero, Lleu. So she set off into time, as we do when we go Watching, trying to work out when he would have been alive, and heading for then.

It didn't go well. First she went back too far, then she didn't go back far enough. Then she found herself in the middle of a terrifically bloody battle and barely escaped with her life. After that, she followed a funeral procession to Dinas Dinlle – as it was, before the sea took half of it – and saw a body buried there, in the great mound in the centre of the fort. Then she felt too exhausted to do anything more and came back.

She stepped straight back and landed on the beach where we'd first found Aranrod's unicorn dinghy. There it was, stranded on the rocks above the water line. Sue carried it out into the water and got in – she said later that she needed something to cheer her up. The dinghy carried her out over the shallow water, towards the rocks under the water – then, as she approached, a castle appeared as if out of the sparkling light on the sea: Caer Arianrod.

The dinghy grounded on the rocks, and Sue stepped out on to the harbour side.

'Hello, Sue,' said Aranrod's voice from the castle door. 'I knew you'd get here today. Let me show you how the children are progressing.'

*

(Sue)

I didn't really want to do anything but cry – I felt I'd made such a mess of everything – but I tried to smile and say, 'Thank you,' and 'Yes, lovely,' and followed Aranrod into her castle. She led me into a large hall where children were playing – some of them looking at least six years old, but Jules had told me they were only born six weeks ago! Some were doing puzzles, some were building things out of wooden bricks and pieces of metal, some were playing musical instruments and some were drawing and painting. In the middle of the room on a table was a bowl of large golden fruit, and a plate of flat scone-like cakes. Every so often one of the children would get up and help themselves to a scone or cake. There was also a large jug of fruit juice and a pile of beakers – Aranrod poured me a drink, which I gulped down gratefully.

'They look quite old for such young children,' I remarked.

'They're giants' children in the old sense,' said Aranrod, 'so quick developers.'

I looked carefully at them. The oldest was clearly a girl – that would be New Dawn, whom Jules had told me about. The youngest was a boy with yellow hair.

'Do you give them all names or do they have to earn them?' I asked, thinking about the old stories.

‘I give them names, but they can earn new ones,’ said Aranrod.

‘So do you have a Dylan? Or a Lleu?’

‘No! I don’t duplicate names.’ She began to tell me the names of each, but they were complex names: ‘Light on the wave,’ and ‘Glory at morning tide,’ or ‘Swift gale rising’ and ‘Golden wisdom of the ages’ (that was the youngest boy, with golden hair) – so I couldn’t remember them all.

‘All raised in incubators?’

‘Yes. All of them.’ She looked keenly at me. ‘How are those who were taken to the gods’ house?’

‘Nearly ready to be born,’ I said. ‘They were ill when they arrived and took a long time to get right. Ra’haah – that’s your grandmother – has spent a lot of care on them, but they’ll be all right now.’

Aranrod nodded. ‘Some of them have been growing for a long time,’ she said. ‘I struggled to get them right, but my brother wouldn’t let me terminate any of them.’

‘No,’ I said, remembering Dylan and Lleu in the story. At that moment, I had a thought – but so small a thought that I shoved it aside and didn’t think it.

Aranrod was touchingly proud of the children, and she has every right to be. They are a great achievement, the recreation of the human type the land has lost. I can see they will grow up taller, more intelligent and stronger than the people currently living here – provided they don’t fall victim to another epidemic, but I guess we can guard against that now. The people living here now may not welcome them, but Aranrod plans to settle them on the hills, so perhaps they won’t be noticed for a while.

‘The other door out of this room opens on Yr Eifl,’ said Aranrod. ‘The children are learning to live up there.’

At last I said I’d better be getting back to the mainland, and Aranrod walked with me back to the beach, along a causeway which appeared across the water when she stepped on to the waves. We walked up the lane to the village and back to the barn, where we found Lynne writing postcards. Aranrod immediately engaged her in conversation, and I looked around for Jules – I mean, I tried to sense where she was.

Not close by. I didn’t dare think any thoughts at her while I was so close to Aranrod, so I said something about finding Hethie, and went out.

Hethie was in the playground with the other children, including my Aaron, and Nodens. She nodded when I asked after her mum.

‘She’s in the woods with Gwydion. What do you want her for?’

‘It’s about the babies in the incubators at Home – I think they’re ready to be born.’

Hethie looked thoughtful, then said: ‘OK, come on,’ and took my right hand.

*

(Jules)

We weren’t particularly pleased to see Hethie or Sue because we’d been having a romantic peaceful morning, but they were right – we should go and look at the babies at Home. So we linked hands and Jumped there, into the room which Ra’haah and my husband have set up for the babies in their incubators. It’s clean, warm and bright and the babies looked as if they were asleep, all just waiting to wake up.

‘Oh, there you are,’ said Ra’haah, striding in and pulling on a pair of surgical gloves. ‘I’ve been waiting for you, grandson. I’ll release the babies one by one and you can help me bathe

and name them – they’ll all need warm wrappings and a cradle – and then feeding. Hethie, fetch the milk, there’s a love.’ She gestured towards a cupboard on the wall.

There were empty cradles lined up on the floor. There was a basin of warm water for each baby. There were warm, clean towels and wraps for each baby. Ra’haah was creating the necessary equipment as rapidly as she thought of it.

‘Sue, stand there, ready to take the first one – I’ll just release it *here* and *here* – get ready, there will be screaming.’ The babies have to scream, of course, to get their lungs working.

Ra’haah went along the line of incubators, carefully detaching the babies one after the other from the feeding tubes and waste disposal pipes, lifting each out of the incubator fluid, wiping its face with an antiseptic cloth and placing it into Sue’s arms to be transferred to a warm basin of water, washed, dried, wrapped in a warm cloth and cuddled, then laid in a cradle. Each baby screamed at the top of its lungs, then quietened as Ra’haah spoke a name over it. Unlike Aranrod’s names, these were all simple, single words: ‘Hero,’ ‘Lovely,’ ‘Long-limbed,’ ‘Bright,’ ‘Swift’ – but sounded much better in Ra’haah’s language. At last she called Gwydion forward and said, ‘Don’t just stand there, grandson! Take this one,’ and handed a tiny baby to him. ‘It’s smaller than the rest,’ she said, ‘but it will grow fast now.’

Gwydion took the tiny creature and looked into its face. It yawned, opened its big blue eyes and stared at him, then screamed.

‘Nothing personal,’ said Sue quickly, showing him how to put the baby into the water and wash it. I held the towel and helped him to dry the baby and wrap it up warmly.

‘That one had some human genetic material in it, and not yours or your sisters’s,’ said Ra’haah. ‘I assume you were trying to directly recreate life from the dead? It was very old. They were all very old, but that one was the oldest.’

‘Yes,’ said Gwydion, and then said nothing more.

‘The rest were mainly seal or deer or wolf – or bear’ – Ra’haah moved on to the next incubator. ‘You and your brother made them, I guess?’

Sue and I looked at the baby.

‘I saw a battle,’ said Sue. ‘There was a lot of blood.’

‘What’s the baby’s name?’ asked Hethie.

‘He has no name until his mother gives him one,’ said Gwydion, cuddling the baby.

‘That depends who counts as the mother,’ I said, looking at Ra’haah.

‘One of you needs to come and take this next baby,’ said Ra’haah, standing by the next incubator.

‘This baby needs a name,’ said Hethie.

‘He roars like a lion, so call him “Lion”,’ said Ra’haah. ‘Now, someone needs to help me with this one!’

Hethie ran to her side at once. Sue, Gwydion and I looked at the baby.

‘No ambiguity in the name,’ I said. ‘No “is it light or is it a lion?”’ (‘Lleu’ can mean both: ‘lleu’ = light but ‘llew’ = lion.)

‘It was light,’ said Gwydion, ‘but the language changed.’

‘So, he’s a different baby,’ said Sue. ‘Did you really use Lleu’s blood to start off?’

‘Do stop gaping at that baby and put him down to sleep,’ called Ra’haah. ‘I need your help with this one.’

Gwydion nodded to us to go and help her, but he held on to Little Lion, rocking him in his arms.

When all the babies were out of the incubators and sleeping peacefully, Ra'haah set us to cleaning down the incubators and tidying up. Hethie said, 'We could just wipe it all out,' but her aunt retorted: 'Conservation of energy, Hethie. Never destroy anything once created if you can possibly avoid it. There is such a cost in creation that you can't afford to lose it.'

So we cleaned down the incubators and put them away tidily. The cradles were carried lovingly into another, warm room with gentle light, and the babies were lifted out one after the other and fed by bottle, then washed down, wrapped in clean cloths and laid down to sleep.

Jamie came to say 'Hi' and to help Sue and me, but as soon as he and Gwydion set eyes on each other, Jamie backed off.

'There's no need for that,' he said.

'For what?' asked Gwydion, with his gentle sardonic smile.

'That wall of repelling. I'm not going to hurt you.'

'No, but do try harder,' came the response.

Jamie's eyes opened wide at the challenge – no one has ever taken him seriously as a magician! But of course he hadn't a chance against Gwydion, who simply blocked his response, turned his spell into a wood pigeon, and then showered him with oak leaves. Jamie retired hurt. I opened my mouth to intercede on his behalf, saw the glitter in Gwydion's eyes and closed it again.

Gwydion had recognised Jamie as one of Hethie's fathers – and he wasn't letting him anywhere near me. Later he said: 'Whatever is the almighty demiurge going, letting a child like that get into you? He's not worthy to lick your feet.'

'He's amusing,' I said, knowing the answer was inadequate.

Gwydion said something that sounded unrepeatable. Then he said, 'While you are my wife, no boys like that will get anywhere near your shadow. It was an insult to your honour and your husband's honour that he even touched your footstep.' Then he kissed me very hard and we were otherwise engaged for a while.

In any case – we looked after the babies. The question was, should they stay with Ra'haah or go back with us to Arfon? Gwydion was clearly torn, but he knew that Ra'haah had the facilities to care for them properly, and he did not. So reluctantly he left them to her care, but we went every day to see them, and we did take the Little Lion to Arfon to introduce him to the land.

*

(Next few weeks)

So, now, as Big Tim put it, we had enough 'giants' to start a colony. They all needed care and attention but not as much as human babies, and they all grew fast. The cottage at the top of the pass-road over Yr Eifl provided a house for some of them, but there were now over three dozen of them, all well behaved, quiet – after the initial screaming – and growing intently. They needed bottle feeding but after the first month, Aranrod told us, they could feed themselves.

Some of them were odd. Those made with Hethie's hair as the basic genetic code were the most clearly human-type. They grew fast but looked human and acted generally like humans. But the earlier ones, which Wiroan and Ra'haah had taken Home to look after, were made from different sorts of genetic material. Little Lion was obviously based on the blood of the original Lleu, but the fact it had been taken as he was dying and had been in suspended

animation for so long meant that the genetic code had been damaged. Wiroan and Ra'haah had corrected it, but he would need particular care for the first few years. The others were all based on other animals and we could see the wolf, seal, boar, deer and so on in their eyes and body movement. Little Lion started to talk quite quickly – or, rather, to communicate with specific sounds – but some of the others didn't, relying on physical movement and single grunts. They had to be coaxed to speak words: speaking wasn't their immediate form of communication.

I was unsure what Aranrod and Gwydion intended to tell their neighbours in the area about the children. Would they say they'd been adopted? Or that they were starting an orphanage? In fact, they said nothing at all. The children either stayed under Ra'haah's care and came occasionally to Arfon to see the land – when they stayed away from other people – or they lived in the houses on Yr Eifl.

The child I was carrying in my womb, of course, would be born in the 'normal' way and everyone would know about it. But it would take nine months.

'They'll need birth certificates,' said Lynne, 'and to be registered for the NHS and for school.'

'They won't be using the NHS,' said Aranrod, 'and we'll school them ourselves. We'll arrange birth certificates when we need them.'

(Lynne and I exchanged glances: presumably people would see what they expected to see.)

'Won't people ask about the houses on Yr Eifl?' asked Lynne.

'At present they can't see them,' said Aranrod. 'I've shielded them from casual eyes.'

So the summer continued. My friends and the children stayed in the bunkhouse-barn. They ate their meals with Gwydion and me, or went to the rectory, or got take-aways. The children roamed the beach, the moors and the bus-routes, sometimes with the local children and sometimes in their own groups. Caroline and Tonja walked the major hill-walking paths and caught the steam trains, or took the bus to look at castles and the historic houses. The local youths who had wanted to impress them gave up quickly, saying that the girls were too exhausting to follow around. Steven, Simon, Little Tim, Lizzie and Aaron took the bus to Caernarfon and Bangor, took the train to Holyhead, and went for walks with Nodens. Sometimes Hethie went with them; she also hung around with Gwydion and me or went to help Aranrod with the children. A few of the children from the parish tried hard to strike up a friendship with her, realising that she is my daughter (they didn't cotton on to the fact that Caroline, Steven and Simon are also my offspring). Hethie put up with them and tried to be friendly back, but as she said to me and Gwydion: 'They try very hard but they aren't in my league. I've been all over the place and done all sorts of things, and they've only lived here and gone to school.'

Lynne and Big Tim spent a lot of time helping around the parish, which freed Gwydion and me and gave us more time on our own together. Sue was more loose-endish. She spent some time with Aranrod (and, when she was there, Hethie), looking after the new babies. She brought Little Lion over to Arfon and took him for walks. She also went off by herself a lot, without telling the rest of us where she was going. I suspected that she was still trying to get back to the original Lleu, but I didn't pry.

Gwydion had introduced Little Lion to the land, and he kept taking him out into the woods and fields, bathing him in the woodland pools and laying him on the moss so that the land would feel his presence. The wood, the birds and the mammals were interested but less

interested in him than they were in me. I felt that they knew he comes from a long time ago and belongs in the past, not now. Gwydion, of course, wanted Little Lion to be brought up as his forebear had been, to defend the land and concede nothing to its enemies.

But supposing – like Blodeuwedd – he chooses another destiny for himself?

I decided to keep quiet. A good human knows when to keep her mouth shut.

As well as keeping an eye on my own children and the new babies, I was going with Gwydion to the pub each week to entertain ‘the children’ of Glyndŵr. Summer is a difficult time for them. On the one hand, there is plenty of work, so they have more money and feel more optimistic. On the other, no one likes being invaded by foreigners – the Saesneg, the south Welsh, Europeans, the Irish and people from the USA and the Far East. Even their pub was invaded by people speaking a multiplicity of different languages, and the children of Glyndŵr had to meet in a back room, behind a locked door with a ‘private party’ sign in two languages and a ‘no entry’ symbol below that.

While the group meeting behind that locked door conversed in hushed voices, no one in the main bar area could hear them. Gwydion urged them to direct their energies to constructive action: to welcome the visitors to Arfon and show them the positives; to show them a strong, vibrant culture, proud of its language, proud of its past and present, looking forward with pride, not dependent on outsiders, not bowing to Caerdydd or Llundain or the EU. Instead, we would press on with restoring derelict buildings and creating local industry, not drawing in outside money – we could do this ourselves.

But after the discussion, the arguments, the to-and-fro of how to move on, what to do next, what opportunities to pick up and what to set aside, how to combat all the petty annoyances and underminings and keep going – they wanted Gwydion to sing. And of course the people in the main bar area could hear him singing.

In past year, Dai told me, they had been a smaller group, they met less often and Gwydion sang less often. But it showed their success that now they no longer lurked in the shadows but stood out in the daylight – but of course they attracted attention. The people in the front room of the pub wanted to come into the back room to hear Gwydion play and sing – or, if not, would he play for them too, after our meeting was over?

Gwydion’s immediate instinct was to refuse. When all is said and done, he’s a creature of the woods, shy and retiring like the wolf, the boar and the deer. For thousands of years he has kept out of direct sight, the hidden lord of the land.

But Dai and his friends encouraged him: these foreigners should hear the glorious music of Gwynedd! Hadn’t he urged them to celebrate their culture? So eventually, one day he agreed to sing just one song before leaving.

When we sat in the back room I would sit by him, a hand on his knee, channelling energy to him and broadcasting his power to the room. Now we walked into the front bar and found ourselves in a foreign environment – these were not his own people, not of his land, who came to listen but not to understand, perhaps some to mock or question – and so it was doubly important that I be there, but would my being there puzzle the audience? I sat by him, as close as I dared, and let my hand rest against his side.

Then I looked around, and recognised one of the other people in the room: a regular member of the congregation at the village church, here with relatives from Liverpool. ‘It’s the curate and his wife,’ he said to those around him, ‘not long married. Lovely couple. What are you going to sing for us, Gwydion?’

The rest of the group had come into the front bar to listen. They never pass up an opportunity to hear ‘their bard’ sing. ‘Any requests, is it?’ said Dai.

‘No,’ I said quickly (in Welsh – as Gwydion has enabled me), ‘they’ll ask for the saucepan song, and that’s just demeaning!’

Gwydion was tuning his harp. He said, in English (not his usual language!) ‘I will sing something I made myself for this audience. Quiet, now!’ Then he played a ‘quiet, now’ chord, and everyone stopped talking – even those who hadn’t intended to.

Gwydion sang something like this, in his own language:

‘I am the land of mountains;
I am the trees of the woods;
I am the rushing mountain streams;
I am the fertile green pastures.
I am the land of Arfon;
Before your people were formed, I ruled it;
Before Brut came from Troy, I governed it;
Before Aedd the Great ruled in Britain, I was its lord.
I am the wolf of the forest,
I am the secretive boar who clears the pathways,
I am the deer who lurks in the shadows of dawn,
I look down upon you from the stars.
You who walk in Arfon, hear me:
You are welcome to walk in my land;
You are welcome to dwell here as my people;
You are welcome to be one with those who have come before,
I welcome you to my land.
I will be your lord and protector;
I will govern you justly and rightly;
Provided always you place yourselves in my hands.
But there is no place here for rancour or discord,
There is no place here for those who seek bloodshed,
There is no place here for those who seek power over the people,
For I and no other am lord of Arfon;
I am the land of Arfon;
I am the land.’

With a final, long, fluid note he finished, and laid aside his harp.

Apart from him and me, not one person there understood a word of it – it was not in Welsh, but in that much older language that he and Aranrod speak. But every face in the room was rapt, as if they had all fallen under the same spell; which, indeed, they had. There was a long silence as everyone realised that he had finished and came to themselves, and then they all applauded; some wholeheartedly, others a little suspiciously, as if they suspected something had happened but weren’t sure what it was.

‘Sing another,’ said someone.

‘No,’ said Gwydion, smiling his charming smile, ‘one is enough. I will be here again next week.’ Then he rose, holding his harp, and I walked out with him, hand in hand.

‘Lovely couple,’ said the man from the village congregation. ‘I didn’t know he can sing.’

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‘There’ll be trouble over that,’ I said, as we walked back down the street towards the harbour (we had come in the coracle). ‘They’ll want you to sing in church next.’

‘You know the organist won’t agree to that,’ said Gwydion cheerfully, ‘– she doesn’t want any competition. And if she once gave way, your friends would want to play the guitar and the congregation would panic that loose Saesneg ways were corrupting the Church. So we’re safe there.’

But the following day one of the ‘children of Glyndŵr’ dropped in at the house with a message from the publican: could we come in that evening and sing? The tourists were asking for another song. Gwydion’s fame had spread quickly.

Gwydion was in two minds – of course he wanted to enchant everyone in Arfon to build up the land! – but there is only one of him, and he was not confident of being able to hold the people he enchants on a long-term basis. His enchantments are quite short-term – only a day, in the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi*; longer, he explained to me, takes a lot more effort. As the days of his great power are long gone, these days he prefers negotiation and persuasion to magic.

On the other hand, now he has me to channel power to him and help him transmit his power ... so he agreed.

Sue and Aranrod dropped in that afternoon with some of the babies – taking them for a walk, they said. I told them about Gwydion’s sudden popularity.

‘The visitors need to be entertained,’ said Aranrod. ‘They’re expecting music and amusement. This is just a small cantref – we don’t have the great palaces of entertainment that they have in other places.’

‘The weather’s been too good,’ said Sue. ‘Everyone wants to get out rather than lurking indoors.’

That evening we caught the bus into Caernarfon. As we were doing a public performance, said Gwydion, we would arrive publicly.

The pub was packed. Dai and some of his friends had arrived before us and kept places for us, so we had somewhere to sit. The publican had a beer ready for Gwydion and a lemonade for me.

I had to sit behind my lover and look over his shoulder, as there was no room for me to sit alongside: I was crammed into a corner on a stool, with Gwydion just in front of me. I held his glass of beer while he tuned his harp – we were nowhere near a table!

The conversation in the bar was like a roar of water constantly flowing; I couldn’t make out any words, but of course Gwydion and I can communicate by thought. I wished I were back in the cool silence of the woods ...

... as I imagined the woods, a deer slid into my mental picture and began to nibble on a branch. I settled down to watch it. Then a bird flew across the clearing.

Tomorrow, said Gwydion’s thought, we’ll head out into the woods and spend some time with the other inhabitants of my land!

Then someone said: ‘It’s time for the bard to start,’ and suddenly all was silence. I opened my eyes and almost panicked: everyone was looking at us. Then Gwydion smiled his sideways smile, slid his fingers over the strings of his harp, and began to sing.

It was a simple, charming song about the beauty of Arfon in summer. He sang in Welsh – a relatively modern Welsh, which clearly some in the audience understood.

Then he slid into an older song about a man who married a woman from the sea. They had three children, a daughter and two sons. Then the sea-woman took her husband to visit her

parents, and one of the children saw them go and threw himself into the sea after them and drowned. As his sister and brother lamented over their drowned brother, a warrior on a horse rode out of the sea and promised that their grandparents would send a ship for their brother to carry him to live with them under the sea. And so they did: Gwydion described the ship sailing to the beach, and the great crowd of people who disembarked, and how the drowned young man got up from his bier and walked on board with them, and the two other children watched the ship sail away over the waves.

They cried: 'Don't forget us,' and three days later their parents returned from their visit under the sea and took them away to live with them beneath the waves, to marry among the sea people and rule in the kingdom under the sea.

It was a lovely story: Gwydion sang in English as a gift to the tourists, and especially for the children who were there. Many parents had decided to bring their children: perhaps they were running out of ideas of how to entertain them in the evenings.

At the end the applause was enthusiastic and the children cheered particularly loudly. Gwydion lowered his harp.

'I see there are many children here,' he said. 'Will you help me to sing the next song?'

Several voices cried: 'Yes!' and a few whistled.

'Very well. I will sing a song about a king called Teithi Hen, whose kingdom was swallowed up by the sea. Whenever I sing: "Here comes the sea," you must all cry, "Ride quickly, Teithi Hen!" Do you understand?'

There were lots of nods and murmurings of assent. Gwydion nodded solemnly. 'Good. Now, this is the story:' and he began to sing the story he had previously told Hethie and me, but now in English verse.

The story started slowly but as the waves came rolling in it began to move more quickly; and as the children shouted the hero rode faster, but the waves came rolling faster still, until not only the children but also the adults were shouting for Teithi Hen to ride quickly, and when at last he reached dry land and safety, everyone cheered. But then he looked back, and where all his green meadows had lain there was nothing but the great grey ocean, as far as the eye could see – and then Gwydion played one last mournful chord, and I'm sure some of the audience were weeping. There was a silence as he set his harp aside, and then everyone applauded.

'Now my voice needs to rest,' said Gwydion, 'and so do you. I will sing to you again in a few minutes.' Then I handed him his glass of beer, and he sipped it. There was a sigh of disappointment, then conversation began again in a desultory manner.

'They love you,' I said to him, smiling.

He raised his eyebrows at me, and took another sip. 'I take care that they should.'

'Those were wonderful songs, but of course they were because you sang them.'

He held his glass to one side and kissed me. 'Keep believing that, and all will be well.'

'They should have some more Welsh songs too,' I said.

'Are you going to sing *Cad Goddeu*?' asked Dai, leaning over. Gwydion shook his head.

'Too long. I'll keep them short.'

'That last one wasn't short, to be honest.'

'But they all took part, so they didn't notice. I'll sing a story they can all take part in, or a poem they can enjoy but not get bored.' He fell silent, and adjusted his harp strings a little.

A muttering went around the room: 'He's going to sing again!' Conversation stopped, and everyone looked expectantly at our corner. Gwydion smiled, and began to sing.

He started with a simple song in Welsh, about the sea and the gifts it brings. Then he sang in English about a girl who went into the mountains looking for gold and found none, but as the sun set she looked up at Yr Wyddfa and saw it all golden, and realised the real treasure was the land itself. So instead of using her gold to go to Llundain to make her fortune, she stayed in Arfon and became a mountain guide, to show everyone the treasures she had found.

The third song had a chorus for everyone to join in. This time there was an additional line in the chorus each time it was sung, so the audience had to work hard to remember where they were each time.

At last he said, 'That's all; it's late. Time for the children to be in bed,' and laid aside his harp.

There was a chorus of objection. 'Teach us a song in Welsh,' said someone – it was a foreign voice, perhaps a central European voice.

'It's late,' said Gwydion again. 'I've sung enough for one evening.'

The chorus of protests became louder, and one child burst into tears. Gwydion laughed and picked up his harp. 'Very well! I will teach you the precepts of the bards. Listen!'

Everyone fell silent.

'This is what a bard must do: praise what is good, condemn what is evil, and tell the truth. Now, the song goes like this:' and he sang it through, an englyn of three lines.

'Now you must sing it – a line at a time. This is the first line' (he sang it again) 'now you all sing it.'

The result was predictably feeble, with much giggling. Gwydion was scathing. 'You sound worse than rooks cawing,' he said, 'you make the owl sound like a songbird. You sing worse than the English!'

There was much laughter and quite a few frowns. I intervened, plucking at his sleeve.

'Hey – I can sing better than *that*' (laughter).

He kissed me. 'Very well. Worse than the Irish, then.'

There was more laughter this time, and one voice of protest.

'Never mind, however,' said Gwydion, raising his voice above the hubbub, 'for I will teach you to sing like the Welsh, and then you will sound like angels in Heaven. We will try again. This is what you should sing:' – he sang it. 'This is what you actually sang:' – he produced a cacophony of sounds, at which they all laughed. 'Now, sing it correctly – slowly,' and he sang the first line again, enunciating the words with exaggerated care. They followed.

It took about an hour for Gwydion to be satisfied, long past the younger children's bedtime, but everyone was engrossed. More importantly for the publican, they kept buying drinks.

At last, after one final rousing chorus, Gwydion said, 'Applaud yourselves; you can sing at last,' and everyone cheered. Then they applauded him, and crowded round him, and wanted to try out his harp (he wouldn't let them touch it), and wanted to know where he got it ('my mother gave it to me,' he said, at which my mind boggled), and wanted to know who trained him ('my mother'), and whether he was an official bard ('no'), and whether he did recordings ('no'), and would he come and sing at their wedding? ('only if you live in Arfon' – they didn't), and 'where did you learn your songs?' ('I compose my own').

He answered all these questions with a charming smile, and then asked them questions which distracted them, and only later did they think of all the other things they'd wanted to ask but had forgotten.

The publican interrupted. ‘Come round the back of the bar when we’re closed and get your share of the takings. And Huw’s making a collection for you’ – nodding at a figure who was carrying round a hat and asking for donations.

Gwydion looked thoughtful, and turned to Dai and his group of friends. ‘Didn’t you say that the primary school needs money for repairs?’

‘Yes, the roof’s in a desperate state. The Council said—’

Huw and his hat came back to the bar and poured out the cash on the counter. Gwydion rapidly collected it into piles – one for the publican, ‘as host;’ one for Dai ‘for organising it;’ and one for himself. He pushed his own pile towards Dai. ‘Give that to the school. It won’t mend the roof but it will help.’

‘Put mine in too,’ said the publican. ‘I’ll keep your share of the takings instead,’ he said to Gwydion, who nodded.

‘Right,’ said Dai. ‘Fair play, that’ll about cover it.’

‘They’ll expect you back tomorrow,’ said the publican, nodding at the crowds, who were slowly dispersing into the street.

‘I won’t be here,’ he retorted.

But he was. It was too good an opportunity to win hearts and minds, and too good a means of raising money for the local community.

Everyone came: locals, tourists of all nations, the villagers from the church congregation, my friends and children, even Aranrd (with a different pair of babies each evening). Sue brought Little Lion, who had no difficulty in singing along. The Watkinses came with Baby, who enjoyed himself immensely. The Robertses came. Beth Roberts said to Gwydion, ‘I hope you aren’t tiring Jules.’

Eventually, even the media came.

A nice young man from the local independent Welsh radio station sat quietly in a corner with a recording device and asked us afterwards whether we’d be happy if he broadcast some of it. Gwydion and I had known he was there, and we demurred: he should have made himself known to us at the start of the performance. Dai said, ‘This is original music. There’s recording and performance rights to pay.’ The young man said, ‘Would fifty quid cover it?’

Dai spluttered and named a much higher sum (he told us later he’d been researching this as a precaution). The young man spluttered and protested. Eventually a figure was agreed, the young man paid, Dai gave him a receipt, and he went away.

The next day, Gwydion’s song was broadcast during the breakfast show. It didn’t sound the same over the radio – it lost some of its depth and tone. We’d gone up to the rectory to listen to it. Beth Roberts was enthusiastic; Gwydion was thoughtful; I was anxious. Mr Roberts said, ‘You’re making a good name for yourself, but do you want the fame?’

‘No,’ said Gwydion, ‘I want the help for Arfon. My singing has paid for a new roof on the primary school, a new bus shelter for the village, to have the well cleaned out, and is paying for a part-time caretaker at the community hall. If I continue, then there will be more opportunity to make our community better. But there’s a cost too.’

‘There certainly will be, if it takes you away from Jules,’ said Beth.

‘It won’t,’ said Gwydion, and kissed me.

‘We’ll miss you around the parish, too,’ said Mr Roberts.

‘My friends can fill in for him. It’s just for the summer,’ I said quickly.

‘I think they’ll be wanting more than that,’ said Beth.

That evening there was a bigger crowd than ever at the pub, drawn in by the radio broadcast. The publican had to ask some of Dai's friends to act as bouncers and stop anymore people from coming in; so they crowded around in the street and caused an obstruction. The radio station had sent their reporter back again and this time he had a regular sound recordist with him. They negotiated with the publican, paid a fee, and set up a microphone to record the singing. They wanted to put a 'mick' on Gwydion, but he refused on the grounds that it would restrict his moving about as he sang, so they set it up nearby 'to get the ambiance of the location.'

That evening we were recorded and the recording was edited before it was broadcast, but for the rest of the summer we were 'live' every evening.

This had various results. First, it brought in a lot of money from the radio performance fee plus the larger takings in the pub. But it meant that Gwydion had to be more careful about what he said – no more insulting the English and Irish, at least not in English or Irish! But he still sang in three languages – Welsh, English, and his own. No one questioned the last until the very end of the summer when a little grey-haired woman who had been coming every evening for a month introduced herself as Professor of Welsh Literature at the University of Bangor and asked how my husband had learned a Welsh that predated Taliesin.

She said, 'I've been listening to his verb forms and his nouns – it's proto-Taliesin. Which remote hilltop village has he been hiding in?'

I said, 'I think his mother taught him.'

She laughed. 'And I suppose she lived in Tre'r Ceiri?'

I laughed and said, 'I guess so.'

Some of the children of Glyndŵr put together a recording of some of Gwydion's songs and sold it locally. Then a commercial record label made enquiries about distributing it, but Dai didn't like the terms they were offering. Big Tim got involved, but Dai was reluctant to work with 'a Saesneg', even one who was a skilled musician. But meanwhile the radio station sent a recording to their sister radio stations around Wales, and from there it spread to England and, yes, to Ireland too, and started to sell more widely. People said that the music was deeply relaxing to listen to, and they loved the Welsh as well as the English songs. So Welsh music made its way up the music charts.

The downside of this success was that Gwydion and I had less time alone together. We had to be very organised to spend time with the babies, and to see my children and friends. So what could have been a relaxed summer became very hectic. But on the other hand, Gwydion spread his message of hope and constructiveness everywhere. Everyone was listening to him singing, even if they didn't know what he was singing. I heartily hoped that the Professor wouldn't be able to translate 'I am Arfon,' or, if she did, she wouldn't realise what he meant.

The music took my lover's mind off worrying about the babies. Little Lion grew quickly, but he had various problems: his heart developed a fault, but fortunately Ra'haah was able to correct it; he caught a cold that nearly killed him because his lung filled up with phlegm, but Wiroan sat with him hour after hour, helping him to breathe, until the crisis was over. We were only told about these emergencies after Lion had started to recover.

Gwydion would have been frantic with worry, but he realised now that his grandmother wanted the babies to succeed, so he agreed to allow her to retain responsibility for primary care. The other 'giants' had different problems, but none were entirely problem-free. Of course all babies get ill and have tumbles, and so on, but these babies had been artificially created, and this seemed to bring its own problems. Sometimes feet didn't develop straight as

the baby grew, or limbs; some had hearing difficulties and one quickly developed a sight defect – but again Ra’haah was able to correct it.

Sue and Aranrod reported that the children at Caer Arianrhod were all developing well. These more recent babies, based around Hethie’s hair, had a sounder genetic base. They were soon large enough to come to the pub in the evenings regularly to hear Gwydion sing. Sue would bring Little Lion, too, and the others from Ra’haah’s nursery in rotation. But Gwydion particularly liked her to bring Little Lion.

Then there were the two babies he had started in me.

One afternoon Ra’haah came over, walked into Gwydion’s hall and said, ‘Your babies are ready for release; come on,’ and handed us both surgical gloves. When we realised what she meant and followed her to the laboratory, we found Aranrod, Hethie and Sue already waiting.

These were the last two foetuses in the laboratory, and Ra’haah had decided she needed to ensure this stage of the experiment was finished off properly. She supervised Aranrod releasing the two babies from the incubators: one was two weeks’ early, but Ra’haah said it was ‘ready enough.’ Then she organised Gwydion and me to bathe and swaddle them, and she named them ‘Strength’ and ‘Warrior’, and stood over us, supervising us, as we laid them down to sleep.

‘I’ll take them Home with me for the first few days,’ she said, ‘in case any problems develop. Now, we need to clear up here,’ and she supervised us tidying up everything in the laboratory, scrubbing out the incubators – everything.

When everything was spotless, she said, ‘You won’t be using this for a while, until we see how the current babies develop,’ and she turned us all out of the laboratory and locked the door to keep us out. I expected Aranrod to protest, but she didn’t; until Ra’haah had gone, taking the two babies with her, when she seemed to wake up and demanded: ‘Just what right does my grandmother have to close down my laboratory?’

‘She’s looking after most of the babies produced in it,’ I said.

Aranrod snorted, but did not resume the argument.

For a few days after that, Gwydion and I spent a few days at my Home, with the new babies: the first humanoid babies Gwydion had produced from his own humanoid body, as the others were either animal in form (those he and Gilvaethwy had developed) or produced by Aranrod (Dylan and Lleu). Little Lion was based on the dead Lleu’s blood, but nothing of this was Gwydion’s own.

But now he had the joy of a father who can count his child’s fingers and toes, and know that none of this would have existed without his own body. He sat and cuddled the babies, played with them, washed them, had them sleeping in his arms ... he would not have gone out to sing in the pub in the evenings, but Ra’haah threw him out and sent Sue and Hethie to carry the babies to hear him sing. They sat on one side and tried to be invisible.

My lover was very happy; often very tired (he drew heavily on my energy resources), but relaxed in himself, no longer the brittle, insecure individual I had come to find all those weeks ago. He insisted I be at his side every minute of every day and night – except for bodily functions best done in private! – he was happy that his project to spread hope and build up Arfon was working well; he was father of children and another to come, growing in my own womb. Every day he would put his ear next to my bulge and listen to it move and talk to it, ‘So is knows me when it’s born.’ The fame of his singing made him even more popular in the village: even Lewis Watkins managed to smile a greeting sometimes.

The organist in the village church was a bit offhanded with us until Gwydion assured her he had no intention of singing or playing in church. She was very relieved. ‘Those friends of yours,’ she said to me, ‘want to sing in church themselves. They want to bring in guitars, whatever. I said, I told the reverend, I won’t stand for such music, not in a sacred place. Now a harp is a sacred instrument, and my father used to play, but I always say our church needs an organ, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘the organ is exactly right for our church,’ and so the matter was dropped and we parted on good terms.

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Towards the end of the summer, things began to quieten off; the crowds at the pub in the evenings became a little thinner, the babies were causing less anxiety. Gwydion and I took Little Lion, Warrior and Strength into the woods to relax under the trees. Gwydion played his harp for us and I sang with him, while the babies joined in with shouts and banging hands and feet on the ground.

My own children were due to go back to school, and Sue, Lynne and Big Tim were talking about getting back to Watching. Lynne and Big Tim had enjoyed helping around the parish (although disappointed that they hadn’t been able to introduce a guitar to church services), but Sue was quieter. She’d been busy, working with Aranrod and helping Ra’haah with the ‘giant’ children – but she didn’t tell me much. Her excuse was that I was always with Gwydion and she didn’t want to bore him with it.

I blamed myself for not being available as her friend to talk, but Gwydion said, ‘She has a scheme in hand and doesn’t want to tell us about it.’

‘She’s already worked out Little Lion’s origins,’ I said cautiously.

‘She’s still looking for her psychopomp,’ said Gwydion dismissively.

Now, a psychopomp is a divine being or spirit who leads the spirits of the dead to the otherworld. Both Teloan (Sue’s husband) and Wiroan have carried out that function and in that the Irish god Lugh carries some echoes of Wiroan’s status as life-creator and saviour-from-the-dark and bringer-of-knowledge-and-skill, then Lugh also has some such function. Also in a few Irish stories he appears stepping between this world and the otherworld.

But Lleu, his namesake, never did this. He was a brave and skilful warrior who defended his people effectively but he did not go voluntarily to the otherworld. I suppose that as he went when Blodeuwedd sent him, and returned when Gwydion rescued him, he did do that ‘dead god returned to life’ thing, but he wasn’t in control of events. In Wales, it was Gwydion who went to the otherworld to bring back deer, dogs and pigs; and the princes of Dyfed went to the otherworld and brought back a bride, Rhiannon. Arthur also went to bring back a cauldron.

So was Sue trying to get to the otherworld to find Lugh, or even Lleu? That would be crazy? As Watchers we sometimes meet Hell spirits, but they generally keep their distance – and we certainly don’t go there. So what was Sue up to?

I eyed Gwydion carefully. ‘Is she still after you? I’ve told her we could share you if she wants to. Although I’d rather not.’

My lover gave me a sideways glance and then looked away. We were sitting under the trees in a wood high up on the hills overlooking the coast and Dinas Dinlle – Gwydion had been playing his harp, but was now simply polishing it. I wondered whether to wait for a reply: would he give me an honest opinion?

‘You know what I think,’ he said, ‘why should I tell you again?’

‘You don’t believe she does care for you and she’s only interested in Teloan and spirits who go between death and life. But you do.’

Gwydion said nothing for a while. I waited.

‘Witch,’ he said at last, ‘like the ivy around the tree, you have penetrated my deepest part and I cannot stand without you. You encompass me within your embraces and warm me with your abundance when my heart is cold and bare. You surround me with life when my heart tells me I should be dead, and you call forth greenness from aridity and fresh new growth where there are only dry branches. With your power I see my plans grow fruit – never was a better booty brought back from the land of the lost than you from the abode of the spirits, witch-of-my-heart. So will I let your friend dishonour you by supplanting you in our bed? Never. And neither will I let you run after her, for all that she’s your friend. You are my wife, and you will stay with me, as we agreed, until you tell me to let you go.’ His bright eyes looked deep into mine. ‘And I will never let you tell me that – I will freeze your tongue in your mouth first.’

I kissed him. It seemed a fair response.

So I stopped worrying about Sue. I let my children go Home, and tried not to worry about them. I told myself that we went over to see the babies in Ra’haah’s care often enough, and I could check up then that the children were OK, and in any case Jamie or Wiroan would let me know if there were any problems. And again, Hethie kept coming over in the evenings to listen to the singing in the pub, or sometimes to do her homework in Gwydion’s hall, on his long table: ‘because it’s quiet here and it’s so noisy at home.’

‘You’re just keeping an eye on us,’ I accused her.

She grinned. ‘Someone needs to.’

She was teaching Little Lion nursery rhymes, on the grounds that they’re an essential part of education and they would help him to learn to sing.

*

Friday

One evening, after everyone had gone back Home and the nights were starting to draw in, Gwydion and I were in the hall at Dinas Dinlle. Hethie was doing her homework at the big table; Ra’haah had brought Little Lion, Warrior and Strength over to play and Gwydion was teaching the babies to sing simple songs. I was dozing a little – my pregnancy was making me tired.

Suddenly the door into the hall opened and in came Dai Williams – with Euan! The house at once changed around us to be what they expected, and they were used to seeing Hethie around, but of course Ra’haah and the babies were there too.

Ra’haah was wearing a long blue dress and her hair is long, black, thick and curly, so she looked at a casual glance like a human woman. All the babies were wearing wraps that looked like old-fashioned nappies, so they also looked normal.

Dai pulled up and said, ‘Pardon me for butting in,’ and to Gwydion, ‘I’ve interrupted a family party, is it?’

‘This is my grandmother,’ said Gwydion.

‘I can see the family relationship,’ said Dai, and held out a hand, which Ra’haah shook. ‘Dai Williams,’ he said, ‘friend of your grandson here; and this is Euan, just back from Manceinion.’

‘How did you get on?’ Gwydion asked him, without any preliminaries.

‘I did what you said,’ said Euan, eyeing Ra’haah and the babies suspiciously, ‘and I’ve been listening to your songs on the radio. Going in for a music career, is it now?’

‘No,’ said Gwydion, ‘that was only to entertain our visitors this summer.’

‘There’s talk of your being the next Welsh tenor,’ said Euan.

Gwydion shrugged. ‘It’s made a lot of money for the cause. Are you after your caretaking job back? I thought you’d find a better job in Manceinion.’

‘I did,’ agreed Euan. ‘I’ve just come to let you know about it, and to say if you want me to carry on the publicity, I’ve got a little group there, all of us from Gwynedd, who meet once a week.’

‘Sounds good,’ said Gwydion, cutting him off before he could say anything destructive. ‘You can keep in touch with what’s going on here and develop your own ideas.’

‘The children like your singing,’ said Euan. ‘Those stories you tell – was it your grandmother taught you?’ He looked at Ra’haah.

‘No, that would have been his mother, my daughter,’ she said.

‘Are the children yours, missus?’ asked Euan, unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

‘In a manner of speaking. I’m looking after them.’

‘Childminder, is it?’

‘More long term.’

‘Foster parent?’

‘That’s more it. Gwydion and Jules help me from time to time.’

‘We heard you singing just before we came in,’ said Euan. ‘Was that Welsh? It wasn’t a song I know.’

‘It was very old Welsh,’ said Ra’haah.

‘You could teach us those songs, too,’ said Euan to Gwydion.

‘I’ll be at the pub tomorrow evening,’ he said. ‘If you’re still in Arfon, come along.’

‘I’ll be there.’ Euan shuffled his feet. ‘One thing I wanted to ask you,’ he said.

Dai spoke up. ‘It’s about Geraint. No one’s seen him.’

‘I know where he is,’ said Gwydion. ‘He’s keeping his head right down.’

That’s one way of putting it, I thought.

‘Right – well – fair play – *when* you see him – or hear from him – I’d like a word with him,’ said Euan.

‘I’ll tell him,’ promised Gwydion.

I realised that I should have offered them a cup of tea when they came in, but they’d taken me by surprise. I was about to offer it now, but Dai said: ‘We’ll be getting along, then. Good night, missus’ (to Ra’haah), ‘good to meet you; good bye, missus’ (to me), ‘and you, chick’ (to Hethie), ‘ta-ra, mate’ (to Gwydion), and he ushered Euan out, the latter muttering various ‘ta-ra’s.

Ra’haah waited for the door to shut behind them, then tossed her head; we heard the lock fall into place.

‘You would do better to keep your doors secured,’ she said. ‘When Jules’s baby comes, it would be better. You do have enemies here.’

Gwydion nodded; his face was thoughtful. Euan spoke as if he were still our friend, but he had heard and seen things too great for him and might not be able to carry their weight.

‘Can you sing something?’ said Hethie, into the silence. ‘I can’t do my homework if it’s too quiet.’

*

Saturday

It was a clear cold night as we walked through Caernarfon the following evening. The sky was cloudless and we could see the stars through the haze of the streetlights, but there was a distinct nip in the air which suggested frost. I wished I'd brought a warmer coat, but my warmer clothes were all at Home. Gwydion put an arm about my shoulders and held me close, and I felt his warmth surround me like a blanket.

The pub was busy despite the lateness of the season, with families and children as well as the children of Glyndŵr and some people from the village church and other locals. The radio station had sent their usual sound recordist and there was another person there too – a woman dressed in smart-casual, with a microphone in hand. She came over to speak to us when we'd greeted our friends and sat down.

'Neeve Jones,' she said. 'I'm from BBC Wales. My manager said you'd be expecting me?'

'Neeve' is actually an Irish name and spelt 'Niamh', but the Welsh pronounce it 'Neeve' or 'Nyf' and it means 'snow'. In fact she had typical Welsh colouring: pale skin and dark hair with grey eyes.

Dai, who was sitting nearby, intervened. 'To be honest: I meant to tell you, but it slipped my mind.'

Gwydion nodded, and smiled a welcome to our visitor. 'Good day to you,' he said in Welsh. 'How may I help you?'

'Well, I was hoping you would do an interview before you start. Just a few questions from the listeners. You're very popular, you know.'

The publican passed over a glass of beer for Gwydion and a lemonade for me. Gwydion sipped his drink. 'I wouldn't wish to disappoint anyone,' he said. 'Far be it from me to be lacking in hospitality. Are you from Gwynedd, Miss Jones? You have the look of a native of the south, but you speak like the Welsh of Aberystwyth.'

'Yes; I learned Welsh there. Just a moment.' She turned on her microphone and spoke into it, now speaking English. 'This is Neeve Jones at Caernarfon's most popular night spot this evening, about to talk to the popular bard known as Gwydion. I understand you write all your own songs?' She held out the microphone to Gwydion, who instinctively moved away from it as a wild animal moves out of range of a weapon, and then steadied himself. I could see him calling his power to himself to meet this subtle peril.

'Yes, I compose my music as I sing,' he said. 'The music and the words come together. One is nothing without the other; they form a whole.'

She'd expected a shorter response and was slightly thrown. 'Where do you get your inspiration?'

'I sing for those who listen, so I sing whatever they need. Sometimes that is joyful and sometimes it's pure entertainment, songs everyone can join in, to make the listeners happy. Sometimes they need restful music to soothe away their worries, and sometimes thoughtful music to challenge their hearts. I sing of the land of Arfon and its history and people, its mountains and woods, its streams, lakes and rivers, and the sea that bathes its flanks.'

Neeve blinked: Gwydion's voice was so relaxing that she was going to sleep. She couldn't remember what she had been going to ask. Then: 'You sing in English and Welsh?'

'I sing in whichever language conveys the song better.'

Neeve wiped her hair back from her eyes, trying to remember what else she had intended to ask – but her brain was a complete blur. She could only think that it would be lovely to hear him sing.

‘Well, thank you, Gwydion: now I’m sure the listeners all want to hear whatever you’re going to sing for us tonight.’

‘Thank you, Miss Jones.’ Gwydion spent moment or two tuning his harp, and then began to play – and everyone in the pub fell silent.

As he sang, I became aware of Euan, standing by the bar. He was staring at my lover with an expression on his face somewhere between adoration and loathing. I wondered why he had come. To denounce Gwydion? – but as what? He had experienced Gwydion’s magic and knew what resulted when he crossed him. If he denounced him as a magician, everyone would laugh. If he claimed he was *the* Gwydion, no one would believe him.

Did he want to be enchanted out of his anger and resentment? – away from his anxiety, *pryder* in Welsh. When Gwydion slew Pryderi, he slew anxiety. So Gwydion brings joy? The wisdom of the trees (Gwydion) slays anxiety (Pryderi), not only for Gwynedd, but for all of us.

But Euan did not look as if anxiety had been slain – he just looked more and more troubled. As Gwydion sang, his face would slowly relax, but as soon as he stopped, his face grew tense again. Then I realised: he wants to know what happened to Geraint.

Geraint is a flower on the mountain, and tonight is cold, so will the frosts come tonight? Will Geraint die? – but Gwydion promised that he wouldn’t die: he would return.

Gwydion finished a fourth song, in which he had got everyone singing about: ‘the sea rose up, the sea rose up and swallowed up the land; O gracious sea, give back the plunder you have won.’ He laid aside his harp and said, ‘That’s enough for the moment; talk among yourselves while my voice has a rest.’

There was great applause, and then general conversation broke out. I said, ‘Well done,’ and we exchanged a kiss. Dai clapped him on the back and handed him a second drink. Neeve Jones said, ‘That was lovely.’ Then the outside door into the pub opened and a man walked in; and Euan shouted: ‘Geraint!’

We all looked up: it was Geraint, looking much the same as when he’d vanished, but chilly in summer trousers and shirt. He was carrying a bag – he’d had it with him when I last saw him, and I now realised that his harp was in it.

He raised hand in greeting and made his way towards us. Euan pushed away from the bar to clap him on the back and greet him, adding: ‘Where the hell have you been?’ Geraint just shook his head, brushed him gently off, went up to the bar and ordered a beer then he turned to Gwydion and me.

‘Cold night,’ he said.

‘You got back all right,’ said Gwydion.

Euan spluttered something that was probably, ‘You knew he was coming?’ but Geraint ignored him.

‘What’s all this?’ he asked, looking round at the full pub.

‘Our bard is making himself a musical career,’ said Dai. ‘Keep your voice down, you’re on the radio.’

Geraint smiled. It was a much more peaceful smile than I’d seen on his face in the past. ‘I could sing,’ he said. ‘It wouldn’t be as good as our bard here, but I could sing.’

The sound recordist looked worried, but Gwydion said: ‘My friend here has just come back from a long journey and has made a song about his experience. He’d like to sing it to everyone. This is an extra song, there’s no charge.’

There was some murmuring about us, but general agreement was that this would be acceptable, so Geraint was given space to sit down, and got his harp out of its bag. He was a few moments tuning it, then said, ‘Here it is,’ struck a chord to get silence, and began in Welsh:

‘In my pride I said: there is no god.
There is none so wise as me, none so learned.
For I am drenched in druidical lore and all the rules of bardism,
There are none who know them so well as I do.
But now I have been like Taliesin:
I have been at the dawn of the world;
I have been the mountain,
I have been the sunlight,
I have been the little herbs beneath the feet.
I know now that I know nothing,
And yet I know the whole world.
I know now that there is nothing,
Except the joy of life and the peace of death.
No one can be a bard unless he first die;
It is not learning that is the bard, it is the whole life.’

The words and music were not so lovely as Gwydion’s singing, but the clearly honest sentiment carried it through, and everyone applauded at the end. Geraint smiled his appreciation and drank his beer.

‘Not bad,’ said the publican. ‘You can come back.’

‘Can we have Gwydion again now, please?’ said one of the children. ‘I want him to sing the song about Teithi Hen.’

*

We walked back to the bus stop after the singing was over. Neeve offered to give us a lift home, but Gwydion declined: ‘I’d prefer the walk, to relax after the performance.’ She accepted his refusal, although I knew that by tomorrow she’d be wondering why she didn’t press him.

We stood at the stand at the bus station and waited for our bus. After a while:

‘Euan and Geraint will talk,’ I said.

He nodded.

‘Do we do anything?’

‘No – we wait until they’ve had their say.’

‘If they – get difficult – what can we do?’

‘Talk them out of it – but if the time for talking has passed, then they will have to decide what they want. I can leave them to themselves if they prefer not to have me there.’

‘I think they’ll want you,’ I said.

‘We can vanish into the woods. I’ve often done that in the past.’

‘Your village would miss you.’

He nodded. ‘So we wait and find out what they decide.’

The bus came. We got on.

‘I heard you on the radio this evening,’ said the bus driver to Gwydion. ‘You were great, as usual, but your friend wasn’t so good. He doesn’t have your quality of voice, you know? He gestured at his chest, as if implying that a good voice comes from chest capacity. ‘And you have the better harp.’

Gwydion smiled his sideways smile. ‘Thank you for that – but despite all this I still need to pay you for two tickets!’ He dropped the money into the slot.

The driver laughed, pressed out our tickets, and waved us to sit down.

We got off at the stop for when the house is on the Pwllheli Road and walked up to the door. The stars were clear overhead.

‘I can see the Milky Way,’ I said.

He nodded, and led me inside – the neighbours would be watching, and so we needed to ‘act normal’. But later we went out into the back garden and went up into the stars, to that pale star-lit place of his, away from all the crowds and confusion ... Caer Gwydion.

*

Sunday

We went along to the church service as usual the following morning and stayed behind afterwards to help tidy up. Mrs Roberts was anxious that I shouldn’t ‘overdo it’ but I persuaded her to let me collect up hymn books.

‘I heard your interview on the radio yesterday evening,’ said one of the congregation to Gwydion. ‘Very interesting.’

Gwydion nodded and said something pleasant and non-committal.

‘So will you be off to Llundain, then?’ asked the other.

Gwydion looked a question at him.

‘Streets paved with gold. Place of fame and fortune,’ said the other, suddenly feeling disconcerted by Gwydion’s expression: amusement mixed with just a touch of disdain.

Gwydion smiled more broadly. ‘My gold is here.’ He nodded at me, and I smiled back.

‘You could both go,’ the other persisted.

‘Are you so anxious to be rid of us?’

‘No – no, of course not – but I thought a young man like you would want to take his opportunities.’

‘Everyone may go to Llundain. My opportunities are here.’ Gwydion stepped over and kissed me.

The other smiled and dropped the subject.

Gwydion needed all his tact and diplomacy to deal with these persistent questions, but he left everyone contented at last. The greater difficulty awaited us back at our house, where Dai and his friends were waiting. They greeted us cheerfully and waited to be invited in, but there was steel sharpness in the air.

‘Tea?’ I asked, and went off to put the kettle on.

I heard a conversation start in the back room. They agreed that the performance last night had gone well. They agreed that they were glad to see Euan and Geraint back. They agreed that the summer had been profitable and the cantref was feeling much better about itself, as one man put it, after being lauded in the media for having a bard like Gwydion.

I brought in the tea and some biscuits I’d found in the kitchen cupboard. I poured out. Everyone sipped tea, crunched biscuits, expressed appreciation. Then:

‘The question is, now,’ said Dai, ‘what we do next. I’ve had an enquiry from the BBC in Lerpwl. They want you to go over there to take part in some recording.’

Gwydion shook his head. ‘This isn’t why I sing,’ he said. ‘You know why I sing – because I want to, not for money.’

‘We know why you sing,’ said Euan.

There was silence.

‘We think you should go,’ said Dai. ‘It’ll promote our aims – show those Saesneg our great culture and talent, like you always say.’

‘This is my place,’ said Gwydion. ‘I don’t go out of Arfon.’

‘You can’t,’ said Euan.

‘If I go,’ said Gwydion, ‘who will keep an eye on you and Geraint, and you other hotheads, and prevent your destroying all we’ve worked for?’

‘You could leave Cerridwen behind to look after us,’ said Geraint.

‘My name’s not Cerridwen, as I’ve told you before,’ I said.

‘Jules goes with me, wherever I go,’ said Gwydion.

‘If we promise to keep an eye on them,’ said Dai, gesturing at Euan and Geraint, ‘will you go? We think it would be a real boost to our action.’

Gwydion hesitated, and looked up. For a moment I thought he was looking at someone behind me, and turned my head – but saw no one there. Perhaps he was listening?

‘As you insist,’ he said then, ‘Jules and I will go. When and where?’

Dai relaxed and began to explain. I saw Euan and Geraint exchange glances. I don’t trust them.

Later I phoned Sue and explained what had happened. ‘Can you come over and bring some of the children? We need to Watch Euan and Geraint, just for this evening.’ (The BBC had given us virtually no notice.) ‘I’m sure they’ve something planned.’

‘Do you need a lift?’ asked Sue.

‘We’ll jump,’ I said. ‘Gwydion says Beuno has given him permission to go, as he’s going on a peace mission.’

Sue, Lynne, Little Tim, Caroline and Tonja arrived – and we departed, going via Caer Gwydion to reconnoitre and then down, down, down to the city where neither of us had ever been, seeking the voice and name Dai had given us. We arrived unobtrusively in a back alley and walked into the building by the front door. I was wearing my leaf dress and shoes with a fine woolly coat Gwydion had created for me; he was dressed plainly in overshirt and trousers with leather shoes and belt and ditto a woolly coat, with hood. He had his harp in a bag under the coat, to protect it from the cold.

Everyone was very friendly and efficient. Gwydion insisted I sit by him: ‘My wife is my muse,’ he said, ‘my awen; I need her by me to inspire me to sing!’

There were other people there too, who would be talking and singing during the broadcast. There was much testing of microphones and careful positioning. I put a hand on Gwydion’s knee; I could feel the tension in him, but it calmed as he felt me there to ground him, and he put his own hand on mine.

‘Not used to all this fuss?’ said the sound recordist to us, ‘a shock after the peace of the mountains? Don’t worry, it won’t take long.’ He was kind – he put us at our ease.

The broadcast was focussed on local music, local groups and talent. We heard a quartet play, a soprano sing, a pianist play and sing. Then it was our turn. Gwydion was introduced as ‘a young man from North Wales – he’s been making a name for himself doing gigs in his

local music venues, and now we've persuaded him to leave his mountains and come to give us some Welsh culture this evening. Now, Gwydion – that's what you call yourself? – your music has been described by Professor Mared Elunig of the University of Bangor as proto-Taliesin – could you explain what she means?'

Gwydion laughed. He said, 'She means my style of poetry reminds her of the work of the great Welsh bard Taliesin, who lived in the sixth century AD, but the language I use is an older form of Welsh than Taliesin. That's her view as a scholar who studies how poetry is composed. The people who come to listen to my singing tell me that it makes them feel happy, relaxed, soothes away their anxiety, helps them sleep peacefully and face each new day with optimism. These are timeless human needs which Taliesin's poetry met and which I also seek to fulfil. That is why I sing, to lift my listeners' hearts and make them glad.'

The interviewer faltered – he'd been so intent in listening to Gwydion that he'd lost his thread. 'So would you describe your music as traditional?'

'I would not describe it – I would sing, and then you can tell me how you describe it.'

'Right – go ahead.' The interviewer signalled to the sound recordist; Gwydion played a single chord on his harp and then sang. It was a gentle song about the streams and meadows of Arfon; I don't think I'd heard it before. It was in English, but after the first few chords I don't think anyone notices the language, carried away by the beauty of the music.

When he'd finished: 'You also sing in Welsh? Could you sing us something in Welsh?'

'Of course.' Again a single sweet chord, and then a song about Yr Wyddfa, the wounded mountain, its flanks scarred by treasure seekers, but nevertheless the most perfect mountain, most beautiful in form, divine vision, glorious!

When he finished, everyone was still; then there was a little ripple of applause from the people in the studio.

'That was lovely,' said someone, 'I thought for a moment I was back in the mountains.'

'We'll be back,' I said to Gwydion as we left. 'They like you too much.'

'Beuno said the Saesneg need the blessing of song,' said my lover. 'Strange that he should decide that at last, after so long! But we should return to Arfon at once, to defend the land against its enemies.' He sighed. 'As ever, our greatest enemies are those who should be our friends.'

*

(Sue)

Aranrod had come over to see what was going on. I explained that Gwydion and Jules had gone to Lerpwl.

'And Beuno let them?' She was astonished.

'Yes, because they've gone to give a blessing.'

'Well, then there is hope for us all!'

'They asked us to come because they don't trust the children of Glyndŵr,' said Little Tim.

Aranrod shrugged. 'My brother is convinced he can control those ruffians. Do you know where they are?'

'Some of them are in the usual pub,' I said, 'and some are at their homes, and some have wandered away and I'm having trouble tracing them.'

'Try the bridge to Ynys Môn,' said Aranrod.

We all thought about the bridge. Caroline said, 'Didn't it burn down once before?'

'Yes,' I said, 'completely.'

'Then that's where they'll be. Tonja and I will go!'

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Lynne, quickly, and they all three vanished.

‘I’ll go round by the sea,’ said Aranrod.

‘I’ll come,’ said Little Tim, and they went off together.

This left me by myself. I took myself off to the pub.

Gwydion’s friends were there – some of them. The man called Dai seemed to be leading the conversation, but a narrow-faced man kept interrupting. They were all talking Welsh, but I can follow any language if I concentrate – Teloan enabled me. I did my best to remain invisible.

‘I tell you, he’s a *real* druid,’ the narrow-faced man was saying. I decided this must be Geraint – Jules had told me about his interest in druidism. ‘She’s Cerridwen. She inspires him – look how he’s changed since she came. He’s changed almost beyond recognition.’

‘I don’t like all this talk of druids and cauldrons,’ one man muttered. Geraint turned on him.

‘You think it’s all superstitious rubbish, do you? You’ve just told me what he’s done this summer! Enchanted all of Arfon, that’s what he’s done, and he’s got the media eating out of his hand! But he’s always got to have her there. She’s Cerridwen, you see – she has the awen, the power, the muse. She inspires him – she has the pool of inspiration, the flame of it, if you like.’

‘He was always a good bard,’ said the same objector. ‘He still sings as he always did.’

‘You think so, do you?’ I went away at the start of the summer and I come back and hear him and he’s totally changed. He’s not just enchanting us now, you see. He’s enchanting everyone. I know what a druid does – I’ve studied it, but now I know I’ll never be as good as him, but if I can persuade Cerridwen to let me drink at her cauldron–’

‘You’re being disgusting,’ said another man. ‘Jules is a good woman and she won’t have anything to do with your sort. Gwydion is our bard and a bloody good bard too, much better than you, and if the BBC have noticed him at last, good luck to him, that’s what I say.’

‘He’s on the radio now,’ said the publican, and turned up the sound; and everyone shut up to listen to ‘their bard’ sing.

‘He’s bloody good,’ said the same man again when Gwydion’s part had finished.

‘Where’s that he is?’ asked another of the regulars.

‘Lerpwl,’ said Dai. ‘He said he wouldn’t go out of Arfon, but we persuaded him to do it.’

‘Ah,’ said the other, ‘there’s that many Arfon people in Lerpwl it almost counts as Arfon.’

Meanwhile, at the bridge, Little Tim and Aranrod were in a boat under the bridge while Lynne, Caroline and Tonja were on top of the bridge. They were searching for concentrations of hatred – and they found one.

Advancing silently, the three women on the bridge saw a group of four men carefully spreading fluid on the bridge. They were discussing how to detonate it from a distance.

‘I’ll blast them,’ said Caroline, furiously.

‘You won’t,’ said Lynne, ‘that will detonate it. We need to do this intelligently.’

‘Is one of them that man Euan?’ asked Tonja.

They all looked. It was.

‘He’s already really wound up. If he thought we were angels or something like that he would probably surrender.’

Lynne looked up at the sky. ‘No moon tonight!’ We’ll have to do this without any light effects.’ She pondered. ‘Can you sing?’

‘We can chant,’ said Caroline.

‘We need a good chant – then we’ll advance on them.’

‘How about: “Woe to all destroyers, woe to all traitors, woe to all who plot the death of the innocent, woe, woe”?’ – Tonja.

‘We do it in Welsh?’ – Caroline.

‘Start in Indo-European, then Brythonic, then Welsh,’ said Lynne. ‘Brush out your hair and wave your arms in the air.’

So they advanced like the witches of Macbeth, or possibly the witches of *Caer Loyw* (Gloucester, as in the *Mabinogion*), waving their arms in the air and chanting. The men were first puzzled, then alarmed, then – when Caroline sent sparks flying from her fingers into the air – terrified. They jumped up from their positions by the railway line and ran, pursued by our three harpies – and jumped off the bridge into the Menai Straits, where Aranrod and Little Tim caught them. They were *very* surprised to be plucked out of the air and placed gently into a small boat.

‘Now we need to find the police,’ said Little Tim. ‘There should be a harbour master at Bangor.’

Up on the bridge, the three harpies made a dignified retreat and Caroline made an anonymous phone call to the British Transport Police. ‘I’ve just seen something suspicious on the Menai Bridge.’

It was a while before the police arrived. They looked at the bridge and closed it, disrupting all traffic to Holyhead – but at least the disruption would be for only a few hours.

Back in the pub, Geraint got a text message.

‘Euan’s in trouble,’ he said.

‘What’s that?’ said Dai sharply, and grabbed the phone. ‘What the hell’s this?’

I couldn’t see the text message from where I sat, but I gathered it said something like: ‘Mission failed, take cover.’ Geraint denied all knowledge; the others refused to believe him. Dai said, ‘We’re going for a little walk.’

‘Why? I told you it’s nothing to do with me.’

‘No? But we fear you intended something, and we promised our bard you wouldn’t, and if you’ve made us break our promise’ – Dai’s attitude was more and more threatening.

‘I’ve done nothing!’

‘We’re going for a little walk.’ Dai grabbed his arm and dragged him out. I finished my drink and followed the group, still trying to remain invisible.

They marched Geraint down to the waterfront, with him protesting all the way. He said he was no traitor, he was loyal to the cause, he wanted only victory for the Cymri, he would never betray them. He cried, ‘I’m a druid, you can’t do this to a druid.’ He cried, ‘I’m a bard, you can’t do this to a bard.’

‘Do what?’ asked Dai, ‘We’ve done nothing yet.’

Then along the waterfront came a boat, and in it were Aranrod and Little Tim.

‘It’s Dai,’ cried Little Tim. ‘Hello, Dai!’ He waved.

Dai hailed him back and gestured to him to bring in the boat – Aranrod complied.

‘Where have you been so late, young man?’ Dai asked him.

‘Lady Aranrod and I have been vandal catching,’ said Tim. ‘We went under the Menai Bridge, and four of your friends fell off. They’d been trying to blow up the bridge. We took them to the police.’

Dai and his friends looked accusingly at Geraint. He stared back: ‘I know nothing about this.’

Dai and his friends looked at each other, and back at Geraint.

‘Don’t throw him in the sea,’ said Aranrod. ‘Put him in my boat, and we’ll take him up to the police at Bangor.’ So they did.

*

Monday

(Jules)

When Gwydion and I returned, the crisis was over. It remained to be seen whether any of the criminals would try to drag us into it, but in the meantime we thanked all our friends for their support, saw Sue, Lynne, Tim, Caroline and Tonja off home, and went to bed. We were exhausted.

*

I should have mentioned that even though my friends and children had gone Home, the barn was still full of people. There had been a succession of pilgrim groups staying there. The village church is on a modern pilgrim route: some groups walk the long distance path, while others arrive in a minibus. In previous years they’ve been accommodated in various bed & breakfasts and the rectory has taken a few in. Apparently even Aranrod and Gwydion have lodged a few – that must have been strange. I can see that Gwydion could manage this in his imagined stone cottage, but Aranrod?

Gwydion laughed. ‘They see a fisherman’s cottage on the beach,’ he said.

The pilgrims generally arrive on a Friday and continue their journey on Monday, so they spend Saturday having a tour of the area on foot, then Sunday in church – attending the morning service, then having lunch, then various meditations in the afternoon, and finally the evening service.

Beth Roberts told me that in previous years Gwydion and Aranrod have helped show people round and have looked after the groups as groups, and I realised that I’d be expected to help with this too. This is hard work – crowds are not my thing! – and I’m getting to the stage of pregnancy when I just want to rest all the time. But Gwydion kept me close to him and didn’t leave me to the mercy of the visitors, and when Hethie came over he persuaded her to take an active role: she loves being the centre of attention, whereas I try to keep out of the limelight.

*

Sunday

One Sunday Beth Roberts suggested that Gwydion could take a more active part in the Sunday afternoon entertainment for the pilgrims. Rather than just being on hand to help out with song books or helping to bring in the tea, he could play his harp. ‘It would be ideal as a meditation,’ she said.

‘Errr,’ I said. ‘He doesn’t sing about God, you know.’

Beth brushed this aside. ‘It wouldn’t need to be overtly religious, just restful and contemplative. He can sing about creation – he has some lovely songs about nature he could sing.’

‘I think,’ I said, ‘he’s agreed with Mrs Evans’ (the organist) ‘that he won’t sing in church.’

‘I’ll have a word with her,’ said Beth at once.

‘No, please don’t,’ I said quickly. ‘We don’t want to upset her. She’s feeling upstaged and it would be unfair to upset her any further.’

‘Well,’ said Beth firmly, ‘I think you worry too much about upsetting people. First it was Aranrod, and now Mrs Evans. You have to realise, Jules, that Gwydion is a very fine singer and he should be allowed to exercise his talent’—

At this point, thank goodness, Gwydion – who had gone out of my hearing for a moment because Mr Roberts wanted to discuss something with him – came back to me, put his arm about my waist, kissed my hair and said, ‘Come over here, and tell me what you think about this.’ He gave Beth a charming smile and ushered me away.

Thank goodness, I said to him silently, you saved me.

I promise never to let you out of my arms again when she is around, ever again, he answered. She is one who will bully a woman, seeing her weak and helpless, to make herself feel strong, knowing a man will not correct her. But Aranrod will deal with her – and he raised his head to look at his sister, who was talking to the Sexton – but now she came over to talk to Beth, who quickly became agitated and defensive. Gwydion’s lips curled, but he looked away and took me to look at the side chapel.

‘Now,’ he said, when we were away from the rest, ‘I will tell Mr Roberts that you’re not well enough to help today, because the baby is growing large within you and you are tired; and you and I will go to visit relatives and get you out of the parish.’

I looked into his bright eyes, looking into mine with loving concern. His warm arms held me tight. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘that would be lovely. Where will we go?’

‘Dai has been telling me that his sister would like us to visit. He’s been watching you and getting concerned. And probably you should see one of your own physicians. So I think we’ll go to Bangor.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, and we exchanged a warm kiss. Aranrod looked in. ‘Jules,’ she said loudly, ‘are you all right? You look so pale. You should sit down.’

‘I’ll take her home,’ said Gwydion, ‘she isn’t feeling well.’

‘You work too hard,’ said Aranrod, coming over to hold my left arm. ‘We’ll manage without you both. Come on, now,’ and she led me out of the church, Gwydion on my other side, brushing aside comments by Beth and Mr Roberts that I didn’t really hear. Once outside, she said to us: ‘Hurry along and I’ll take care of this,’ and when Gwydion thanked her she said, ‘That baby is too valuable to lose – get on with you,’ so we went.

We went back to the little stone house which is Gwydion’s home in the here-and-now when he needs to be near the church, and I lay down on our bed upstairs while Gwydion packed a bag.

‘How will we get there? Do we need to call in advance?’

‘She’s expecting us whenever we arrive,’ came the reply, ‘and we’ll go the quick way.’

We went up – invisibly – to the sky, checked where we were and located where we were going, and went down again.

Dai’s sister lives on the outskirts of Bangor, not far from the hospital. Of course I have an NHS record – out of date now – but I hadn’t registered in Arfon. Gwydion had been dealing with any normal medical needs I might have, but pregnancies (as we all know) are beyond him and Aranrod.

Anyway, we found the house and knocked on the door. Dai’s sister turned out to know us from Gwydion’s singing during the summer – she used to come to the performances, although Dai hadn’t introduced us. As Gwydion had said, she was expecting us when we

arrived. She took one look at me and sent me to lie down, then sent Gwydion to sit with me while she made us both a cup of tea.

She's a trained midwife, and had told Dai I wasn't looking well and needed a check-up. Now she told Gwydion off for not taking me to see a G.P.: 'the moment she knew she'd fallen.' Gwydion said, 'She's had children before – we thought it would be no problem this time.' 'Well, it is,' said Dai's sister – whose name, when we asked her, is Dilys. 'The more children, the more problems. I'll examine her myself when she's rested.'

So Gwydion sat by me, singing to me and stroking my hair, while I dozed, and then Dilys came up to the room and gave me an examination, and took my blood pressure, and told me off for doing too much, and said I needed to slow down.

'Is it the singing keeping you busy?' she asked.

'Not at the moment,' said Gwydion. 'I help out in the parish church where we live and Jules helps me. It's busy at this time of year with pilgrim groups.'

'Well, they're going to have to do without Jules,' said Dilys firmly. 'Are you going to leave her here and go back? Dai tells me you two are inseparable.'

'Yes,' I said. Gwydion squeezed my hand. 'Nothing will separate me from her,' he said.

'Then you can both stay here a while,' said Dilys.

I slept most of that afternoon; Gwydion sat by me and played his harp softly. His excuse to Dilys was that he was practising, but in fact he was weaving protection around me. Dilys said he should go downstairs and practise in the lounge and let me sleep in peace, but Gwydion smiled, shook his head and went on playing.

Dilys woke me up at six o'clock to 'come and have some tea,' and she told Gwydion to 'put that instrument down and help your wife downstairs.' We complied.

'Tea' was what used to be called 'high tea': bread and butter, ham, pickles, jam, Welsh cakes, bara brith – and tea to drink. It was mostly carbohydrates and I felt much better afterwards. Dilys refused to let me help with the washing up, told Gwydion to help me into the lounge, and tidied up herself.

Over tea she had explained to us that her children are grown up and her husband is currently away. Like Dai, he's in the building industry, and he's working on a big site in Manchester. 'He'll be back next week,' she said, 'but it's quiet here on my own and I'll be glad of your company.'

Dai dropped in during the evening to see we, specifically I, were getting on. Typically, he said very little to me but talked to his sister and Gwydion. He told Dilys that I needed to get out of the village because: 'they put on her too much.'

'But what will they do for a living if they're away for two, three months?' asked Dilys. 'I know curates don't earn much but they need something to live on.'

Gwydion and I kept quiet – of course, we don't need any money to live on, but we prefer not to shout about it.

'Ah, now,' said Dai, reaching into his back trouser pocket, 'I was getting round to that, fair play.' He pulled out a folded envelope and handed it over to Gwydion, who unfolded it, extracted the contents and read it aloud.

It was addressed to Dai in his capacity as Gwydion's agent, and was from the producer of the radio programme in Lerpwl. The BBC was offering Gwydion a fixed spot in their weekday schedule – he could go over and pre-record it each week – for three months. A figure was given for the fee, plus expenses.

Gwydion looked up from reading this, and said, 'You know I need Jules with me.'

‘I told them that,’ said Dai. ‘They’re agreeable.’

‘It’s ideal,’ said Dilys. ‘You can keep going while you’re waiting for the baby, without all the stress of your usual work.’

Gwydion nodded, refolded the letter and handed it back. ‘How much did you bribe them?’

Dai laughed. ‘I couldn’t stop them. It was “name my price”. You went down so well the other week, they can’t wait to have you back.’

‘That’s brilliant,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

He shrugged, embarrassed, and put the letter away. ‘I’ll give them a call tomorrow and let them know you’re coming, then.’

‘When do they want to see him?’ demanded Dilys. ‘Because tomorrow Jules is going to a check up at the maternity unit.’

Dai shrugged again. ‘Oh, Tuesday will be fine.’

‘What’s your fee for fixing this up?’ asked Gwydion, smiling his sardonic smile.

Dai returned the grin. ‘I’ll ask for ten percent – agents always do.’

‘I’ll toss you for it.’

Dai shook his head. ‘I know better than to toss against you!’ He turned to Dilys and me, adding: ‘He always wins. Born lucky, that one.’

Gwydion laughed, then held out a sober hand to Dai. ‘Thanks, mate.’

Dai shook it once, then got up. ‘I’ll be on my way. You take things gently, missus’ (that to me), ‘take care, luv’ (that to Dilys), ‘ta-ra, mate’ (to Gwydion) – I’ll see myself out.’

Nevertheless, Dilys saw him out. She returned in time to see Gwydion and me exchange a very warm kiss. I was aware of her nod of approval – despite her nagging him not to hassle me, she was glad to see Gwydion so devoted. She didn’t know that a large part of his devotion is his desire for a child – but I hope / like to think that he really does care about me, too.

*

Monday

The check up was a bit of an ordeal. The medic – he called him a ‘registrar’, but I’ve met them before and this one seemed rather junior – was angry with me for not coming to see him earlier in the pregnancy. I had Gwydion with me, so to stop him getting angry with the medic I said, ‘It’s my fifth child – in fact it’s my tenth pregnancy – and as it was going smoothly it hardly seemed worthwhile troubling you.’

‘Tenth? I’ve never seen you here before.’

‘You won’t have. I had them in Leicestershire.’

‘Are you registered with a GP there?’

‘Yes,’ I said. I haven’t seen them for sixteen years, but I am registered.

‘Oh’ (pause) ‘so your records are with NHS England – that’s why we couldn’t trace them.’

I would have shrugged, but I was lying down so I just said, ‘these things get mislaid.’

‘So where are all these children?’

‘Four of them – they’re in Leicestershire,’ I said, ‘at school. They were here over the summer.’

‘Staying with relations in Leicestershire?’

‘Yes, and friends.’

‘OK.’ He was calming down now. ‘How old are they?’

‘Sixteen – fourteen – twelve – ten.’

‘So nothing for ten years.’

I agreed that was the case.

He began to lecture me on how the female body stiffens with age and greater problems arise the older the mother is. I know all this, so I stopped listening. I wish men who've never had a child would stop 'mansplaining' it to women who have.

At last he said, 'Well, you'll do for now, but I want to see you at thirty-two weeks. And don't forget this time,' – and sent me and Gwydion off to arrange an appointment. I had to count on my fingers to work out when it would be, as I don't carry a diary with me.

'Did you listen to any of his lecturing?' I asked my lover as we walked out hand-in-hand.

'A little,' came the answer. 'He told you not to do any housework, so no more cleaning out the barn after the visitors leave.'

'I only did it once.'

'I told you not to do it at all.'

'Well, your magic didn't get it clean.'

He grabbed my chin and kissed me. 'No more. And no more rushing around the parish. We will lead genteel lives like that idle rich – whoever they might be.'

'I don't think Wales has many idle rich,' I said.

'And tomorrow we'll go to Lerpwl – I hope our hosts will let you sit around.'

'Supposing Beuno doesn't let you go?'

'He will. I've seen him.'

'I thought he'd be angry with you for drawing attention to yourself.'

'He says I'm promoting peace, so he's happy.' We'd reached the bus stop by this time and the bus back to town had arrived, so we got on.

I rested for the rest of the day. Gwydion played his harp and amused me and Dilys with a stream of entertaining talk, anecdotes and longer stories. Dai dropped in at five o'clock to confirm arrangements for the following day. Dilys offered to drive us to Lerpwl, but Gwydion said we'd make our own way.

*

Tuesday

So we did: we went by his starry road, and arrived invisibly, then made our way to the studio and reported to reception.

As before, all went smoothly. Everyone was very welcoming and kind. They didn't kick up a fuss about my being in the studio with Gwydion, who made it clear that I'm his muse and he sings to me. I'm sure the real reason is that he needs me to channel his power out; also he's keeping an eye on his child and doesn't want anyone else to get at me.

For two songs he wanted my voice alongside his: the 'Teithi Hen' needed a 'ride, ride, Teithi Hen!' and there was another song which needed a second voice to ask a question at the end of each verse. I wondered what the professor at Bangor University was making of it all, and whether she'd managed to decipher Gwydion's songs yet.

We were busy for a few hours, and by the end I was very tired. The sound recordist finally said, 'You remember all that stuff about Taliesin? Could you sing us a song from Taliesin? Several people have asked us about that.'

'The "Spoils of Annwn"?' asked Gwydion.

'No – they were asking for something about trees.'

'"Cad Goddeu"?' – it's very long.'

'We can cut it. Let's go with that one.'

Gwydion adjusted the tuning on his harp and began to sing.

Eventually he came to an end and played a few sharp chords to bring everyone back to reality.

‘Wow,’ said the sound recordist, when he looked at the clock, ‘it is really that time? Where did the day go?’

Around four thousand years away, I thought, but I only smiled.

They let us out at five o’clock and we went straight back to Bangor via Gwydion’s star-road.

‘I was wondering where you’d got to,’ said Dilys. ‘Did it all go well? I hope you haven’t tired Jules.’

‘I’ll rest on the sofa,’ I said, lay down and promptly fell asleep.

*

Wednesday

I was feeling less tired next day, and Gwydion and I went out for a walk. As he’s lord of Arfon that makes him lord of the towns as well as the countryside, but (as I’ve mentioned), he isn’t a town person, so he seldom walks there. Now we wandered down to the sea and walked along the coast as best as we could, and then walked along the boundary of Arfon – Gwydion commenting that he needs to check the boundaries occasionally.

I remembered the walk we’d done down Aberglaslyn, back in June, when we’d seen the dark presence which hadn’t fled at my approach and which had gone only when Gwydion ordered it out. I still wondered what it had been. I’d mentioned it to Wiroan, but he only suggested it was a hell-spirit. They, however, generally run away when they see me coming.