

Wind over Troubled Waters

by

Francene Stanley & Edith Parzefall

Journal of Tallulah McBride

March 23, 2032.

As the world ends, I've assembled my vellum and proper ink and pen. Vellum lasts longer than paper. I don't think anyone will survive the flood and devastation. The water is rising higher all the time and I haven't seen the sun for forty-eight hours. No light penetrates my room. I'm writing by candlelight. I'm not sure why I'm writing except that it might help me get a grip on what happened. And just maybe, someone will survive and read this journal.

Corn World. Britland.

Far in the future after the great flood.

Chapter 1

On the bed next to her mother, Cerridwen snuggled further into her sleeping furs. Wind roared over the town, and rains lashed against the thick wooden walls of the house nestled half way down a steep slope above the quiet village. Built in the before times when men knew how to construct things properly, the house resisted continual rain. A lightning flash lit up the small room. Thunder roared. In the cot beside her, Mother whimpered and turned in her sleep.

Cerridwen concentrated on creaking noises followed by a thud. A tree struck by lightning? Aware of possible danger, she bolted upright. Her brother Ivan had left before sunrise with a group of Red Roof men to hunt deer in the first light. She hoped for their safe return.

A mighty growl jarred her out of her drowsiness. What could it be? Not thunder. The sound lasted too long and grew into a rumble.

She sprung up, heart thumping, and shook her mother awake. "Quick, we need to leave the house."

"I had a dream." Mother raised herself on one elbow.

"Take your fur." Cerridwen slid her feet into shoes, and grabbed her bag.

Mother's eyes widened. "What's that noise?" She swung her feet onto the floor.

"Don't know," Cerridwen yelled over the roaring, slipping sound. "We've got to leave." Underneath her feet, the floor moved.

"It's no use," Mother sighed but rose and clutched her fur around her shoulders. "Where can we go?"

"The house is moving," Cerridwen yelled. "Come outside." She supported Mother's frail body

while they staggered to the door. Screaming and wailing in protest, mud and water carried debris down the hill. No time to dwell on fear. Cerridwen forced them outside into the eerie backdrop.

Clouds obscured the moon. Rain drove into their faces. She headed for the familiar large overhanging rocks in the distance. At one with the earth, the outcrop would offer safety. But could she and Mother reach them in time? Mud ran over Cerridwen's feet. "The hill's sliding towards us." Pushing against the driving rain, they struggled on. She dragged Mother with each step. A flash of lightning lit the rocky part of the hill.

"Look. Over there." Nearly to their goal, maybe three men's length away.

The slipping mud knocked Mother off her feet. Cerridwen clutched her fur, but Mother slid away from her grip. In panic, Cerridwen bent, grasped her arm, and pulled her from the sucking mud. After a few staggering strides, a gust of wind almost pushed her over. A thick branch hurled towards them and struck Mother. "No!" Cerridwen screamed. Slipping and sliding, she used strength she'd never needed to call on before. With a mighty effort, she pulled Mother up and hauled her over the last few steps to the shelter of large boulders.

In a space just big enough for both of them under an overhanging rock, she bundled Mother in her furs again and lay beside her. "Are you hurting?"

"Don't worry," Mother whispered. "Not much longer now."

Her weak voice chilled Cerridwen more than the wet garment sticking to her body. She wished she could collect her medicine. She peered over the boulder blocking her view. Maybe she could make it back to . . . No, the collapsed house lay half-way down the slope.

They huddled together until the roar of the storm calmed to driving rain. Faint dawn light showed the devastation of their dwelling. The collapsed roof and sections of wall littered the mud further down and their possessions scattered the slope.

Cerridwen bent over her mother's sleeping shape and studied her face. Her cheerful yellow aura paled with each passing moment. She'd never seen Mother in such a weak state, or so close to death.

Would she hold on to life until Ivan came back from hunting? How Cerridwen wished her older brother could be here. The veined hand in hers felt too cold.

The crinkled eyelids moved and Mother's eyes fluttered open. She moaned, looked around, and back to Cerridwen. "The dream," she whispered. She gripped Cerridwen's hand, raised it, and blinked her eyes. "No ring!"

Cerridwen leaned closer. "What did you say?"

A weak smile hovered around her mother's mouth, but her arm dropped back to the ground. "I saw you painted on a wall, Cerridwen. A picture-mural. A pretty dress . . . blue . . . A ring on your finger that lit up the world. You looked like the goddess I named you after."

"What do you mean?" She gripped the frail hand as if to stop her mother slipping away. Cerridwen forced words through lips rigid with grief. "Don't tire yourself." She longed to hear more. What did Mother see?

The glassy eyes sparkled. "Go to Hailing, daughter." Her expression became tender. "You're so young. Just seventeen. The wise woman will guide you. The ring . . . the key to the future." Mother drew a shuddering breath. "It will lead Britland . . . a better tomorrow."

Cerridwen kept a steady grip on the slack skin over her mother's hand. "I don't understand." A cry of woe rose inside. She couldn't help the fifty people living below in Red Roof in their struggle for survival. How could she bring a brighter future to Britland when she couldn't help the people in Corn World? But she must ease mother's passing. "I'll go to Hailing, Mother."

"Good. Your brother will protect you." Mother choked. "With his life." She gasped for air. "So much pain." Her eyes closed. "Wish I could . . . Say good-bye to Ivan." Her voice trailed off and her aura faded.

"Mother, don't . . ." Don't die, I need your love. Your wisdom. No use saying the words, which would make loss even harder to endure. Mother Nature eventually claimed all her children. When to let go—one of the most important lessons a healer must learn. Cerridwen kissed her mother's forehead and

whispered, "I miss you already." Tears spilled from her eyes onto her mother's face as the truth sank in. She'd never again venture out to visit the sick with her mother. Never share the bread people gave them out of gratitude, or cook a thick vegetable soup from their gifts. "I love you."

A last breath eased from Mother's chest as her spirit lifted. Cerridwen sat back on her haunches, spread her arms and raised her face to the sky. "Farewell Mother! I will do as you wish." Taking a shuddering breath, she acknowledged that she had no idea of how to find Hailing.

Don't. Don't fail before you've tried. Tears streamed down her face.

Too many questions scuttled around her mind, while her Mother's words sank into Cerridwen's soul. She too must travel and leave the life she knew behind. She'd go to Hailing and find the wise woman from her mother's dream. The mention of the mural, the ring and the task of leading Britland into a better future confused her. But she knew one thing: Mother's visions had always guided their lives for the best. And Cerridwen had promised.

* * *

The week after her mother's burial passed in a haze of grief for Cerridwen, along with uncertainty about the coming journey. Kind neighbours had taken her in, while Ivan stayed with friends to help clear away the devastation left by the land slide. Now, on the day of their departure, the rains had stopped as if to encourage her to travel. But before they left, Cerridwen must say good-bye to Dilla, the hermit living on top of the hill, and her mother's best friend. Maybe Dilla could answer some questions.

With grief filling her heart, Cerridwen walked up the slope towards the old hut, carrying a heavy sack of shrivelled apples and potatoes left from the last crop. She tramped the familiar path, passing the small wooden dwellings—memories she'd carry away in her heart. She and Ivan could take few supplies on their journey and would have to accept the kindness of other people or depend on their wits to find food. With her brother by her side, she'd certainly never starve.

The world outside Red Roof puzzled her. How many people lived away from this village? Mother had taught her to read and heal the sick. But she hadn't learned enough about life, the world, anything.

But she'd promised Mother to find the wise woman in Hailing. Maybe by that time, she'd learn more.

Breathing hard, she reached the weathered hut and pushed one of the shutters open. "Dilla, may I come in?"

"Of course, Cerridwen dear. You're always welcome."

She stepped into the dim room that smelled of charcoal and herb oil. Dilla was the only person since her mother had died who called her by her full name, not the shorter, less pretentious Wen everyone else used. Close to the fire, Dilla carved a short branch. She sat on an old animal-skin sack stuffed with dry grass, the same kind Mother had made. Cerridwen blinked away threatening tears.

A forest-green coloured band surrounded Dilla's deep tan aura, which bridged the physical and mental to show a balanced person. Her fine hair looked like moonbeams around her wise face.

Cerridwen examined the figurine in Dilla's hands.

"That's pretty."

Dilla's smile exposed crooked, yellow teeth. "Sit with me, my girl."

She lowered herself onto the smooth dirt floor close to the hearth and crossed her legs. The stalks of rosemary herb lay scattered in front of the fire.

"I'm carving this for your mother and will burn it in my fire together with thyme for a farewell."

"Very kind of you." Dilla came up with a new way to send off each departing spirit in her own private farewell ceremony. "I miss her so much."

"Of course you do. Grief hovers over us for many years." Dilla gazed deep into Cerridwen's eyes. "This is my advice: remember the way she lived and loved and spoke. Hold that inside. Each time sorrow comes, picture her cooking a meal."

"I will." How did Dilla guess her favourite memory?

Dilla's hands stilled. "Anything else?"

"I want to ask you something. What's wrong with the world? Why does Britland need a better future?"

"People of the world are scattered and desperate." Dilla's forehead creased. "They need to pull together or they'll tear each other apart. You'll see."

"I guess I will."

"When will you leave?" Dilla asked.

"As soon as I return to the village. Ivan is packing the few things we can take."

Laying the knife beside her, Dilla clutched the little figurine. With half-closed eyes she said, "You must follow your mother's wish."

Cerridwen nodded. She knew better than to speak of her doubts. Trying to make her voice sound firm, she said, "I will do my best."

"Now don't worry too much." Dilla smiled. "You'll find help on the way. Trust your instinct and allow that feeling to guide you. Have faith in your friends even if they betray you."

"Betray me, how—" She clamped her mouth shut and waited for Dilla to continue.

"You are destined to be special. Your pale skin glows through the ether high above the earth."

Cerridwen longed to ask about ether, but pressed her lips together.

The old woman's gnarly fingers stroked her face. "You're turning into a beautiful woman, Cerridwen. Do not let any man approach your body until you find the right one."

"How will I know . . .?" She let her voice trail off and peeked from under her eyelashes.

Dilla smiled and patted her hand. "He'll be yours before snow covers the earth again for the winter sleep."

Cerridwen sighed.

A glint came from Dilla's eyes when she smiled. "He'll burn when he touches you."

"Burn?" Cerridwen suppressed a chuckle. Was that Dilla's way of referring to passion between wife and husk band?

"Burn, freeze, get struck by lightning." Dilla's firm fingers dug into Cerridwen's shoulder. "Now, go and meet your destiny."

So many questions spun in Cerridwen's head but as Mother used to say, life was all about finding answers. "I've brought you apples and potatoes. We can't carry them with us."

Dilla simply nodded as if she hadn't expected anything else and held out a little package. "Beeswax for your skin."

"Thank you. I'll treasure this." At the old one's nod, Cerridwen took her leave.

Outside, she ran down the hill. Ivan would be waiting. She dashed along the street, splashing her baggy pants with mud. She didn't care. They needed to leave and at last she could let go of her home town and her friends. A new purpose called.

A memory from one of her dreams came to her. Grey streets covered with something hard and enduring. Not mud. Strange metal objects on wheels speeding along with people inside them. She'd learned to understand that her dreams were visions of before the floods, but never made complete sense of them. Would the picture-mural and the ring her mother mentioned help her understand these dreams?

"There you are!" Tall, strong Ivan surrounded by a vibrant tan aura, stepped from the low door of their neighbour's dwelling and flashed a dashing smile. His skin blended with the colour of the earth just like most people's and his eyes shone as golden as the setting sun. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, but have you said your good-byes?"

"To be honest, I can't wait to get away. This place reminds me too much of . . ."

"I know." She lowered her gaze from his eyes to his chest. "I miss her too." A journey waited to shake away her grief.

"Curse that land slip. If only I could have talked to her one more time."

"We'll carry her in our hearts." She took her bag from Ivan and pulled the strap over her head and around her shoulder. "What's the world like?" Tension lapped over her like fire over a heap of dried grass. Fear of the unknown screeched a warning. She'd heard stories in the village . . . violent men . . . hiding among the trees . . . waiting to take her for their mate.

"I've only seen bits of Corn World." He reached for the larger sack. "There are dangers from

people, the weather, hunger, illness, but also many helpful folks."

Cerridwen flung her arms around her brother and protector. A sense of foreboding made her want to stay in Red Roof even though her mother's spirit urged her on.

Ivan laughed and patted her back. "Hey, hey, Wen, what's this? Did you forget that I'm coming along?"

She wiped away a tear and smiled at him. "I'm glad you're travelling with me." But what would they find outside their village? She raised her chin.