

Talibah – The Egyptian

Chapter 15

Finding One's Space

Still rather uncertain about her place and what she would be expected to do in the great labyrinth of Caverns the Bards had dubbed Wynseren, Talibah had seemed to be left to her own decisions for the present. “Don’t worry.” Remarked Brandon, “It’s only been a couple days. Taliesin is just returned and that occupies the Counsel most. Besides, you need some time to get used to everything. Where you are, where to go. I know that’s why they haven’t bothered me much, either. They know I’m helping you in that respect.” He shrugged a bit, the light filtering pleasantly into the room. It was an easterly window that eased Talibah into morning with the grace only a sunrise could give. Even shuttering it did not keep out all dawning light and this pleased Talibah for she liked the gentle rousing nature it provided. She always liked the morning air, it had a crispness in energy, a newness almost, that faded as the day faded. She liked being in that crispness for it seemed to clear her heart and mind a space, something she always felt she could do more with.

Talibah stretched a bit, yawning and looking at Brandon as he moved about, putting some clothes on for the day. “Should I not be helping somewhere, at least?”

For a moment the young man paused at the polished metal that served as mirror in the room and noted the bristled hair on his face, wondering if he ought go and shave it or just let it be. Talibah had evinced no preference yet, so he opted to leave it alone for a while, if for no other reason, to see what her response might be or even if she would make one. Smiling at her, Brandon sat back on the bed as he pulled on a pair of cloth and leather shoes. “If you like.” He said. “Whatever, where-ever. I doubt it matters much, yet. I really expect they’d like you to explore, love. This is a big place, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. And we’ve barely gone through much of it.”

“Perhaps the stables, then. I love horses and I enjoy working with them. And I’ve not seen my horse since we got here.” Talibah got up and casually looked out the window, pulling the shutters back completely to let in the golden rays. “I see people all about working in the fields, husbanding the stock and riding here and there. It is busy here inside these caverns and out.”

“It is as big as a large town. Maybe larger. There’s a lot to see. I barely have much grasp of it all though I’ve been here several times, even staying several seasons when much younger. But, I like being here. I always have. ‘Course, I am like to be sent out again before long.”

“Sent out?” Said Talibah some startled, looking back at Brandon with concern in her eyes.

“Why, yes.” He frowned a bit. “I am a Runner and still in training. Perhaps I will be sent with Kevyn again. Though I get the impression he’s already being prepped and making ready for new destinations. And I doubt they’d expect me to leave so quickly.” Brandon’s eyes turned reflective. “I like working with Kevyn. He’s easy to work with. And right fun to tease!” He grinned, trying to ease a sense of tautness that had gathered in the airs about them.

“And what of us?” Talibah sat closely by him, watching his face, his eyes having again become distant within the privacy of his thoughts.

“Ahhh.” He returned and turned to face her as he sighed. “They’ll give us a bit of time, I’m sure. And I would return, you know. Or you would find me in your own travels. We are Bardic, Talibah. We go where we are needed and where we can learn the most.” He brushed a hand through her hair, regarding her face closely. “But Bards believe in love. Yes. In fact, love is a cornerstone to our very system. And if our personal love for each other is strong enough. And we were to request it. We would be placed together. But I think we need the time to grow right now. Don’t you?”

“Silly. I realize this.” Talibah sat back, shaking her head at herself, giving a small smile in some apology. “But it did not register before now. So much has happened so quickly. And I had been searching so long. And now I find myself here.”

“From Egypt. All the way from Egypt?” He ventured, obviously curious.

“Yes. Do you know how far that really is?” He shook his head, ‘no.’ “A journey. Days, months, years, even. Into strange lands, strange peoples, strange ways. Listening to people speak and not understanding. Forcing one’s self to understand, learn as quickly as possible for your life depended on it. Venturing into a darkness with nearly no light to guide you. Until entering here. Entering Cymru... Cymru. It is bright here. Your People. Your Country. Full of life. Compassion. Love for each other. Love for your Land. But strange, too. As if I had been in a dark cave for long and long to emerge here. And here is another World.” Memories suddenly filtered to Talibah; drifted sand and lush, vegetated crops by the fertile Nile midst great cities of stone and light. She could nearly smell the press of people and animal mixed in with delicious spices that seemed forever present in the air. Talibah sighed, a lone tear tracing her face as she blew out a breath, then inhaled nearly as strongly, her mind reflective. “So much. So different. So strange.”

“I confess I don’t... totally understand. I’ve met strangers to our Land. Traders, merchants. But, that, too, is a life, a way of its own. Sometimes they become part of Cymru. Of Cymric Ways. But, it is not something I share in. And no-one means to rush you, Talibah.” He took her face gently to look deeply into her eyes. “Taliesin loves you. And I believe, so do I.” He smiled largely and kissed her, wherein she returned it with a long, warm embrace. Pulling away, he shook his head. “Let’s go look for your horses.” He shrugged. “There is much to see and investigate here. Let me show you.” To this, Talibah nodded warmly, letting Brandon pull her up to go.

Talibah and Brandon wended through some of the longer tunnels of Wynseren on their way to stables where Talibah’s horse was now being kept. At the beginning of these tunnels were tapers and a box of flint set nearby so that one could pick up a taper to light and use through the area. Once at the other end, one extinguished the taper and set it with others there for the next person to use. If yet dark in the area one entered, one either lit candles or torches in the area or proceeded to another set of tapers in another tunnel. That way wax and torch were preserved to the best one might, yet provided everyone enough light to move about. Entrances and windows, natural or created, appeared from time to time to alleviate the shadowy atmosphere as one moved from place to place. Yet overall, the latticework of caverns and tunnels created an almost dream energy that had a curious subtle influence on all who lived within.

The sounds of occasional notes and movement as if in some disconnected dance seemed to brush upon Talibah and Brandon's ears as they walked through an especially long passage. It echoed eerily before them, reverberating in long vibrations that touched the walls. Talibah caught slight flashes of color from it, causing her nerve endings to tingle some. As disjointed as it was, for whatever reason it also drew her as she almost instinctively followed the sounds. Finally they came to an opening that led into a fair sized area lit both by a couple windows and some torches. Talibah peered in slightly but Brandon lightly pulled her back. "It's not polite to just barge in. Here." He smiled, picking up a small bell in a little niche at the entrance. "We do this." With that, he rang the bell a few times, then put it back down in its place. "And wait. If we may enter, someone will appear in a moment or so. If not..." He shrugged and smiled again. "We move on."

Talibah returned his smile and nodded, pleased as always that she had a guide in this literal labyrinth. She wasn't sure she'd ever really memorize this maze, though some facets of it were just beginning to make some sense in design and manner. She felt like she could find the kitchens well enough and at least one passage that led back out of the caves themselves. There certainly were no signs of any real kind, one seemed almost led by sound or smell, albeit Brandon seemed certain enough of himself. It was adventure with a certain safety to it as they also passed others as they wandered through and that pleased Talibah as well. She had wandered long enough in uncertainty and danger. This was more like children playing, or really, lovers, and that was something Talibah could savor with true relish and enjoyment.

A few moments had gone by as they waited and listened by the opening with no reply, so Brandon indicated that perhaps they ought pass on. But before they could truly move, a face finally appeared. Talibah recognized the face as the graying man who had sat next Taliesin at the homecoming feast with the little girl that was Taliesin's daughter. "Did you wish to enter?" He spoke quietly and grinned. "They asked me my opinion on some things." He shrugged and indicated they might come in the area if they wished. "Perhaps you might have some ideas, too?"

Returning his positive gesture with smiles of their own, Talibah and Brandon nodded their heads pleasantly as they entered the area at his gesture. Within there were what appeared to be several Dancers in fairly sparse clothing in variant shades of reds and white. Colored streamers of all hues and shades of cloth lay about that were sometimes used in the dancing. A few others were sitting with some instruments, their clothing in shades of blue telling Talibah that they were Sacred Musicians, as well as Singers in their colors in a assortment of yellows and gold. But none Bards but themselves and the man who had greeted them at the door who now indicated a bench a little ways from the others where it was obvious they were meant to sit.

Once they had settled down, their eyes adjusting to the windows' streaming light that seemed to fall especially on the Dancers themselves in interesting patterns, the graying man spoke to the Dancers, "Did you want to try it again, then? We've new viewers. Perhaps they may have an opinion. Personally, I think some of the stomping steps could be crisper. Don't fear snapping the color waves. The pop fires something in my brain. And stimulates my heart to open some. It's a good thing. You ought push for it more."

One Dancer, a middle-aged man with light brown hair nodded slightly in acknowledgement. “Yes, Brother. We will see what we may do.” With that, the man signaled to the Musicians and Singers to start again.

Talibah was surprised to realize that she could see colors stream from their dancing almost immediately, causing her to intake her breath with near astonishment. Noting this and understanding, the graying man turned to her. “It’s the lighting. That’s why they practice here, you see. So that someone like you or I can observe the colors better. Tell exactly what they’re doing and how. Wonderful, isn’t it?” She nodded her head lightly as she continued to watch. “I am told you are Taliesin’s student.” He said after a few moments. One of the Dancers seemed to trip some, causing the man to smile and say, “A little fast there, I think. No. Slow it down a bit. I assure you the next phrase will pop despite it. It doesn’t rely on the notes or steps before it. Truly.” As the Dancers, Singers and Musicians regrouped, the man turned to Talibah again, raising his brows.

“Yes.” She replied in answer to his question before the Dancer’s misstep. “I am Taliesin’s student. I came to Wynseren with him. My name is Talibah. And you are Dylan, aren’t you?”

“Why, yes. Yes, I am.” He responded, seeming rather pleased she knew.

“You are a close friend of my Teacher.” She ventured.

“Indeed.” He grinned, then looked over at Brandon. “And you are?”

“Brandon.” Brandon said enclosing a hand around Talibah’s. “I was part of the band that went to escort the Father here.”

“Ah, I see.” Dylan responded pleasantly, noting protectiveness in the younger man’s words and demeanor.

“I thought it wise that I should help Talibah get used to it here.” Brandon continued almost defensively.

Glancing benignly at him, Dylan returned, “It’s a very large place, yes. And it is wonderful that Talibah has a guide, I agree. But, it does have a rhythm, a how and why. It will make enough sense, in time.” At that point the Dancers, Singers and Musicians began again, causing attention back to their sound and movement.

As the Dance continued, Talibah found that she could virtually ‘feel’ their movements pass through her, as if pushing within. And as that happened, the music itself seemed to follow on it, touching and moving her energies from within as well. It also began to make her a bit lightheaded as she finally put her head in her hands. Feeling as much as seeing this, Dylan gave motion for the group in front of them to stop.

“Talibah?” Brandon said as he, too, realized something wasn’t quite right. “What’s wrong?” He did not yet sense things quite as she and Dylan did, so was some surprised at her reaction.

Dylan came over, kneeling before Talibah, putting his palms on either side of her head as he emitted a low, comforting hum. After a moment or so, Talibah looked back up, her eyes clear and focused with a mild expression of pleasant astonishment. “Better?” Asked Dylan as he stopped the hum and took his hands away. She nodded her head ‘yes’ and he crinkled his eyes as he smiled at her. “A little strong, eh? Ah, well.” Straightening back up, Dylan turned to the performing group. “Why don’t you just work on certain moves and notations now? In fact...” He said, looking back at Talibah, “I’d like you to show our young Bardic student some strains. Come on, Talibah.” He smiled, looking at

her as he extended a hand indicating she get up. “These are some of the best in this part of Cymru.”

Talibah stood at that and walked over to the group a bit uncertain. Though she looked back at Brandon a moment in solicitation of his help, he sat firmly where he was. In this he seemed excluded as Dylan sat down next the young man. One of the women Dancers touched Talibah gently on her shoulder to get her to turn. When Talibah did so, she was met by a wave of energy seeking to welcome, comfort and enclose. It was so amiable Talibah nearly sighed as the woman who had touched her smiled in understanding. “See. We have our ways, too.” She remarked. “Now, my friend. Let us show you some easy but effective steps.” With that Talibah no longer felt any ill at ease as she proceeded to work with this affable and receptive group.

So engrossed was Talibah in their teaching as she learned with an ease and quickness that really rather startled her new set of teachers, Talibah was unaware that anyone else had entered the area. Finally, when the group called for a break and Talibah recognized that she had garnered enough for the day, she looked up to realize that Saffir had joined the small Bardic cluster. The woman sat between Brandon and Dylan with a certain satisfied mien about her as Talibah caught her eye. Seeing Talibah’s gaze, Saffir grinned and clapped her hands. “Well done!” She quipped, “You are very good. You had quite surprised them, I think.”

“Saffir.” Talibah responded as she came up to the others. “I’ve not seen you since the Homecoming for Taliesin.”

To this Saffir shuffled a bit. “I wished to spend a little time with Kevyn. He’ll not be tarrying here long. A couple weeks at best. But, I intend to stay on a bit. At least ‘til High Summer, maybe longer. See, he’ll need to make tracks fair soon if he wants to get anywhere close his destination before he’d be forced to Winter somewhere. I know he even hopes he might get there. Hard to say.” She shrugged, noncommittally, “Depends on how many side treks he’ll take. ‘Course, I think the Council’s pretty serious about his presence in his new status, so perhaps they’ll request he fly a Council Banner.”

“So soon. I’m sorry, Saffir. But, why not go with him?” Talibah asked partly in sympathy, but mostly from curiosity than anything as she finally sat down with them all.

Saffir shrugged again, her face a bit distant as she looked off to watch the Dancers, Singers and Musicians discussing a few notes and moves. After a moment she shook her head and looked back at Talibah with her bright, green eyes, “Believe it or not, he’d want me to settle, stay with him. He’s mentioned it, you see. And it could be arranged. But... I don’t think so. Not now, anyway. Humph. Not sure I ever could. Besides. I will ‘know’ where he is, eh? I could always go for a visit.” She grinned showing strong, white teeth. “A Court Bard.” She laughed a bit. “Who’d a thought it? He goes to take a Second, you know. But, I’ve strong suspicions he’ll be a Chief in a few Seasons. Truly.”

At that, the Dancers, Musicians and Singers began up again, causing the now little Bardic audience to fall silent as they turned their attention back to the performance. Suddenly Talibah felt the tendrils of ties that seemed to be beginning to weave about her. She wondered if it might be from the music and dance before them, but wasn’t sure that’s what she really felt. Something made her feel that both Dylan and Saffir had just entered into her path to join her own. It was a curious sensation, one that felt like deliberate choices rather than circumstance. And somehow the notations and steps before them all

were helping cement this weave deeply within Talibah's being. As she pondered this, she felt the gentle weight of Brandon's hand grasping her own and knew he was already strongly woven into her inner fabric. 'What curious imagery.' She thought, knowing it was a facet she would begin to note and pay more attention to now.

Everyone had been killed of the Greathouse sent to encounter Oswald and leaving an easy route to the Greathouse's takeover. Yet, Oswald had not proceeded once the battle was complete. 'Leave them.' The voice within had instructed. 'Be like a fear that strikes in the night. If you take the House, they will know who takes them. If you leave... here... now... you let a malignancy infect them. Return to Briton. Wait. And I will show you. And you will strike again with fear already seeded and roots beginning to do their work for you.' So, despite his men's wonder, Oswald called a retreat once victory was assured. It had been an eerie day, watching the beings in the mist feeding on the death wrought before them like maddened wraiths of nightmare imaginings. Some might have questioned the force that was unleashed but did not dare it for it had brought them an easy victory and few of their own numbers had even been wounded. Yet, for some, the sight of the bloody feast would linger in the depths of their bowels the rest of their lives. An infestation that grew and fed like the creatures they had seen.

Oswald had allowed a certain amount of booty to be taken from the desecrated village and defeated warriors. No one had been left alive in the village; none of man, woman or child. However, Oswald restricted the booty to whatever each man could carry and only the horses that could be led were gleaned from the livestock. "We breed fear today." Oswald had explained, "We are to be as ghosts of the mist. Cymru will fear what it can not define."

Returning into Briton, Oswald had gone back to the Greathouse where his troops had so currently guested before. Here he told the Lord that for the time being he, Oswald, would assume control and base. It was not something this greedy Lord found an easy acceptance, yet knew Oswald was not a man to breach. Oswald was the son of the King and that King was known to be cruel should his attention ever be turned in one's direction. And much as his father, Oswald was known for the same in temperament and action. Especially now, when Oswald had apparently gained such easy triumph, did an unease filter into the Household's Lord.

Oswald was also known for a certain patience and calculation, he had to cultivate it if he ever hoped to gain his father's place. Yet, his heart did not feel the same patience and he chafed sorely, knowing he was meant to wait before even planning the next steps to take. Where to strike. Yet, as days passed, days that crawled into a few weeks, signs of distress did indeed begin to filter along the borders. Oswald's scouts began to come back with reports of wariness, unease and fear.

In the darkness of a restless night, as many of his nights were these days despite any wine or women he might employ, Oswald chose to wander the halls to the Courtyard. Stepping outside he met with a quiet for now near the entire Household slept but for the few guards taking watch. Clouds seemed to tighten and gather overhead, by morning there was like to be rain. For some moments Oswald looked at the sky thinking on his men. They needed practice and if the day was wet and muddy tomorrow, he was certain

to command they do just that. It was not a favorite thing of his men, but Oswald knew it would present both a good distraction on a gloomy day as well as make his men keener in difficult situations.

As he lightly pondered these thoughts, Oswald felt presence behind him causing him to turn quickly, the long knife he always carried drawn into his hand. For even within this sworn House, Oswald knew one could never rely on such sureties completely. Yet, as he turned, he also felt the glow of the medallion on his chest as he came round to face the being who had appeared to him that night when this all began. Nearly dropping the knife on seeing the being, Oswald also dropped to one knee.

“Ah.” Remarkd the being, a subtle light glimmering all about it. “My friend. Do not fear me. Rise and look on me.”

Hearing this, Oswald did as he was bid, though he could not help the strange feelings within this being always stirred. The sheer beauty of this being caused Oswald’s heart and mind to hurt in ways he did not know how to ascertain. “I have done as you instructed. And we wait. Do you come to give new instructions?” Oswald said hopefully, his body shaking slightly.

“Soon.” The being replied. “Be patient a little longer. It is soon... I come to warn you.”

“Warn me?” Oswald narrowed his eyes, in some surprise.

“Merchants come to this Court. Merchants that seem to be from the interior of Briton. They are a small number. Three, four. They claim to be a father and sons. But... they are Bardic.” The words of the being were hushed, almost conspiratory in sound and inflection.

“Bardic?” Oswald nearly gasped, a snarl encasing about his lips.

“Oh, yes... It has happened before, as your father knows. Perhaps more rampant, more infiltrated once. But it continues. Even harder to discover. Yet, ‘I’ know.”

“But, what am ‘I’ to do, then, Lord? Do I needs somehow try to stop commerce? Certainly my father would not demand such measures. At this time my efforts would be poor and pitiful and surely it would stand to cripple my country if I were to try. What would you have me do?” Oswald felt flustered, upset about the Bardic possibility, yet distressed by what the being might propose for action.

“Commerce... No... not at this time for you are right. Your efforts would be small and ill timed at best... It is ‘your’ awareness we ask for. Your awareness that is of importance. And today your concern is only for the merchants who come to this Greathouse. And when they are here, do nothing.”

“Do nothing? But, Lord, you just said...”

The being turned sharply to regard Oswald, looking directly in Oswald’s eyes for he had been gazing off, almost as if distracted. It was a keen and startling stare that penetrated Oswald deeply and the medallion on Oswald’s chest felt heavy and nearly hot. “You will send a small company of men before ‘these merchants’ when they leave again. A mist, a haze, will overtake this Bardic scum in the early morning hours. Their bodies will be found by villagers the next day. Take dogs. Wound these evil rags of godless carrion only and let the dogs have them for the finish as the mist descends. And it will be on Briton’s soil, the village on Briton’s soil. But also some friendly to Cymru, friendly enough to spread news of the deed. And they will think it ghosts in the mist. The villagers will have seen the misted haze in the early morning and it will help confuse all. Cymru

will not know whence or where, but they will know it was some of their favorite sons who died.” It was as if the telling of these plans instilled some sense of pleasure in this being for the sound of his voice had grown rich and almost satisfied in accent and tone.

“But... how will my men know to do this? To ambush? Bards are known for espying danger and they are hearty, well trained fighters.”

“Do you doubt me? Doubt the Powers that send me?” A wall of control and strength surrounded the being, a glow of intensity that crept into Oswald, causing sweat to break out all over him as he whispered ‘no’ and a rush of fear swept through. “Send your men West and North. You will accompany them. There will be a slight haze before you and your men and in time this haze will stop and therefore so shall you. The Bards will know you are at the Greathouse, know who you are. They will be wary; you will see it in their eyes. But, they will move on, anyway. And they will not see you or your men prepare for them when they travel from here for they will think they have left unnoticed one night having said no goodbyes or given anyone to understand that they meant to leave. They will have set themselves up in a nearby village to this House. Only to come trade the Greathouse in the day, but they will have seen you and you they. But they will not suspect that you know. The medallion hides you, hides your heart and mind. Our Gift to you. That is ‘why’ they will not, cannot know. And do not inform your men, not until you go to ambush. Not even until you are upon your quarry. Your men needs think it only an exercise until it is time to strike. The Bards will only think that they needs cross over to Cymru soon for they will be unsettled by your presence, suspicious that you are here to work something on Cymru. And it is why they must be stopped. Killed. And to help spread fear. You will know when to have your men prepare for these merchants, these Bards in disguise, to follow when they leave. It will be seen to. Know this. Believe this. And your rewards will be as great as all of the Island of the Mighty. All under your control and command.” With that, the being disappeared as Oswald clutched the wall near him, wondering if any but he had witnessed the interchange.

Looking about, all Oswald saw was stillness. He knew there were sentries, but they obviously had remained unaware for they showed no signs of disturbance. The dim gray of morning began to filter along with a thin drift of rain as Oswald finally turned to proceed back to his rooms. He had found no sleep that night, only distress now strode with him. But he gritted his teeth and spirit as he walked, knowing nothing less would be demanded of him but to do as the being of light and fire had ordered.

Yet, as Oswald passed by, moving into the House and into his personal restlessness, other shadows watched. Shadows even the being had been unaware of. Noting, sensitive, uncertain. Regarding the exchange with keen interest, yet unsure what steps to take, if any. Somewhat tall, dark, moving on the edges of twilight with large, ethereal eyes and mien. Beautiful and intense, a creature of the night, given neither to good nor evil, but regarding all with knowing eyes. He watched from afar and thought. Perhaps he would do nothing and observe how things might play out. Perhaps. Perhaps not. The Bards had hurt him. But, the Bards had helped him, too. He would watch, then. Wait. See. From afar. For somehow he also knew of the being that had come to Oswald and that it was not of the Earth, or for the Earth. And that did distress him some. The Earth should be autonomous. This he had learned and now believed. She should decide Her own ways, Her own dark and light. And whether She survived and grew or destroyed and was destroyed ought be of Her own doing. So, when Oswald finally left, the shadow

remained to contemplate a moment, then moved on back into the shading, into the twilight, into the dark, knowing he would return to watch and wait some more.

The little band of Bards that had escorted Taliesin to Wynseren had been on the road the last time Talibah had called for Jared. Though the period that had passed had not been much more than a week, still Talibah felt some guilty for it. She wasn't really certain if Jared understood time in the same sense and in the past there had been longer interludes of time go by before she might see him. Yet, that was also before she could actually call his presence and truly choose to see him and she had now only called him a couple times since Cordelia had given her the ring. How might Jared judge such things? And how was it that she had seen his face in her ring at Taliesin's homecoming unbidden? Or, had she, really? Perhaps it was simply her reminding herself, playing on her guilt. And now it had been a couple more days as new experiences and Brandon's presence caught her attention.

Entering the Between, Talibah's mind still meandering some back to things she had done during the day, she was startled by a large pair of golden eyes. It took her a moment to realize that her dragon was already activated, facing her and looking directly at her, into her as if internally questing her. Golden eyes, golden incandescent energies filling her in concentric waves. 'My Lady.' Talibah thought she heard whispered inside her head in sweet, earthy tones. 'Heart of your people. May you join the heart of the Earth, the heart of Cymru.'

Wonderingly, Talibah reached out and touched the shiny scales of the dragon's head, surprised to feel a sense of warmth and delight. It was more like touching the rays of sunshine mixed with the warm sensation of dirt beneath one's feet than any other description Talibah could voice. "What is your name, exquisite one?" Talibah asked, watching the eyes in continued fascination.

A purring sound seemed to emit from the being and Talibah wondered if that was the response until she heard the inner voice again. 'You may call me Durga. It is what your People have called me. When they invoke me.'

The actual image of the dragon faded, though all about took on a golden hue. As Talibah stood wonderingly, she was startled when she realized another presence stood next to her. "My friend." She heard, recognizing Jared's voice. "Why have you been away so long?"

Distinguishing a different cadence in his voice, Talibah turned and she got the same sense of looking directly into Jared's eyes as she had with the dragon. A little disconcerted by this, Talibah took a slight step back. When she saw that this had perhaps slighted the Elf a bit, she tried to recover. "You surprise me, friend. I didn't mean to start."

"But, you called me. I know. I heard your voice and I am drawn. So, here I am." Jared's eyes were clear and bright, reminding Talibah of a beautiful, waiting vessel that might be filled with either sorrow or joy. A simplicity, perhaps, though Talibah guessed that was a bit illusionary on her part.

Frowning some, Talibah responded a bit quizzically, "Your voice, your speech. It's different. It's changed."

Biting his lip and glancing apprehensively at his feet a moment, Jared finally looked back up. "I am trying," He stammered ever so slightly, "to speak more like... Humans. But, it is hard sometimes. It hurts." He said, squinting his eyes as he finished his statement.

"Your thoughts run faster than mine." Smiled Talibah. "I begin to honestly understand that. I'm not sure why. But, I do. But, I fully appreciate your attempts. And don't be embarrassed. I will help you, if you wish. And I will not be upset if you have difficulties or slip. For I ought do my best to understand you, too, you know. The Eldritch. The difference as much as what is the same." Talibah watched Jared and could see that even her string of words was some difficult for him to follow, though his return smile to her at the end indicated that he had. Letting that settle a moment before proceeding, Talibah also remembered and decided to ask. "Jared... the other night... Did I see your face in my ring?" His eyes showed startlement as she continued. "Did you 'see' me?"

Feeling a little caught by that, Jared's eyes grew wide and staring. But, before he could give any kind of answer, another presence entered. "Talibah." The presence said and both Talibah and Jared heard and turned to be greeted by a Elven woman with hair of burnished red and clothed in what seemed like green and gold leaves and bramble that clung and wrapped themselves about her in an disarming array.

"Daerwydd." Spoke Jared before Talibah made any reply of her own. "My Lady." He continued as he slightly inclined his head in recognition.

"Ah, yes. My Sister's cousin. Her beautiful cousin, Jared. Talibah's Guide and friend. It is a delight to see you again. In Wynseren." She took his hands to squeeze them and kissed his cheek before turning back to Talibah. "I am Daerwydd." She said to Talibah in a sweet and disarming manner. "I am Lady of the Wood that surrounds Wynseren. I know Maerdydd well. And I know of you. And of your dragon." The rich scent of Earth seemed to cling to this Elven woman, an earth filled with wild flowers and rich with rain, trees and sun. It was as if the energies of life wrapped themselves about her as she looked at Talibah. Though friendly enough, her eyes looked as if they could turn wild and fierce and Talibah took note of it. "Walk with me a while. Both of you."

Saying this, the woman turned and walked, saying nothing more for the time. She seemed to move into some wooded darkness and after briefly looking at each other, Talibah and Jared followed. Jared lightly took Talibah's hand as he often did, yet this time Talibah felt response in herself she had not really sensed before. She squeezed his hand a little, causing him to look back at her briefly. A tingling warmth passed through her then and she knew it had come from him as he squeezed her hand in return.

They followed Daerwydd through a tangle of roots, foliage and branch and Talibah realized they passed through and within because of Daerwydd. They were under Daerwydd's protection, though the presence of Talibah's dragon also gave them a certain grace as well. The sense of eyes, presence, watched them as they moved and Talibah could feel slight tremors run within Jared in such a way that surprised her in her certainty that she knew such. Getting close to his ear, she whispered, "We are protected."

"I know." He whispered in return, his eyes big with wonder as they continued.

It seemed they had walked a long ways following the glowing shape of the Elven woman before finally stopping before a great tree. The woman turned to face the two and smiled, soft and knowing. "There are two Great Trees at Wynseren. One deep inside the

Caverns and one in my Woods. Both have their voice, both communicate. To each other. To the Eldritch. And to the Bards. When the Bards first came here and decided to stay in these mountains near the wilds of these Woods, my Woods... These two Trees spoke first to Rhiannon. Then to Maerdydd. Which is proper. And it is best to speak with the Great Tree of the Woods before speaking with the One of the Caverns. So that is what we shall do, my ones.”

Talibah looked where the trees stood, up into the branches and leaves and saw nothing but for it was as if the Tree covered the sky above. Then she gasped when she realized she had been taken within. Within the branches and leaves, within the Tree itself. Engulfed by bark and root, music and color filled Talibah’s heart and mind, and a whirl of images as if some history of the land itself played before her. Plants, animals, birds, insects, earth and sky moved through Talibah in a curious rush that dizzied and dazed her senses. It was near impossible to concentrate or focus on anything, but perhaps that was not the intent as Talibah finally let her senses ride with the experience presented her.

In time, the wash of energy slowed and Talibah felt as if she stood on the sands of Egypt near her home. The vision surprised her as she comprehended she was standing near a grove of palm trees she had often gone to and played in as a child. A grove she had felt drawn to for reasons she could not explain other than it had seemed a source of comfort and peace. Now she perceived that the palms looked back at her, telling her they had been and were her teachers. That they had overseen and protected her as she grew. That they knew of the Great Trees of Cymru. And that they had helped instigate Talibah’s journey to find Sophia. For in Cymru, the power of the Mother was still strong. It was the trees that, more than anything, had helped and guided her on her journey. Protected her, whispered to her, taught her. Warned her of any dangers and created a path for her.

Streams of thought moved through Talibah, though without real words, just communal understanding. A sensation of time moving, eons moving as the Earth grew in awareness. As this passed within her, Talibah also felt her dragon stir and the trees responding in recognition. They knew of Talibah’s dragon, giving her to understand that her dragon was related to the Great Dragon of Cymru and therefore related to the Dragon of the Earth. Yet in this revelation, Talibah suddenly understood that somehow her people, her particular family, was also related. Related to families in Cymru. She had thought her family originated from the Frankish lands and knew some of that was so. But now she also perceived that there was another line, a Matrilineal line, that part of her family that had seen to the tattoo on her shoulder when she was so young. It meant that somewhere in Cymru she had relations, she had roots, she had family in this strange and wonderful land. Whether or not she’d ever be able to find such family, she couldn’t say; yet now she understood Cymru was her home, too. She had a place in this countryside and that was partly why it had called to her.

As Talibah receded from her communion with the trees of Daerwydd’s domain, she looked to see that Jared, too, was coming out of his own experience. His hand grasped hers tightly and she decided she rather liked the feel of its weight in hers. His eyes were pleasant when he opened them and he smiled to himself, catching Talibah’s eyes and causing him to smile at her as well. “Trees love you. Love dragon.” He whispered in a near purr falling back slightly into his more Elven speech pattern.

Smiling back at him, Talibah pressed his hand again. "I know." She responded, then remembered other concerns. "The Star Being." She breathed.

"Yes." Daerwydd said and frowned some. "The trees puzzle over it. And so do those of the Elven Court, as you would call us. Time and time ago, before humans have memory, the Earth called to the Stars. The trees sang to the firmament and it responded. Do the Stars now call to the Earth? The Earth shudders some, aware that something may be amiss."

"The Being had said that through the dragon I would know them. Know these Beings. Understand somehow? Yet, I do not. I don't recall anything."

"Not yet." Daerwydd's eyes were round and full as she looked at Talibah, giving Talibah the sense that the whole area where they stood was filled with the Elven woman's eyes. "But it will come. Perhaps the real question is 'who' you are, Talibah. And 'how' might you remember that? The trees can't answer such a question. Your dragon may help. Yet, only you are truly privy to that information."

"I..." It was as if a bell rang, far off and muted; yet, all three heard and looked back to where the Bardic Caverns would be. "I must return. I feel movement and rays of sunlight on my body." She passed a hand over Jared's cheek noting slight tears glinted in his eyes. "My dear friend." She whispered, then softly kissed his mouth, almost startled to realize that they were warm and soft, a wisp of air seeming to pass between his lips.

As Talibah gained consciousness and lay in her bed knowing Brandon slept next her, Talibah wondered, 'What do I feel? What do I feel for you, Jared? What can I feel? And why? You are an Elf and I am not. But, Maerdydd is an Elf, too. I am confused.' As she lay wondering some moments more, she felt Brandon stir, causing her to come back into the physical and it's ever present now. She felt that she loved Brandon, that he was warm and sweet and had the makings of a Bard. And that somehow their bond was important to him becoming a Bard and she would do all she could to help him be so. She began to feel a little torn and did not know what she needs do to resolve it. Yet, for now, she would let it rest as the sun streamed ever more brightly and the day opened its doors with passionate insistence.