

TALIBAH, THE EGYPTIAN

Chapter 10

Light and Shadow

In the darkness, in the shadows of a thick forest, deep in the northern borders of Briton, were beings shattered, left in pain and the sting of memories in defeat. Memories of battles and blood and rich energies they had once feasted upon much as the ravens and crows that gluttoned themselves on the dead and dieing. Feasting brought to an end wherein these beings had also been banished, their own energies finally crippled by the pervasive power and ritual of the Bards. Had only Briton won and destroyed the Bardic strongholds; to continue and encourage fear, struggle and bloodshed; to continue humanity's downward spiral to eventual extinction. That had been the hope, the vision given these beings. The eventual eradication of the human species no matter what souls might occupy their physical form. Perhaps, then, a new world might be born, quiet and graceful, nature undisturbed by the malformation of such disquieting creatures. Then perhaps, in this newfound beauty, the Eldritch, the kin and brethren of these lorn and shattered shadow beings, would realize their folly and open their arms once more and open the gates between the worlds where these forsaken ones might regain their former essence and beauty. And should that forgiveness not be forthcoming, then these beings would do battle, battle with their own brothers and sisters of the Eldritch, until the Realm of Light Itself was subdued. So had they been promised and had come to truly believe was even possible, so great was the magick and charisma of their former leader.

But these beings had been duped in the end, and though they had continued to fight even at their leader's demise, hope still instilled by the pursuit of Briton's King for Cymru's defeat; in the end the Bards had won. The Bards had maintained Cymru's freedom because Eldritch souls occupied the Bardic Council Seat and that Council Seat had made certain the magick wielded against Cymru would suffer dearly in its defeat.

Broken, confused, in continual pain; these beings, these shadows wreathed and twisted in this abandoned hold, hiding their existence lest the Bards at some point decide to seek them out and finish in the destruction. But it was not the Bards who found them out. It was as if a strange, foreign energy had located them, covered them, soothed them, sang to them. A hum that mended them, strengthened them, straightened them, letting them rise and releasing their chains. Thoughts moved through them, speaking that instructed, though no words were spoken. Knowledge, understanding; a new hope, a new way, much greater power and help. Power that was coming, power on its way, power that knew just how to crush the Bards and the Bards' plans to protect and insulate the Earth from any outside energies, that humans might not only rule, but be left to claim the destiny and direction of the Earth's future without interference.

Strengthened, the pain gone, the chains broken and severed, the beings of shadow were grateful, willing, listening, agreeing. A new plan was formed, a new strategy; and this time it seemed assured that the power that would oppose itself to all that the Bards hoped and planned was something far greater, more far reaching and more final than

supposed or dreamed. It was what was believed, anyway, for what else could have severed their bonds so easily and completely. Agreements were made; new plans formed and soon there would be the strength to venture forth to put these plans in motion.

A light dusting of dew still clung in a faint glistening on the grasses as the horses stepped lightly along the path in the morning airs. The sun rose with its mantle of golds and reds over the ridges of mountain and hill as if unfurling flags to announce the day. There was a great quiet to it that made Talibah smile as they journeyed, letting the smell of the newly growing plants invade their fragrance through her as if she could feel it covering her, passing through her and within her. She closed her eyes lightly for a moment as they continued on their expedition realizing that she could 'feel' the day all around her, the sights, smells, sounds seeping gently through her skin, seeking a certain oneness with her being. A curious sensation, one gained from the dance of the other night when Taliesin had told her she had acquired Bardic sight. It was beyond just sight, really; it was as if all her senses sometimes ran together; yet it receded, too, when she wished. A curious twist of control she couldn't explain though Taliesin understood well enough. "I am glad of that." He had said, "Sometimes that is not the case and it is something that must be worked with. Especially when one opens that door very quickly as you did. But, I am also not too terribly surprised at your adeptness. You have proven to be quite strong in many areas... And now you know the truth intimately. We are all part of everything. And everything is part of us. It is no longer something merely said and believed. It is something you now 'know'. In day to day experience." He had smiled in a soft subtle manner that she had felt reaching to her, warming and touching slender lines within her like the vibration of her harps' strings. And though she could indeed control it, in so many ways, everything in life seemed new and sometimes a bit startling so that she might drift and stare a moment or so, allowing for a certain absorption of it to take place.

She opened her eyes back up gently, softly as they moved on, glancing over at Brandon who now paced his horse beside her and smiled at her when she looked over at him from time to time. It had been an evening full of new sensations at the town Taliesin had directed them to go. One last night before they might finally come to Wynseren, the Bardic Seat. They had ridden into the town with the Bardic banner flying, albeit not of the Council's yet, and not using Taliesin's name, though by this time the town was aware something of note was about. Taliesin had produced coins at the inn they were to stay at, indicating that the party truly did not wish obligations and all settled in each to their own designs. Saffir and Kevyn had elected to stay in a private room together and Taliesin had indicated that Osla and Brandon might stay with him making it clear that Talibah might stay in a room on her own, though she also realized that this created an opening for her to face her feelings about Brandon.

Talibah decided that having chosen to invite Brandon to stay with her that night had been a good choice as she softly smiled at him in the clear crispness of morning as they rode. He had been gentle and warm, intuitively aware that this was not something she had much experience of. The new senses that had been opened in her allowed her to wrap those energies about the both of them, and though Brandon was not quite at that stage of understanding, she knew he could discern some of it and reacted to it with

pleasure. However, he also turned out to be a fairly adept lover, which hardly surprised Talibah and she was grateful for that. There was no clumsiness on his part as he allowed Talibah her own level of discovery and trial. Yet, Talibah couldn't help wondering what it all might be like if he could truly merge his energies with hers as she did with Jared, or if that would even be possible at any given point. Or would it enhance the experience or confuse it? She had enjoyed placing so much concentration in her skin, letting all her senses commune in his touch, rippling across her body in waves of converged sensation, colors and sound, taste and smell, as much as touch. When she did finally move into her climax, it was as if this burst in fragments all around her as the nearly frightening feeling that she might also disintegrate into pieces with it held her for a moment in a curious sensation as if she could touch into some eternal void and yet bring herself back instantaneously. And this, too, passed as she felt her whole body simply relax, a certain part of her mind gliding out with the release as Brandon, too, moved through his own apex and release. Tenderly, sleepily, they pulled apart, and even these sensations echoed in a sublime, though almost subliminal chorus that spiraled slowly downward. Lying closely next each other, Talibah listened to Brandon's low breath, this time being conscious that his energies did wrap themselves around her and that he did have some awareness of doing this.

Though the window in their room was shuttered against the still coolness of the night, Talibah could feel the moon in the sky shining bright amid her stars as thin clouds passed before her face. The hoot of an owl echoed near the window amid the soft clutter of crickets reminding Talibah that Nature Herself seemed to be singing. How curious to feel so one with everything, to enjoy the darkness as if she melted into it, the warmth of her body, Brandon's body, melting into the warmth of the night.

They made love again in the very first filtered lights of the sun as he just began to dawn, this time with more drive and passion, their bodies glistening with a thin sheen of sweat. It was pleasant to see the contours of each other's bodies; their youth, their firmness. Talibah was strong and lightly muscled, yet still retained soft, gentle curves that Brandon seemed to like to run his hands along. There was some rawness yet to Brandon's youth, but Talibah was impressed at how well he handled himself, that he had a steady manner that was curiously unhurried in every move he made. She believed he'd make a fine Bard one day, composed and certain, a trait that she had seen in all the Bards she had met so far. Was she so composed and certain? She didn't really 'feel' that way. But, perhaps it was something she gave off to others, anyway. Even as emotional as Kevyn could be, he, too, had a presence and was always collected when they were with people outside the Bardic folk. It seemed to Talibah that the Bards had a certainty that the common person needed to believe in, a strength that even the lords and ladies relied on and looked to.

Now as they rode in the new day, Talibah thought on these things, watching Brandon, watching the landscape, letting herself move in and out of her feeling of oneness, getting used to it and her flexibility with it. It was slowly becoming something 'normal', almost as if she could send it to the background of her being so that she might be in control of the sensations. Taliesin glanced her way from time to time and she knew he was quietly monitoring her to make certain she did not feel overwhelmed at any point, ready to be of help if she needed it. Yet, he would smile and nod, a loving dotting teacher, aware and satisfied with her progress. He had even seemed rather pleased that she had

asked Brandon's company though he well knew her open sensitivity. Perhaps Taliesin felt he was leaving her in good hands for surely if any problem had arisen, he would have quickly and firmly intervened.

After a period of amiable quietness where the horses' hooves clacking on the dirt and stone road with the crunch of saddles and gear were the main sources of the party's sounds, Kevyn began to sing. It was a wistful song Talibah had heard many times, had sung many times, that spoke of Spring and first stirrings of love between the Earth and Sky. The whole little band seemed to beam as he sang several lines before everyone decided to join in. Suddenly the airs were filled with the sound of Bardic voices that appeared to even echo into a valley before them. Finally reaching the edge of a ridge, Taliesin bid they all stop a moment, indicating he wished to also say something. "Soon," he spoke as everyone had halted and listened attentively, "Soon we shall near the Court of Gwydion and his Greathouse. We will not stop there, but will pause a moment... Talibah has never seen the Ricon's Seat... It is certainly the largest Greathouse in Cymru. And holds many, many memories for me. For no other reason I would pause... If just to remember." He smiled, then slowly brought in a deep, long breath. "Well, let's go. It's really just a little over the ridge on a great hill." Talibah could feel a curious wave of warmth emanate from Taliesin's words, his breath nearly startling her with an unexpected sense she could feel what he was feeling for a moment. Then it passed as Taliesin gathered his horse's reins up, lightly kicking the horse's sides and clucking sounds that would entice all the animals to move on.

As Taliesin promised, it was but a little over the ridge and the evidence of humanity was plainly visible across the countryside in terraced hills of fields and pens, livestock, horses and huts. More than one village could be distinguished and a town looked to be at the base of a large imposing hill, a background of mountains behind it in the distance. A road appeared to run up the side of the hill where it met a stone wall and the wall circled the entire top of the hill in a sort of meandering, tumbled way where it was evident many buildings of variant sorts lay within. None of those buildings appeared to be higher than two stories, but of what could be seen, looked sturdy and well built. Many colored banners flew above the walls creating a peculiar sense of gaiety in the bright blue of the sky. Taliesin sat his horse looking out at it in obvious pride having stopped to pause once more. The smile on his face was soft with memory, his eyes reflective and almost sad.

For a moment or so Talibah wasn't certain how to feel about the view. Having come from Egypt she knew buildings of true stature and magnificence surrounded by a horizon of dwellings in a metropolis that expanded beyond one's sight. What lay before her now seemed but the first glimmer of such thoughts, the poor country cousins at the farthest reaches of human industry. Then suddenly it was as if a new vision invaded her and she realized she was being gifted Taliesin's sight and heart, for now she saw something removed from such simple expression. There was hard, long work and sweat here, years of toil and conflict this landscape represented. A divided land made into a single, solid country, proud and strong. Leadership that was respected, sometimes feared, yet certainly loved by the people of Cymru. This was Cymru's center, Cymru's heartbeat and Taliesin had had much to do with its creation and the pride he felt for it now was not ill placed. In some ways, Talibah also understood that this rather free, meandering look echoed a people who were free and easy, open and generous, living their lives in a closer

association with the wilds of their land and the dictates of Nature. Somehow she knew that the Eldritch themselves would be attracted to such places for the kinship of humanity with the rest of the world was in far greater evidence in Cymru than anywhere else she had ever seen in her travels. With that, Talibah gave over to the great satisfied warmth she knew Taliesin was radiating, smiling up at him when he turned to her that she might show to him that she was receiving his impressions and that she fully understood and appreciated them.

“They have already left.” Taliesin whispered at last. “The Ricon and his party will meet us tonight at Wynseren.” A sudden thought drew across him, surprising him a little as a tear glinted in the corners of his eyes. “And something very precious is being brought to me.” He swallowed and pursed his lips, his voice low and almost inaudible, “Something I left in the hands of a great and dear friend.... Ah, Dylan, I’m sorry. Truly. I had no idea how long it had been. No idea. Time and place were ripped from me as if in some madness...” He sighed deeply and long as he closed his eyes and shook his head and though Talibah tried to maintain the open link Taliesin had given her, she realized that he now had softly closed her off. Having no intent on invading his privacy, she withdrew completely when she understood this was indeed what he wished although she was also somewhat distraught at the saddened cast that had moved across him. Yet after a space or so he seemed to shake free of it, turning back to everyone with a rather warm and generous smile. “The party that has left the Greathouse shall arrive a little before us, I should think. We are closer here to Wynseren than they had been when starting. And though the day may still be in the last vestiges of morning, it won’t be for very much longer so we best be on now if we truly do wish to be at Wynseren by nightfall... A little up the road now and we shall bring out the Council’s banner to finally announce that I am coming home.” With that Taliesin led them on and away from the view of the Greathouse and its attending countryside, picking up the pace a bit for awhile as they strode along the ridge for what seemed a mile or so before moving in another direction. As they rode, Talibah saw a ridge of mountains rise before them realizing the road they trod led in the direction of those said mountains as well.

Later, the early afternoon, the road obviously getting closer to the mountains that she had first espied, Talibah felt that she just began to see movement along the base of some of them. It seemed there might even be buildings and fields, though it was hard to be truly certain, there was still a good ride away. The trot Taliesin had bade of them he finally slowed to a steady walk as he himself seemed to be looking about at everything as if reminding himself and reacquainting his memory somehow. Halting at a clump of trees, they broke out some fruit, nuts and drink, more to let the horses rest a spell as they sat in the great shadow of the mountains, the sun high overhead and about to begin his descent for his western realms.

As they sat, Brandon obviously enjoying some time to sit next to Talibah, though he appeared to know enough not to crowd her space or dominate her occupation, Talibah’s thoughts turned to a couple nights before. It was as if the very beauty of the landscape that she saw before her reminded her, reminded her of the dragon, of her dragon, and the ride she and Jared had made into the stars. As the chatter of the others moved about her, Talibah closed her eyes, seeing the beautiful and strange face of the otherworldly messenger, a deep sadness filtering through its eyes. “Shh...” Spoke the

voice of Taliesin beside her, “We will speak of these things later. Don’t worry.” Startling, Talibah looked up only to note Taliesin fitting gear on his horse.

Brandon took Talibah’s hand seeing her curious expression and suddenly a little concerned. “Are you alright?” He asked, question lighting his brown eyes reflectively, “You seem outside yourself.”

“Oh... Yes... But, I’m alright.” She turned and smiled to ease him. “Such a beautiful day. I sort of got lost in it.” She let her senses stretch out a moment as if her mind could unravel and unwind itself within the branches of the trees and she sighed and smiled at Brandon, nearly whispering and lightly squeezing his hand. “A beautiful day.”

The hall seemed frigid, almost bitter from the starkness of the gray stone walls as no tapestries hung now to keep any cold out from the last of the lingering cool nights of early Spring. Everything was actually in a state of near and seared ruin, the villages of the area scorched and pillaged, and the great round house of this Pictish community would have been burnt to the ground but for its stone walls. Yet the victors were now not unhappy in this for in these remains a fire was lit, the thatching of the roof quickly and clumsily replaced, that the warriors of these victors might keep themselves as warm as they might and shut out what they could of the night to feast and go over the spoils obtained that day. It did not matter to them the stains of soot along the walls, having removed whatever wreckage remained so that they might bed down within. No prisoners had been kept; they had slaughtered every person they had found from Chieftain to newly born child. Their enemies had been Picts after all; savages, and it were better to rid the land of such vermin so that the folk of Briton might claim it for their own without the stink of such Pagan savagery. Not much in the way of spoils really fell to these victors, only the animal skins were of any real worth for any tapestries woven or artifacts created were filled with wanton Pagan images and were duly destroyed.

The Picts were not like the Cymru; for though their lands were also rugged and often stark and bitter, they were very scattered and wild. No central power of any kind held their attention, each Chieftain proud of his or her Clan’s independence; and though they, too, honored and respected the Bard’s presence, they did not depend on Bardic judgment or were as wont to keep Bardic Chiefs as did the Cymru. Yet, the Picts were friendly to Cymru in a certain unobtrusive way and as long as borders were unchallenged, trade and movement was easy and unrestrained.

It was from Briton that real threat now came and despite Pictland’s ruggedness, Briton began to be determined to claim her bit by bit, reddening the mountainous landscape as crows filled the skies to feast on the carnage. It was a task the King of Briton did not truly have time for as his attention was more nearly occupied by threats along the coast from the Saxons. Yet, his eldest son was free to such and the father even encouraged such endeavors knowing the best way to learn to rule was by the good command of one’s comrades in arms. Besides, Oswald enjoyed the harshness of these bitter climes for somehow the more rugged and fierce the land and people, the more sweet the victory seemed. And this day had been a long fought one, as many of Oswald’s own men had died in the battle from the ferocious, unyielding Picts. The land had only recently been sown and Oswald determined to leave it that way, leaving much of the

livestock unharmed and whatever horses they could. Perhaps the spoils were even better than first considered for now this area was well set to let a fair amount of Britons move in, build and reconstruct without as much concern in the doing. If there had been crops already up, he would have been hard put to stop any fire that would have lit the fields. In fact, he would have been like to have started such himself for the lust to destroy would have been too great; and the livestock would have been more like to perish and scatter, too, once the blaze was set. Now this land was mostly left intact but for the burning homes and it had been easier to round up the animals for they had been kept far enough from the humans' habitats to not have bulked or scattered to any great degree.

So as these victors sat by the fire, drinking, eating and praising each other, Oswald thought long on their success and how they would proceed and what was best to follow. He sent messengers behind them, back to towns to call for those who might be willing to leave their native areas for new lands that for one reason or another might promise new hope to them. There were always those down enough on luck who welcomed a new start or poor enough to welcome the chance for a real home. And Oswald would also offer first rights to any of his soldiers and warriors here if they should decide as such, though often most preferred to go back home when all was finished. However, Oswald also knew he would have to post some here whether they willed or no. Yet, this would be a good post and he felt he could get several to see it as such. Any Pict left alive had run, a small scattering that held no immediate threat and was more like to become dissolved within other Pictish settlements than attempt any sort of real return.

Into the night the Britons enjoyed their victory and though the round house held a great many of Oswald's armed men, there were still a good many without who tented as best they could and built a small smattering of small fires about. To the men outside Oswald also made appearance from time to time, speaking pleasantly yet firmly now that they had won, making certain all understood the importance now that no more destruction should be fostered and the livestock and horses, the fields should be left alone. It was important to let these men enjoy the night, the feasting, the dancing, the drunkenness; yet it was also important for Oswald to maintain his own sobriety and steadiness with a few trusted men as they watched over the whole. Was it the Romans who had taught them this? Sometimes it seemed like knowing how to manage wolves – to give them as much kill as they needed and no more so that they might sustain a hunger for another day, another kill.

The sky had grown crisp and clear, the stars littered across the night in its cold array when the whole of Oswald's men were finally asleep. All asleep but for Oswald himself and the guards at the outskirts of their camp; for even his own had finally lain down when it was apparent that the last of the songs was sung, the last of the drunken voices quieted and nothing but snores filled the airs. Oswald sat near one of the round house entrances, a great mound of heavy furred stitched skins about his shoulders for warmth as he stared into the skies. He was proving his mettle, he knew; it was important he handle his men well, that they respected him, heeded him and at times feared him if not liked him. He was tall, fair skinned and eyed with big bones, large features and great physical strength as much as mental toughness. Although he had little interest in religion himself, he also saw to it to keep a priest or two in his ranks; ones that could accept the bloodshed well enough in order to further the territory of their god. Who fed the beliefs of his men, that what they did was good and proper, to rid the land of evil that good

Christian men and women might occupy and sanctify these once heathen holdings. These 'men of god' also slept now, as drunk and as sodden as any as Oswald continued his thoughtful vigil in the night.

After a time as even the little fires began to die into embers of soft flickering coals in the darkness, Oswald continued to watch, realizing he had become mentally restless. Something seemed strange to him, off somehow, as if shadows moved within shadows in manners that simply ought not to be. The rugged landscape seemed rather like deep welling echoes in the distance as he surveyed it, a shuddering of feeling suddenly tingling down his spine. Strange thoughts filtered through him, thoughts of otherkin, of spirits, things he held no real belief in; and yet, somehow sought to invade his mind.

After several moments, Oswald realized there were shapes moving towards him; indistinct, dark and disturbingly purposeful. Oswald stood abruptly, his hand on his ever present sword as he scanned these images closer, trying desperately to make them out as if he could somehow force them to be clearer by his will alone. A deep chuckle seemed to penetrate his ears and he demanded, "Who are you? Show yourselves!" and though he would have expected the men about and near him would have stirred from his movements and words, no one else made any sound or move. In fact, it was as if all about him had gone into a peculiar and liquid stillness, a vacuum in a pocket of space and time, and Oswald did not know whether to be afraid or amazed. A great shadow abruptly stood before him, only a glint of eyes peering at him from the huge dark shape, and he knew no sword would affect such a one as stood in front of him now. Yet, he mustered himself, calming his heart and limbs as he spoke, "Again, I ask you," He grit his teeth to still them, "Who are you? And what would you want of me?"

"Son of Balin." It hissed, low and dark. "We know you. We are sent to you. We offer our help. Our services." An eerie air surrounded the shadow as if Oswald could feel it smile.

"Help me?... What are you? You are shadows, you are evil." He blurted.

"Ahhh... Do not be so hasty. You do not understand such things, now, do you? Besides, what we offer can only improve your status, my king. King Oswald."

"My father is King. I may be eldest, but I have other siblings. There are no guarantees, though I expect to prove my metal and will fight any challenge to that inheritance."

"But 'we', we 'can' guarantee your crowning... And you. you will win Cymru."

Oswald stared at the peculiar, shadowed space that seemed more like the shape of emptiness. "Cymru? They are a great source of bitterness to my father... But their Ricon is strong and is backed by great and evil magick."

"And it would be a great thing to break such evil, would it, not?" Queried the shadow rather sensibly.

"Break it." Oswald shook his head. "I'd need great faith from my men. I'd need a real edge... And Briton is beset by enemies to our West and South. To ask us to strike East at this time with any real force... It is suicide."

"But you would be helped. There are others much greater than I. And 'they' have something. Something the Cymru need, the Bards need. Something that if the Bards cannot obtain, they can be eventually be broken from the want of it... But, it shall also take you. You, with our backing and the backing of even greater forces. Together we may see Gwydion and his Bardic evil tumbled."

Oswald watched into the night, the strange eerie stillness about him, though the stars shone brightly in the clear crystal-like sky. Finally, he sat on a huge rock that had been seated on before, saying nothing for a long space as he wrapped the furs about himself tightly, though in this curious state there was no stir of air. "I must think." He said at last. "You are shades. Why should I trust you? Are you not evil yourselves?"

"Evil? We would help you to break Cymru. And you may do with her as you will. We will help you become King of not just Briton, but over all the Island of the Mighty."

"Yes, so you say." He looked up into the red glitter of eyes in the near formless darkness, the only sense of life that stood in the shadow before him, "But what is it that 'you' want? What do your 'masters' want? Surely you do not do this simply for my sake or the sake of Briton."

"You are wise." The shadow said and Oswald could almost feel the smile emanate from it. "We would eat the very soul of the Bards. We would feast on their destruction and consume their very being. They hold us, they torture us, for we were once good Christians as yourselves... We are your brothers, sire. We are your kin."

No entirely certain he believed them, yet wanting to convince himself in order to open himself to their help, he finally replied. "I will want proof, then. That you really can help me. And that your objective is the destruction of Cymric rule in the Western lands of the Island. And... I would meet with your master. You are still but shades to me."

"To your wisdom I defer." Remarked the being sweetly, "My 'Master', as you say, will come." With that, the shadows disappeared and the night returned to its normal sounds and movement.

Cordelia and Jared moved through the energies of the plants, flowers and trees like liquid sparks of fire and glittering smoke, a ripple of colors and soft caressing sound. They were like a sigh within a forest, a sigh of longing and pleasure when the breeze is warm and sweet with the scent of early Spring. It was apparent that both Elves were somewhat distressed and thoughtful, a wave of emotion often quite unfamiliar to their kind, which distressed them even more. Jared was especially disturbed by his own cascade of emotions, even fairly perplexed by them. Watching her younger cousin with concern, Cordelia was worried for two reasons; one, the news of the star being that Jared had relayed to her, and the other, for Jared himself. Certainly, she had hoped that Jared would grow fond of, even close to Talibah. She still wished for that. But she now became a bit troubled that his feelings were such that he might become hurt or seek answers that could see no satisfactory solution. Elves were not normally jealous by nature, though some were known to become possessive and seek all sorts of avenues to satisfy that craving. She had not thought that Jared was one as such, yet there were times now that he doted much on thoughts of Talibah and it could take considerable effort on Cordelia's part to distract him elsewhere.

However, now the question of the star being had entered the equation. And though it was evident that Jared's thoughts still veered in Talibah's direction, he also was filled with apprehension over this new presence. Somehow Cordelia sensed, knew that in this Jared would 'need' to continue his work with Talibah even more, and regardless of

her concerns, Cordelia must help the two continue to do so no matter what the far reaching consequences might be.

Finally Jared and Cordelia stopped in a ring of tall, strong oaks about them, the limbs seeming to reach up high into the overhead sky as if to touch upon passing clouds. The energy was full and bright, the power of the trees merging upon the forest floor, a faerie ring of strength and command. As Jared and Cordelia stood, other Eldritch beings entered, their faces bright, though deeply apprehensive as they moved into the space. When she was satisfied that all who needed to be were there, Cordelia stepped into center to address all present. "Greetings." She began, her tone simple and clear like the soft tinkling of bells in a Spring breeze. "Sisters, Brothers of the Light... I know that our main interest lies with the health and maintenance of our Mother, of the Earth and Nature... Little time is spent now with humanity. It is generally deemed best so. To let them mature and grow on their own. In hopes that we, too, are left to our own. And though, sometimes some of us do have contact and discourse with those of the Wheel, it is with care... I know there have been dark times of late. The battle with the dread one from our own who sought dominion over the powers of the Earth in both the Realms of Light and the Realm of the Wheel is not long past. And though most of us were never called in that battle, we all can recall the shadow that moved across us in that time and the anguish we felt in our hearts. We would that we might never feel such again... Yet, here we are." She paused again for a moment or two, reflecting on her thoughts, her anxiety and how it best to espouse these things to the others. "Those here... You shall tell yours or not as you see fit. But, you... You needs know, understand and give council. We have been contacted." She looked at everyone's faces, trying to decide, then looked back at Jared. "Well." She said to him, "Perhaps it were better I let Jared tell you. Come here, Jared." She smiled gently at her cousin. "You needn't speak, dear one. Stand before me, open your mind and I shall help you direct it out to all."

With that, Jared did as she bid, shyly stepping to his cousin, then turning to face the others as Cordelia lightly rested her hands on his shoulders. He sighed deeply once as he closed his eyes, letting his heart and mind open, trusting Cordelia to guide, protect and direct. Soon it was as if every mind in the circle was connected as they saw and felt and heard the star being just as Jared had as he and Talibah did when they had ridden her dragon to the stars. The images and sounds filled the circle, engraving themselves deep into all present, deep into their memories as if they, too, had experienced this, becoming a group reality, a group understanding and awareness.

As the images receded and individual awareness once again allowed the usual sense of personal uniqueness, all faces looked up and at Cordelia once more. A timid voice spoke from the others, "But, what can we do?"

Cordelia nodded her head gently. She understood the consternation they all felt. "At this time, I think it is best to wait on what Maerdynn has to say and can do. It is just important now that we are all aware and that we take some council within our own persons. Reflect... Somehow, support for the Bards, support for what Maerdynn does is the key. To continue as we always have. But, to be aware. To listen. I would not suggest any alarm. Any distress. Just be watchful... At this time I truly simply wished you all to 'know'."

And though there was some feeling of consternation and confusion at this news, it was agreed that this vision would not be conveyed beyond this ring. That it would remain

only with those who had participated at this time and would await decisions and news from Maerdydd and the Bardic Seat.