

TALIBAH, THE EGYPTIAN

Chapter 11

New Paths and Possibilities

Late afternoon shadows spread from the trees as if slowly stretching their limbs, the sun beginning to wash the sky with his evening colors like a long cloak wafting into the infinite. Talibah sighed long as she looked about herself, feeling as if the whole little band of riders about her had sighed as well as the horses' hooves beat in a natural rhythm on the earth beneath them. The fields about the mountain were well defined now, the movement of people busy at their tasks as livestock and horses wandered near and away about the mountainous edges. Watching all the movement, Talibah could make out various openings in the mountains itself realizing that now and again people and even riders on horses emerged or disappeared to and from those openings. The sense of a strong, living and vibrant community emitted its essence from the scene, a spiraling vibration that moved across Talibah in a warm embrace of welcome.

When it was obvious that their little band was easily seen, Taliesin finally told Kevyn to raise the standard of the Council to formally announce their presence. Talibah had never seen this standard before and was pleased by it seeing the unicorn and dragon of white facing inward to a gold and silver harp between them. "Feminine and masculine – balanced and in harmony make the greatest sound of all." Remarked Talibah impulsively watching the cloth gently sway in the afternoon breeze.

"What a lovely summation." Said Taliesin riding up to her, "And very correct. The Bardic Path is ultimately about balance. Especially within oneself." Then he looked out over the countryside in a rather wistful manner as he pulled out a cloak of many colors from his pack to wrap about his shoulders quickly. Talibah frowned, uncertain if she'd ever seen it before but had no space to query as Taliesin spoke again, "Well, then... Are we ready, friends? Shall we give our horses their heads and make for Wynseren?" With that everyone seemed to smile as they set themselves into a graceful gallop across the land. As they truly neared the outer edges of the fields, shouts could be heard and some of the people could be seen running here and there. Many folk stopped whatever it was they had been tending to watch the riders as they progressed nearer the mountain itself. Some of the people waved and even threw early spring flowers as the band passed. It was a pleasant feeling of welcome as the party got closer, though Talibah sensed a certain amount of puzzlement as well. All here knew the Acting Head of Council and had heard of Taliesin, yet too few had ever seen or remembered this figure with the long, braided white hair, the cloak of the Head of Council on his wide shoulders in its intricate design of animals and trees in multi colors. Despite the small escort, he was an impressive sight that all seemed to wish to view as the small group continued to ride.

Getting close to the mountains, Talibah noticed that there were no actual barricades, no walls; no real fences even for the livestock as there had been everywhere else they'd been in Cymru. It gave everything a curious sense of openness and freedom in a land that was already fairly open and free in its ways. With a little astonishment she

also noted that there were many children, even babies, and though she expected enough young folk, she was surprised at how many were truly as young as they were. A well pounded dirt road that wended through these village areas finally led to a great cavern entrance that although Taliesin had slowed their pace some as they neared it, did not stop until they had gone well within. It quite amazed Talibah as they entered for the cavern was great and the ceiling high with torches affixed in sconces along the walls and lit everywhere giving it a magnificent sense of both openness and majesty.

In this cavern the horses came to a natural halt as Runners walked up purposely in an obvious move to help them with animals and gear. Smiling and nodding, Taliesin indicated they might all dismount and leave their horses and belongings in the hands of the young folk who had come up to them. After a space or so of this disembarking, it was clear that a little group of people had entered; a woman with pale braided hair about her ears and gray eyes who had a cloak similar to Taliesin's over her shoulders and two others who seemed clearly elders of some kind. A great warm glow lit Taliesin's eyes and face as he approached the woman. They held their palms up to gently grasp each other's hands in an interesting gesture that seemed both joined yet removed as they fully looked into each other's eyes. Then Taliesin broke it with soft greeting. "Mother, sister, friend," he spoke low and firm, "It is good to be home at last. The journey has been long and arduous."

After a pause the woman replied, "Father, brother, friend. It has been long and long. You were sorely missed. But now with joy we greet you." After a moment of stillness as they continued to gaze at one another, they broke their posture to hug in a warm embrace that had an intimacy that startled Talibah a little. She also noted that one of the people this woman had brought with her watched she and Taliesin more closely than the other as if somehow the embrace may have bothered him somewhat. He was quite tall and broad shouldered with fair, surprisingly blond hair, causing Talibah to remember the occasional Norse trader she had managed to see along her journey to Cymru. A handsome, robust looking man who kept watching the two so closely it seemed to Talibah to almost hurt. When Taliesin drew away from the woman, for a moment it looked as if he might kiss her, then he glanced over at the fair, tall man, nodded slightly and drew away. With that, the man came up to the woman where she took his hand and squeezed it as she said informally, "You remember Pwyll, Taliesin?"

"Yes, indeed, of course I do. Believe it or no, I do remember my Advisors." He looked at the other as well and smiled. "It's been awhile, I know. But, I surely do remember. And Pwyll had been Chief Advisor to Rhiannon. You are and always have been a dear friend."

The woman's gray eyes sparkled playfully. "Well, Pwyll acts as my chief as well. But also as my husband." With that she put an arm about the man's waist, hugging him to her, the top of her head not quite coming to his shoulder.

"Ahhh, Gwen, yes... And so I've missed a Handfasting as well... I am delighted for you. For you both." As Taliesin beamed at the two of them, the man finally seemed to relax some. With that something broke in general as everyone began to fidget a bit. "Well, I guess we would all like to settle in. I expect there are others to meet later as well?"

"Yes." Spoke Gwen simply. "Does your party know where to go?"

“All but this one.” Taliesin looked over and indicated that Talibah step up to him as the others took the cue and quietly left the space. “May I present my student to you.” He remarked warmly as Talibah came up to the small greeting party of the Council and he rested a hand on her shoulder in an almost protective, parental gesture. “This is Talibah. She has truly journeyed to be with us, indeed. I am hopeful she will make Cymru her veritable and rightful home.”

The space in which they stood seemed almost overbearingly large now that the horses were gone and only but the few people stood in it. The ceiling arched well above them in rock that appeared to glisten from all the torches around the walls. Talibah wondered if there might be bits of crystal veining throughout for the shimmer of both the ceiling and walls made her feel as if they stood in some other world deep within a vast preternatural womb. The woman, Gwen, regarded Talibah kindly seeing the young woman’s eyes looking at the glitter and twinkle about them. “Beautiful here, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry.” Startled Talibah as she stood at Taliesin’s side feeling as if she had moved slightly between the time and space of some other dimension. Taliesin wrapped his arm around her shoulders and smiled as he looked fondly at her face a moment aware of her vague sense of confusion and misplacement.

“Bits and flakes of variant types of crystal are especially apparent in this particular space.” Gwen began. “You will see veins here and there throughout these mountains as you move within these tunnels and caves. However, we do not mine any of it, though we may carefully and with ritual, respect and prayer extract some from time to time. And in this especial cavern, the crystal veins are particularly apparent and wonderful. Being large and open as it is, it makes for a fine and delightful greeting to all as they enter.” She continued to remark pleasantly and easily. “As we greet you. As we welcome you, Talibah. Our hands and hearts stand open.”

Talibah cast her eyes down some in self-consciousness. “It is an honor to meet you.” She was well used to Taliesin by now, but felt somewhat humbled realizing the full stature of all those now present.

“Now, now.” Gwen stepped away from Pwyll to go to Talibah where she laid her hands on the young woman’s shoulders getting Talibah to look into her eyes. When she got Talibah’s eyes to see her evenly, she smiled graciously and kissed Talibah’s cheek. “We are friends here. We are not soverns. We are teachers and we are family.” Talibah nodded shyly watching Gwen’s benign face.

“She’s had many, many, many new experiences, Gwen.” Breathed Taliesin in a soft, genial wash like a rhythm of pastel colors passing through leaves on a gentle breeze. It had a remarkable soothing affect on Talibah, making her feel curiously safe and warm in the midst of all the uncertain newness. “I think it is time to let her settle in and have a space to rest.”

“Well, then.” Said Gwen as she stepped back amiably, looking back at Taliesin, “She is a student. However, I also note that you’ve given her full Bardic status.” She remarked, lightly touching the pendant on Talibah’s shoulder. “There is a small private room she may have.” Looking back into Talibah’s eyes she went on, “Yet, you may find it better to room with a friend or two in the future... Sometimes it is better that way. You will need to work with others, in any case.” At that, Talibah blushed a bit, though no one took real note. “So, then. Let us go. We’ve a wonderful dinner planned this evening and I know everyone needs a little time to settle beforehand.” With that Gwen turned, as did

the two who had accompanied her, to lead Taliesin and Talibah into the Bardic complex within the mountains. Various tunnels ran from the huge open cavern like paths into hidden mysteries beyond human sight and sound and Talibah began to wonder of it all. The tunnel they walked through was fairly wide, though it, too, had other tunnels that would branch off from time to time.

Intermittently torches in great sconces stood along the walls lighting the way just enough to see by and Talibah wondered what it took to keep these passes as such even with a tempered amount of light. Yet, she noted that not all the passes that went from this tunnel were lit at all though she seemed to espy torches in their sconces there as well. Perhaps it all depended on which tunnels were being most used, when and by whom. Finally they stopped at one point by another tunnel where Gwen actually took one of the torches out of the wall. "There is a room that is open on your right down that passage that you may have, Talibah. I will let a Runner know where you are so they might bring you your gear. Take this torch for the moment. The door of the room is open and is empty of others. Anyway, it is the third one down; I looked in on it earlier. It has a small window, so you are lucky. There are candles in the room, so light some and bring the torch back when you have a taper to see by... And welcome, my dear. I hope you shall be very happy here."

Talibah took the torch almost shyly, then looked at Taliesin rather tearfully realizing he was going off with the others. "Teacher." She whispered.

Immediately sensing her feelings, Taliesin put a warm, loving hand on her shoulder. "Talibah. My dear. I'll be here. And not far. Ever. Get settled. Enjoy a moment or so of privacy. Someone will come for you in a little while to take you to dinner and show you around some... Oh... and privies are at the end of the 'hall' from your room. I'm sure you'll want to know that, too." He smiled benignly and kissed her brow. "You are as a daughter to me." He said in a near whisper. "I love you. You know that. I'll not abandon you."

Talibah breathed deeply once and gave a brave smile. "Yes, Father." She murmured back giving more meaning to the term than one. "I love you, too." Then she looked at Gwen to nod in respect a moment before leaving them all for her new room.

Jared walked a little while on the edge of some trees where an expanse of grassy area beyond melted into hills and mountains in an array of energy and movement. It was the Earth, but in a very different way than humans saw it with its shifting colors that at times might even sparkle or burst. A place where everything seemed to have almost a liquidness to it and nothing, not even mountains, ever stood still. And within him, Jared could feel all about him as well; the warmth of the trees, the coolness of the grasses, as well as a certain communion with it. There was no real sense of aloneness; he could hear the trees whisper above him and the sigh of flowers in the fields. Birds chattered in the trees' limbs as other animals mumbled as they passed. If he wished, Jared could understand everything he heard; and sometimes they knew his presence, sometimes not. The trees knew, though. The trees always knew. They were the one being that could see both into the realm of humans and that of the Eldritch. The Elves often relied heavily on the trees for communication and information, both on what went on between the Eldritch

and also what was happening with humanity. Especially the Elves like Jared. Jared knew the trees well, sometimes melding with them for hours, even days, deriving both knowledge and comfort within their strong and steady beings. It was known that there were Elves who had even fallen into a long and silent slumber within some of the trees and though Jared had too much vitality to become as such, sometimes it seemed a dreamy temptation.

After a little time as Jared wandered he neared a stream that ran back into the wooded area, back within the trees, and he smiled. This was a favorite place of his where he might sit for long periods letting the sound and energies of the water pass through him until it was as if he were nothing. Nothing but the sound and lights rushing over the rocks. If there were flowers on the banks sometimes little groups of faeries were like to pass through, their giggles and speech both startling and pleasing, like hearing the tinkle of bells and chimes on the breeze. Though the constant play of colored energies tended to obscure any sight of the sun, Jared sensed a bright, sunny day, as all the colors were clear and distinct like myriads of ribbons or threads. Finally, he came to sit on the bank, drawing up his knees. He closed his eyes lightly. Elves didn't really need to sleep, but at times found it a suitable way to merge into the energies and forget themselves awhile. In this state it would be difficult for other Eldritch to even tell his presence, yet one of the tree Elven had seen him as he sat, to watch him a bit as he drifted. After a space she decided she might like his company for a while despite his obvious withdrawal, so she came next to the area she knew he had merged into.

Touching lightly on the shimmer of his energy she sing-songed, "Jared-kin, Jared-kin. Bright day. Happy day. Sleepy no. Need to play."

After a moment or so one great hazel-green eye seemed to appear out of nowhere, "Armes." Jared's voice responded, a little irritated, though not overmuch, "Should know." He said, shaking his head as the rest of his form restated itself. Though energies moved about them and from them, their forms, as well as everything that was directly of them, shown through as distinct. However, Eldritch were highly adept at hiding their forms within other energies when they chose and Jared had attempted to do exactly that. But obviously, Armes had no desire for any sort of hide-n-seek that day and Jared rarely hid himself unless he were asleep or afraid and this Armes would not tolerate that day or let be.

"A good day for play." Remarked Armes teasingly, testing Jared as she took his hand to try to pull him to his feet. In response he looked up at her rather darkly giving her a slight start. "Sullen. Hmph. But, why? Bright and happy day. Sprites want play." As soon as she had declared that a couple of figures emerged from out the water of the stream like liquid dreaming to walk over to where Jared sat, Armes' hand still clasped tightly to his own. "See!" Armes declared merrily, a great wide smile in her round face, the large golden eyes barely blinking midst the swirl of her vivid yellow hair. She wore but leaves and vines upon her sensual form with bits of bright red berries that glint like traces of jewels here and there about her. Jared looked past her to the sprites as he felt the slight mist that surrounded them as if they carried some of the stream's very essence with them as they moved. Their hair had a shimmer halo of blues and greens, their bodies seeming clad in lichen and moss. Lithe and tall, they gazed down at Jared curiously, staying a little distance as they sensed that Jared was a tad bit off that day. The colors about him gave off a muted glow as if he were dressed in somber bits of flowers and

grass and browning leaves. With great soft eyes of muted greens, browns and blues, the sprites continued to watch Jared as if they were slightly entranced, though perhaps a bit puzzled as well. "What to do." Remarked Armes finally as she stood up by the sprites somewhat dismayed with Jared's demeanor. "Our pretty Jared. Sad and blue."

With that, Jared got up at last to look at his friends and sigh a long hard sigh. "Sorry." He shook his head, more at himself than any of them, trying to remove some of the dark looks in his face. Then he smiled a little at them, though he knew it did not have the usual brightness it ought as he went and hugged each to him in an intent display of his friendship to each. "Borders... Edges..." He shivered slightly as he pointed a ways past them all to some distance beyond that any could really see. "Wish not so many."

"Ahhh." Armes stepped back from him, her eyes vivid with mischief, "Talibah." She laughed and danced about him suddenly singing, "Borders, borders. Edges, edges... No Talibah anywhere... No borders make, no edges take. Then Talibah everywhere!... Oh, wish Talibah... Always. Always Jared wishes Talibah. Bright Talibah. Pretty Talibah." She continued to dance in circles about him delighted with her own insight.

Jared frowned at Armes as he had never spoken of Talibah to any of them and was a little unnerved that she might have picked this up from his thoughts. "You do not know." He grumbled, just a tinge of slight anger touching his voice.

"No?" Armes stopped and looked directly at him, her eyes wide as an owl and feigning innocence as the other two swayed causing a light spray of moisture and energy lights to move in graceful whorls about them all. "Funny creatures, they. Talibah, they. Help Mother, no. Live in clusters. Like sticky ants. Make life gray. Ruin pretty bright day. Make Jared dull. No want to play."

Jared shook his head. "Not true. Not all of them." His eyes looked far away from the little group, diffused and distant. Although he loved them all, right then he wished they might go away and leave him to his thoughts. But Armes was not the sort to stop once she decided she wanted attention of any kind. The other two, twin spirits of the stream, lovers who were of indistinguishable sex, might well have drifted away once they knew his state of mind being more shy and reticent in every way. Yet Armes had not that bent of perception or seemed any desire whatsoever to grasp such subtleties as she began to play with Jared's hair and kiss his cheeks. "Please, Armes." He protested knowing it was like to do little good.

"Sullen Elf." She pouted as she nestled herself into his chest and wrapped her arms about him.

Sighing, Jared lightly hugged her back. "Darkness." He whispered somberly in her ear, a slight shiver moving through his form that passed itself to her like an unwanted and unlooked for guest.

"Darkness?" She startled against him, then pulled back to look into his eyes that had become cloudy and almost gray.

"See." He whispered again as he looked out and Armes followed his eyes beyond the edge of the trees, into the distance. "Out there, Armes... Hazy. Very hazy. Not right. Shadows and confusion."

Armes brought her gaze back to him and frowned, shaking her head. Taking his head in her hand she drew his face to hers to look back at her. "Those creatures, bad they. Make Jared strange. Make Jared sad."

The sprites had by this time also wrapped themselves around Jared trying to feed him energy much as he fed the plants and trees. Warm and comforting, Jared found himself relaxing, giving in to their kind, attentive embrace, realizing the love they all had for him and each other. “Ahhh... dear friends.”

“We love you.” They all seemed to say together in an amiable hum as Jared fully succumbed to their pleasant ministrations, forgetting any difficult thoughts or speculations for the moment.

Having lit some of the candles in their holders and returned the hall torch to its sconce, Talibah looked around her new room for a moment. It was small, but comfortable, even cheery in the fading daylight that shown through her little window. She was very happy about having a window, too, as it looked out over the countryside across the fields, even beyond the woods, giving Talibah a sense of openness. Not that she hadn't already been in a number of caves, lived in a cave several months; but these caves, caverns and tunnels seemed to be vast, complex and not just a little intimidating.

There were shutters on her window and though worn, appeared sturdy, as did the whole of the room itself. She stood at the window a long while, gazing out, watching the sun descend in his streaming colors over the land. In time, she turned her attention back into the room though her mind remained in a sort of drifted space. Yet, she took note of the room as she looked about. By the window was a small writing table and stool of rough-hewn wood, the candle on the table bright, ready to help the pupil at her chores or pleasure. A low platform held a bed of stuffed sweet grass and straw on the other side from her with a couple actual pillows and some blankets. It was a decent sized bed as well; though hardly huge it wasn't narrow, giving Talibah pause to smile. This was no celibate's cloister and though everything here seemed fairly simple, it was made with comfort in mind as well. A nice sized trunk sat at the end of the bed for storage, and a small table with a pitcher, water basin and another candle were a little beyond that against the wall that faced in from the hallway, with a chamber pot beside it all. A small round image of polished metal stood above the water pitcher and basin to serve its best as a mirror. Next the bed at its top was a low table the height of the bed for a couple candles and a place one might set personal items. After a certain darkness was truly evident outside, Talibah finally sighed as she moved away from the window, suddenly feeling both exhausted, yet lonely as it dawned on her how terribly far from her native home she had wandered. Would her homeland people even recognize her now? Were her ways becoming foreign, even to her? She went over and sat on the bed a moment, looking at the walls of cavern rock, the rough, uneven surface belying any image of starkness; rather, somehow giving it a curious essence of warmth and comfort. She prayed a moment to Sophia and in her mind's eye experienced the streets and sounds and smells of Egypt. And though it did fill her with a sense of lonely memory, she also realized a faded quality as if somehow it might be quietly melting away. As if Sophia Herself drew her away from it and the faces of her family, her parents and siblings became like a mist. She wondered if once settled she might write something to them, yet wondered if such a letter would ever find its way so far. It would be good to know how they were; it would be good to let them know she was well; but the prospect seemed awfully remote. However,

she resolved it was at least something she would try. "I lay my life to you, Divine One." She whispered into the shadows that echoed in the room as she felt herself meld with the pleasant resonance. "May harmony fill my days and understanding. May I seek it always. May my heart know Your wisdom. And may my ears hear and my eyes see, for You have sent me here and I know that I must walk here with an open heart." After that she laid back on the bed thinking to rest a moment as she closed her eyes. "Mind, soul, body, spirit. May they all be open." She murmured as she softly fell into a light sleep.

"Well, I see it's not taken you long to move in." A pleasant, low voice remarked, startling Talibah from her sleep. Her eyes shot up in confusion a moment until she recognized Brandon's face framed by the light of a taper in his hand. "I brought you your gear." He said, patting the bundle he set on the top of the trunk. "Are you all right?" He asked seeing her eyes large, disoriented and somewhat distressed. "I surely didn't mean to upset you." He remarked as he sat on the edge of the bed next to her carefully.

She rubbed her eyes a bit and sat up. "I'm sorry. I've moved around so much lately, you'd think I'd not react so... But it is so quiet. So peaceful. I was lulled."

Looking fully at her Brandon smiled pleasantly, then set the taper down on the floor so he might hug her. "I hope it truly does bring you peace, dear Sister." For a moment he looked about the room. "My... What a nice room, too! They count you special, I see. And a window as well! Ahhh, but I guess I ought expect that, eh? You 'are' Taliesin's student, after all."

She gazed around again at the simple room though she understood that just the privacy alone was like to be fairly unusual. "It 'is' awfully nice, I admit." She decided to remark. "Perhaps it is also to give me space to adjust. I am not exactly from around here, you know."

"Umm. You are probably right about that, too. And... you 'are' special." Brandon got up and looked out the window where he could see the wink and flicker of lights in the village homes that graced the countryside. "Would you like me to shutter this?"

"No, oh no. Not now. There is a light breeze and I am enjoying it." She watched him subtly with her eyes, sensing the light warm touch of energy he emitted, nearly breathing it in. "So when is this dinner, this homecoming for Taliesin?"

"Well... We could go as soon as you are ready, actually... There ought be water in your pitcher if you'd like to freshen some." Brandon went up to her and pulled her up from the bed to quickly hug and kiss her once more. "I expect you'd like your comb, too." He laughed a moment as her hair was rather awry and he pushed some of it away from her face playfully. "Not that it truly matters to me. I'd much rather stay and muss it more, but I think you are rather 'expected'... and I..." He shrugged, "I'm just another Runner."

"Just another Runner." She repeated back and shook her head. She was just about to kiss him again, but decided it was no longer prudent and made her way to the basin instead as she sighed. "Yes, just another Runner, indeed." She mumbled softly and shook her head as she poured some of the water out into the basin so that she might wash her face. "Are there no baths?" She asked as she splashed the water liberally on her features enjoying the snap of crispness as it tingled on her skin.

Having seated himself back on the bed as he waited and watched, his eyes dotting on her somewhat hazily, Brandon responded, "Oh, yes. Some large pools of underground water run through these mountains. Some of it much warmer than you might imagine..."

However, for now, everyone waits and our party is tired. No one here minds a little travel dust. In fact, it's almost rather expected." The candle lights glinted as if in response to the stars that twinkled in the night sky outside the window. The long shadows that fell about them felt warm to Talibah, comforting, like gentle, loving hands. She brushed her hair a moment having finished with her face, then went to her gear that Brandon had set on the chest to pull out her comb and brush that she might straighten and braid her hair in one single strand down her back, Brandon watching silently. When she seemed ready he finally broke the silence getting back up from the bed. "So... ready, my lady?"

Talibah breathed long looking at him with great, wide eyes that slightly sparkled from the candles' flames. "Am I?" She queried, suddenly rather anxious. "What am I to expect?"

Brandon laughed some at her apprehension, "A bunch of Bards... Don't worry. They eat like most humans do. Sort of... Least that's what I'm told."

This tickled Talibah and she chuckled back. "Really."

"And I know where to seat you. You've been introduced to the Mother Gwen already. If there is something more formal they'll ask it of you later and the Father will be there to help you. This is just dinner, really. A celebration, yes. But, you're just meant to enjoy yourself. Eat. Drink. Enjoy. That's all."

"And you?" She asked suddenly curious.

"Well. I am just a Runner, yes. And normally I'd be asked to serve, as would Osla and Adian. But as we were part of the party that escorted the Father home, we will all sit together at a table close to the front. Of course, the Father will sit with Mother Gwen and Council Members. But tonight, we will sit in honor, too... So... you will be surrounded by friends. I expect even Kevyn will sit with us." This made Talbah smile widely. "Yes." Said Brandon. "And Saffir, too. Or Kevyn might not, after all... Well, anyway. Let's go. I am hungry and the cooks here are some of the best in Cymru." With that, Brandon retrieved the taper he had brought and they left as Brandon led the way.

"How... You speak differently. I know, now. More... Hmm. Human. More like humans, I think." Jared watched his cousin as she ran her fingers lightly over a mass of sprightly colored flowers, the energy tingling like a breeze of tiny bells.

Cordelia thought a moment on his words, sensing a consternation, even some slight frustration. "Sooo... You recognize that I speak more like humans? Ahhh... Perhaps it is so." She nodded crouching by the petals, then straightened to stand and look into his eyes. She nodded again and remarked at him, "Good." She squinted a moment as she regarded him thoughtfully, choosing her words carefully, "It is good that you truly notice this. Hear it, sense it... And do you wish to understand this, then?"

He looked back at her seeing the seriousness of her eyes, "Yes." He said quietly, "To understand. To understand Talibah... To understand humans." He swallowed nervously sensing he was stepping into unfamiliar areas.

Cordelia nodded and smiled, "Come, then." She took his hand. "Walk awhile with me. Listen to me. Listen to me and listen to how I speak." Kindly she pulled him with her, her pace slow and measured, movement that seemed to match the rhythm of the plants and animal life around them, a pulsating stream of life as if the breath of some

sleeping, dreaming god. “Elves. The Eldritch.” She said after a pace or so, “Our thoughts. They are compressed. We are tuned to each other and therefore speech is not so necessary. Ah, but humans.” She stopped and turned to regard him. He was much taller as an Elf and she looked up into his eyes that were wide and seeking and it pleased her to see such. “Other beings outside the Eldritch. Outside our kin. They are often not so in tune as we. So in speech they must seek this ‘attunement’. Through words. Even so. Just being another type of being makes it so... You must learn to slow down your thoughts. Elongate them, spread them out. Explain them more. As I do. Even now.” She reached up and touched his face. “I’m so very proud of you, dear cousin. This is a most important step. This realization. This understanding. This desire.”

“Elongate, spread out... my thoughts? Slow down. My thoughts?” Jared closed his eyes tight, squinching up his face, “My head hurts. I ache.” Opening his eyes back up he looked at Cordelia as if in some very real pain.

“I know, young one, I know.” She smiled patiently. “It is very hard at first to deliberately try to focus. To slow oneself down as such.... And, to be quite honest, never truly easy. But... It will serve you. And serve you well.”

“How...” He squinted, “How is it that you can speak this way and think this way all... the time.” He finally managed, trying hard to emulate her.

“The Ladies. We maintain our speech so... And Maerdynn. He has been a great boon in these times. It is important for we need to be able to communicate, to commune. It is a matter of safety as much as anything.” She cocked her head at him. “You need not try so hard. Talibah will help you. And she will understand. Explain it to her and she will help you.”

Jared sat back in the grasses and held his head for a moment. Yet the sparks of energy did seem to slow some, to gather into more subtle threads of dancing colors swaying into a more elegant rhythm. It pleased Cordelia to see this, to feel this; perhaps her cousin might even make a fit consort to one of the Ladies one day. This was truthfully an important step, this wish to enlarge his world and understand it. Then abruptly a burst of fragmented energies in splintered colors emitted from his heart as tears glided down his cheeks from the corners of his eyes. “Talibah.” He gasped. “Darkness.” He whispered. “Why this darkness.”

Cordelia knelt by him to brush her hand through the golden tawny of his hair. “Shh... My cousin, shh. Do not let it catch you. It is not for you to worry about or fear.” She put her arms about him, pulling the energy from him as she sought to ease his unexpected distress. Elves had a propensity to feel very deeply, very quickly, though if tempered would also pass with as much speed.

“Where is Talibah? Why doesn’t she call me?” He thought more than said, though Cordelia heard it well enough. And she knew that it was a confused eruption mixed in with his fears from this new sense of darkness that intruded on his thoughts and heart.

“Jared, Jared, Jared.” She murmured as she held him, trying to quiet him. “For an Elf you are so very complex, eh? As complex as the Ladies, I think. As complex as Maerdynn. As complex as myself. I begin to believe you shall take your place at the high table someday, uhm? But it is hard. A hard thing to do. A hard thing to ask... Come.” She said gently, getting up once more. “Soon I shall meet with some of my Sisters and I think it is time you might accompany me. Perhaps they might even soothe you better than I. And perhaps you’ll have a better perception of what true court in the Eldritch is all

about.” She did not wish to voice again her concerns over what appeared to be his growing fascination with Talibah. Besides, it might well be time to begin some preparation with him in the responsibilities of the Elven who safeguarded the Realm of Light. His wish to communicate more deeply, more widely and in depth was surely a sign that he was approaching that readiness and soon he would no longer be her student.

Looking up at her a moment after she stood, his eyes clearing as he grasped the full weight of what his cousin was saying to him, Jared simply stared, his mouth slightly agape. “True court?” He said at last.

“And council. Yes.” She replied. “Let us go. We shall work a while on your ‘conversation abilities’. And then, soon, you shall accompany me to my Sisters. To the Ladies.” With a surprising clumsiness, Jared seemed to stumble to his feet though Cordelia smiled compassionately and openly as he rose. “My dear, dear cousin. Favorite cousin and kin.” She said as he came to her side and they began to stride away. “I am dearly and deeply proud of you.”