

TALIBAH, THE EGYPTIAN

Chapter 1

The Crystal's Gift

“I remember great black skies that seemed to stretch forever into the night’s horizon with so many stars that one could get nearly lost in their magnificence. I would lie upon the ground so that I could watch them, with the stillness in the air around me and only the mild slapping of the water of the Nile breaking upon my ears like a lulling whisper, as if to explain some secret I pursued as I continued to watch the twinkling overhead.

“I was a child then. My parents had traveled to Egypt to be near the Coptic Priests and secret Gnostic factions that still existed. We were happy if somewhat reserved and I loved to go where the old temples stood and wondered at the statues that still watched.

“It was in the shadow of those temples we would gather with others in secret worship. I admit that, as a child, I did not really understand it all – but there was something in the music of our quiet hymns that instilled a kind of magic that I believe even the ancient gods of Egypt admired and approved of.

“When I was thirteen I was dedicated to Sophia. I hardly understood what that meant, although it seemed to make my parents happy and proud. Our Priest (who was a woman – both men and women are called Priests in our belief system) did everything she could to open a bond between myself and the great Divine Feminine of our beliefs, filling me with an emotion that I had no comprehension of its source or whereabouts. The Priest decreed that Sophia had answered. I did not know what that answer was nor would I be told until I came of age at fifteen and my destiny would be revealed to me through an oracle ritual. It was simply how things were done.

“As the time went by and I got closer to that seemingly magical age, I learned what I could of the religion my parents subscribed to and found out that my dedication was an unusual event. Certainly there were rituals for our budding woman or manhood and dedication to the belief system itself – but nothing as specific as mine had been. I was finally given to understand that our Priest had felt Sophia wished it and would speak concerning Her wish; as indeed our Priest believed She had done.

“The day I became fifteen was the time of the Nile floods. That year the great river’s banks swelled in the most beautiful manner, as if she were making love in a gentle rush with the shores – rich, moist and fertile. A warm rain softly pelted from the skies as if they were kisses from above. Our Priest remarked on this as a good omen as I went to her to receive the ritual and blessing. Throughout the ritual, the Priest seemed hardly surprised at the portents she received. ‘Sophia is the embodiment of God’s Wisdom,’ she finally remarked as we both sat down afterwards, the small fire in her small house giving forth the smell of the lightly burning incense of the rite. We did this alone at her house for it was only for me to hear words on this day though I well knew there had been conference with my parents well before. ‘And in Her Wisdom did She speak...’ she peered at me a little, squinting her eyes as if she were trying to discern something in me that even I would have not have known. ‘She wants you, Talibah... She wants you to

pursue Her, to understand Her, to 'find' Her.' I studied our Priest a long time, frowning, wondering exactly 'how' I was meant to do that. 'And it is not 'here'.'

"Her words surprised me, 'What do you mean, not here? Not in Egypt?'

"'Not in Egypt... Not even in the Franklands where your family is from... But further... further North.'

"'I am to wander?'' I asked, almost incredulous, 'I am a woman – what sort of life are you asking of me?'

"'What Sophia asks... Do not be afraid... we have members here who will train you in fighting and concealing attire... But, pursue Her you must... she wishes to show you Her Mysteries.'

"'And why aren't Her Mysteries here? With us?'' I nearly whined. I was young; I did not wish to leave my family and the beautiful land of Egypt. 'What of my parents?'' I questioned further.

"'She has shown me... of course we love Her... but, somehow, we are missing something. Something She desperately wants known. And it's simply not here... As for your parents... This ritual today confirmed what I already knew and your parents had been made aware some time ago. It was advised that they make no moves to find you any suitors and why your studies have been so focused... You are 'Her' choice. There is nothing more to say.'

"I think I cried for three days after my meeting and ritual with the Priest. Now my training would change, a strange severity would settle in – something I knew I did not want, but must accept. I was assured that there would be others who would travel with me, though I must learn to truly protect myself. And I must learn to listen – to listen for Sophia's Call. And to hear Her in the stillness.

"It wouldn't be until my nineteenth birthday before I could feel a strange tugging at my heart. Something unbidden, deep and troubling. Until then, I was in training, training to fight, to be deceptive, to be cautious. Learning how to recognize others who would help me along the way, and how to avoid those who did not.

"I was asleep one dark night with no moon, but millions of stars dotting the skies. I sat up suddenly, startled and groggy, as if a whisper had graced my ear and I sought to recall its meaning. I knew then that it was time. Time for the lessons to be over and my wandering to begin.

"Seems like in some ways you may not totally understand my journey. A woman in your society does as she will, pretty much. Learns to fight as much as cook or raise a family, or learn and teach. So, too, in the Gnostic group I grew up in – yet, not so true in others around us. We had learned to be reserved for many reasons, let alone our particular beliefs. And there is some safety in our numbers, if curtailed as well. At least we had each other to count on, to look to. I would be going into a world that at times could be fairly hostile and cruel. I had trained very hard before I left the womb of my people with no realization that I would find others that might accept me as I was for whom I am.

"I won't belabor my journey here to you. Suffice it to say that I truly did have to use all I was taught on more occasions than I care to speak of. At least along the coast of the Frankish lands I did find pockets of Gnostic groups, though mostly in the South. As I traveled North, the Roman influence had taken more hold of the general populace than I was very easy with. Yet, ever was I drawn further North through dream and meditation. One Priest in the South in the Frankish lands held another oracle ritual for me and

informed me that I would meet true aliens of the Roman Empire before I would catch a glimmer of Sophia's desires for me.

"It wasn't until I looked across the Channel that divides the Francos from the Island of the Mighty that I felt that finally I might be coming close to that which I was seeking.

"Your Island is so conflicted, really, and I wondered many nights as I and my companions huddled in some hidden cave or grove how I had come to the conclusion that Sophia's Grace might be found here in what seemed so far removed from the civilizations I had known. Yet, we continued; though I must admit, my heart became disquiet until one day when we neared the Cymric border and I heard singing on the road. It struck me that these songs were sung in such a way I had never heard before, causing such strong emotions in me that I stopped my horse and wept for reasons I could not fathom. Feeling no sense of fear from these singers I sought them out. They didn't seem the least surprised at my appearance and were quick to assure their pleasure of our company. Somehow they immediately knew me as a female despite my disguise; and yet seemed honored, remarking on my bravery and cunning in territory they deemed unsure.

"Who are you, then?' I asked, 'that you would remark so?'

"Bards.' They said simply as if that should settle the matter, 'From Cymru. And we need to be getting back across this area as quickly as possible. We've been gathering news for the Council acting as merchants and Christian troubadours, but now it is time to go home.' They seemed to have no fear of what I might make of what they just said. 'You may come with us if you'd like. We know the roads well and would keep you on the safest routes.'

"I would like that, indeed. Would you sing some more? The sounds are delightful!' with that we moved on again as they continued their singing.

"That night they briefly explained to me what Bards were. I was intrigued and shared with them my feelings for Sophia. They remarked that She sounded much like their own versions of the Goddess and when I finally divulged that I was sent on a quest by Sophia, they asked that I would sing. So I sang. I sang a hymn or two of my people. It was strange how homesick I suddenly became and I felt a tear or two glint at the edges of my eyes. What surprised me was that my new companions looked to have a glister or two in their eyes as well.

"When I finished, the one who seemed to be apparently a leader of sorts, came to sit by me and kissed my hand. 'Your voice is beautiful. Ride with us to our Council. I can promise you nothing, but perhaps you may find our ways helpful in your Quest.

"So I went with them and before long my own companions from my homeland realized that they were no longer needed and requested that they might return to Egypt. They were as homesick as I and I tearfully released them, instructing them to let my family know that I was well.

"As we rode on, I listened to all that the Bards might tell me of their ways and their Goddess. Sometimes they spoke more about the Council and its structure and how the Head of their Council was really the 'Acting Head' and that they hoped for some resolution over it. I asked them finally why this was such an issue. They scudded around about it and I picked up that they weren't entirely certain just how to answer me. Perhaps because my beliefs were not the same, I'm not sure. Or, perhaps they weren't

quite certain whether or not the actual Head of the Council still existed. It seemed at once both important and incidental to them.

“I gather we were well into an area of the land of the Cymru that the Bards called Gwent, when the weather made a turn for the worse. Winter seemed to have come early, or so they said, and it was as if the cold descended on us in a night. We found lodging at a Great House in the area, which we were all thankful for knowing well that we might end up there the rest of the season. The Lord and Lady of the Great house were very gracious, though, and seemed more than pleased by their additional guests. I gathered later that this was more than common for Bardic Folk to winter over where-ever they might find themselves and that it was expected that they would be treated well.

“Of course, it also meant that they were expected to perform for everyone. They more than earned their keep, keeping the residents entertained and I noted that they performed rituals as well. It was then that I truly saw them functioning in their role as Sacred Artist Priest.

“It was in this time that one night I awoke once more to the darkness and stars. I felt a strong sense of Calling in me and I could not put it aside. Quietly I left in the night, though how I managed to slip past the sleeping Bards, only Sophia could have arranged. I found my horse and did not bother to put any gear on her, as I didn’t want to alert anyone. This Call was for me alone and that I needed to be totally alone in this. I mounted her with nothing but the clothes on my back and rode into a moonless night seeking I did not know what. I seemed to ride a long time in a quiet sort of dream, the stillness engulfing me like a cloak.

“Morning came and I still rode as snow flakes began to softly feather down from the sky. I had spent enough time in snow by now, but I had never ridden much in it and I began to wonder if my ride now was very wise. Soon the flakes began to fall harder until I could barely see in front of myself. I called out Sophia’s name, yet I knew I was lost and assumed that somehow Sophia had failed me and I was like to freeze to death. It was one of the saddest moments of my life as I felt myself slip from consciousness in the bitter cold.

“Of course, then I found myself here. With you. In front of a warm fire in some hidden cave. And you ask me whom I am, how I came here. Well, I’ve told you. Perhaps, now, you may do me the favor in kind?”

Talibah looked around herself, the simple surroundings, the man across from her slightly smiling, a knowing glint in his eye. Something was odd about him, besides him obviously being a hermit of some kind. His hair was white and gray, yet his face seemed fairly young, and his baring seemed youthful as well. “Well done.” He smiled again, “I enjoy a well told tale.”

“It’s not a tale... it’s the truth.”

“A tale is a tale... truth or no. And if well told, is always worth the listen... And that was truly worth it. Did it take you long to learn our language? You speak it with such grace.”

She watched him a long while in silence before trying again to ask who he might be. Sighing, she shook herself out, “Are you loathe to tell me who you are or why and how you came to be here... or find me?”

“Loathe? No... Sometimes I’m not so certain myself.” He shrugged, but at least he seemed willing to speak a bit at last, “I left what I was because it was too painful. I

thought nature might gift me with some relief... and perhaps it has... I had left the ways of men... then you appeared the other day..." he toyed with a stick, pushing at the embers of the fire, dropping his eyes from her face. For a moment he drifted deep into thought as he watched the flames. At last he shot his eyes back up to hers, they were so blue they seemed to almost hurt, "She sent you... your Sophia... my Goddess. The Goddess... perhaps the time for me to return to the ways of men is knocking at my door... but first, I shall teach you."

Talibah frowned, her dark eyes clouded as a stray breeze wafted her long dark hair from her face, "Teach me?"

"To be a Bard."

"To be a Bard? But you've never heard me sing..."

"I don't need to..." He smiled quietly as he let the thought sink in. "Besides, it's a lot more than 'entertainment', you know... A lot more..." he whispered the last few words. "My name is Taliesin... I was a Bard once."

Talibah sat back and shivered, "I've heard that name... You've been mentioned when the others spoke of the Council."

Taliesin shrugged it off lightly, "Then you know that I can teach you... and this is where you shall Winter... and perhaps in the coming Spring we shall see about the ways of men."



The smoke rose lazily from the small fire, a slight tinge of mugwort mingled with the wood amid other herbs that Talibah was harder pressed to recognize. The cave was quiet as the flames flickered shadows on the walls. She could just see the entrance where she marked a gentle fall of snow in the night.

The hermit Bard, the Bard she suspected had once had something to do with his Bardic Council, watched her from the other side of the fire. He had never really explained just how he had found her in the blizzard while she sought answers in a voided night and lost herself in the snow. He was like that, prying her to open herself up to him yet saying very little of himself. Other than being a Bard. Other than that he could and would teach her to be a Bard herself.

For days he seemed to test her voice, her range and the echo of her voice's sound. And he began to speak of laws and rituals in a dry, matter-of-fact way. At first she almost resisted as she felt rather overwhelmed by it. Yet, he smiled assuring her that in time it would come. "The laws and rituals have a certain mind-set to them. Once you comprehend that mind-set, you'll be surprised how easily it will all fall into place. It won't seem nearly so difficult then."

He certainly was patient, she had to give him that. Fairly tall, graceful, she never could figure out just how old he should be. Outside his gray and white hair he seemed so young, except for his eyes. Somehow his eyes seemed very old, almost sad and sometimes quite distant – tales he was still unwilling to tell.

"Taliesin..." she spoke in an almost whisper as she sat and watched the flames as he had instructed.

"Shh..." he smiled across from her. "Just watch the fire, smell the smoke... the moon shall be out soon." Slowly he got up to move in a clockwise circle around her and

the fire, singing softly, intoning now and again. Although his movements did not seem truly ritual like, Talibah knew it to be a ritual, non-the-less. She listened to his voice and felt a curious sort of sleepiness, something that made her body begin to drift though her mind remained sharp and aware. She knew her eyes had finally closed as Taliesin spoke to her quietly, his voice in her ear. "I am sending someone to work with you. Trust him... I want you to retrieve a crystal... he'll know where to take you... And remember... you cannot count on force... sometimes you must count on cunning..." again Taliesin began to sing, something pleasant, something that sounded very old.

Talibah opened her eyes to a world where she felt more than saw her surroundings. A slow wash of colors echoed around her as she sensed herself in a great space standing in the center of something. Suddenly the colors began to slowly form as Talibah felt her skin prickle. Whatever the forms were, they felt threatening to her and as they came towards her she threw out her arm and found that she emitted a charge of energy of some sort when she did so. Realizing this, she struck out, throwing forms back away from her. However, when she did so, they only began to reform and move towards her once more. Frightened, she continued to strike out as a male figure watched her from the side for a moment or so. Finally he stated in a rather dry, almost disinterested tone, "So why 'do' women always do that? You feel threatened and so your immediate response is to strike out..? I never have quite gotten that..."

"Who are 'you'?" gasped Talibah feeling very stretched and bewildered.

"Been asked to help you..." He shrugged, rather nonchalantly.

"Then why aren't you helping me?!" cried Talibah as she continued to push and hit the forms back from her.

"I am... Striking will do you no good. Stop fighting them."

"Are you crazy! They're everywhere!" she shouted at him in a panicked voice.

He shook his head, "Women..." then sighed, "Close your eyes and forget them. Then fall back into yourself. Go into yourself."

"I can't!" she cried vehemently.

The male sighed again long and low, "You must. Must trust me on this... Trust me or we'll have to stop... Try again later... Not exactly something I really want to have to do, thanks." He said as if that would be rather trying to him.

Still very frightened, Talibah looked at him a moment. So what was he? Some spirit? Something people referred to as the 'good people'? He seemed bright haired and eyed, in fact his being seemed oddly luminous and ethereal. His gaze was steady, watching as if trying to gauge her somehow. Soon she would be engulfed by the shapes if she did not do something, so she finally did as he bid. She quit hitting at everything and shut her eyes. Trying to forget, forgetting, then letting herself drift.

After a moment or so her eyes shot back up and she stood in a beautiful flowered field under a bright blue sky. "Good for you, you made it." Said a voice next to her and she turned to see the same male figure from a moment before. "He 'had' just told you – Mustn't count on force." He said wryly.

"Well, I certainly didn't expect..."

"Hush... forget it. Forget now and go on."

"But where was the cunning, then, in all that?"

"Cunning?... Mmmm... Chose to trust me... Finally... Cunning enough in that." He looked back behind them and pointed, "Now... see that?" he said and she looked to

see a small hill near them. “Now... see this?” He pointed away from them over an expanse to another hill a little ways away. “We now walk the line from this power point here to the other one... From that hill to the other hill.”

Talibah frowned, looking at him, then from one hill to the other. “Line?... what line?”

He shook his head, “Never mind... just follow me. Come on.”

He started walking towards the farther hill, but as he did so, the scenery seemed to shift this way and that to the point that Talibah became confused. “Wait! Everything is fading in and out... I can’t tell where we are going.”

“Focus your eyes on me, then - won’t lose sight, then.”

“Focus on you... what are you, anyway?”

“What am I?” He blinked, “And thank-you, too... I am Jared, your Guide... Well, at least Maerdynn asked me to.”

“Maerdynn? Who’s Maerdynn? Taliesin sent me on this quest.”

Suddenly Jared laughed, rather well amused, “Still uses that name? Guess it keeps some folks guessing... Guess he’s not given you leave to call him by his true name, then. Hmm... Course, you are just a student...”

“Thanks... That made me feel good.”

“Wasn’t meant meanly... Know Maerdynn, er’ Taliesin well enough... Yet who truly does know that one?” he shook his head, then shrugged it off, “Follow me, then. Don’t look at the landscape. Just watch me... and, oh, – don’t touch anyone... ‘Cept me... You ‘can’ touch me... Taliesin set that up. I can ground you if you need it... Best if you don’t speak to anyone along the way as well.” With that, Jared resumed his pace before her. She kept her focus on him as she followed, though at times it seemed difficult as the scenery continued to shift. She also began to realize that they were noticed as she caught figures moving around them, a hum of chatter in the air. Though she found it fairly disturbing, Jared paid no attention as he continued walking. Talibah began to wonder if Jared had even forgotten she was behind him, yet when she stopped a moment to puzzle out a figure close by them, Jared turned, “No, Talibah. Told you not to talk to them... don’t be stopping, either.”

“What?” She blinked, surprised.

“Come on. We’re almost there.”

For a moment Talibah looked him full in the face. ‘Could he be human?’ she thought. He looked fairly human, but something seemed off. His hazel/green eyes were beautiful and his tawny bright hair appeared too soft and fine. He was lithe and strong to her trained eyes and moved like a cat – too sleek, too controlled.

At her rather long stare, he finally smiled, “I think you’re quite lovely, too. A warrior’s body, but very lovely. Such wonderful brown eyes.”

Startled out of her brief contemplation she whisked, “I’m sorry... just trying to understand you.”

“Umph... Don’t need to be understanding me... I’m not important here... You are... Just here to help you complete the task Taliesin gave you ‘without’ getting in the way... You are being challenged, but not without an escort because some things you aren’t ready for yet... Just the task itself is enough... and one or two other things.” He winked. “Not entirely sure just ‘why’ Taliesin asked me to do this... but, now, I’m not so sorry...”

“You were sorry?”

“Never mind... we better go now... Your time is limited.” This time he let her catch up to him and he only walked just slightly ahead, his pace more slow and almost casual. Then he stopped and she found they were at an entranceway that seemed to be in the side of a hill. At this point Jared began to sing a moment and it haunted Talibah’s soul seeming to dig deep into her being, rich and dark and full. When he quit, a beautiful being came forward to them. So beautiful it filled the area with a stunning brilliance that made Talibah gasp and her heart was filled with desire, a desire to touch, to connect. Jared saw the reaction too late, gasping out, “No, Talibah! No!” just as Talibah reached out to touch her fingers on the being’s arm. Jared jerked her away, but the damage was done, Talibah’s eyes had grown soft; the longing, the love, the desire – this ‘other’ world had claimed her. Yet, Jared took her hand firmly, “You ‘do not’ let go of me, now... I can not repair the longing for the Realm of Light in your heart... but, we’ll go on inside anyway... There is one inside who may be able to help... Just hope Maerdyann won’t be too angry with me.”

Jared nodded to the being and the doors were opened as Jared gently took Talibah inside. Though the area was cave-like, it was also done up as a hall with various beings all around watching them closely. Talibah’s heart was almost breaking. “I was a fool, Talibah... Should have taken your hand sooner, before the entrance... Did not think there was a problem until after we had entered... Didn’t want to seem presumptuous to you... I’m very, very sorry... Now I must truly guard you.” Talibah said nothing as she gazed about in a haze.

Sighing hard, a bit dejected and angry with himself, Jared began to sing again and the sound echoed through the great cavern in melodious tones that resonated more and more like deep undulating waves. As the ripples slowly became softer after he stopped his song, a glimmering glow started at the far side from where they stood. It strengthened and moved towards them finally taking form into a woman with great green eyes and long red hair. She was smallish in stature, but great in presence.

Coming up to the couple, she smiled at Jared, then looked at Talibah, a knowing in her eyes. Surprising Jared, the woman embraced Talibah fully, hugging her tightly, lovingly whispering into her ear, “I love you, I miss you.” For a long moment the woman held Talibah, her eyes closed as if communing with her. Jared continued to hold Talibah’s hand tightly, upset and rather shocked. When the woman pulled back, though, Talibah’s eyes were clear and her presence firm. The woman looked at Jared, his mouth open and eyes distressed, “It’s alright, Jared... I’ve done as you hoped... And we have made an agreeable bargain. You can let go, now.”

“Bargain?” Jared whispered, down casting his eyes.

“Don’t worry, Jared... You’ve done well... You’ve done just fine... In fact, there will be no repercussions from Maerdyann, I promise.”

“Lady, I...”

The woman touched his cheek, “Believe me... there’s no failure here... You could not have stopped this... Well” she said, turning back to Talibah, “My name is Cordelia... and you are welcome here... I believe you were sent to get something? Perhaps this, do you suppose?” The woman brought forth a crystal that made even Jared’s eyes grow wide. “Wonderful, isn’t it? Do you think you can get this... my dear?” Cordelia laughed merrily.

Talibah found herself alone in a dark winding tunnel, her head disoriented and no sense of direction. After a moment or so, she saw Cordelia far down the tunnel, the crystal shimmering bright in the darkness. Cordelia laughed, light and merry, a mild taunt in her tone, then turned away and began to walk. Not sure a moment, Talibah finally decided to run towards the receding figure. Though it seemed as if the distance was relatively short, Talibah found herself running and running, and getting no closer to Cordelia. Yet, she could see that Cordelia was casually walking. Going no further yet coming no closer, Talibah ran and ran, her strong runner legs were sure and swift on the uncertain path. After a time, though, she became exhausted and almost faint. She had to stop and take her bearings, perhaps to even give up. As she did stop, tears welled in her eyes in frustration. She had lost and she hated the thought of disappointing Taliesin. In dejection she finally called to Cordelia in plea, "Please lady, please stop." as Talibah slid to the floor and wept.

As she wept she felt a presence beside her. "Very good," spoke Cordelia quietly as she knelt down to Talibah, "You finally remembered... Force is usually not the answer..." At that Cordelia offered her hand to Talibah and gently pulled her to standing, "I think you may just make it." She smiled at Talibah and kissed her cheek, "Come with me."

Cordelia led Talibah into a gently lit area that displayed a huge ornate mirror trimmed in silver and gold braiding. Stepping up to the mirror Talibah saw her figure, sharp and clear, almost too real and defined. Next to her in the mirror where Cordelia should be standing, she was startled to realize was a giant black raven with glowing red eyes. The eyes of the raven seemed to smile as it croaked, "Blessings to you, Talibah. You have well earned this crystal. Now Maerdynn shall teach you how to use it." Great pain seared through Talibah and she screamed realizing that the crystal had been jabbed into her neck to go down into her spine. There was pain, terrible pain as Talibah found herself losing all consciousness.

The smell of pleasant herbal smoke that mingled with the oak and pine began to draw Talibah to her senses. Her eyes fluttered slightly as she thought she could see Jared quietly discussing something with Taliesin. Then she closed her eyes again a moment as she gathered more strength only to find Jared was no longer there when she opened them again.

Seeing her movement and that her eyes were opening, Taliesin came to her and sat by her, gently taking her into his arms, "Well done, my dear... Very well done... But, I hear you have also exacted a price... well, that, too, is for the best." He smiled gently and rocked her slightly. "Let me heal you, now... and open your gift." With that he began a slow, soft, resonating song deep in his chest, the vibration humming into her body as she rested in his arms. She drifted slightly again as he sang, comforting and warm. Then she began to feel something new, something that started at the base of her skull and traveled down her spine to her tailbone. Slow at first, then building strength in a great pulsating rhythm as she began to understand what had happened to her. Her spine had become the crystal itself, each vertebra toning and singing as Taliesin sang. 'How wonderful' she thought and smiled, 'Thank-you, Lady... thank-you – all of you.' The vibration from her spine echoed out into her entire body as she lulled and drifted entering into a beautiful and healing sleep.