

Chapter 1

Birthing the Light

Wrington Valley, Somerset, England

January 25th, 1460

A midwife's sleep is shallow and short. Far in the distance, a newborn's cry calls Madlen out from under warm her bed rugs. Faint, familiar Celtic melodies drift about her head, a haunting harp soothing her sleep-deprived ears. Until, suddenly alert, she detects undertones of urgency in the thrumming. In that same instance she senses the presence of Goddess Cerridwen; a soul is on its way.

Taking care not to disturb her young son, Callwen, Madlen greets Cerridwen with a reverent bow of tousled auburn hair. She sees the Celtic goddess clearly, though most would not. Cerridwen's ethereal form glows like embers in the fire pit as she stands in her usual place near the hearth. In the centre of the smokey room a black iron cauldron hangs above the dying fire, the humble three-legged pot synonymous with her revered name, an everyday chalice, and vessel of alchemy.

Cerridwen's green velvet dress rises up out of the rammed earth floor, draping her in a mantel of moss. Her bodice is laced with ivy vine, and meadow flowers grow in her flame-red hair. In her arms she cradles a newborn bathed in numinous, gold light.

Madlen shivers and pulls a thick woollen shawl about her shoulders. The first cracks of daylight have entered through gaps in the daub and wattle walls, the same cracks that steal her fire's warmth. Before words have time to form on her lips she hears the name, Arianwen.

"My dear sister! Arianwen's child is coming. I shall leave for Wrington at once. Thank you Cerridwen." She turns to wake Callwen, but the goddess has a message.

"Madlen, know that your sister is birthing a soul with a special destiny. Nurture his early years and teach him the Old Ways. Before he is taken."

"Poor Arianwen. He will not survive childhood?"

Cerridwen smiles, "Do not fear. He will make old bones. But at seven years, his calling will move him beyond his mother's reach. Make haste. He is coming."



Madlen gasps at the sight of Arianwen hauling her swollen belly over the side of the huge oak bed. In her excitement at Madlen's arrival Arianwen stands up too fast and, a drizzle of water trickles onto the floor. Swaying with giddiness, she clutches wildly at the ochre curtains that hang from the canopy.

Still in her riding cloak, her cheeks ruby from the cold air, Madlen bounds across the room. She grabs and steadies her sister, hugging her until the floor rushes have drunk their fill.

After tucking Arianwen under the covers in a dry nightgown, Arianwen carefully removes her muddied cloak. She perches on the edge of the four poster and takes Arianwen's hand. Glad to be out of the biting wind, and catching her breath after the fast ride, she gazes upon the large, expensive wall tapestry, admiring the stitched scene. She knows Arianwen has made a good marriage into the Whiting family. Her husband, Sir Thomas Whiting, seems content as Steward for the family business of wool merchants in Shepton Mallet. It had been his wish to take on the comfortable Tudor manor house in Wrington Valley and oversee the tenant farmers. He wanted to learn every aspect of England's glorious wool trade from pasture to mill.

Her thoughts come back into the room with a giggle.

"How clever you are not to drench the mattress with your waters." Kissing her sister, she declares, "Arianwen, you were swaying about just like your embroidered weeping willows. When your waters broke, you became the river they stand in."

Resting against plump pillows, Arianwen exclaims, "It's no wonder I've embodied the tapestry - it's been a long lying in." What with Cousin Agnes....' Her words trail off, her voice quivering.

She fights back her tears before continuing in a brighter voice. "It has been lovely to look upon the willows and water. Sometimes I dreamed of bathing in the river. I imagined myself floating, weightless, with my child in my womb."

Madlen sits up and reaches over to twirl a strand. "Ah, yes, I see you there. Drifting with the current under dangling willow fronds. Your raven-black tresses splayed around your lovely face.

Now that Arianwen is calm, she asks in a more serious tone, "Your pains have begun?"

Arianwen nods, slightly breathless. "Already strong." Winding her arms about Madlen's neck and finally giving into her fears, she sobs, "Thanks to God you're here. Agnes has driven me mad with her superstitions. It's the devil this and the devil that."

Madlen nodded her sympathy. Casting her gaze around the shuttered room she finds the low, black beams oppressive. She notes neat piles of clean linens and cloths, white as the lime-washed walls. Her eyes linger with approval at the tranquil tapestry but jerk away from the tall silver crucifix given prominence on the oak sideboard.

"Did Agnes rent the crucifix from the priest?"

Grunting with the effort to get comfortable, Arianwen shifts on her green linen bolsters and squeezes Madlen's hand again. With a heavy sigh she nods, "Yes she did. But tell me your news before she returns with the priest on one arm and the Grim Reaper on the other."

Madlen gives a hearty laugh. "She sounds as pious as ever. We won't be telling her that over these past years I have undergone many initiations."

"With your secret order?' Arianwen asks, her green eyes filled with wistful admiration. 'I wish I could have continued learning with you."

"Yes, with the Druids. Although we must go under the name of Celtic Christians." She stops mid-sentence and lowers her voice as a looming presence outside the door is detected. "I will tell you more another time."

Madlen is standing next to the fire smoothing down her russet dress when Cousin Agnes enters the room. The three women are of similar years, but Madlen sees Agnes has aged. As though the sins of humanity that fill her mind have etched themselves on her stern countenance. An inky linen bodice and sleeves worn over a black woollen kirtle lack trimmings, adding to her funerary look. She is fingering the rosary around her neck. Perhaps she does not expect this winter-born child to survive - many won't.

Paying no heed to the woman's sourness, Madlen chirps, "Greetings dear Agnes. My sister is indeed fortunate to have your assistance. But your duties seem to have taken a toll. Why, you look a bundle of nerves. Try to relax dear Agnes. All is well here. We don't want you to wear out your beads."

"Lady Elizabeth is not your true sister," huffs Agnes.

"It's a term of endearment between devoted friends, Agnes." Ignoring the devout woman's glare and fanning herself with her hand, Madlen takes stock. "It's rather stuffy in here. Agnes, kindly remove the paper from the shutters and open the window or we shall soon smell like the stables."

"But the room must be sealed off and kept dark," objects Agnes. She moves her frigid frame closer with nervous bird-like steps, all the while twisting her black beads. "Surely you know birthing is a time when evil spirits lurk in every corner. And the light will damage Lady Elizabeth's eyes."

Madlen drops her chin on her chest and draws a slow breath, summoning patience at this first challenge. She also makes a mental note to call Arianwen by her baptised name. Her face shows acquiescence, but her voice holds undeniable authority. "Then perhaps you would be so good as to fetch fresh flowers. Winter sweet and daphne will do. And dried lavender for strewing. Lord knows, we could be here for a while. Oh, and a jug of boiled water to make the mugwort tea. You can

blend it with chamomile and rose petals to ease her pains. You'll approve of that, Agnes. Mugwort wards off the devil."

Agnes bristles like a twig broom and retorts in her thin, reedy voice, "The priests don't allow herbs that ease suffering. They say birthing pains atone for the mother's sin."

"What sin is that, Agnes?" knowing full well.

A blush spreads over the cheeks of the spinster. "The sin committed through procreation." Covering her embarrassment she sneers at Madlen, "Perhaps *you* would be so good as to tell your devoted friend to make her will. She might want to leave her fine tapestry to one who cares for her soul. Unlike some," she mutters, stomping out the door. Her scowl remains in the room, sitting like a cold chill in the low seated groaning chair that Arianwen will soon bear down in.

Arianwen lets out a long sigh and rolls her eyes. "Thanks-be-to-God. Agnes has been insistent I make a will. And she's been waving that birthing hook in front of my nose. Heavens knows why she was so impatient for my waters to flow. I said they would come in their own good time. Worse than that, she's been reading me the Passion of St Margaret day and night. I know she means well but I could scream. And this wretched birthing girdle is making me scratch like the chickens."

"My poor lamb." croons Madlen, stroking her pale face. "Let me see what nonsense she has wound around your belly."

Lifting Arianwen's gown she inspects the crude drawings inked onto a long strip of parchment. Sighing and shaking her head, she says "I don't think the dripping side-wound of Jesus on the cross is going to encourage a new babe to come into the world. How this nonsense can be encouraged in the name of God, I'll never understand. While druids with centuries of wisdom stand accused of witchcraft." She shakes her head again, thinking of the superstitious beliefs she deals with each day. "Where in heavens name did she get it from?"

"Agnes bought it from the priest at Wrington Church. I didn't want to offend her."

"It's coming off before she gets back." Unwinding the smelly sheep parchment she remarks, "Heavens, it must be ten feet long - I didn't know we had such long sheep in England. It's got incantations all over it, But I can't see one that protects you from Agnes."

With colour back in her cheeks, Arianwen pleads through her laughter, "Stop it Maddie. Or this time I will pisse the bed!"

After rubbing rose oil on her sister's hips and belly Madlen picks up the birthing girdle again, repulsed but fascinated by the crude talisman. She traces a finger over the rough symbols that deter evil spirits and remove the unavoidable sins associated with creating new life. "Look here," puzzles Madlen. "This green crucifix is smudged."

Arianwen smothers a fit of giggles, "That's where Agnes has been kissing it. Hush, here she comes. Quick, roll it up. Hide it under the bedskirts."

The door is flung wide open. The two friends press their lips shut, but, when seven-years old Callwen rushes into the room, hysterical peals of laughter escape.

He looks from his mother to Arianwen. "What?" he asks, scratching his crotch. "Sir Thomas said to tell you the mare has begun."

Arianwen laughs again and holds her arms out to hug him. Ruffling the red curls under his hat, "That's wonderful news Callwen. And you can tell your uncle that his other mare has begun as well. "No doubt," she says, looking at Madlen, "he thinks it's one and the same. I'm glad for his distraction."

"Aye, if only it were the same," sighs Madlen. "There will likely be a foal in the stable while you still travail. But this is late for a mare to birth. Somebody must have left the stallions' gate open," she chuckles. "Now my sunny boy, tell your aunt how goes the mare."

Callwen puffs up his chest. Rusty dots on his nose seem to jiggle about as he straightens his hat. "She looks like she swallowed a church bell. And she turns her head to look at her big bump when her bell is moving. And she's walking around in circles. Sometimes she lies down then gets up again. That's all," he concludes.

“Get out,” scolds Agnes, making them all jump. She lays down her load of dried flowers, a steaming jug and a coverlet. Glaring at the boy she snarls, “Men are not allowed,” and moves to bolt the door.

“Well, I’m a boy,” grins Callwen, sticking out his bright pink tongue before scarpering back to the stable.

After the bed is remade with the best green coverlet embroidered with letters and flowers, Madlen takes a strong linen cord from her bag. She winds the string that’s knotted at one-inch intervals around her fingers then gently reaches between Elizabeth’s legs to check her sister’s progress.

“Praise the goddess, you have almost reached the last knot, sister. It may well be a fast but intense birth my dear. Rest while you can my love,” she advises. She places dried lavender around the pillows and ties winter sweet above Arianwen’s head. It’s for later on, when she will need the heavenly scent to uplift her.



Madlen was right. Arianwen’s second stage begins with alarming intensity. With little respite between spasms, excruciating pains rack Elizabeth’s body, each shuddering wave more painful than the last. Distressed to see Arianwen writhe in agony she tries everything she knows to ease the suffering.

Sometimes all she can do is blot the fine beads of sweat each time they reappear on her sister’s brow.

“I’m burning,” cries Arianwen. “My body feels like a furnace. Like every shovel of pain is stoking fires of atonement.”

“Hush, dearest,” whispers Madlen. “You know that’s not true.”

She knows Arianwen has faith in the Old Ways but suspects her cousin’s indoctrinations have had some effect. It’s a vulnerable time for a first time mother. Madlen is well aware Agnes would go as far as to call her a witch if things were to

go badly. But even Agnes knows that folk hold her in good regard. Still, Madlen must guard what she allows others to see.

Holding winter sweet under Lady Elizabeth's nose, Agnes encourages her cousin's wife to inhale the fragrance. With unusual tenderness she says she hopes the child may be blessed with golden hair, the same colour of the tiny floral clusters. Unaccustomed to seeing the lady of the house distressed, she fetches a spiced pomander with a more stimulating aroma.

But something stronger than invigorating fragrance is needed. Worried Arianwen can't endure much more, Madlen soaks a scrap of muslin, and squeezes drops of mugwort tea through her parched lips.

"Is it helping, dear sister?"

"The ceiling is coming closer," Arianwen stammers, her voice made dreamy by the mild hallucinogenic. "I'm floating above the bed. Can't stay in my body. So much pain. My baby is floating up here too. Help me Maddie," she pleads, clutching a fistful of her friend's skirts.

Close to exhaustion, she screams at the unbearable ache in her back and the searing fire between her legs. It's the hour between day and night and pains roll in like relentless waves. But the baby has stopped moving forth, as though it too is caught in the twilight between worlds.

"Let's get you standing again," urges Madlen. "That will move things along. Lean against the wall, my love. Agnes will hold you."

But Agnes looks at Madlen, terror on her face. She hisses, "Evil spirits have entered her. We must read the priest's prayers on the talisman."

She yanks up her lady's nightdress, horrified to discover the protective girdle is gone. "Where is it?" she shrieks. "We must open all of the cupboards and drawers. Madlen, we must untie all of the knots in the room. Untie her hair, let it fall loose."

"For heavens sakes, Agnes, calm thyself. The only thing you will open is the window," growls Madlen. "She needs fresh air, not stale nonsense. Take the window coverings down. Do as I say," she snaps.

Gripped with fear, Agnes crosses herself and falls to her knees, garbling Latin prayers while Madlen drags Arianwen back to the birthing stool. Pressing cool rosewater to her burning temple she whispers, "Ignore her sweet sister. I see divine spirits overseeing this soul's arrival. We must let the light in."

She rips off the paper coverings and flings the window wide open. The last failing light enters on a rush of chilled air, causing Agnes to wail and clutch the crucifix to her breast.

A flutter of panic crosses Madlen's belly, but then Cerridwen comes into her awareness, humming a beautiful song. It's unfamiliar to Madlen, but with nothing else to be done, she allows the goddess to sing through her. Exquisite, ancient sounds from another realm drift in the air, swirling like silvery bells in a mist around Arianwen. Perhaps elven in origin, Madlen doesn't know the meaning, but she feels it, and so does her travelling sister.

"Yes," cries Arianwen. "The light. Birth the light."

Arianwen grips the arms of the birthing chair until her knuckles are white. Leaning against the sloping back, she fills her lungs with icy, exhilarating air and screws her face in to a ball of determination. Summoning heroic strength she grits her teeth and arches her back before bearing down. With a blood-curdling scream she pushes her son into the perilous world in our lord's year of fourteen hundred and sixty.

Relief washes over Madlen as she hands the damp infant to his mother. Her heart swells with tenderness to see him resting at his mother's breast. She gazes in wonder at this small parcel of life that could have so easily been returned to its sender. But souls are tenacious, and she laughs when Callwen yells through the open window, "Mares waters broke. I got splashed."

Madlen calls back, "That's good luck for sure my bonny boy! Is she lying down?"

"No, but Sir Thomas says not long now."

Too tired to battle religious dogma, Madlen dispatches Agnes to fetch a nourishing egg and milk caudle for the spent mother. She cuts the babe's navel-string three finger widths out from his navel, aware that Agnes would have insisted it be burnt. She would say that the priest had said this would thoroughly rid the infant of the sin transmitted at the time of its conception.

While Arianwen rests, Madlen bathes the tiny infant and rubs him with acorn oil, then sits by the fire to gaze upon the fairness of this swaddled, honey-haired boy. There is indeed a golden light around him, just as the goddess had shown her. And, there was no mistaking the presence of holy beings crowded in the birthing room. She had recognised some, including Jesus and Mary Magdalene standing next to Ceridwen.

Madlen closes her eyes and whispers to the Goddess, offering silent thanks for the well-being of mother and child. It will take the passing of two nights to be confident of no fever developing in the mother. Such a fever could take Arianwen before the moon was full. It is in this quiet moment of gratitude she hears someone calling; it's not a physical voice. Shaking off her tiredness she takes a fur rug and carries the bundled baby down to the stables.

Sir Thomas and his stableman, along with a wide-eyed Callwen, are hovering over Lizzie. They look chilled to the bone despite six burning braziers. Madlen catches a glimpse of Goddess Ceridwen standing in a corner of Lizzie's stall and hears the horses welcoming her. Concerned for his mare, at first Sir Thomas glances at his child, expressing concern about bringing the newborn out into the cold. Then he remembers to praise God for favouring him with a son and heir before returning his attention to Lizzie.

Sharing her warm rug with Callwen, Madlen perches on a hay bale to watch.

The chestnut swishes her raised tail with pained agitation. "Look," squeals Callwen, showing off his new knowledge. "her teats are leaking. She could give birth any moment."

Lizzie circles a few times with her neck stretched down, her nose near the ground. Taking care to balance, she folds her front legs and groans with the effort of

lowering herself carefully onto her side. Moments later the watery sack emerges from under her tail, followed by one tiny, pointed hoof, the second hoof just behind it. Lizzie grunts and pushes the foal's head and shoulders out. The rest seems to flow out with the remaining waters.

The colt lies quietly, and Lizzie swings her neck and head around to look at him. She makes a low, deep nicker, the special sound reserved for her newborns. It's so low it's barely heard, but Madlen sees her nostrils vibrating. The nearby horses stay still and quiet, alert to this precious moment.

Callwen lets his breath out and meets his mother's smiling eyes, then asks to hold his baby cousin while the colt rests. Before long Lizzie stands and smells every inch of her colt before licking him all over. She stimulates him with her constant nickers and is soon rewarded with his piercing, shrill response. He makes his first awkward attempt to stand but sprawls back into the straw bedding. Within minutes he is upright, wobbling on all leggy fours but manages to stabilise. A chorus of celebratory whinnies goes around the stable.

The colt's long, slender legs and short fuzzy mane and tail liken him to a child's hobby horse. He is chestnut like his mother except for a white sock above each small hoof. In the soft amber light of hanging lanterns Madlen sees the same light around the colt and is astonished when it teeters towards them. It comes straight to Callum to nuzzles its velvety mouth against the baby's downy head.

"Well I've never seen the likes of that," says Sir Thomas, scratching his head. "Perhaps this winter born colt is for my winter born son." He thinks for a moment, "Though some will say four white feet is bad luck."

Ignoring his stableman shift uncomfortably on his feet, he adds, "My wife and I plan to name the boy after my cousin, Father Richard. A good man, and willing to be godfather."

"Aye, a fine choice," nods Madlen, moved by the bond between the newborns. Dabbing at tears with a fistful of swaddling cloth, she asks, "And the colt my Lord? What of him?"

Sir Thomas is a serious man and takes his time before answering, "Perhaps you should name him. For bringing my son safely into the world this day. I don't pretend to understand your ways, but I do recognise things go well when you are here. I am grateful to thee, Madlen."

Madlen gulps an involuntary deep breath and brushes damp wisps of red hair off her forehead with the palm of her hand. It's a habit she shares with Lady Elizabeth, and Thomas smiles at the familiar trait. But when he quickly averts his eyes Madlen remembers the three blue spirals inked onto her skin, half-hidden in her hairline. She drops her hand, praying he hasn't seen the triskelion. Sir Thomas would surely recognise it as a sign of the long-banished Druids.

With her heart beating a little faster, Madlen berates herself for being careless. Recalling her promise to Cerridwen, she momentarily pictures herself in a forest gathering medicinal plants with the boy. Sir Thomas slaps warmth into his arms while staring at her, waiting for her reply.

"Lightfoot," breathes Madlen. "My lord, would the name Lightfoot please you?"

"Lightfoot it is then."

When Sir Thomas and the stable hand turn away, Madlen traces the same ancient symbol on the infant's forehead with her finger. Three interlocking spirals connected in the center. Madlen feels his tiny chest expand, his eyelids flicker and open for a moment before falling asleep in her arms.

Chapter 2

Forest to Font

Wrington, North Somerset, England

January 26th, 1460

“But what if he dies in the night?” wails Agnes, wringing her hands. “Unless he is baptised he will burn in eternal hell. You of all people should know how quickly newborns are taken in the night. I thought the devil had got him. And you had him in the stables of *all* places. If he dies from the cold it will be your fault.”

“He was wrapped in fur, and we didn’t stay long. Do calm yourself Agnes dear. He is not going to die. Look at him sleeping next to his mother, his little cheeks are already filling out. What a suckler, a right little piglet this one.”

“Madlen, you must listen to me,’ begs Agnes. He must be cleansed of his sin straight away. Please, for his soul’s sake. We must take him to the priest now.”

Seeing the woman’s fright, Madlen softens her stance. It saddens her to see Agnes shackled to a faith that cripples her with fear. “Agnes, it is almost freezing outdoors. The ride to the church at this hour would surely kill him. Besides, Sir Thomas is still busy with the mare and her newborn. Can I depend on you to help

keep vigil through the night? We will need your resolute faith. I promise we will go to the priest at first light.”

Agnes meets her eye with such doubt, Madlen takes her hands and says, “If anything does happen in the night, I am permitted to baptise in such a situation. God help us.”

“Very well,” sniffs Agnes. But you must show me everything from the birth. I will bury it now. We don’t want it falling in to the hands of witches.”

“Of course dear Agnes. It’s in the dish next to the hearth. Now get some rest my dear, you must be exhausted. Sip this draft, it will fortify you.”

Grudgingly accepting the potion, Agnes closes the door behind her. Madlen waits for the house to be silent then takes dried agrimony leaves from her bag. Lighting it from a candle she allows it to smolder and smoke, purifying the room. She lights a small resinous lump that contains ground valerian root and places it next to the bed for a restorative sleep. She smiles to herself, predicting Agnes will sleep well this night.



Madlen knows it’s their only chance. Still, she is loath to disturb Arianwen from her deep sleep.

She had shared Cerridwen’s message in the middle of the night while Arianwen nursed her tiny son by the fire. His mother’s response to Cerridwen’s portent affirmed that the boy had his mother chosen well. Madlen believed that

souls make their familial choices for each life before they take a body on the Earth again.

"This tiny babi at my breast?" Arianwen had said, full of wonder. "A destiny. Did the goddess hint at what that might be?"

"No dearest, she did not. In accordance with the Old Ways we are only told what we need to know at the time." Tucking a warmed stone under Arianwen's feet she had added in a soft voice, "Cerridwen did foresee that he would not live his life in Wrington Valley or Shepton Mallet when the family returns there. Her words were that his destiny would take him somewhere else."

Blinking through her tears, Arianwen had tenderly muzzled her son's downy head and whispered to him, "Then our time together is all the more precious, sweet child."

Wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand she had said with determination, "Madlen, we must have a naming ceremony before the priest gets hold of him. And we can take comfort he will survive childhood and live a long life. Old bones you say?"

"It would have to be brief. We can't keep the babi outdoors for long. Ah, he's asleep, bless him." Madlen had helped Arianwen back to her nicely warmed bed, promising to wake her before dawn.

In the biting cold darkness, wearing cloaks lined with rabbit fur over their thickest woollens, the two women creep out of the house. Smiling at the baby bundled in layers of fleece finely woven by his mother, Madlen thinks he looks ready

to be hung from a branch like a cocooned caterpillar. Frost crunches under their feet, and they use this silent time of enchantment to walk in contemplation. Under their cloaks, the women have hitched up their skirts at the waist to avoid tell-tale wet hems. Madlen wears her favourite moss-green kirtle and Arianwen's russet red gown accentuates her raven's hair. A lingering half-moon that seems reluctant to yield to the rising wintry sun guides them to a copse of birches, oaks and hazels. Only those with eyes to see would notice the moss-covered flat stone etched with ancient symbols placed in the centre of the grove.

They laugh, when as one, they both push back their fur hoods and remove copper wire hair pins to shake their lovely tresses about their shoulders. Delighting in this act of freedom, Madlen exclaims, "Praise the grasses and the fieldmice! That feels better!" Stretching her arms to the heavens, she says, "Now I know how the king's royal falcon feels between hunts."

She smiles to see her friend radiant, her happiness shining through her birthing fatigue. "Breathe deep, dear sister, this will do you a power of good. The Lady of the Woods is ideal for inspiring the beginnings of this soul's life." Laying a rug over a tree stump, she says, "Come, rest while I call to her, and prepare the circle."

Madlen begins the ceremony by welcoming and thanking all present, especially the Spirits of Place, the seen and unseen sentient guardians. She acknowledges the trees, birds, flowers, and wildlife, asking for their blessing. She states their purpose of a naming ceremony, thinking it a pity they must honour this soul's first rite of passage in secrecy. There will be no celebratory *eisteddfod* today,

no singing and dancing or sharing of mead and bread. Finally, she invites Goddess Cerridwen to over light and inspire their ceremony.

Madlen places a feather, candle, vial of water and small vessel of salt on the central stone, admiring tiny frozen crystals of water held in the moss. She calls the quarters by moving sunwise. With her wooden staff raised and, facing each of the four winds, she acknowledges the elements associated with each cardinal direction. Finally she casts the circle, her footsteps imprinting a frosty perimeter while she recites the Celtic Christian's call for peace:

"Let there be peace in the East, so let it be.

Let there be peace in the South, so let it be.

Let there be peace in the West, so let it be.

Let there be peace in the North, so let it be.

Let there be peace through all three Worlds.

So let it be."

Invoking the spirits of the three worlds: the skies, earth, and seas, Madlen is enchanted by the beauty of moonlight beams striking the frosted ground. At just the right angle there are specks of ruby, gold and cobalt blue glinting like minuscule crystal spheres. This is her first rite in her role as a Priestess of the Celtic Christians. Gliding her fingers over carved symbols on the wooden rod that denotes her achievement, she realises this dawning day holds many beginnings.

Arianwen joins her chanting the *Awen* three times, each woman creating her own way of toning the three sacred vowels of *ah-oo-enn*, yet weaving their sounds as one. Their haunting harmony fills the little grove with gratitude for the spirits of the natural world.

Breathless from taking the cold air into her lungs, Arianwen exclaims, "Oh, how wonderful it is to fill my heart and soul with the magic of the *Awen*. I feel alive and rejuvenated. I must come here more often. And bring this little one of course," she says, kissing his pink nose, the only visible part of the child. Adding through chattering teeth, "In the Spring."

Hurrying through the main part of the ceremony more than she would have wished, Madlen invites Arianwen with her son into the centre of the circle, then honours all ancestors who have gone before. "On this day of January 26th, 1459, under the waxing gibbous moon of Scorpio, we celebrate this soul's first rite of passage. What name have you chosen?"

Without hesitation, Arianwen says, "I heard the name of Gwion throughout my lying-in time. I believe it means one who is fair and blessed. One who is devoted to a cause." She reaches into her pocket and says, "To my son Gwion, I gift this acorn. The seed of the mighty oak. To help you remember, whatever that predestined cause may be, that mighty things have small beginnings."

Beaming with pride for her sister, Madlen prompts Arianwen to turn a full circle, beginning in the east and pausing to present her child to each of the four winds and Spirits of Place. She calls for the blessing of Gwion from the ancestors

and from Cerridwen. Uplifted and filled with joy, Madlen hastens through a closing prayer:

“Deep within the still centre of my being, may I find peace.

Silently within the quiet of the grove, may I share peace.

Gently within the greater circle of humankind

May I radiate peace.”

They express gratitude again through the *Awen*, lifting their chins to chant the ancient vowels that spiral in white, wispy vapours around their chilled faces. Madlen uncasts the circle and closes the quarters in reverse order.

“We must hurry now, as much as you are able, dear sister. I’ll carry Gwion. Both the sun and the servants will soon be up.”



Madlen arrives in the kitchen to find Callwen sobbing at the kitchen table. Above his head, salted ham and black puddings hang like bats from the rafters. The smoky room makes her eyes water and she looks from her tear-streaked child to the cart driver heading out the door. He shrugs his shoulders, dons his heavy cloak and hurries off to harness the horses. The long oak table is littered with farm worker’s wooden bowls and, smears of duck egg and crumbs of brown bread evidence their hearty breakfast.

They will need that while mending thatched roofs and wattle fences in the cold air, Madlen thinks, eyeing Callwen’s untouched bowl of honeyed barley porridge

and milk. Knowing she won't eat her first meal until later that morning she sighs at the myriad of ways the Church reaches into every corner of her life. With her belly rumbling, she helps herself to warm spiced cider, then asks Callwen what the matter is.

"Aunt Agnes said our baby will burn in hell if he dies before the priest baptises him." His bottom lip wobbles and he screws his fists in his eye sockets. "He won't die will he? He won't burn will he, mama?"

Madlen spreads her arms around Callwen like a swan cradling her cygnet and kisses the back of his head. She wonders how to best comfort him, knowing whatever she tells a child will find its way back to the adults. She must not say anything that contradicts Agnes, yet she wishes with all her heart to spare another generation from distorted teachings that foster ignorance and fear. Even her own son is a liability. Until the day he is old enough to hold her secrets she must conceal her innermost beliefs from him.

Winding a red curl around her finger Madlen feigns lightness. "There, there my bonny son . Our baby is strong and healthy like you. He is not going to die. Why, at this very moment he is suckling like a sweet little piglet. He even has a curly tail."

"A curly tail?" Callwen giggles and chants, "Baby has a curly wurly, baby has a curly wurly."

"Eat your breakfast while I fetch our little piglet. We are going to find the priest."



Wearing his best homespun jerkin and woollen hose, Sir Thomas is animated on the short ride to the parish church, despite the bleak landscape. Madlen is heartened to see him enjoying the easy banter with his brother in law, John. She knows Thomas feels his responsibilities keenly each time wool prices drop - the younger man's bright manner is good for him. She watches streams of mist billow between their mouths as though their words scramble to get back into a warm place.

Thomas is explaining to John why he encourages his tenants to crop some of their land. "Sheep farmers are the backbone of the English economy, but they need protection against hardship when the wool trade is interrupted. These past five years if it wasn't plague taking our good men, it was the private armies."

"You would be alert to that Sir Thomas," John sympathised. It was a terrible thing when Sir Richard didn't come back from the first battle at St Albans."

"My father had five decades. Most don't have that. And he was knighted for his services. But it make no sense when men fight against their own countrymen. They say this War of Roses could flare up again at any time. Maybe we should be selling England's best cider, not wool," he remarks, waving to workers in the orchards.

"Or pork," says John, as their driver slows to pass a sounder of swine on the road.

Slaughtering and salting animals is crucial to sustain families through the wintry season that brings poverty and death. Enduring months of draughty dwellings, many of the frail will slip out of their wretched lives. Madlen knows full well that although a newborn will hearten the village in the dead of winter, many will doubt its survival. And they will predict the colt is sure to die; it has more than two white feet.

Madlen pulls the woollen blanket around the baby's head who seems none the worse for his first foray into the forest. She steals a look at Agnes who has seated herself on the opposite bench with the men. Her yellow bonnet is a curious choice for a winter baptism and looks at odds with her black clothes and stern countenance. At least Callwen is back to his happy self, swinging his legs over the back of the bouncing cart and singing a nursery rhyme.

"Baa Baa Black Sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes, sir, yes, sir,
Three bags full.
One for the master,
One for the dame,
And one for the little boy
Who cries down the lane."

"Why does the little boy cry?" he wants to know. He brings his legs to a halt and turns to Madlen for the second awkward explanation that morning.

Before she can answer, Sir Thomas pulls his scarf away from his mouth and declares irately, "Because after the master and dame take their taxes, there isn't much money left for him." He continues to complain about this to his brother in law.

"Who are the master and the dame?" asks Callwen.

Mindful of Agnes' tightly drawn mouth, Madlen answers in a neutral tone and rubs her chin, her secret signal to her son for no more questions. "The master is the king and the dame is the monastery."

She wonders why Thomas should agitate about this when he enjoys the privilege of taking his wool directly to the family mills and pays no taxes to Glastonbury Abbey. She knows his grandfather was also knighted and thinks it unusual he is the only child. But then again, she has seen women so badly damaged with birthing hooks they are unable to carry another child. Arianwen was right to be worried.

Her thoughts go to other influential members of the Whiting family and decides this a good subject to cheer Agnes. "Cousin, dear, what is the name of the exemplary bishop who comes from the Whiting lineage?"

Agnes looks at her with suspicion and remarks, "That's a curious question." Nevertheless, she continues with a glint of pride in her eyes. "He was Walter Stapleldon, Bishop of Exeter."

“But he is rather distantly connected, I understand,” says Madlen, allowing mischief to get the better of her.

“That doesn’t matter in the least,” snaps Agnes. Regaining composure she folds her gloved hands neatly in her lap and continues, “He must have been a wonderful and generous man as founder of Exeter College. Oxford, you know.” Then adds for good measure, “He was also Lord High Treasurer of England. Twice in fact.” She sighs, “That was a hundred years ago of course. But we can be proud to have another priest in the family. Father Richard. Not a bishop by any means, but still, the chamberlain at Bath monastery.” She clasps her hands to her bosom as the mighty gothic tower of Wrington Church comes into view. “I am looking forward to seeing my cousin at the church.”

Madlen hopes Agnes isn’t disappointed, and that Father Richard does indeed see her godliness. And she prays no one else in the family suffers the fate of Bishop Stapleldon; hooligans had removed his head from his body with a bread knife.



Father Simon, the Wrington Church prior, has to be woken by the housekeeper who looks as though she hasn’t had much sleep. It’s mid-morning and his crushed robes smell of ale. Like them, he has a red nose but, his is not from the biting cold. Madlen can see tiny bits of flesh stuck between his teeth, making his breath putrid and, she wants to pull away each time he speaks. Father Richard looks appalled but, diplomatically asks if he might be permitted the honour of baptising his second cousin.

Clucking with delight, Sir Thomas and Agnes look to the portly prior who is having trouble keeping his bloodshot orbs focused in the same direction. He mumbles his agreement and is soon replaced by a most sober clerk to assist Father Richard. This tall, lean man checks to make sure there is the correct number of godparents.

“Is the child a girl or boy? Ah, thank you, and I see we have the required two godfathers and one godmother,” he says in an efficient manner.

He bustles the family inside the entrance of the church where the font is strategically located to remind parishioners of their own baptism. It’s designed to prompt them to pray. The church is short in length compared to many churches yet its ceiling rises to an astonishing height, giving an impressive, lofty appearance. Tall oak pews stand in rows like brown-robed monks pointing to the heavens, while the earth-bound village plough squats in the porch. It won’t be needed for another month when the fields are fertilised.

Madlen is surprised to see how handsome Father Richard looks in his borrowed robes. Over the white linen amice that covers his neck and shoulders, he wears a long white alb with deep embroidered cuffs. A purple satin stole drapes each side down his front, held in place with a girdle cord around his waist. He is of medium build like his cousin, but carries himself as a much larger man would. Robes maketh the man, Madlen thinks. His confidence and warmth are an appealing combination and she smiles, watching Agnes melt like her buttery bonnet at this pleasing sight of her cousin.

Father Richard gathers the small group around the font. The octagonal-shaped stone font is ornately carved with angelic faces protruding outwards at each corner. Callwen crouches to examine the creamy angels and dragon-like creatures with clawed feet, while the clerk winds a finger inside an iron ring and removes the heavy oak lid that seals the holy water.

Following the prescribed Roman Catholic service, Father Richard refers now and then to the illuminated vellum book held out by the clerk.

"We trust in All Mighty God that this child be purified of it's inherent sin through the blessing of thy holy waters. We give praise to our Lord God that should anything befall this child and he be taken from us, we are certain of his eternal life in heaven."

"Not hell." sneers Callwen, at his Aunt Agnes. Madlen quickly cuffs his ear to derail her laughter.

Father Richard signals Madlen to pass the baby and sprinkles holy water on his head while reciting prayers to ward off evil spirits. The tiny infant whimpers at the shock of the cold water but is quickly soothed. When the outer shawl of the wriggling baby comes loose the priest awkwardly swaddles him like a butcher wrapping meat. "With God as my witness I declare thee cleansed of thy born sins."

Father Richard chuckles, saying that the baby would normally be passed to the senior godparent but as he already has it he might as well hold on to him. He knows John is also a godfather but is unsure which of the women is godmother. Agnes steps forward, but Sir Thomas takes her arm and pulls her back. With firm

kindness he says, "Cousin dearest, remember Elizabeth has asked that her sister be this child's godmother."

"But they are not sisters," she retorts.

"As far as the bloodlines go. But in all other ways, they are sisters."

Feeling daggers from Agnes in her back, Madlen stands next to John. Father Richard impresses on them that as godparents they must ensure the child follows the rules and teachings of the church."

Madlen ignores Agne coughing loudly at this.

"And now we come to the naming ceremony," says Father Richard, with a twinkle in his eye. "What name is to be given to this child?"

Thomas smiles and replies, "Elizabeth and I would be honoured if our first born could take your name, Father Richard. And that of his grandfather, bless his soul."

Father Richard looks genuinely pleased and declares Richard Whiting a new member of the Wrington Church.

"Why aren't the bells ringing?" asks Callwen when they step outside.

"Because our magnificent tower doesn't have any bells yet," answers the young clerk. "It's quite new."

"t's very high," says Callwen, stretching his neck back to see it all. "And it's got five stained glass windows."

“And monsters that torment naughty boys,” snarls Agnes, pointing to fierce gargoyles glowering from the roof.

Madlen hugs Callwen and whispers, “Don’t take any notice. That’s what happens to drunken priests, more’s the like.”