

"Megge of Bury Down is a wonderful debut."
—David Anthony Durham, author of *Pride of Carthage*

The Bury Down Chronicles, Volume 1

MEGGE OF BURY DOWN



REBECCA
KIGHTLINGER

"Readers will not forget the women of Bury Down."

—Elizabeth Searle, author of *We Got Him*
and librettist for *Tonya and Nancy: The Rock Opera*

We arrived at our cottage just after dark—hungry, tired, and blood-smearred.

“Every day, Gus,” Mother called to Mister Tucker as he checked his wheels before setting out for home. “She must take those bandages off and air those wounds.”

“Yes, mistress.” He waved his hand over the back of his head and climbed up onto his high seat.

“Dora’s a dead woman,” Mother muttered, shaking her head as she walked out to the well. She filled a bucket and lugged it into the kitchen.

Clariss ladled some of the water into the kettle of pottage hanging over the smoldering turf.

“Thank goodness for Morwen and Aleydis,” she said. “This smells delicious.” She reached up, snapped off some herbs from the drying rack, and crumbled them into the kettle.

Mother carried the bucket into the workroom, Brighida and I following close behind her. As soon as Mother had returned to the kitchen, Brighida dipped her hands into the water. Splashing it on her face, she whispered to me, “I watched you today. You’re meant to be a healer.”

I sat down beside her. Pretending I hadn’t heard, I splashed water onto my own face and began to scrub off the blood.

“Just open your mother’s book,” Brighida whispered.

Pink water dripped from my hands and face into the bucket.

“You nearly did it once,” Brighida said. “Just open it.”

Opening that book would finally make me one of the family. And it was the only thing that would. Perhaps it was time—

Murderer, came the hoarse whisper.



The Bury Down Chronicles 1

MEGGE

of

BURY DOWN



Rebecca Kightlinger



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

MEGGE OF BURY DOWN

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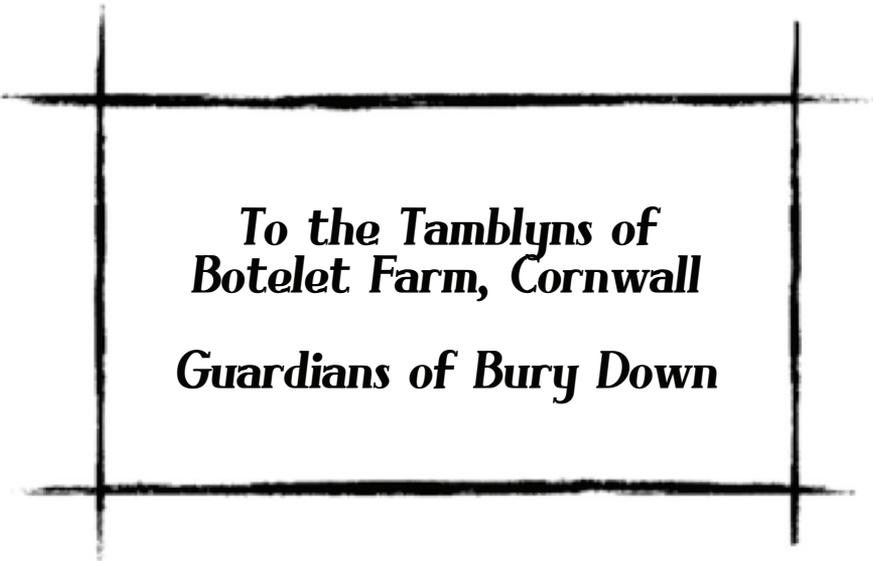
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*To the Tamblyns of
Botelet Farm, Cornwall
Guardians of Bury Down*



*Scientia nupta
sapientia potestas est*



*Knowledge wedded to
wisdom is power*





PROLOGUE

Kernow, Britain
372 CE

Anwen steps into the lee of the hillfort wall, and the ripping winds go still. In the sudden quiet, she hears the thud of picks and the ring of shovels. But it's too late in the year to till, she thinks. Too hot, too dry to plant. What can they hope to reap from this parched ground?

"What one plants at daybreak," says a voice cracked with age from deep in the shadows, "another harvests after dark."

Anwen swings her bow into position, nocks an arrow, and takes aim. When her vision becomes accustomed to the gloom, she sees a grey-haired little lump of a woman tilt her head and look up from her fire with her one good eye.

"Sit, Anwen." The woman pats the log she's sitting on. "I'm called Murga. And we've little time."

She knows that voice. Lowering her weapon, she draws nearer. Murga nods, and Anwen sits down beside her.

The seer takes Anwen's hand and rubs her thumb over fingertips as black and calloused as her own.

"A hunter," she muses with a glance at the bow. "Yet your inkstains and calluses tell me you etch." She fixes that eye on Anwen. "You'll do."

Anwen looks around, studying Murga's roundhouse with its roost, its grove, and its plot for growing herbs. It has fared no better than the others she has seen; the roost is silent, and the ground a mosaic.

I could have stayed on the cliffs to the west, she thinks, where the sea breeze still brings rain.

But her dreams had called her to Murga and guided her on her journey to this dying place.

A young woman holding a bundle in her arms hails Murga from across the barren fields. Murga nods to her and beckons.

"There is hunger here," she whispers to Anwen, who already knows of the hunger. Everyone knows of the hunger in this blighted place outsiders now call Bury Down.

Murga looks over her shoulder and calls, "Bryluen!"

Cheeks flushed, a girl child emerges from the roundhouse carrying a square oak plank, its edges rounded with age and wear. With a nod, Murga takes it and jerks her head toward the door. Bryluen runs back inside the house, and Murga places the board in Anwen's lap.

"This was passed to me from a mystic called by a dream." Carved into the wood are the symbols and images Anwen has seen in her own dreams.

Bryluen returns with a tanned hide and lays it in the seer's arms.

"The meanings of the symbols are etched in this." Murga places the stiff hide on the board, then takes Anwen's hand and lays it on top. "These writings call forth the power to return to the living world." Murga's eye goes to the arrows filling Anwen's quiver. "And I've but this child to guard them when I'm gone."

Now Anwen knows why she's here.

A sound like the mewling of a cat causes Anwen and Murga to look up. The young woman from across the field stands near the fire. All bones and points, she cradles in her arms a blue-hued babe too weak to muster a proper cry. Bending close to Murga, she whispers in the seer's ear.

Murga nods as she listens and then murmurs to Anwen, "Etch what you see here today."

She gets to her feet and takes the elbow of the wasted young mother whose babe won't see another dawn.

"Come, child." Murga leads her to the grain bin and lifts the heavy lid; she scoops out a heaping cup and puts it in the young woman's hand.

Movement from across the hillfort catches Anwen's eye as a leather-aproned colossus comes out of the smithy and strides toward the seer's hut, a sledge hammer swinging from his hand. Anwen looks to see if Murga has noticed, but the seer is steadying the hand of the young mother, for she is spilling her grain.

The blacksmith stops at the young mother's back. He looks first into Murga's face and then into the dusky face of the slack-mouthed babe, and he smiles. Leaning forward, he whispers into Murga's ear. She turns her head and spits in his face.

The smith shouts, and villagers come from the direction of the burial grounds with shovels and picks. Pushing past Anwen, they circle the blacksmith and Murga, then drop their tools and take up a chant.

"Witch. Murderer."

Anwen hands Bryluen the plank and the hide then points to the grain bin.

"Take them, Bryluen. Hurry. Hide them in the grain. Then run."

She reaches for an arrow and nocks it while searching the crowd for the blacksmith. When he breaks from the mob, his long strides closing the distance between them, Anwen shuts one eye and draws back her arrow.

"Too slow, little girl." Bony fingers grab her elbow and squeeze until the arrow falls from her hand. "You think it's so easy to take down Colluen?"

The man at her side, leathery, with sparse stubble over hollow cheeks, coughs out a laugh and releases Anwen's elbow as the blacksmith wrests the bow from her hand and twists her arm behind her back, bending her wrist until she's sure it will break.

She grits her teeth to keep from screaming.

"The other one." Colluen juts his chin toward the grain bin, where Bryluen, clutching her master's writings to her chest with one hand, struggles to lift the bin's lid with the other. The old man catches her around the waist, carries her to the door of Murga's hut, and sets her down before the towering smith. Snatching the writings from Bryluen's arms, Colluen shoves her and Anwen inside the hut and closes the door.

"Keep them there," the blacksmith says.

Anwen hurls herself against the door, but it doesn't budge, and the man outside only laughs. Bryluen runs to the other side of the hut, stands on tiptoe, and looks out a window little larger than her head.

“They’re taking her away, Anwen.” Her voice quavers. “Look.” Anwen nudges her aside, bends down, and looks out.

The villagers have seized Murga. Still chanting “Witch! Murderer!”, they drag her to the grove alongside her hut. Two men pin her against a sturdy rowan while others scatter branches and sticks at her feet. A woman comes running with a torch and lights it from the embers in the fire ring outside Murga’s hut.

Murga says something, and the crowd goes silent. Her cracking voice repeats the words, but Anwen cannot understand them.

A chant? Anwen frowns. A spell?

“She’s saying something, Bryluen. Something about... the sea? ‘Sea and...’ What is she saying? Listen.”

Bryluen cocks her head, and as Murga repeats the words, the child moves her lips along with her, murmuring, “*Scientia nupta sapientia... Scientia nupta sapientia...*”

“I know those words.” Anwen closes her eyes and tries to summon the words Murga had spoken in her dreams. There’s more, Anwen is certain. She can hear the cadence, four more beats, but the final words elude her. Still, she knows this tongue. She’s heard it spoken by foreign traders and tin streamers. The language of the Romans.

She looks at Bryluen. “You know Latin?”

Staring into Anwen’s eyes, the child nods.

“My master taught me.”

“And you know the rest of this chant.”

Bryluen tightens her lips and blinks. She’s shaking.

Anwen feels the chill wind blowing through the window; but Bryluen is standing alongside the wall, out of the cold. *How much has Murga shown her of what’s to come?*

“Murga taught you...” Anwen’s voice, gentle and slow, coaxes the seer’s pupil.

“... all her secrets.” Bryluen exhales slowly, her gaze steady. “She told me I’m meant to teach you—” Bryluen frowns, then lifts her face and sniffs. “I smell smoke, Anwen. My master—” She forces herself between Anwen and the window.

“Stay back.” Anwen looks out again and puts up her hand to keep Bryluen from seeing her master at the stake, kindling piled at her feet and a hard-faced woman standing at her side holding a smoking torch.

The crowd parts, and Murga’s voice goes silent though her lips continue to move. Colluen approaches carrying beneath his arm the

plank and hide that bear Murga's writings. Bending down, he smiles at her and holds them out.

Her chant has saved her. Anwen's hands fly to her throat as Murga struggles to free her arms from the men holding her fast to the rowan.

The blacksmith leans in close to Murga's face.

"To hell with you, Witch." Then he shouts over his shoulder, "Rope."



CHAPTER 1

Bury Down, Cornwall
November 15, 1275

Mother cast a wary glance back into the cottage, hesitating at the threshold for a long moment before swinging her cape over her shoulders and stalking down the path alone, hens and chicks scattering before her ruthless step.

“Morwen?” I tugged at the old bard’s woolen cloak.

Morwen knelt beside me and pulled up my hood, smiling as she tied the strings beneath my chin.

“Tisn’t every day a daughter of Bury Down turns six. Watch close tonight, Megge. Learn from your mother now, child.”

We followed the path Mother had taken, and when we reached the pasture, Morwen raised her arm and swept her walking stick in a great arc as if tracing a rainbow over the herder’s hill in the distance.

“Look out there, Megge, to the east. To that high, gentle slope. Can you see the sheep grazing, heads down, their white fleece tinted pink with the setting sun?”

That low voice, constant as the hum of bees in the hedges, fixed each step forever in my mind as we climbed the herder’s hill. I can hear it even now, although my hair is as white as Morwen’s was that day.

“Now, cast your gaze to the summit, child, to Bury Down, once a hillfort of rock and timber, now but a low stone crown set crooked

upon a great green head. Can you see the last of the setting sun, blood-red upon that granite ring?"

She fell silent as we climbed, and when we reached the top, she took a deep breath, opened the neck of her cloak, and exhaled into it.

"What are you doing, Morwen?"

"I'm keeping this ember alight." Opening her cloak, she showed me a clay cup that held a chunk of turf. "The wind would blow it out, but without a breath of air it would die." She covered the cup with her cloak and held out her hand. "Come, Megge, we've fallen behind."

Mother, having gone on ahead, was out of my sight, so I held tight to Morwen as the rising breeze became blustery and the sky and the stones went grey. Walking just outside the wide stone ring, we finally came to rocks no higher than Morwen's knee.

"Come, Megge." She helped me step over the wall and, for the first time, into Bury Down circle.

A hillfort, she had said. Rock and timber.

But this was no fort. The hilltop was wild, one side covered with grasses laid flat by the constant wind and the other taken up with oaks.

"This was once Murga's grove," Morwen whispered, pointing to the copse with her staff. "She was the first of us. The first seer of Bury Down."

I was about to ask why Mother always called it the healer's grove when my eye was caught by a lone rowan standing just outside the grove, all its branches flung to one side as if it were trying to flee, its hands thrust out before it.

"Morwen..." I could barely breathe. "This tree..."

Morwen glanced at the rowan.

"There's always been a rowan here, Megge. Ever since Murga's day, nearly a thousand years ago. One tree dies, and another springs up to take its place, all its branches blown sideways by the ceaseless wind." She squeezed my hand and led me past the sentry tree and into the oaks. "Come along now, lass, the others are waiting."

Deeper and deeper we trudged until the forest floor, spongy with fallen leaves, began to smell of truffles and rot. Morwen took a deep breath.

"Can you taste the sweet night air? Can you feel the soft earth give beneath your feet?" When the sky had gone dark and the air cold and damp, she squeezed my hand. "Your aunts will have made everything ready. Tell me, Megge, are you very brave?"

I was not. I was dumbstruck with fear. Fear of the dark. Fear of the smell. Fear of that frightful rowan. Even Mother, a healer unafraid of anything at all, had appeared frightened as she prepared to come here.

Why? Why had she stalked off without me? And why had Morwen sent the others—Great-aunt Aleydis, Aunt Claris, and my younger cousin, Brighida—ahead of us to this lonely place? What were they making ready?

Morwen finally stopped walking and pointed to the sky.

“Look above you, child, to the gibbous moon dozing in the oaks. And, now, to your feet, where the fire’s been laid.”

In the scant moonlight that reached the ground through the skeletal oaks, I could see we were standing in a glade, within a circle of logs. When my eyes had grown used to the dim light, I saw at my feet a fire pit with split logs arranged on the ground like the spokes of a cart-wheel. At the wheel’s center, atop a deep nest of tinder, lay a stack of kindling. Nearby stood a green branch half again as tall as Morwen, its foot plunged into the ground and its head covered with a tightly bound rag that smelled of rendered fat.

A chill shook me, and I expected Morwen to laugh and say, “Someone’s just walked over your grave,” as she did whenever anyone shivered. But Morwen had not noticed, bent over as she was, drawing the cup from beneath her cloak.

From somewhere behind me, leaves crackled and twigs snapped. Heart pounding, I moved closer to Morwen and stood behind her until I saw Aunt Claris, my mother’s twin sister, step from the woods, one arm cradling a bundle of branches and the other holding Brighida’s hand.

Aunt Claris, seeming not to have seen me, called softly to Morwen, “All is ready.” She looked around. “And my sister? Where is she?”

“I hear her.” Great-aunt Aleydis, coming out of the woods behind Claris, lifted her ax and in one smooth movement pointed with it to a path I had not seen. “She’s coming just now.”

“Come here, Megge.” Aunt Claris’s voice was gentle as she laid the branches on the ground and took my hand. Aunt Aleydis propped her axe against a tree trunk and took my other hand. We gathered beside the spokes of firewood, and when we had stilled, Mother walked into the clearing.

She wore over her tunic a gauzy hooded cape the color of that night's sunset, a crimson garment that covered her from the crown of her head to the heels of her boots. Her eyes steady upon Morwen, who held out the cup containing the ember, Mother pulled the torch from the ground and lowered it to the cup. The rag at the top flared.

Mother handed Morwen the torch then turned her back as Morwen lowered it to the tinder and the firewood burst into flame. Mother did not look into the blaze but stood with her back to it and her arms crossed as Morwen sang tales of wisdom, of courage, of fate—Mother's and mine—and of Mother's sole charge in this life.

When she had finished, Morwen nodded to Mother, who drew back her hood. Though only the side of her face was lit by the flames, I could read both fear and resolve in the muscles bunched at the corners of her jaw.

Mother turned and faced the fire, took a breath, and spoke the words Morwen gave her to say, Celtic words whose meaning I did not know. They left Mother's lips like plumes in the clear night air; and when they had dispersed, Mother knelt before me, took my hands in fingers as cold and damp as old poultices, and squeezed them tight.

"Now, Margaret, it is for you to take up your book."

My book? What was she saying?

"But I have no book, Mother." I looked to Morwen and whispered, "Have I a book, Morwen?"

"Aye, child," Morwen said. "You have."

Mother said no more, but drew that crimson cape about her shoulders and linked arms with Claris. Heads together, murmuring and nodding, they circled to the other side of the fire, where a kettle sat warming. Flames lit their faces from below as they bent to decant mulled wine into four pewter cups, gifts from a grateful earl.

Claris carried a cup to Great-aunt Aleydis and put it into her hand with a smile and a gentle embrace. Aleydis held a sleeping Brighida in an arm still strong despite the years that had grayed her hair and thinned her eyelids—so delicate were they that a fine web of blue showed when she blinked.

She closed her eyes for a moment, took a sip, then sat down on a log as thick as a blacksmith's waist. Laid end-to-end with so many others, it formed one link in the ancient oak-and-rowan ring that encircled that wheel of fire.

Mother put a cup into Morwen's hand and then joined Aleydis and Claris, settling in beneath wool blankets and tanned sheepskin hides to wait for the moon to lose herself to the dawn.

Tiny Aunt Morwen—an elderly cherub, a rheumatic imp—gave me a sip from her cup, then winked and emptied it in one long, gulping draught. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, leaned on my shoulder, and lowered herself onto a felled oak on the other side of the fire, away from the others. Drawing me to her and wrapping me in her old wool cloak, she sang a tale of destiny, keeping her voice low as the moon made her leisurely way across the sky.



I must have fallen asleep, for when Morwen squeezed me, I opened my eyes to the dying fire and the dawn—a single brushstroke of pink. Her voice went low.

“Now 'tis your turn, my Megge.”

My turn?

Mother came over from the other side of the ring and helped Morwen up, and together we descended the long, gentle slope, the sky before us still gray, the dawn creeping up our backs.

As we gathered in the cookroom of our thatch-and-shingle cottage, whose window soon would frame the rising sun, Mother's hands began to tremble and her eye to dart, again and again, to her cupboard high overhead.

“Niece,” Morwen whispered to Mother, though she was not truly our kinswoman. *Aunt* was simply a term of endearment my great-grandmother Gytha had bestowed upon Morwen for rescuing Mother and Claris when they were newly born. Still, though I knew she was not a great-aunt, like Aleydis, nor even kin, I loved her as if *she* were my mother.

Morwen tipped her head back to look up at Mother and whispered once again, “Niece.”

Mother, startled, looked down, and Morwen dropped her gaze to the bare tabletop, knocked on it twice with the knuckle of her forefinger, and raised an eyebrow.

Mother drew from the sideboard a soft, tanned hide. She spread it over the table and smoothed out its folds, the motion stilling her shaking hands.

“Claris,” she said. “The tapers.”

Aunt Claris unrolled her soft leather pouch and took out four long, slim candles the cloudy green of the River Fowey a-churn with silt. She lit them from embers that smoldered in the grate and set them into tiny cups carved from rowan.

“Gytha’s,” Morwen whispered.

The flames faltered and smoked, smelling of tallow and holly. When finally they stood straight and glowing, they revealed Claris’s sweet, fair face, her mild grey eyes, her smile for her gentle aunt, and her graceful hand, which beckoned Morwen sit. She drew up Morwen’s chair, and the tiny bard sat down with a grunt and pulled me onto her lap whilst Claris laid peeling, silvered logs onto the grate and worked the bellows to bring up the fire. Never before had we burned anything but peat.

“Morwen?” I whispered.

“’Tis oak, Megge, and rowan. From Murga’s grove.”

Mother wrapped a warm hide around Morwen and me, and there we huddled, our backs to the hearth, Morwen singing the story of my grandmother Natalje’s sixth natal day—the day she first opened *The Book of Time* and became apprenticed to her own mother, the great seer, Gytha—and I shivered, more from excitement than from cold.

Claris squeezed the bellows, blowing new life into the hearth fire. It sparked and snapped, the flames now pixies dancing over walls and floor and about the herbs drying in the racks overhead. Morwen pulled me tight to her soft belly and bosom so my head rested in the scoop of her shoulder as she sang. I reached back and stroked her sparse hair. White as our sheep, it was soft as carded fleece.

Warm now on her lap and soothed by her soft, lilting tune, I closed my eyes. Brighida—younger but already taller than me, lithe rather than pudgy, long of limb rather than squat, golden-haired and grey-eyed like her mother—pulled a chair up beside me and dozed.

Aunt Aleydis came over and knelt beside us, the candlelight shining on silver hair and deep blue eyes, irises ringed with white. She whispered something to Morwen and then stood up, her wiry hair mingling with the crisp herbs and flowers that dangled from above.

Morwen touched Brighida’s shoulder, waking her, and Aleydis bent down and whispered in her ear.

“When spring arrives, you, too, shall turn six, Brighida. Learn from your cousin now, child.”

“In but a moment,” Morwen said, looking at my cousin, “our Megge shall take up *The Book of Seasons*, her mother’s ancient book of knowledge of the physical world. And in the spring, you, Brighida, shall take up *The Book of Time*, your mother’s great book of celestial wisdom. To one of you...” She looked from Brighida to me. “...shall pass much more than ever has passed to any other heir to the books.

“For to one of you, the daughters of the twin caulbearers, shall fall the duty to protect the books and to guide them from one life to the next. From one healer, one seer, to the next, each heir inscribing into the book on the last day of life a truth upon which the next will build, each then passing into eternity to serve as an immortal Mentor to those to come.

“And it will be for this chosen one to protect for the Mentors the power that preserves their spirits forever within the books.” She paused and glanced at my mother. “To each of your mothers has fallen but one charge in this life—to ensure that her daughter takes up her book.”

Morwen whispered now, looking only at me.

“And so, on this morning not yet dawned, this long, cold night in the dark of the year, a girl shall open her mother’s great book and speak the words that shall make her a woman of Bury Down and fulfill her—and her mother’s—destiny.”

But I knew naught of destiny that night. I knew naught of the fears that had set Mother’s hands a-tremble—that she would fail, that I would fail her, that we both would fail the Mentors. Nor of her grit—her vow to face flames rather than fail. No, I knew naught of the import of that night. That night, for me, was simply a lark and all that I ever craved—a sleepy, dreamy moment awake with the women and a part of their world.

Morwen pointed. “Megge, look.”

Mother was wresting from her high shelf a weighty block as thick as her fist and as long as her arm from elbow to thumb. She carried it to the table and laid it before me with a great blow of dust. Musty and acrid, it smelled of the ages, of old, dead times. And yet, it whispered of mystery, of memory. Of belonging.

My breath quieted as I looked upon its heavy leather bindings, its oak cover deeply etched with symbols that spoke a name I knew was mine. This, once, had been mine. Had long been mine. *And for so long*, it seemed to whisper, *we have been lost to one another.*

I longed to touch it, as once, wandering lost in the woods, I had longed to touch Mother's hand.

I reached for the book.

"Courage, child," Morwen whispered.

I can still see my outstretched hand, poised for a moment over the ancient wood, over dull brass hinges that would fold back upon themselves to reveal the vast knowledge within.

Morwen drew a breath and held it. Mother leaned toward me, urging me with her stare. Aunt Claris drew her daughter near, bowed her head over Brighida's silky hair, and whispered, swaying, forward, back, forward and back.

And then they all whispered sibilant, hypnotic words I seemed to know. "*Scientia nupta sapientia potestas est.*"

My eyes drifted shut, and I could sense the book beneath my hovering fingertips, could taste dry, musty vellum, could see oak-gall ink upon curling parchment, red-berry words upon tanned leaves. I could feel the pulse of each Mentor's life and witness trusting hands etch the ancient symbols known only to the heirs to the books. All would be revealed, every spirit preserved, and Mother's destiny fulfilled, once I spoke my oath and took my place amongst the women of Bury Down, one with the heirs to the books.

Morwen touched my shoulder. My fingertips paused above the beloved book a moment longer and then lay themselves down upon it.

Something within it began to writhe. Something hot, coming to life. It called my name. It drew me in, beckoned me *come*. And then it whispered *Murderer*.

"Morwen!" I tore my fingers from the book and flung myself back into her arms.

"No, Megge!" Mother hurled herself toward me.

Morwen dropped her head to rest on mine and held me close, her lips on my hair, murmuring my name.

"There, there, Megge. There, there, little one."

It had lied. The book had lied. It told me it was mine, but it wanted only to steal me. And something fiery writhed within it.

"I won't go!" I looked from Morwen's kind face to Mother's anxious one, her traitor's eyes trying to hold mine. "You can't make me go!"

Mother knelt at my side and took my hand. She tried to draw it back to the book, but I held tight to Morwen. She whispered, “It is your birthright.”

I shook my head.

She looked into my eyes. “You’ll be one of us.”

I buried my face in Morwen’s cloak.

Mother slapped her palms on the table.

“All will be lost, Megge. We will have failed the Mentors.”

I clenched my fists and hid them beneath my chin. Never again would I touch the accursed *Book of Seasons*.



CHAPTER 2

May 1, 1280

Iwoke early on Brighida's tenth natal day and slid from under the hides without waking her. Pulling a fleece off our pallet, I drew it over me and carried my boots past Morwen and Aleydis, asleep on the pallet next to ours, and Mother and Aunt Claris, asleep on one nearest the door of the cool, deep cave we called "the sleeping lodge."

The hills to the west were black against the bluing sky, but the stars were dark and no moon showed. *Perhaps this year will be different*, I thought. *Perhaps this year, Brighida's natal day will pass as mine always does, unheralded, all of Cornwall hunkered down beneath grey skies.*

I sat down on a rock beside the cave opening to pull on my boots and dropped the hide from my shoulders. The breeze was warm upon my neck. Winter had lost its grip.

"Spring's here, Megge. A beautiful first day of May." Aunt Aleydis leaned out the door and mussed my hair, then called into the lodge, "It's a glorious morning, Brighida. Come, your cousin is already up."

Mother came to the door, her cooking apron already tied over her best tunic, and looked out as she braided her hair. A tiny silver rose dangled from a thin chain around her neck.

"Mother." I pointed to the charm. "Who gave you that rose?"

“The Lady Margaret,” Mother said as she wound the thick braid around her head and fastened her cap over it. “She’s finally conceived. When she came to us in the grove last night, she brought one rose for each of her healers. Now, we must to see to it she doesn’t lose this child.” She threw her cloak over her shoulders and tied it at the neck. “Come, Claris,” she called over her shoulder. “Work to do.”

Aunt Claris, her plain tunic covered with an apron embroidered with vines and studded with colorful seeds and pods strung on fine wool thread, picked up her vial of scented water. She sprinkled a few drops onto her brush and drew it through her hair in strokes so long they stretched her arm all the way out. When she had finished, she fished two thin braids from beneath her hair and untangled them from the chain holding a delicate silver rose that matched Mother’s. She crossed the braids over her head and tied them together behind her neck, leaving her hair loose and the rose in full view at the base of her throat. The village women in their caps and coifs and veils would whisper.

I went back inside. Brighida, awake now and shining with excitement, was holding her new white wool tunic before her. This one, with saffron-dyed lacings up the bodice, would cover her ankles as her old one no longer did. She slipped it over her head and pulled her necklace out, so her own silver rose showed. Then she stepped into new shoes. Even her feet had grown over the winter; and today she wore soft, low shoes, once her mother’s, the handy Aleydis had cut down and cobbled to fit.

My old boots, although snug, still fit me, even after the long winter. And my dress, a yellowed wool tunic with no lacings front or back, a child’s gown that nearly covered my ankles but not my boots, “would do for now,” Mother had said.

“Come along quickly now.” Aunt Claris kissed Brighida’s forehead. “Lovely.” And she slipped out the door behind Mother.

Aunt Aleydis, holding out my old dress, admired my cousin.

“Getting so tall.”

I took the dress from her and pulled it over my head, then began to brush my hair as Morwen snugged Brighida’s bodice lacings and tied the sash at the back of her dress.

“There.” She patted Brighida’s shoulder and sent her off to comb her silken hair. Taking the brush from my hand, she took a good look

at me—at coarse brown hair she always had to fight to untangle, unlike Brighida’s, which always lay smooth and neat. Even in the morning, Brighida’s part ran straight down the middle while mine wandered over my scalp like an old country road.

Morwen gathered and combed my hair, having to work so hard at the snarls my eyes watered. Soon, my nose was running, and the tears I had been holding back all morning dripped onto the front of my dress.

“What’s this now? Tears on such a festive day?” Morwen lifted my hair and her fingers closed on a wad of matted hair at the nape of my neck. “Oh, this’ll take some time. Close your eyes, child, and I’ll spin you a tale while I work.”

“But Mother bade us hurry.”

“Nonsense, Megge. Close your eyes now. There’s always time for a tale.”

I closed my eyes and waited for the bard’s voice to take me away from this hyacinth-scented chamber where my cousin preened.

“Very well, then.” Her voice went low...



Look out before you, Megge—out over the sea to the very edge of the world and a time long past. Can you see the sun glowing red and setting the sky aflame? Watch closely as that red, red ball falls toward the sea. Can you see it? Keep watching. Lower, lower, and... there.

Two masts. Two tall masts have pierced the horizon, their sails crimson with the setting sun.

On that evening, long ago, your own great-grandmother Gytha, regal, with the face of a goddess, faced the wind and the setting sun, her daughter Natalje in her arms and her serving girl at her side.

Gytha’s young servant, the daughter of a traveling bard, had once stumbled, lost and hungry, upon the doorstep of Gytha’s cottage. There she stayed with the seer, singing to her, serving her, and learning by heart the tales of Gytha’s people—the healers and seers of Bury Down, the heirs to *The Book of Time*. Now, standing upon the quay, Gytha and her serving girl raised a hand to shade their eyes as they watched *The Navigator*, a great seagoing vessel, divide the setting sun and cut through the choppy green waters of the River Fowey to draw up alongside the quay at Lostwithiel.

When his ship had landed, Captain Adaem of Aldestowe, a giant of a man with hair yellow as the sun, a face as smooth as moonstone, and eyes as blue as the wide Welsh sky I was born under, strode onto the deck. Still exhilarated by the winds and the treacherous seas, he boomed, as though through a gale, “Lower the plank!”

And, slam! Down came the ship’s plank. Adaem stormed down that creaking wooden bridge and onto the quay in three long strides. He drew his wife to him, and Gytha accepted a kiss that must have tasted of the sea.

“The lands to the east are splendid, wife!” He scooped the child out of Gytha’s arms and tossed her into the air until the sky rang with her laughter. “They must be seen, daughter! And one day, Natalje, I shall show them to you. I shall show you the world!” That great mountain swung the laughing child around in a circle. “The world, Natalje!”

Gytha—seer, wisewoman, some said sorceress—reached out a hand, and as she took her husband’s arm beheld a vision of Adaem racing the wind in search of the woman their Natalje would one day become.

The family returned to the great round fortress where they served the Earl of Cornwall—Gytha his counselor and Adaem his explorer—and there they stayed until the days grew cold, for Adaem sailed in the warm of the year, his ship at the service of the earl. But the dark months belonged to Gytha, so when the days grew short they returned to her ancestral home, the ancient tract of hallowed land that lay in the shadow of the ringed stones of Bury Down.

Through the dark months they lived in peace and happiness, raising Natalje. As the winds and rains raged against the cottage, Adaem taught Natalje the stars that made up the constellations of the winter sky.

“Capella. Castor. Aldebaran, the eye of Taurus. Sirius, the Dog Star of Canis Major,” he said pointing into the night.

But when the breezes warmed and the seas had thawed, *The Navigator* departed upon the spring tide, Adaem at its helm.

“Wife!” he shouted over the rising wind. “Perseus!”

Gytha smiled and waved, knowing she would teach Natalje of Perseus and Aquila, of runes and symbols. She would teach their daughter the seer’s arts. For that night Natalje would turn six.

In a quiet cottage warmed by peat, with tapers aglow and her servant at her side, Gytha spoke her oath and placed before Natalje an ancient tome.

“Open it, daughter,” she said.

Natalje ran her fingers over tough, tanned hide and then opened the book. Then, like all who had come before and had left their mark in *The Book of Time*, she spoke her oath and became one of the seers of Bury Down.



Morwen tugged on the long braid that now lay on my back.

“There.”

“*The Book of Time* didn’t burn Natalje’s fingers?” I asked as she settled a stiff cap on my head.

She stepped back and looked at me. “Burn her fingers? No, lass. *The Book of Time* didn’t burn Natalje.”

“And it didn’t burn Brighida when it passed to her.” It wasn’t fair. “Why, then, did Mother’s book burn me?”

“’Twasn’t *The Book of Seasons* that burned you, child.”

“Then what *did* burn me?”

“I can’t say, Megge. ’Twas a long time ago, now, wasn’t it? It’s all over.” She lifted my hands and touched my fingertips to her lips.

I whispered into her ear, “Must we go to the village today, Morwen?” I held my breath as I waited for the answer.

Morwen stepped back and tilted her head.

“Why, to be sure we’ll go. Whyever wouldn’t we?”

Brighida whirled around.

“Not go? Whyever wouldn’t we, Megge?”

I blew out my breath. Taking up my herding stick, I ran from the lodge toward the cottage, going straight up the hill and across the field. Glancing behind me, I saw Brighida close on my heels.

Across the wet field we raced, I in my boots and Brighida in her slippers; and because she was careful to stay out of puddles, I touched the door first. I leaned on it as I caught my breath, studying the milky pink sky behind Bury Down.

When my breathing had slowed, we went inside and sat down at the table. Aunt Claris set before each of us a bowl of porridge and placed a ball of hard cheese in the center of the table. She poured cold ale into tin mugs and set them alongside our bowls. Morwen and Aley-

dis arrived a few minutes later, took out their knives, sliced the cheese, and broke their fast with us.

“Your mother is tending the sheep.” Claris laid a slender hand on my shoulder. “As soon as she returns, we will set out. Hurry, now. We want to be ready.” She kissed Brighida on the head and smoothed her hair back from her brow. “Lovely,” she said, tucking fine, pale tendrils up under her cap.

A glorious day, Brighida. Why, to be sure we must attend. A lovely day. Such a lovely girl. And it's her natal day. We must all celebrate Brighida's natal day. Whyever wouldn't we? Whyever wouldn't we, Megge?

I got up as soon as I had finished eating and went outside to gather eggs and rake the chicken yard. When I was through, I scooped a handful of grain from the barrel, relishing the feel of the grains passing between my fingers, and scattered it on the ground for the chickens.

“And there'll be dancing and singing and feasting,” Morwen was saying as I came back inside. She picked up our bowls and took them out to the well to wash them.

“And a procession,” Brighida said as she swept the floor.

Claris wiped out the pot while Brighida swept the old rushes out the door. Aleydis was scattering fresh ones when Mother came in smelling of the sheep pen.

“A shame we can't put them out to graze on a day like this.” Mother took off her cloak and hung it on the peg. “I won't need this today.”

“I'll stay and tend them,” Aunt Aleydis said. “It's a fine day, too, for game.”

I ran to her. “I'll stay with Aunt Aleydis.”

“It's but one day.” Claris touched Aleydis's spotted hand. “Come.” Then she squeezed my hand. “You, too.”

“And who's to say we wouldn't?” Morwen set the clean bowls on the sideboard, dried her hands, and picked up her stick.

Mother turned to Claris and raised her voice, putting an end to the argument.

“I've just spoken with the sickly young bride who came to us in the grove last week. It seems the spearmint I gave her hasn't stopped her vomiting.”

Claris nodded, her eyes closed.

“No, I feared it would not. Spearmint calms the stomach, but she needs lavender as well, for lavender calms the mind and will assuage her fears.”

“What fear has she, Mother?” Brighida asked.

“Her husband has gone off with the earl’s men, and she fears he will not return,” Claris said. “Many do not, it’s true.” Reaching to take down a bunch of lavender from the drying racks, she snapped off the tops, wrapped them in a piece of cloth, and handed the little bundle to Mother. “Tell her to steep a palmful in hot water with plenty of honey. If she drinks one cup this morning and one before the moon reaches her zenith tonight, the sickness will ease, as will her fear.”

“A palmful. How much water?” Mother frowned.

“Let me go to her, Sister. She’s in the grove?”

“No, she’s out at the pen. She was waiting for me when I got there. Hadn’t slept all night.”

Brighida followed her mother to the door.

“Might we offer to make a healing image for her if she doesn’t soon feel better?”

“What metal would we use?” Claris asked, now master to pupil.

“Tin, for courage,” Brighida recited by heart from her mother’s great book, “creating the image when the moon is in the tenth house, Venus ascending.”

Claris stopped walking. “And Mercury?”

“Not asking the malefics,” I called out from the kitchen.

Claris, eyes wide, turned to me. “Megge?”

“Is that right?” I did not know what the words meant but had heard them over and over as Brighida took her lessons.

“You have been listening,” Claris smiled at Mother. “You see, Sister?”

Mother snorted.

“*Aspecting*,” Brighida said. “Not *asking*. It means *looking toward*, or *facing*. And it—”

“Pride, Brighida.” Claris held up a finger, and Brighida said no more. Smiling at me, she took Brighida’s arm, and together they crossed the field toward the pen.

Morwen looked up at me and winked.



Mother, Aunt Aleydis, Morwen, and I set out across the pasture at Morwen's pace, each of the women carrying a jug of Morwen's mead. We joined Claris and Brighida behind the sheep pen, near the woods. Claris took Morwen's jug, and I walked behind them, watching the sun dapple all those white caps. Claris's unbound hair, though, seemed to catch that light and throw it all about her so she appeared an apparition. It was no wonder the church women whispered.

At the edge of the pasture, we crossed the footbridge over Fowey Creek, and I spotted on the bank a small green turtle someone could have stepped on. When I picked it up, it pulled its head into its shell. I tried to look inside, but when I brought it to my face, I sneezed hard. I lifted my arm to wipe my nose, and—

"Margaret!" Mother hollered and gave me a look that made me drop the turtle. It rolled down the front of my dress leaving a trail of muck. When Mother turned away, I wiped my nose with the back of my hand and brushed the dirt off my dress, smearing what had been a fine line into a wide green-and-black blur.

The path took us to a field of rye, and we skirted it, walking along the curving hedge that separated it from a field of oats. Just around the bend something big rooted around in the leaves.

"Boar," Mother said. "They have young right now. Stay close."

A squirrel skittered past, and I jumped. Claris took Brighida's hand. Mother put her hand in her pocket.

"Just stay on the path and you'll be fine."



We crossed into the priory fields, and Morwen bent to smell the blooms on a honeysuckle hedge.

"Careful, Morwen." I pulled her back. "It's full of bees." In and out of the hedge they went, hovering close, moving from flower to flower.

"And where do you think all the honey comes from that I use to make my mead? The good brothers have beehives just over there." She pointed to a distant field just as the tower bell sounded.

"The tolling for morning prayers." Morwen nodded toward the monks laying down their rakes and shovels and bowing their heads. "Respect, girls," she said.

We slowed as we passed the monks, then hurried past the church. Morwen insisted we attend on the great feast days.

“And you’ll tithe,” she always reminded us. “’Twas Gytha’s command. ‘Though we’re not of them, we dwell amongst them, and we serve them. We shall abide by their rules, even as we live by our own.’ Just be thankful for these monks, girls, that they’re not zealots like the friars in the abbey.”

I shuddered as we neared the church’s grey stone walls. The high bell tower. The wide stone steps three old women always stared and whispered from.

But today the church was empty, and the road was crowded with villagers. Hanging from each doorway were brightly colored banners embroidered with pictures of shoes, cloth, candles, and loaves of bread. Merchants and their wives called out their wares. We crossed the busy road and, passing all the shops, made our way to the green. People streamed past us in pairs and groups, the girls dancing and the boys kicking each other.

“We will be near the cooking fires. Are you listening, Margaret?” Mother put my hand into Morwen’s and took Aleydis’s jug of mead. “Be good, wise girls and mind your aunts.” She squinted at me. Setting down her jugs, she spat on her thumb and scrubbed my cheek. Then she took a square of cloth from her apron pocket and put it in my hand. “Blow your nose,” she said. “With the cloth.” She noticed the black smudge on my dress and shook her head. “Ruined.”

She walked away to the fires with Claris, shaking her head.

“Can this truly be my daughter?”

The breath left me.



CHAPTER 3

I *walked backwards, watching Mother walk away with Aunt Claris.* I could almost see her lips pull themselves in tight at the corners. After a moment, Morwen gave my hand another gentle squeeze.

I turned around and finally noticed that the village green, a wide, emerald meadow, had been transformed into a faerie land of flowers and ribbons. Girls dressed in white summer shifts filled the gazebo. Others danced over Fowey Creek's tidy crossing stones then stepped barefoot through the grass. The lawn was dotted with still more village girls—girls with embroidered sashes and colorful laces—picking delicate stems of stitchwort, charlock, buttercup, and lady's smock that they wove into wreaths and set upon each other's hair.

Brighida ran to the gazebo and stroked one of the ribbons.

"Vivienne," a high voice called from within.

Vivienne Penneck, who lived on a farm not far from ours but who never spoke to us, had grown up over the long winter, just as Brighida had. Lovely in her white smock and blue sash, she looked up from the bluebell posy she was tying onto her wrist and caught the eye of the girl who had called her name. The girl inside the gazebo pointed her finger at Brighida, and Vivienne looked over at my cousin. Smiling, she whispered something to the other girls on the lawn. They all swarmed Brighida.

They were going to put her out! I raised my stick and was just about to run at them when they took her hands, led her into the square, and laid a wreath on her head. A piper, resplendent in purple, lifted his flute. When he began to play, all the girls joined hands and skipped with my cousin around the maypole, a tree trunk that had no branches but was festooned with embroidered streamers.

My breastbone pricked each time Brighida skipped past me. She held out her hand to me, but I folded my arms over my chest. None of those village girls—those daughters of merchants, with their posies and their blue sashes and their soft slippers—none of them wanted me, in my ankle-high boots and dirty dress, to dance with them.

I huddled at the edge of the gazebo, my heart as tough as a chicken gizzard. Then the piper announced his final tune, and Vivienne ran to me.

“Come dance,” she said and took my hand.

Now that I was so close to her, I noticed her golden hair and grey eyes. Why, she looked so like Brighida, they might have been sisters!

When the tune ended, all the girls scattered to the feast tables. Daisy garlands hung from the trestle tables on which village women were setting out wide bowls heaped with cakes. Children dipped dirty fingers into clay jars decorated with flowers and filled with butter and preserves. Leather-aproned men turned spits and heaped roasted venison and boar onto platters as long as their arms. The aroma of meat and dripping fat made my stomach grind.

One of the men sliced a piece of charred meat and held it out on the end of a fork. I took it from him, savoring the greasy, salty flavor.

“What is this?”

“Boar,” he said.

Boar. I had never tasted it before. Who knew it would taste so good?

At a table alongside the spits, Mother set out pitchers of ale, and Claris poured mead into cups. One of the aproned men walked over from his spit and reached for the cup Claris was filling. His hand joined hers on the cup as he spoke to her; and for a moment, I could not tear my gaze from those two hands. *This means something*, I thought, although I knew not what.

“Megge,” Brighida called. “Megge, look out!”

A tumbler careened toward me, walking on his hands with a bowl of fruit balanced atop bent knees. He kicked his legs straight up,

tossing his bowl high into the air, then flipped onto his feet, colliding with me and sending fruit flying and rolling on the ground.

Vivienne ran to me. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head and bent to pick up the fruit.

Vivienne and Brighida helped me, and when the tumbler had gone on his way, Vivienne smiled at my cousin.

"Come, Brighida, it's almost time!"

"Time?" she asked, "For what?"

"For the procession!" Vivienne took her arm. Laughing and skipping, they joined all the other girls in the white dresses, who seemed to be forming a line. Brighida looked back at me, but I ran to the edge of the square, where the festival musicians were tuning their instruments, and huddled against a fence post. Aleydis found me there a moment later. She bent down and leaned her head so close to mine that her wiry hair tickled my cheek.

"Let us go somewhere quieter, Megge, where we can sit and listen awhile."

We wound around the press of merrymakers and climbed to the top of a hillock.

"You see those flat little drums they're tapping?" Aleydis pointed. "Why, when I was a little girl in Aldestowe, my father—"

"What makes Brighida so special, Aunt?" I had to know. "Why does no one lead *me* into the dance?" I waved my arm before us. "Why do all the girls make merry for Brighida?"

Aunt Aleydis, stroking her throat, folding and smoothing her wattle, looked into the sky. After a moment, she frowned. Her hand paused.

"Megge, are you jealous because Brighida is favored on her natal day?"

It all rushed out. "Everybody loves her *every* day. Everyone thinks Brighida is special, especially today."

I wiped my tears with the hem of my dress. I had had only one special natal day, and it had ended in seared fingertips and tears. The day Brighida turned six had finished with rejoicing, with her becoming her mother's true apprentice and being called a woman of Bury Down. And now, this.

Aleydis leaned close to me, speaking each word with great care.

"Megge, surely you know that today is May Day. The village is celebrating the coming of summer. The new life it brings. They do this

every year. We have simply never come to the May Day Fair before.” She brushed back my hair. “People everywhere celebrate the First of May. It just happens that Brighida was born on this day.”

“But no one ever celebrates *my* natal day, Aunt. No one even speaks of it. I know only that it comes in the dead of winter.”

“Don’t be silly, Margaret. We always celebrate the sixteenth of November. Why, Morwen even takes you to church every year on that day. It’s the feast day of St. Margaret. But you were named for another Margaret—Earl Edmund’s wife, *Lady* Margaret.” She looked around and lowered her voice. “And for a great seer—”

“Aleydis!” Morwen shouted from the hill, interrupting her. Then she held out a hand to me. “Megge. Come, lass, and give me your hand.”

I ran to help her. When I reached her, she handed me her cup of ale—nearly empty—and slipped an arm over my shoulder, rubbing a cheek as soft as pudding against mine. She dropped her stick next to Aleydis, gave Aleydis a frown, and lowered herself to the grass with a grunt.

Aleydis looked away and pointed to a flock of girls gathered at the center of the green, crowning an older girl with a daisy wreath bedecked with white and yellow streamers. A pretty young woman was helping the younger girls line up two-by-two behind her.

“Look there, Megge.” Aleydis said, “Can you see what the children are doing?”

“Why, that’s our Brighida!” Morwen waved and pointed to my cousin. “Right behind the Queen of the May! Oh, I hope your mothers can see her.” She squinted and looked closer. “And look who’s helping the girls, Aleydis. It’s Jenifer Penneck!” She nudged Aleydis and pointed, lowering her voice. “Do you see the girl standing next to Brighida?”

“The girl in the blue sash?” Aleydis squinted.

Morwen dropped her voice. “Aye. That’s Jenifer’s daughter. The very one—”

“The one who could be Brighida’s twin sister?” I jumped up and pointed, too.

“That’s nonsense, Megge.” Aleydis said. She reached over and pulled Morwen’s hand down. “Hush now, Morwen.”

At the foot of the hill, standing between the tables and the spits, Claris clapped her hands and tossed flowers into the air as the girls

passed, while Mother poured ale into flagons for aproned men, who seized them the moment they were full. Aleydis offered me a sip from her mug and pulled me closer to her.

The wreathed girls paraded onto the green, led by their queen. Just behind her, Brighida took careful steps over grass flattened by hooves and steaming with manure. The girls must have released her plaits, for her hair hung in golden ripples down her back, just like her mother's. As the parade passed below, she looked for us. Before I could stop myself, I jumped up and waved. She did not see me, but Aleydis patted my other hand.

Behind the royal retinue, a girl my size rode atop a dappled horse the size of a bullock, its mane and tail plaited with ribbons and field flowers. Behind her, a man in a crimson cape flicked a whip over the hindquarters of a chained bear, spurring the beast into pawing, roaring pirouettes. When he had passed, boys raced each other into the square, set up targets, and competed at marksmanship with longbows and spinning axes. When they were through, men corralled sheep into makeshift enclosures and sheared them so fast the fleece appeared to simply fall off.

I tugged on Morwen's sleeve.

"That's what *I* want to do."

My hands had been too clumsy and the shears too large the summer before, and Morwen had told me I was too young.

"Can I shear this year? You promised."

Morwen held her hand up to mine.

"They're nearly the same size," I said.

"Aye. They might do." She squeezed mine.

I looked at her closely. She was short and squat, like me. Her hands were small, like mine. Studying her, I thought of Brighida's lithe form and long fingers—so like our mothers'—and I heard again the words I could not stop hearing.

Can this truly be my daughter?

Wreath gone but tiny white petals still clinging to her hair, Brighida ran up the hill calling, "Come, Megge, they're about to begin the egg dance."

She held out her hand. I took it and ran with her down the hill to the green, where the girls were dancing barefoot in the grass. Brighida slipped off her shoes, and I sat down and took off my boots. When I