

The Light in the Abbey

Chapter One

Birthing the Light

Wrington Valley, Somerset, England

January 25th, 1460

A far-off newborn's wail stirs Madlen out of her shallow sleep, the lot of a midwife. She hears familiar faint Celtic melodies from a haunting harp. Magical notes soothe her sleep-deprived ears. Then, Madlen detects undertones of urgency in the thrumming. In the same instance she senses the presence of Goddess Cerridwen. She is alert now. A soul is on its way.

Seven-years old Callwen is asleep beside her. Taking care not to disturb him, Madlen greets Cerridwen with a reverent bow of her tousled red hair. She can see the Celtic goddess clearly, though most would not. Cerridwen stands in her usual place at the hearth in the centre of the room, by the black iron cauldron that is synonymous with her name. It was an earlier symbol of the chalice, the vessel of alchemy.

Cerridwen's shimmering, ethereal form glows like the embers in the fire pit that warms the small house. Madlen marvels at her green velvet dress seems that to rise up out of the rammed earth floor, draping the goddess in a mantel of moss. Her bodice is laced with ivy and meadow flowers grow in her flame-red hair. In her arms she cradles a newborn.

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

'My sister! Arianwen's child is coming. Blessings for your message, Cerridwen. I shall leave for Wrington at once.' She begins to wake Callwen, but the goddess has another message.

'Madlen, know that your sister is birthing a soul with a special destiny. Nurture his first seven years and teach him the Old Ways,' adding, 'before he is taken.'

Madlen frowns. 'He will not survive childhood? she asks.

Cerridwen smiles, 'Do not fear. He will make exceptionally old bones. But his calling will move him beyond her reach. Make haste. Arianwen's time is near.'



Madlen gasps at the sight of Arianwen hauling her swollen belly over the side of the bed. Her excitement at Madlen's arrival causes her sister to stand up too fast. A stream of water trickles onto the floor. She sways and clutches wildly at the ochre curtains that hang from the ceiling.

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 thirsty floor rushes have drunk their fill.

Madlen fetches a clean nightdress and gently steers Arianwen back to bed. Carefully removing her muddy cloak, she lies alongside, taking Arianwen's hand, glad to be out of the biting wind. Catching her breath after her fast ride she looks upon the wall tapestry and laughs, 'You know, you were swaying about just like your embroidered weeping willows. And when your waters broke, you became the river they stand in.'

Resting against plump pillows, Arianwen laughs. 'Yes, I've embodied the tapestry. No wonder, I've stared at it for an eternity. It's been a long lying-in. What with Cousin Agnes...'. Her words trail off, her voice breaking.

She fights back her tears before continuing in a brighter voice. 'It has been lovely to look up upon that stitched scene. Sometimes I dreamed of bathing there. I imagined myself floating, weightless, without a child in my womb. And long willow fingers combing my hair.'

Madlen sits up and reaches over to twirl a strand. 'Ah, yes. I see you drifting with the current under delicate fronds dangling of willow in the stream. Your raven-black tresses splayed around your porcelain face. Such a lovely image dearest. And yet you are practical. How clever you are not to drench the mattress with your waters.'

Now that Arianwen is calm, she asks in a more serious tone, 'Have your pains 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.' She wipes the end of her nose with her knuckles.

Casting about the shuttered room Madlen finds the low, heavy beams oppressive. She notes neat piles of clean linens and cloths, white as the lime-washed walls. She looks with approval at the tranquil tapestry, but turns from the tall silver, ruby-encrusted crucifix given prominence on the oak sideboard.

'Did Agnes rent the crucifix from the priest?'

Arianwen relaxes into her green linen bolsters and takes Madlen's hand again with a sigh. 'Yes she did. But tell me your news before Cousin Agnes returns with the priest on one arm and the Grim Reaper on the other.'

Madlen gives a hearty laugh. 'I take it she is as pious as ever. We won't be telling her that over these past three years I have undergone initiations. I am much changed my love.'

'With your secret order?' Arianwen asks, her green eyes shining with admiration. 'I wish I could have continued learning their wisdom.'

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

Madlen is standing next to the fire smoothing her russet dress with her hands when Agnes enters the room. The three women are of similar age, but Madlen sees Agnes has aged. It's as if the sins of humanity weigh heavy on her mind and stern countenance. Her black linen bodice and sleeves worn over a black woollen kirtle lack any trimmings. She looks somewhat funerary, as though not expecting this winter-born child to survive.

Madlen passes over any grimness and chirps, 'Greetings dear Agnes. My sister is indeed fortunate to have your assistance. But your duties seem to have taken a toll. You look a bundle of nerves. Try to relax dear Agnes. All is well here. We don't want you to wear out your rosary beads.'

'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. 'Now, let's see what's to be done. It's stuffy in here. Agnes, kindly remove the paper from the shutters and open the windows. Or we will soon smell like the stables.'

'But the lying-in-room must be sealed off and kept dark,' objects Agnes. She moves her frigid frame closer with nervous bird 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 Elizabeth's eyes.'

Madlen drops her chin on her chest and draws breath, summoning patience at this first challenge. She also makes a mental note to call Elizabeth by her Christian name. Although her face shows acquiescence, her voice holds 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. I'll blend it with chamomile and rose petals to ease her pains. You'll approve of that, Agnes, mugwort is known for warding 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?,' although she knows full well what fills the devout woman's mind.

'The sin committed through ... of procreation.' Mimicking Madlen, she sneers, '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.

Elizabeth 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 the birthing hook in front of my nose, 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 Passio 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.' She lifts Elizabeth's gown to inspect the crude drawings inked onto a long strip of parchment. She shakes her head and sighs. '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 learned druids stand accused of witchcraft. She shakes her head again, thinking of all the superstitious beliefs she must deal with. 'Where in heavens name did it come 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,' Madlen determines, unwinding the smelly sheep parchment. '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 your Cousin Agnes.'

With colour back in her cheeks, Elizabeth pleads through her laughter. 'Stop it Maddie. Or I will pysse 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 sins of procreating new life. 'Look here,' she says, 'this green crucifix is smudged.'

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