

Megge of Bury Down

Chapter One

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 cartwheel. 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*.