



CHAPTER ONE

THE BIRTH OF BRIGHTNESS

YOU HAVE ALL HEARD of his birth in Bethlehem in a stable—though his mother told me it was really a cave, and she’s vague about the location. You know the story of the attendant animals, the bedazzled shepherds, and the Magi who followed the long-tailed star. But did you know that the star had a twin? The sister star chose a tiny island in a northern sea. Its long tail lashed cold waters. Far from that holy birth in the hills, brightness rose from beneath the wave.

That was me.

I had a full head of red hair exclaimed upon, as I crowned, by the seven midwives, my foster mothers all. I had no need of awe-struck shepherds. My mothers kept sheep and pigs and goats besides. And listen, even though it’s midnight, the mourning doves lift their heads to make soft, wondering noises, almost obscured by the raucous chorus of ravens in the wood and the cry of seabirds from their nests in the cliffs. And yes, if you pay attention, you can hear the walrus and seals barking for joy on the rocks. Wild horses answer, and a she-bear roused from sleep adds low, grumbling praise. Now if you look very carefully at the island’s heart between mountain breasts, you can glimpse a moonlit flash of gold as the salmon of wisdom leaps from its pool.

And what need had I of visiting wise men when I was already surrounded by the Warrior Witches of Tir na mBan, the Land of Women? Ah, I see that name stirs some forgotten memory. Just as everyone is a little bit Irish, who has not dreamed of the Shining Isles always to the West? The Summer Land. The Apple Isle. The Isle of Women. The Land of Youth. The Isles of the Blest. Dangerous, paradisiacal places where a hero could be made or undone. The greatest heroes—Cuchulain and Fionn MacCumhail—received their training in the arts of war and the mysteries of love at the hands of women who dwelled in island strongholds of ancient, female power.

At least, that’s how it was in what my mothers called “the good old days,” lamenting the lack of heroes in these slack modern times. Maybe it was the times. Though none of us knew it then, that pivotal moment,

when he and I were born, was the meeting place of history and myth, of time and time out of time.

Wait. Before you mourn the passing of myth, think what it might be like to live in one. Or to embody it, as my mothers did. For every great adventure, told and retold as a stirring tale, there is a vast and smooth eventlessness, like the featureless sea surrounding the quirky surprise of an island. The story is always biased towards the hero. When Cuchulain leaves the Isle of Skye, you follow him. You don't hear what Scathach and her daughter did for the rest of their timeless lives. Well, I can tell you. They waited, like my mothers, for the next trainee, scanning the curve of sea and sky for a glimpse of a phallic mast. Not that they wouldn't have welcomed a girl hero.

My mothers more than welcomed me. They rejoiced in me; they gloried. I was the great event of their elemental lives, washing up on their shore from the inward seas of my mother's womb. See their fierce, hungry gladness as they bend over me in my birth mother's arms. Notice how the curve of their backs echoes the curve of our round wattle and daub hut built in the shape of a beehive, the shape of a breast. See them examining me, admiring the delicate rosebud of my sex. At my first cry, colostrum spurts from—count them!—sixteen breasts. Though to the sorrow of seven only one could carry me in her womb, they all succeeded in their determination to lactate. So my first meal was a sumptuous, seemingly endless feast as I was passed round and round from breast to breast.

I imbibed, with that magical abundance, a desire that grew, as I grew, to be not the setting of a narrative, but the teller—better yet, the protagonist. To be, in short, the hero of a story with a plot. In this determination, my mothers inadvertently encouraged me. For I was their nursling, their fledgling, their ready-made and only pupil for their many arts.



All parents affect the climate of their children's lives. You could even say they create it. My mothers did—literally. They were weather witches as well as warriors. Picture us on our mythic island at the rim of the world, leagues away from the mainland (if any of the British Isles can be called that). We couldn't leave the success of the crops to chance. On a clear day, sister islands floated just in the range of vision to the Southeast. I spent hours gazing out over the sea, seeking that ephemeral line of land-blue. The back of a whale was a more common sighting. Or the undulating curves of a migrating sea monster.

Weather magic was also needed to maintain the fragrant garden that blossomed and bore fruit all year round. You see, it was essential that perfumed breezes waft from this garden at all times in case the nose of a hero might be passing nearby. Perhaps now is the time to mention that the Shining Isle of Tir na mBan resembles the shape of a woman lying on her back, thighs sloping down into the sea. You can imagine where the garden would be.

I have to admit that my mothers did not work weather magic out of necessity only. Just because men have hoarded the more obvious forms of power for several millennia doesn't mean women are immune to its seductions. To say that my mothers abused their power may be too strong. Their isolation and wildness gave them innocence. In temperament, they resembled the weather, which can be bad and destructive from a purely human point of view yet has no malevolent intent. In any case, they could not resist playing with the weather. On our island, it was both entertainment and sport, a competitive sport at that. Each one had her jealously guarded area of expertise. I'll introduce them to you by way of their meteorological specialties. Never mind if you can't remember them all. Think of them as a collective maternal force.

Fand presided over fogs and mists. She regarded them as an art form and had hundreds of different names for her creations that only she could remember, all very poetic: The Seventh Veil of Danu; The Silkie's Cloak; Filigree of Gull's Wing; Crane's Wedding Day.

Emer, Etain, Deirdru, and Dahut, sisters in blood as well as art, commanded the four winds, as they liked to put it. They were usually good about taking turns, but occasionally conflicts rose that resulted in twist-ers. Once they created an enormous whirlpool off shore that so delighted them they forgot their quarrel.

Liban came into her element in spring when softening rains were needed to ready the fields for planting. Since they both dealt in moisture, there were occasional border disputes between Fand and Liban.

Boann ruled storms and extended her realm to include hard frosts and the odd snowfall. (Weather witchery notwithstanding, we didn't get much snow, being such a tiny land mass so far out to sea.) Boann was impulsive and impatient and had a special fondness for hail, which could be disastrous if dropped on the crops at the wrong time.

Of course, we all liked a good storm. (Even my womb mother, Grainne. I will tell you more about her later.) And if Boann was reckless and needed to be restrained at times, she was also the most gener-

ous about sharing her turf. Often everyone got into the act, and together they created some really first-class squalls. These joint ventures had a tendency to coincide with my mothers' collective PMS.

PMS! I hear some of you protesting. But I thought they lived in harmony with nature! Sure they did. But who says nature is always nice? Yes, they cycled together (more or less according to the moon's phases) which made it all the more companionable and efficient. And they were not as depressed as some modern women, because they didn't believe in holding anything back. They reveled in bitchiness. Like everything else they did, from chariot racing on the beach to wild blue body painting, they bitched with verve and their own peculiar style. Just listen for a moment.

"Deirdru!" someone snaps. "Either tune that thing or hang it up!"

(The above, you understand, being a loose translation of what scholars call Q-Celtic.)

"This harp is in perfect tune," Deirdru insists, as she twangs off key, giving new meaning to the word harpie. "Besides. Even Mabon Ap Modron would have a hard time keeping an instrument in tune in this damp."

Here she casts a speaking look at Fand.

"You call this delicate hint of moisture—designed to preserve your rapidly deteriorating complexion—damp! Well, if you want to look your age, dear, I'm sure one of your sisters would be happy to call up the si-roccos."

"We all know the problem isn't the air, it's the ear." Boann jumps in to escalate the conflict. "You either have it or you don't. And it's no secret, Deirdru, that the great druid Cathbad laid upon your father a Geis of danger and destruction if he should so much as open his mouth to sing another note, and as for your mother—"

Now all four sisters are on their feet.

"Is it our lineage you're impugning then?"

"Now, ladies." Liban has an aggressive habit of attempting to soothe people just when they're fully roused for a good fight. "I'm sure we're all a little on edge, it being that time of the moon. I'm going to make us all some of my delicious snake slough tea—"

There follows a collective gagging.

"No offense intended," Etain lies shamelessly. "But I'd rather go milk the billy goat."

They can be wonderfully crude, my mothers.

"It did help my cramps last time," puts in my tender womb mother Grainne, seeing the wounded look on Liban's face.

But by this time it's too late to placate anyone. Boann has gotten her drum and something perhaps best described as Q-Celtic rap is about to begin. Anticipating Boann, Etain is already sauntering center stage, rapping as she goes:

*Well, my name is Etain
and I sprang from the breeze.
My daddy met my mama
in the sacred oak trees.*

As Etain takes a breath, Boann jumps in.

*You're hot air for sure,
there's no denying.
The Dagda spread his cheeks,
and Etain went flying.*

Now Etain is back, on a roll.

*Well, I'd rather be a fart
from the good god's ass
than a half-assed witch
without any class.*

*So don't you dis my lineage
or I'll tell you 'bout yours.
When your daddy met your mama
she was down on all fours.*

Boann doesn't miss a beat.

*All four feet of Macha the Great Mare.
When a goddess is your mama
you got class to spare.
And if you call me a bitch, girl,
I'll bite your behind.
Takes one to know one.
We're all the same kind.*

This could go on all night: brag capping brag, insult rivaling insult. Doing the dozens was my mothers' favorite martial art. All Celts, left to their own devices—that is, without Roman legions massing on them—preferred single combat. To this form, lengthy, verbal challenge was essential, a fine-honed wit and quick tongue as important as any other

weapons. So my mothers kept in practice. When they'd exhausted their store of words, they'd let it rip: air masses would collide, lightning split the sky, winds tear and tumble like huge kittens play-fighting. Finally rain or sleet or whatever was in season would come sluicing down.

The next day we'd all go down to the shore to watch the storm-whipped waves crash on the rocks, sending up spray shot with rainbows. If it was warm enough, we'd strip, my mothers bleeding richly and freely, often using their blood for ritual finger-painting on flat stones. All quarrels would be temporarily forgotten—if not forgiven. They didn't believe in forgiveness, my mothers. I think they feared it would blunt the edges they liked to keep sharp, blur the shapes of personalities they preferred to keep distinct—even if it meant they chafed. But if they held onto ancient enmities, no one ever loved her enemies with such fierce devotion as my mothers.

Life on Tir na mBan was not all storms. (Though I later learned that the erratic weather patterns surrounding our island had attracted the attention of druids, who advised voyagers to give it a wide berth.) My womb mother Grainne—the youngest of the eight and the shyest—had the power to coax the sun. Do you remember your mother bending over your baby self? Did you think all warmth and light began in her? Imagine my mother, standing on a rock, overlooking a lack-luster sea, shrouded in one of Fand's lingering fogs—let's call it Walrus with a Toothache. She is wearing a green tunic gathered at the waist with a gold cord; a gold torque circles her neck; and her hair, a cloud of gold, floats around her head, lifted on the eddies of air she stirs with her body's heat.

I am a small child—maybe three or four years old—crouching nearby, playing with smooth, cold stones that are beaded with moisture. My heavy cloak is heavier with damp.

Now see my mother lift her arms. She is making a cup. She is a light-bearing chalice. Her radiance spreads out in ripples. Feel that heat touch your skin; feel it enfold you as it enfolds me. I close my eyes. The world swims with hot gold. When I open my eyes again, the fog is gone, the sea leaps with light, and my mother is so bright I can't look at her. But I know she's there, all around me. And there is nowhere I can go in the whole world that she is not.



Some of you may have noticed that my mothers' names belong to Celtic goddesses, bean sídhe, hero women. Whether they were those mythic figures or were merely named for them, even I don't know.

Reincarnation makes everything so complicated, don't you find? I do know that old female archetypes never die; they just retire to the Shining Isles, as the Celts well knew, and as I know better than anyone.

There was some controversy among my mothers over what to name me. There is a Celtic custom of giving a newborn a childhood protective name. If the fairies or the *sidhe* knew the child's true name, they might spirit her away. Some of my mothers wanted a childhood name for me, my womb mother Grainne among them. Looking back, I can see that tall, blonde Grainne was more Celtic than the other mothers. They were smaller and darker and looked like the queens of earth they were reputed to be: remnants of the old people who were native to the Holy Isles long before the Celts came and more or less conquered.

"But we don't have to worry that anyone will steal our babe, Grainne," Fand insisted. "Don't you understand? For all intents and purposes, we are the *bean sídhe!*"

Though no one ever admitted any such thing, it occurred to me later that my womb mother herself might have been a stolen child. I never knew much about any of my mothers' lives before they came to Tir na mBan. Oh, they told stories, lots of stories—with no concern for consistency whatsoever.

"But it's traditional, Fand," argued Liban. "It can't do any harm."

"Let's give her a child's name now," suggested Boann, "and let her true name come to her when she's ready for it."

"Make it a powerful name of protection," urged Grainne.

Fand took a deep breath, as if absorbing all the air so that no one else could use it. Then she spread her arms in that flashy liturgical way of hers, and pronounced:

"She shall be called Bride's Flame!"

With that, she expelled all her breath and fixed each one with a glare, daring anyone to dispute her poetic inspiration, her prerogative as prime namer.

So it was that I came under the protection of Bride, also called Brigid, mother and/or daughter of the Dagda, goddess of smithcraft, poetry, and healing, who survived the coming of Christianity by turning into a saint—I told you, they just won't quit, those old girls)—and not just any saint. According to lore, Bride was the foster mother of Christ, which makes him—don't you see?—my foster brother.

In my lifetimes, I have been called by many names. Or, you might say, certain names have called me. More than one of those names begins

with the letter you know as M, a compelling shape in Latin script, echoing the shape of breasts, mountain peaks, sea swells, the wings of birds spread in flight. And if you take the Latin letter B and tip it on its side, you see that shape repeated. But it was many years before I learned any form of writing or inscription. Raised in the oral tradition as I was, I'm still not convinced that the written word is any improvement over the spoken. After all, talk never killed a tree.

Meanwhile, despite Fand's authoritative naming of me, my womb mother called me Little Bright One, and the others soon fell into the habit. And that is how I knew myself in my earliest years.