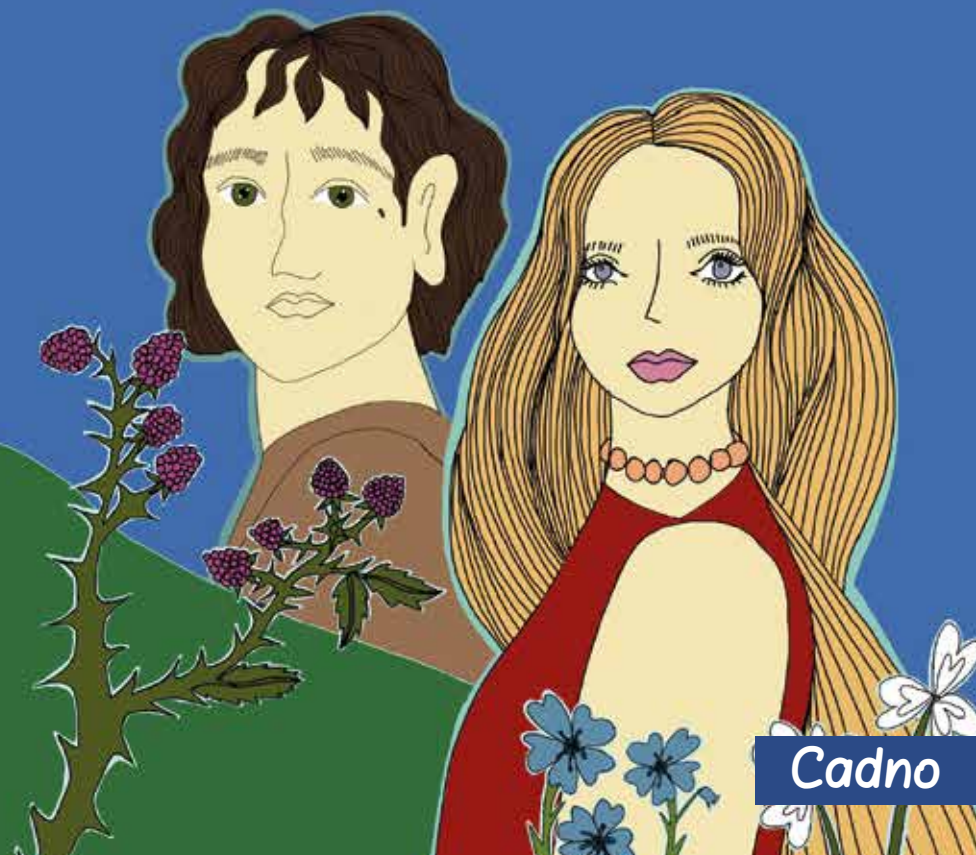
Culhwch and Olwen

Catherine Fisher



Cadno

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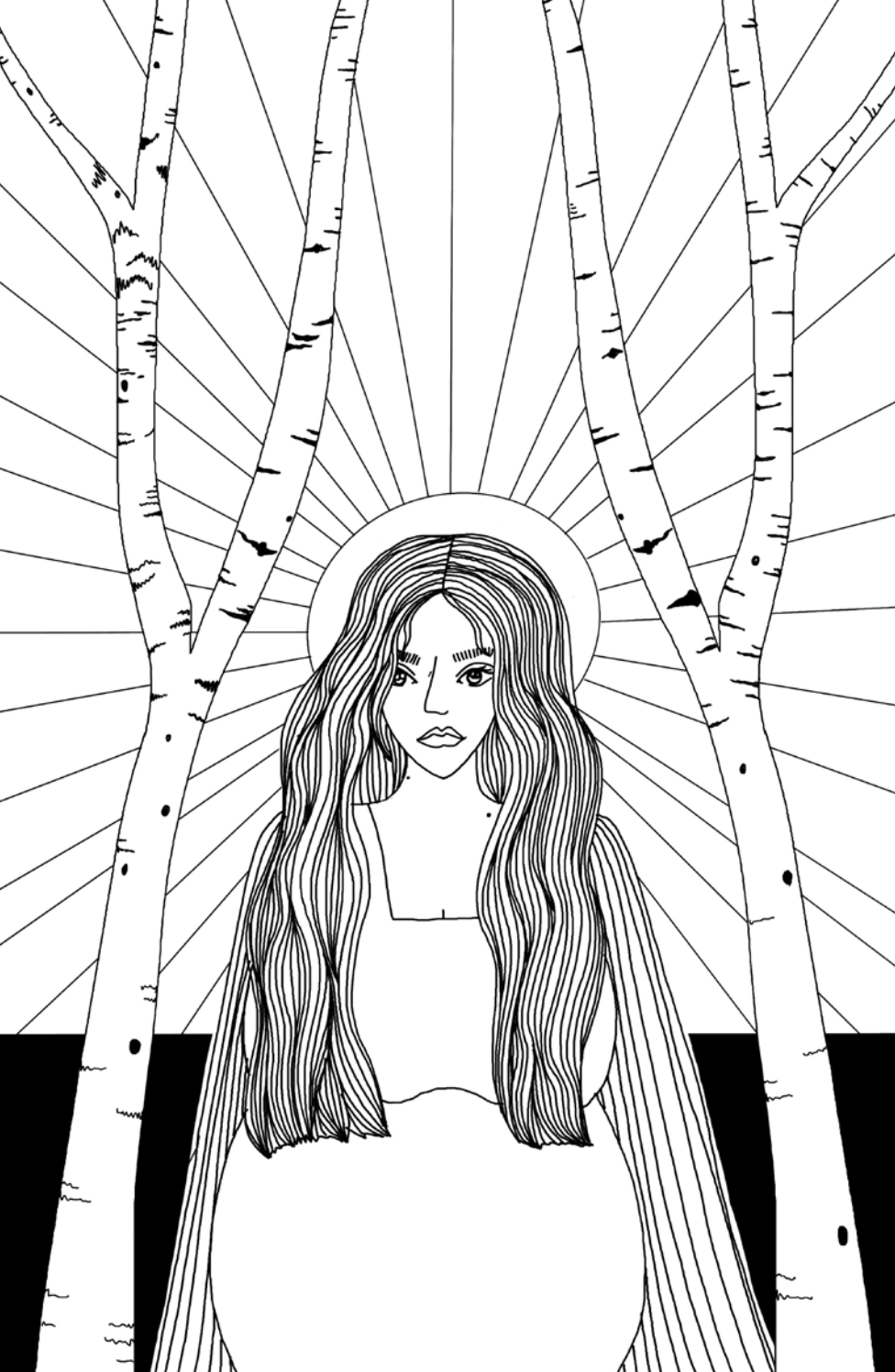


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Illustrations by Efa Lois

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1. How Culhwch was Born

It begins with Daylight.
It begins with Goleuddydd.

She lay curled in the mud and the leaves and the berries. Her hands clutched acorns. Pain pulsed through her body.

Far above, through the branches of a great hollow oak, she could see the sky, high and blue, and the sun, sending down shafts of light.

Her name was all she had left. There was nothing else in her memory, no knowledge of who she was or where she had come from, or how she had crept here, to the depths of this tanglewood.

She sat up. Every moment was a stiffness and an ache, and she was shivering with cold. How long had she wandered in the forest? Now she could see that her dress of velvet and gold was tattered and ruined, that her delicate white arms were scratched by brambles. She was a lady, she was sure of it, a king's daughter and a woman of quality. Why was she here?

Propped on her palms, the acorns and dead leaves wet beneath her, she listened. She heard a new sound.

Not the wind in the leaves.

Not the whistle and click of small birds.

Something stranger.

Something warm and wet, something snorty and squealish.

Suddenly, between the trees, she saw animals, large white snouted creatures, each with one red ear, and she stared at them in astonishment, because she had no idea what they were.

The pain came again. She put back her head and screamed.

The scream rang through the forest. It echoed down aisles of oaks, into hollows of birch and thickets of holly, up hillsides and hidden streams. It echoed deep in a valley of golden beech trees where a prince pulled his horse to a standstill and turned his head, startled.

"Did you hear that?" His men listened. "It's her! It's my wife!"

He spurred on, the grey cloaked riders racing after him through the wildwood. He was burning with fear. He was icy with dread.

"Lady?"

A face was close up to hers, a red, sunburned face, worn by weather, its eyes deep in wrinkles. "Lord bless us, lady, you shouldn't be here. Not in your condition. Are you

Prince Cilydd's wife? He's been searching for you for weeks now. Let me help you."

Goleuddydd stared at him, and beyond him, at the white pigs snorting and grunting for acorns in the litter.

Her mind cleared. "Cilydd..." she whispered.

"Yes." The swineherd knelt awkwardly and helped her up. "And God knows what his wrath and relief will be when he sees the state of you. My shelter is near here. It's not much, just a brushwood covering, but it's something, though not where you should be. You should be safe and warm in a palace, lady, with your women around you, not lying here in the rain.. This is no place for a prince to be born."

She nodded, and struggled up. It was hard to walk. Her belly was stretched and swollen; it impeded her and weighed her down. He led her to a hovel of woven branches, its floor mucky straw. She crumpled, grateful to have no rain falling in her eyes.

Her dress was sodden. Her fingers dripped water. "My name is Goleuddydd," she whispered.

"I know, my lady."

She looked at her nails, dirty and broken. "How long have I been in this wilderness?"

"Weeks. I heard at Lammas that a madness came down on you. It happens sometimes, they say..." He bustled, lighting a fire and turning to fetch water in a

leather bucket. “There is no rhyme or reason to it. My own mother had a turn like that once, but…”

The pain.

It went through her like a knife and she screamed till she could breathe again.

“Don’t worry. The baby’s coming,” the swineherd said. He pulled a face and shook his head. “I’ve delivered many a piglet, but never a prince. Mary and the angels guard us…”

She barely heard him. Because the life inside her was pushing its way out.

Cilydd flung himself from his horse and plunged into the brambled undergrowth. “It was near here! Hurry!”

The second scream had split his fear into two, for Goleuddydd, and the child.

Nettles whipped his hand; he crashed down a muddy slope and into a small stream. Water up to his knees, he waded across and scrambled up the trampled bank. Then one of his men yelled. “Look! Smoke!”

The baby came.

He came with a squalling and an eager cry, into the rain and the wind. He came like a hero, without fear. He yelled aloud his triumph.

The swineherd wrapped him hastily in his own ragged coat. He looked down into the small, puckered face. “Well,

well, he's a lively lad! A lusty fellow, lady."

She nodded.

She was pale and tired.

He didn't like the look of her.

At that moment the pigs erupted into squeals and fled like white streaks into the wood. Suddenly there were men everywhere, tall men with glittering swords and tunics of saffron and cloaks of cloth-of-gold and scarlet, and they pushed the swineherd aside and snatched the child from him. The lord Cilydd looked down at the shining face of his son. Then he sat weakly by his wife's side.

"I thought I was too late," he gasped.

"You are too late, my lord." She breathed slowly, and her hand was white as it held his. "I was lost before, and now I will be lost to you again."

"Goleuddydd. Don't say that..."

"I don't know where I have been. Down wild ways, along forgotten paths. Maybe not even in this world! All I remember is sitting by the fire on Lammas night and then, for no reason, standing up and going to the door and looking out. It was cold and windy. Something was calling to me. I wanted to turn away, but I couldn't. I stepped outside. What is it out there in the wild and the wilderness that calls us like that?"

"Don't you remember anything?"

"Nothing. Until now."

"We searched for weeks. You were nowhere..."

"That is exactly where I was. But it's over now." Her fingers closed on his. "I don't have much time left, so listen to me. The boy is to be called Culhwch."

"*Pig-run?* But..."

"It will be his name. The boar is a sacred animal for him. It will shape his destiny. Come closer."

He bent. Her breath was the softest warmth on his cheek. She smelt of wood and briar and wildness. She whispered, "I will die of this birth, it is happening now. You will want to marry again..."

"NO! No, I..."

She shook her tangled hair. "Men are weak, women decide these things. Marry and be happy if you want to, but not until my son is tall. Not until you see a two-headed bramble growing on my grave."

"But..."

"Promise me!"

He nodded his head.

"Now," she whispered, "bring me the priest."

The priest was fetched – a small humble man who hurried from his horse. He brought out his cross and his holy water and his book, but before he could say a word she had hold of his hand and her grip was like iron and her voice a whisper. "I lay this dying command on you. Every year you will clear my grave. Nothing must grow on it. No

weed, no bramble. Nothing! Do you understand?”

Astonished, the priest nodded.

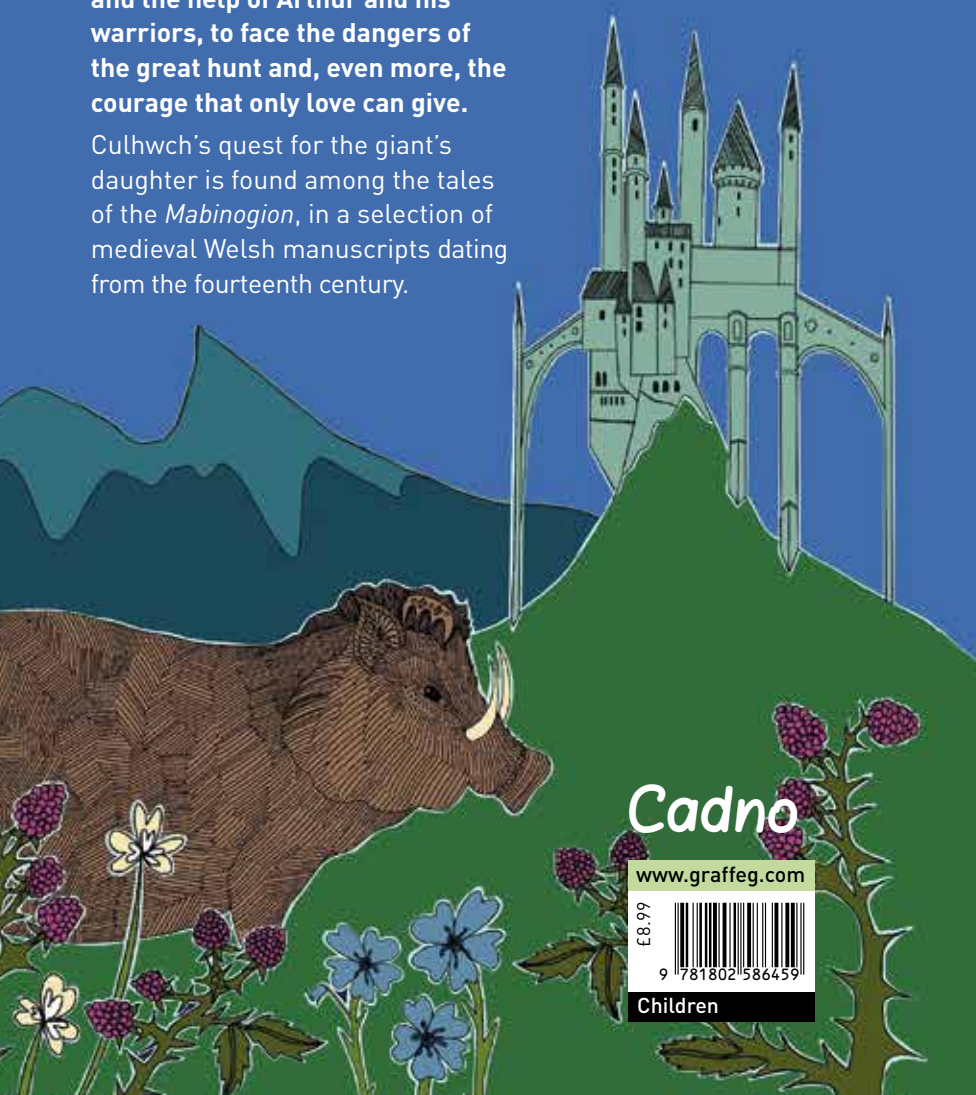
Then he began the words of the Sacrament, as Cilydd stood above with the child in his arms.

Before the words were ended, she was gone.

Culhwch and Olwen

Culhwch falls in love with Olwen, the daughter of the terrible giant Ysbaddaden, Chief of Giants. But the marriage can only take place if Culhwch can deliver the many magical gifts the giant demands. He will need Olwen's wisdom, and the help of Arthur and his warriors, to face the dangers of the great hunt and, even more, the courage that only love can give.

Culhwch's quest for the giant's daughter is found among the tales of the *Mabinogion*, in a selection of medieval Welsh manuscripts dating from the fourteenth century.



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