

AISLING¹

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*Are you a Faerie?
Or spirit of old?
Are you just a woman,
Whose heart is cold?*

Eilean na Drùidh, the Druids' Isle . . .

Some say the sacred island is in the middle of a secret lake hidden in the highlands of Scotland, and others say it is only an ancient legend. Yet the stories persist of those that found the mist shrouded island when they were close to death, and were healed.

In older times, when the Other World was closer to the people of the clans and villages, the woodland path to *Loch Drùidh*, the Druid's Lake, was well known. The wounded and ill who could not be cured by village healers would be brought to the little wooden wharf and the great brass bell that hung from a giant oak would be rung. Only a few dared to stay and witness the coming of the *Seann Daoine*, the Old Ones.

For those who dared to look behind, a barge would drift from out of the fog and two tall, thin, ageless women would appear. They each held an intricately carved wooden staff in their gnarled hands, one of Hawthorn, the other Blackthorn. They were the *slàinaighear*².

Sometimes the person left behind was never seen again, and sometimes they would reappear on the mainland, in a daze, unable to remember much of what had happened. Always, those who had been healed were never quite the same. No one crossed the waters through the mist to investigate.

In centuries past, the inter-clan warfare was constant and violent. Slaughters occurred on a regular basis, leaving families destitute, and often widows and orphans were left without support.

One such orphan was a small girl named Aisling, whose parents were killed in one of the endless land raids. At the young age of seven, the shock of witnessing her parents being butchered by marauders had turned her fine long hair pure white.

When she was found wandering mute in the ruins of her family's holdings, the villagers did not recognize the white haired child, and crossed themselves against what

¹ *Dream* in Scots Gaelic

² *Healers* in Scots Gaelic

they thought was one of the *sidhe*³. The superstitious villagers came to fear the strange melancholy child, and no one was willing to take her in. Finally one evening, the village healer took the queer silent child down the woodland path to the wharf, rang the old brass bell, and left her there.

From the mist over the lake, two eldritch sisters glided their barge toward the mainland, and found the child sitting on the wharf awaiting her fate. They noted her hair – it was a beautiful color, almost silver in the moonlight, making her look like a faerie child.

Huathé⁴ and Draighionn⁵ beached their barge on the shingle of the lake and came toward the child. Unlike the villagers and clanspeople, the girl did not flinch away from them.

“She’s very brave . . .” Huathé noted.

“Let’s get her aboard, “ commanded Draighionn briskly.

The child made no protest when Huathé took her hand, pulled her to her feet, and the two strange women escorted her aboard the barge, then poled their way back into the mist.



The hilly lands between the River Garry and the mountains had been claimed and fought over by many intrepid clans for the benefit of their grazing cattle. None greater than the bold MacDonnells and their persistent enemies, the “wry-mouthed” Campbells.

One Spring day, there raged a battle between the two warring the clans, and a strong young lord – Robeart MacDonnell, was gravely wounded in his side. His two loyal gillies, Eoin and Hamish, carried him from the field, and were told by the local village healer that he was mortally wounded, and his only chance of survival was to bring him to the healers’ wharf and ring the bell.

Warily, they traveled with their tall, dark haired master tied to his father’s black stallion, following the strange path through the forest to the edge of a misty lake. There, they found a small wharf with a large brass bell hanging from a massive oak, whose higher branches hung with the mysterious Druid’s herb - mistletoe.

The sound of the bell echoed across the lake, and they waited as a black swan drifted by. They watched it as it joined a white swan, and together the two water fowl

³ *Faeries* in Scots Gaelic

⁴ Huathé - Hawthorn

⁵ Draighionn - Blackthorn

glided into the mist. A strange omen, both the gillies thought, looking fearfully around them.

Then, through the mist they saw the barge, with what at first looked like an old white haired woman. But as she drew closer, they realized she was young, fair, and strange. They shuddered and almost took their charge and left. But Robeart groaned with pain, and they knew they had no other choice. They drew his limp body from the horse and placed him in the barge, leaving him in the pale, silent woman's charge, and then departed quickly without a word.

Aisling poled the barge back into the mist. When the gillies looked back, their master and the strange girl were gone. One of the men crossed himself as if for the dead.

The mist surrounded the island, but evaporated as they neared the shore. Huathe and Draighionn were waiting for Aisling and her wounded charge. They had a wooden framed rope pallet, and carefully lifted the almost lifeless body out of the boat onto the pallet, and carried him ashore while Aisling tied up the barge. The two swans drifted out of the mist and glided past the wharf and out of sight.

Huathe and Draighionn carried the litter onto a path leading into a deep woods, which eventually wound its way to their infirmary in a woodland glade. There, near a peat fire, they deposited their unconscious patient. They stripped him, examined the wound, cleaned it carefully with pure spring water, wrapped the wound in clean cloths, made a poultice of herbs, seaweed, and clay, and placed it over the bandages.

Huathe and Draighionn both placed their hands over the wound and uttered arcane incantations in Gaelic.

*“An ainm Athar,⁶
An ainm Mic
An ainm Spioraid,
Tri nan tri.*

*Cnèimh ri cnèimh
Cuisil ri cuisil,
Céirein ri céirein
Slànaich!*

*Créis ri créis
Cneis ri cneis
Gréis ri gréis
Slànaich!*

⁶ Adapted from “Charm for Sprain”, Carmina Gadelica, Volume IV, page 215)

*Fuil ri fuil
Feòil ri feòil
Féithe ri féithe
Slànaich!*

*Smear ri smear
Smuas ri smuais
Saill ri saill
Slànaich!*

*Streafon ri streafon
Snàithle ri snàithle
Seil ri seile
Slànaich!*

*Dé nan dé
Léigh nan léigh
Sporad nan ré
Tré nan tré
Slànaich!*

*(In the name of Father
In the name of Son
In the name of Spirit
The three of threes*

*Bone to bone
Vein to vein
Balm to balm,
Heal!*

*Sap to sap
Skin to skin
Tissue to tissue,
Heal!*

*Blood to blood
Flesh to flesh
Sinew to sinew
Heal!*

*Marrow to marrow
Pith to pith
Fat to fat
Heal!*

*Membrane to membrane
Fibre to fibre
Moisture to moisture
Heal!*

*The God of gods
The Healer of healers
The Spirit of Eternity
The Three of threes,
Heal!)*

Aisling helped with the preparations, and watched, fascinated, as the two older woman prayed over the helpless young soldier.

Watching his muscular chest rise and fall, she felt strangely drawn to him and crept closer. She noted the fine dark hairs that matted his chest and trailed down his torso, disappearing beneath the linen sheet. His dark hair was swept back into a long queue, tied tightly behind his head. She wondered what color his eyes were. The two older women looked at each other knowingly and withdrew.

Aisling placed her own hands over him and whispered, "*Slànaich!*"⁷



Aisling could not be parted from her handsome young patient. She kept her hands over the gash and visualized the injury healing. She took total charge, cleaning the wound, changing the wrapping, formulating the poultice, feeding him spoonfuls of broth, which he swallowed convulsively, wiping him down to cool his fever. At night she slept next to him, singing to him softly, her arm wrapped around him protectively.

Finally, one morning, Aisling was sitting next to him, singing softly, with her hand over the wound, when a strong swarthy hand seized her wrist. Startled, she looked up, and his fine dark blue eyes were staring at her in amazement. The sun was behind her, and all he could see was a woman with a halo of white hair.

"Am I dead?" he whispered? "Or have the faeries taken me?" His voice was deep as a well.

"You are well, and safe on *Eileen na Drùidh*"

"Druid's Isle? I've heard of this place, I though it was just a fairytale."

"It's no tale. I've lived here most of my life." Aisling told him.

⁷ "Heal!" in Scots Gaelic

Huathe and Draighionn entered the cottage, and seeing Robeart alert, they smiled.

“You have done well, my child” Huathe said approvingly to Aisling.

“He is still weak,” warned Draighionn, “and he needs nourishment.”

The days passed, and Robeart grew stronger, fed nourishing meals of nettle stoup, fresh fish steamed in seaweed, hearty breads, and heather ale. He was soon out of bed and wobbly on his feet.

“He needs to regain his strength before he leaves us.” Advised Draighionn, “For he has a perilous journey home.”

“Why don’t you show him the island?” suggested Huathe to Aisling.

Like two children on holiday, Robeart and Aisling sauntered along the shore surrounding the island. Soon he was able to climb the hills. They even took out the skiff and paddled around the island. One day they looked back, and in the wake of their boat sailed two magnificent swans, one black and one white.

Robeart was a fine, strong young man, and soon grew fit as a young oak. He took part in the islander’s many chores, collecting deadwood for kindling, mending nets, fishing in the lake for trout, even working in the herb garden.

“How did this island come by it’s name,” Robeart queried one day as they gathered kindling in one of the island’s peaceful patches of woods.

“*Eilean na Drùidh?* Look around you,” Aisling pointed up into the branches of a nearby oak, “*Drualus* – the Druid’s herb.” Robeart noted the ball of mistletoe hanging between the upper branches.

“Some say it’s a parasite, but it’s a holy plant.” Aisling continued, “Draighionn and Huathe tell me it’s also called All Heal, and we use it when strong medicine is needed.”

Often nights, they sang together, his fine base contrasted with her delicate soprano. The two older women sometimes joined in with their raucous voices. Other nights Huathe and Draighionn enraptured them with eldritch stories of the Other World.

One day, while working in the medicine garden, Draighionn said to Huathe, “They grow closer every day. Yet he must eventually leave. He’ll break her heart.”

Huathe eyes twinkled, “I think he will leave something of himself behind.”

“That is what I fear.” Warned Draighionn.

“I see a child, a little girl. Someone to carry on our traditions here on the isle.”

“That is strange, for I see a boy. And he will bring trouble.” Warned Draighionn.

“It will be a girl.” Huathe was firm.

“And if it is a boy?”

“Then she must take him to Robeart’s people to raise as his heir.” And Huathe turned from her sister and dug vigorously in the ground.

That night there was a violent rainstorm, and the two young people did not return to the cottage.

The island was strange. When they rowed around it, it seemed a small, compact island surrounded by mist. Yet to walk within it, the isle seemed endless with its wooded hills and valleys. As many times as Aisling and Robeart explored it, there was always another path to trod, another stream to cross, a further hill to climb.

This day, they were climbing a high sunny hill, hoping to glimpse beyond the fog surrounding the isle, to the mainland. But instead, above the mist, storm clouds gathered and the sky darkened. Lightning slashed across the sky, and thunder clapped.

“Let’s go back!” urged Aisling. Then the rain pelted down.

“There’s a cave!” cried Robeart, propelling her toward a dark opening behind a rocky shelf.

They clambered over the rocks into a shallow cave, and it afforded them a dry place to wait out the storm.

“This storm is rare for the time of year!” exclaimed Aisling. Her voice was nearly drowned out by the pelting rain and thunder.

It grew cold as the wind whipped the storm into a frenzy, and patters of rain found their tiny recess. They clung together, Robeart wrapping his long arms around her, holding her close to his warm body. Her white hair was damp, and he brushed it off her face. Then he kissed her for the first time. She turned her face toward him and they kissed again. Soon, the storm of their passion eclipsed the weather outside their rocky haven.

When they woke, the storm was over and the sun glistened on the wet landscape. Pools of water sent rainbows of light into the shimmering air. Robeart woke first, and gazed long at Aisling, then gently kissed her eyelids.

“My beautiful Aisling . . .” he murmured. Her eyes fluttered open, and he lowered his face toward her, and they kissed again, his long black hair mingling with her white.

“The storm catch you unawares?” queried Draighionn archly, when they finally sauntered in, hand in hand, as the sun was high overhead.

“We were lost in the hills for a while.” Robeart explained. But he was so happy, his heart was bursting with joy, and he would not be chastised. He began to sing,

“Beautiful dream,
My darling Aisling
My love for you
Makes my heart sing . . .”

Then they heard the brass bell clanging.

“What was that?” Robeart was startled.

“At the wharf. Someone is injured or ill, and the village healers cannot help them.” Aisling explained

Huathe and Draighionn looked into the mist and shook their heads bleakly. “They’ve come for you.”

Aisling and Robeart looked at each other, stunned. Robeart started to shake his head, but Aisling touched his cheek and said sadly, “I fear your people need you.”

“Then come with me!” he pleaded taking her hand, pressing her fingers to his lips.

“My place is here. I am fey. Your clan would never accept me.” Gently she withdrew her hand from his warm lips.



Huathe and Draighionn pushed the barge into the water and turned to the reluctant Robeart.

“You canna stay here, Robeart. You are strong and well now.” Draighionn told him.

He shook his head, “I’ll settle my business with the clan, and come back to Aisling.”

“No, my son,” Huathe told him, “Only the ill and dying can travel to *Eileen na Drùidh*. You will never find us again unless you desperately need us. Go now, they are waiting.”

Robeart took each old woman into his arm and kissed her, then whispered, “I will never forget you.” Even Draighionn blushed under her dark skin. The old women turned sadly away and made their way back up the path.

Robeart stepped onto the barge and pulled Aisling after him, “Stay with me.” He said simply. He picked up the barge pole, but Aisling took it from him. “I know the way,” she said. In silence, she poled the barge into the mist.

Eoin and Hamish waited by the Healers’ Wharf. Hamish reached for the bell again, but Eoin stayed his hand.

“I hear it again.”

They could hear the sound of two voices singing in Gaelic, then out of the mist, the barge appeared.

“Robeart!” The gillies both cried.

“Your father sent us to retrieve your body. We thought you must be dead.” Called Eoin. They both looked to Aisling, her white hair floating around her face in the breeze, and they shuddered.

“The witches healed you?” whispered Hamish fearfully, crossing himself.

Robeart leapt ashore and anchored the barge. Aisling wrapped her cloak close around her and did not step ashore.

Robeart grasped the hands of both his gillies and said, “I am well! And . . .” He turned around, his hand out to Aisling, but the barge had receded from the shore. Aisling stood at the edge, tears running down her face, as the barge drifted further away.

“AISLING! WAIT!” cried Robeart as he ran into the shallow edge of the lake, but the mist reached out for the barge and swallowed it.

The black swan glided forlornly in the shallow waters, bereft of it’s white mate.



The three men traveled through the perilous countryside, for their clan was still at war with the land hungry Campbells. They passed *Creagan an Fithich* – the famous

Raven's Rock, the symbol of their clan. The Glen Garry MacDonnell stronghold was a fortress along the banks of the river Garry.

"I see three riders!" proclaimed the *Freiceadan* (watch guard), observing from the tower gate. "It's Master Robeart and his gillies!"

Kaitlin was the first to greet the trio, her arms held out to Robeart, "I thought you were lost to me!" She cried out.

Robeart leapt from his mount and took her hands gently, but kept her at arms length, "I'm not so easily lost," He laughed. Then he let her go, and took his stunned father into a warm embrace, "Father!" while Kaitlin turned and stared at him, bewildered.

"Robeart? You're alive!" his father gasped. Robeart noted that his once robust father had aged since he last saw him, only months ago.

His clansmen and women gathered around him, embracing him, touching his clothes and hair tied back in a long black queue, as if to see if he were a real, or a ghost.

"Give him room!" beseeched Father Callum, but *Ruis*⁸, the elderly soothsayer, approached, holding her staff of elder, and looked into Robeart's dark, clouded eyes closely and nodded sagely, "You have been touched by the fey."

Inside their stronghold they stood by the large stone hearth with a smoldering peat fire, the Glen Garry Chief, Alasdair MacDonnell told his only living son, "When Eoin and Hamish came back without you, I thought all was lost, I sent them back for you. They were told to bring you back to us, dead or alive, or not come back themselves. They took their time about it," he cast them a sour glance.

Sheepishly, Eoin explained, "We searched everywhere, but couldna find the island. The villagers wouldna help us, pretended they never saw us before."

"I'm told the isle is unapproachable by anyone not in need of healing. How did you find it then?" queried Robeart.

"I swear we heard you singing. We followed your voice and found the wharf with the bell, and rang it. And you came out of the mist with your white haired witch-woman." Hamish crossed himself fearfully.

"Witch woman? Where on earth did you leave him?" Alisdair demanded.

"*Eileen na Drùidh*," whispered Eoin.

⁸ Ruis – elder tree in Gaelic

“That evil place!” Kaitlin wailed, “You fools! You’ve cursed him!” and she struck Eoin full across the face. He drew back in shock, holding his reddened cheek. Hamish and Eoin glanced at each other and left hurriedly.

“There, now Kaitlin, he’s back among us, he’s safe, none the worse for wear.” Soothed the old chieftain holding the hysterical woman.

Father Callum touched Kaitlin on the shoulder and said, “You’d best come with me, Lass. Let them talk together in private now.” Kaitlin stiffened and shrugged the priest off, but followed him out the door.

“Son, you’ve delayed your marriage long enough. She was near unbearable while you were gone, greetin’⁹ morn and eve. I’ve worked long and hard for this arrangement with her father, and it is time for the two of you to marry.” The old chief advised his son.

“I’ve never loved her,” Robeart told his father, shaking his head firmly, “To tell the truth, I don’t even like her.”

“Love comes with marriage, son. You’ll see. Your mother was afraid of me when we first married, but our marriage brought peace between the MacDonnells and the MacGregors. We had no regrets. Kaitlin’s a fine bonny lass, and the daughter of a minor Campbell Chieftain. Your marriage will bring peace to our warring clans. Spurning her will re-ignite the war.”

“I’ve seen no lessening of their aggression since this unholy arrangement of yours.”

“I have her father’s word. On your marriage day, the hostilities will cease.” The old Chief felt the subject was closed, and started to turn away.

“Father, “ Robeart insisted, “I cannot marry one woman when my heart lies with another.”

His father turned slowly around, he eyes cold with bewilderment and anger. “What woman?”

“The woman who healed me when I lay dying.”

“The *witch woman*?!” he bellowed, “Has she besotted you, enspelled you? I will send you to the priest and have her evil spell banished. Do not defy me in this, Robeart. This wedding will take place.”

“If you’re so eager for this marriage alliance, Father, you’re a widower,” Robeart suggested angrily, “why don’t you marry Kaitlin *yourself*?”

⁹ Scots for “crying”

Robeart never saw such a look of rage in his father's eyes.

"Then so be it." The old man said venomously, "And if we do marry, and if she bears me a son – you will be disinherited for your defiance." He turned in a cold fury and strode out.

Stunned, Robeart stood by the fire, and shivered with cold despite the heat. "Oh, Aisling, what have we done?"



Robeart was not present at his father's wedding. His congratulations to his prospective step mother were met with icy coldness. His father had not spoken a word to him since his defiance. Forlorn and restless, he packed his gear and set out, with his two loyal gillies, to find his beloved island, his heart yearning for Aisling.

"You've found it once," Robeart pleaded with his gillies, "Find it again!"

They came across the sight of the battle where he had been wounded. For the time being, there was peace with the wedding alliance. But the villagers claimed they did not recognize the trio, and *Eileen na Drúidh* was only a legend. The three men wandered the countryside to no avail.

Robeart grew thin and wan as they traveled. Everywhere, Robeart's eyes sought to see through the mist, his ears straining for the sound of her music, or the ringing of a brass bell. His gillies feared that he might be going mad.

In his sorrow, he forgot all songs but one. And in a deep plaintive voice, he sang his sad song,

“Beautiful dream,
My love, my Aisling
Memories of you
Make my heart sing . . .

When I lay dying
You came and found me
With your gentle hands
You healed my body.

You live in the mist
Where I can't find you
You left me ashore

Then you withdrew.

But you took my heart
It's in your keeping
And left me hollow,
Forever weeping.

Are you a Faerie?
Or spirit of old?
Are you just a woman,
Whose heart is cold?

Are you afraid?
Have I scared you away?
Is my human heart
Too strong for the Fey?

Until find you,
I'll never rest
Am I doomed to wander
On this endless quest?"

One day, Hamish woke up in the middle of the night to find Robeart poised above his sword, which he had struck hilt first in the ground.

"My lord!" He leaped up, Eoin close after him, and they restrained the forlorn young man before he could plunge his body onto his sword.

"You fools!" cried Robeart, "I dinna mean to kill myself. But if I am sore wounded, I can find the island and go back to her!"

"It is time we took you home." Sighed Eoin. And between the two of them they packed up the gear, and got him on his horse. Slowly, they led the broken young lord homeward.

There was no welcome for him when they returned.

"He has trafficked with witches, and will bring their curse down upon us all." The vengeful Kaitlin declared, "Can't you see he's gone quite mad? It's the witches' curse at work!"

At Kaitlin's insistent urging, his father reluctantly sent Robeart away, accompanied by his two steadfast gillies, whom he trusted to watch over his son.

Ruis warned Father Callum that the wrathful Lady Kaitlin meant Robeart harm, and the good priest secretly sent the three men to an old cave high in the hills, once

used by a Culdee hermit. Only he and Ruis knew where they were and brought them supplies to supplement their hunting and fishing. Away from the fortress, the priest prayed Robeart would reclaim his sanity and win back his father's trust. Too late, the priest had realized the wicked sort of woman his lordship had married. The sight of her cold glittering eyes made the old man shudder, as no ghost, demon or witch could.



"We were both right!" exclaimed Huathe. Each old woman held a newborn child in her arms, a boy and a girl. "Twins! Lovely twins!" Crooned the usually dour Draighionn.

"What shall we call them?" asked Huathe.

"Let's call them Merlin and Nimue?" suggested Draighionn. "After all, this was their island originally."

"or Diarmid and Grianna" countered Huathe, who preferred romantic names.

"What about Scathach and Cuchulainn?" Draighionn proposed gleefully, preferring the legendary warrior's names.

"How about Murdoch¹⁰ and Muirne¹¹." interrupted Aisling, and her decision was final.

The twins were like wild young animals. Before they could walk, they were crawling through the gardens, napping on soft beds of moss. Small animals and birds were drawn to them, staying playfully out of their reach. Brilliant butterflies danced before their dazzled eyes as they flitted from branch to flower.

They could imitate the sounds of animals and birds before they uttered their first human words. And they could climb a tree as soon as their short legs could carry them upright.

The sound of their gleeful laughter filled the island, and made even dour old Draighionn smile.

Often, at night, the two old women would cradle a child to sleep while Aisling sang to them, soft Gaelic lullabies.



¹⁰ Sea warrior in Scots Gaelic

¹¹ Beloved in Scots Gaelic (pronounced MOOR-uh-nyuh)

The seasons passed. The bell would clang throughout the year. Frightened and desperate villagers left their beloved on the old wooden wharf, ringing the bell before fleeing the witches, and the women would come and collect their fragile charges. They'd work diligently day and night to save lives both young and old.

Seldom did anyone who had recovered on the Druids Isle have any clear memories of what had taken place there, but found themselves dazed on the mainland, yet healthy and strong enough to make their way back to the village. Some said the three women were witches, some claimed they were the last of the Druids, and others said they were not human at all - but faeries. None had the courage to satisfy their curiosity and seek the hidden island.

Some unfortunate folk were lost, too far gone to recover, and they were eased painlessly into death, and wrapped in a shroud of linen. The woman would softly sing the ancient dirge¹² for their souls:

*“Caidil-sa, caidil, agus dhiot am bròn
Caidil-sa, caidil, agus dhiot am bròn
Caidil-sa, caidil, agus dhiot am bròn
Caidil, a chagair, an Carraig na crò.*

*(Sleep thou, sleep, and away with thy sorrow,
Sleep thou, sleep, and away with thy sorrow
Sleep thou sleep, and away with thy sorrow
Sleep, thou beloved, in the Rock of the fold.)*

Their shrouded corpses were ferried to *Eilean na Mairbh*, the Isle of the Dead, and buried within their ancient sacred mounds, guarded by the *Sidhe*.

Only rarely did the strange little family leave their island. Sometimes to go to the seashore to harvest seaweed for their medicine. Sometimes to trade their salves and notions for goods on a market day in a town where they were not known and feared.

Always Aisling was carefully cloaked, for her wide, pale green eyes and gleaming silver-white hair marked her as fey. When once, Murdoch pulled the hood from his mother's face, the bystanders stared at her, stunned by her strange, ethereal beauty. She quickly pulled her hood back over her face and moved away from the crowd.

Safely back on the island, Aisling was busy storing the items they had harvested and traded for in cupboards. Masses of seaweed were lain outside to dry, linens were folded and stored, wool was placed in a large hamper, ready to spin. It was autumn, and winter was soon to follow.

¹² Carmina Gaedlica, Volume III, page 383 (The Death Dirge)



“You have done well, Aisling” Draighoinn informed her one cool early October morning. “You have learned all we have to teach. The time has now come.”

“Time for what?” Aisling asked anxiously, wondering what the two old women were up to.

“To be initiated into the ancient healing arts, and heal and a deeper level.” Huathe explained, “To become one with the trees that guard and guide these sacred islands.”

“We’ll watch over the children. But for now, you must spend a night alone in the woods. The spirit of one of the trees will come to you, your healing guide. Bring back a staff freely offered from that tree.” Draighoinn instructed her.

That night Aisling wandered alone in the woods, with only her warm woolen *brát* for comfort against the chill October night. The old women had not even fed her, fearing that she would sleep when she needed to be alert.

The wind howled above the trees, and the branches swayed, shedding their colorful leaves. Clouds scudded across the full moon, casting shadows and light within the woods. The sound of animals scurrying under the brush was comforting compared to the sound of a lone wolf calling in the hills beyond. Once again, the tiny island seemed enormous, Otherworldly, and full of mystery.

Aisling drew her *brát* close under her chin, and shivered. Her eyes were growing heavy, and she felt sleep hovering over her like a dark cloud. Then a shimmering whiteness caught her eye. She looked down the path and saw what looked like a mist shrouded shape slowly approaching.

As the mist neared, Aisling saw it coalesce into a beautiful woman, an ageless faerie spirit wearing a long pale green gown, long copper tresses shimmering down to her waist. The Dryad smiled at her, “*Is Mise Abhall*, I am the spirit of the Apple tree.”

Shakily, Aisling rose to her feet and trembled before the spirit. “I am Aisling.”

“I know who you are, I know your lineage, and I know your teachers.” Her voice was like the sounding of bronze bells – smooth and melodious.

“I have no lineage . . .” Aisling began. Her heritage had been lost to her years before when her parents had been killed.

“Your folk were keepers of my orchards.” The fairy told her, “They knew the medicine of apple. It is no wonder that you came to the healing isle of Druids, for the art is in your blood.”

The fairy woman lightly touched Aisling’s forehead. For the first time, the portal opened to her long lost memories, and Aisling saw the rows of apple trees in the meadow near her lost home. Then the memories came rushing back – her father and mother harvesting the apples, her grandmother stirring a steaming cauldron, the delicious smells of the healing apple brew. The memories brought her peace, instead of pain, and she smiled her gratitude.

“It is well that you remember, child. Nothing is lost forever.” And the spirit reached out a glowing hand and held Aisling’s chin lightly, “You are among the *slàinaighear* now, and your healing name shall be as mine, *Abhall*. Say it. Say it three times, and it is yours.”

“Abhall,” Aisling whispered, “Abhall, Abhall.”

“When you call to me, I will come to guide you, child.” And the figure began to dissolve back into a white mist. Aisling’s eyes clouded with sudden tears, and when she shook them away, the faerie was gone.

Exhausted, Aisling curled up in her *brat* under the sheltering rock, and fell into a deep sleep. She dreamt of apple orchards and cauldron of apples brewing, and it comforted her.

When she woke the next morning and stretched out, her arm felt something hard beneath it. Opening her eyes, she regarded a long straight pole of wood. It was an applewood staff, a gift from her spirit guide.

“Well done!” Draighoinn grinned with delight when Aisling had returned home to them.

“Abhall – I like it.” Huathe mused. “You will grow into the name as the years pass, and that is how you will be known to those you heal.”



Samhain was drawing near. It was a solemn time on the island, when the three women prepared for the ancient festival. They made oaten cakes, gathered harvested apples, and brewed heather ale for offerings to the sidhe on the sacred isle where they brought their dead.

This year, they brought the three year old twins with them for the first time. Even they were subdued as the women poled the barge through the lake's murky waters to the other island, also shrouded in the eerie Highland mist.

The family disembarked at twilight and lit their torches. The island was smaller than their own, a rocky expanse of gentle slopes and hills. It had been a burial island for eons, and there were hundreds of cairns and mounds. Since the New Faith had come to the mainland, the island was abandoned as the Christian dead were buried in their churchyards.

On the top of the highest hill was an ancient stone circle, perhaps dedicated to a long forgotten pagan king.

"May the Dead join us this sacred night." Draighoinn called out to the surrounding darkness, stamping her blackthorn staff on the ground three times.

"May the Ancestors share in our bounty with delight . . ." chanted Huathe, stamping her hawthorn staff three times.

"May the Old Ones guide us in the coming year." Aisling, whose magical name was now Abhall, added, stamping her apple staff three times.

"Spirits of the night, Appear. Spirits of the night, Appear," the three women chanted in unison. Thus, the ancestors were summoned nine times by three sacred woods.

On a flat stone in the northwestern corner of the circle, the three women solemnly placed their offerings, then built up a peaty fire in a small stone fire circle in the middle of the great dolmans, to keep them warm on this cold November eve.

The fire burned brightly as the three women sat, their *brats*¹³ pulled close around them, the children listening drowsily in their "aunties" laps. Huathe told them gentle fairy stories until their lids began to droop. Draighoinn told darker tales of ghosts, witches and wizards. Then the women fell silent and stared into the fire, for this was a night of prophecy.

The wind rose and whistled through the stones. Gusts of wind fanned the fire, which burned brighter, sending up sparks. The winds took on the quality of voices, coming up from the barrows and whispering to the giant sentinels. The fire took on shapes, accompanied by the voice of the wind, and the women stared, entranced, as the spirits of the night surrounded them and whispered their secrets.



¹³ *Brat* – mantle in Scots Gaelic

“Mama, mama, wake up” insisted young Muirne, pulling at her mother’s cloak. Murdoch pushed on the old women’s arms, “Auntie Huathe, Auntie Draighionn!”

Groggily the women rubbed their eyes and sat up. Aisling got up and went for their basket and served the company with honey spread bread and heather ale for breakfast. She liberally watered the ale down for the toddlers. Huathe and Draighionn were silent through their breakfast.

“What is it?” Aisling asked, alarmed.

“What did you see last night?” Huathe asked her.

A look of tenderness crossed the young woman’s face. “I saw Robeart, and our children were with him. It was but a dream that can never be,” she said sadly.

“It is time you sent his son to him, Aisling.” Draighionn stated.

“No! I canna be parted from Murdoch! He is so like his father! And to separate the twins . . .” She clutched her children to her, and they protested noisily.

“I saw a storm brewing.” Huathe whispered, “It was a storm that brought you together, the night your children were conceived. And it is a storm that could tear us all apart if we resist our destiny.”

“And what is our destiny?” Cried Aisling.

“It is Murdoch’s destiny to go to his father and take his place among his clan. It is Muirne’s destiny to stay with us and learn the healing ways.” Draighionn declared in a voice that would brook no defiance, though in truth, it would break her own heart to part with the boy.

“And how do you know this?” cried Aisling.

“The spirits spoke to us in the night, Aisling.” Huathe told her, “And there is no denying them. We’ve known this all along.”

“He must go to his father before the first snow.” Draighionn said sadly.

“Then I will take him myself,” announced Aisling.

“That would not be wise,” said Huathe alarmed.

“Perhaps it’s meant to be.” Draighionn bowed her head.



The two children sensed that something was amiss, and clung to each other crying, at the wharf. Huathe picked up Muirne and carried her away, tears streaming down her own face. Draighionn held Murdoch to her briefly, then handed him to his mother. “Be careful, Aisling. You’re facing great danger.”

Aisling pulled her cloak close about her face, and traveled the lesser known paths to avoid villagers. Murdoch was excited about the unexpected journey, and danced along the path ahead of her. A cloth sack contained a change of garments and dried food for their journey. Murdoch was encumbered with a flagon of watery ale.

Sleeping on beds of moss wrapped in their *brats*, cooking over small camp fires, they finally left the paths and eventually made their way to the River Garry, and followed it upstream. In four day’s time Aisling found herself in the unfamiliar Glen Garry territories and drew closer to the fortress.



“Who goes there?” The sentinel asked the strange, cloaked woman, with the child tugging at her skirts.

“I’ve come to see Lord Robeart.” She told him.

“And what business do you have with him?” Uilleam, the sentinel asked suspiciously.

“Tell him it’s Aisling. He will see me.” She informed him, then bent to attend to her child.

The sentinel went straight to his mistress, Lady Kaitlin. “There is a woman and child asking for your stepson, Milady.”

“Send her to me at once.” Kaitlin was dressed sumptuously in a gold silk gown that set off her lush brown hair. Her eyes were a peculiar tint of brown with hard golden glints, like a feral cat’s. Kaitlin glanced in the mirror and was reassured once again of her crystalline beauty. She was convinced that every man in the garrison was in love with her, and would do anything for her. She glanced down at her trim figure, which in three years with her elderly husband, had not billowed with child.

She had sent for Ruis, the old clan soothsayer, who mumbled an incantation and consulted with a small collection of worn wooden staves inscribed with the strange *ogham* markings. She had spread her ragged cloak on the ground, tossed the staves onto it, and studied the pattern they formed closely. Then she turned her strange gray

eyes on Lady Kaitlin and told her that she could not conceive a child with her elderly husband, Lord Alisdair.

It was time she found another route, thought Lady Kaitlin, or the lands would go back to her hated stepson, Robeart, on his father's death. Already the old man's health was weakening, and his anger toward his son waning. Lately he had been calling Robeart's name in his restless sleep. Never would she forgive the handsome Robeart for rejecting her, which forced her into a marriage with the old man instead. Often in the night, she pretended it was a robust young Robeart next to her instead of his aging father.

She looked appraisingly at the sentinel, Uilleam. It was said that he was the illegitimate son of old Alisdair's younger brother, now long dead, and he had the dark good looks and long sinewy body of the McDonnell men. She smiled at him winsomely, and he smiled back.

Uilleam fetched the strange young woman and her child. On their way inside the fortress, Ruis stepped from the shadows and held up her hand for them to stop. She pulled the cloak from Aisling's head and stared into her light green eyes. Ruis could see the lake, and the isle, and knew who she was. "You have come." She whispered, and stepped back into the shadows. Aisling was strangely comforted by the old woman, who reminded her of her two island mentors. She was escorted to Kaitlin's chamber.

Kaitlin stared at her, eyes as hard as topaz, with angry golden glints. "So you are the Witch Woman who cursed the clan." She glared at Aisling, and then slid her eyes to Murdoch, "And who is this?"

"I've brought Lord Robeart's son." Aisling said simply.

"Lord Robeart? He's a lord no more. He was disinherited and cast out for fraternizing with witches and faeries. He's gone quite mad."

"Where is he?" Aisling demanded

"No one knows. He may even be dead." Her laugh was harsh. Murdoch moved closer to his mother, protectively. "And we have no use for his half-demon child." She reached for the child, and tore him screaming from his mother's skirts. "Guards!"

But it was Father Callum who responded. "Who have we here?" he queried. Ruis, who had summoned the priest, stood quietly outside the door, out of view.

"You're a priest. Don't you know a witch when you see one?" screamed Kaitlin. "LOOK AT HER!" and dragging the child forward, she tore away the cloak and revealed Aisling's eerie silver-white hair and pale green eyes. Even the priest crossed himself in a moment's fear.

“Mama!” wailed Murdoch, and wrenched free from Kaitlin’s grasp. He buried his dark head in his mother’s skirts, his hands clasped around her legs.

“Robeart’s son.” Aisling said simply.

“So *you* say,” countered Kaitlin.

The priest kneeled down and gently pulled the boy around to face him, “You’ve only to look at him to see he is Robeart’s son. Are you blind, woman?” he turned toward Kaitlin, and met with her icy stare.

Alisdair, Chief of the Glen Garry MacDonnells, entered the room. “What is all this?” he demanded.

“The witch that cursed your son is among us, with her demon spawn!” shrieked Kaitlin.

The Chieftain looked over at the silent, white haired woman. Then he looked down at her son. “Is it Robeart’s?” he asked simply.

“Yes. And he has a twin sister as well.”

“Did you bring her here?” the old man asked and looked around.

“It was decided that my son would live among his clan, and my daughter remain with us on *Eileen na Drùidh* to learn our healing ways.”

“Then leave my grandson here with me, and be off with you.” The Chief demanded.

“He’ll be safe with us.” Father Callum promised her gently. With a sorrowful look, Aisling looked down at her son, then abruptly left. Tears running down her face, she parted from the fortress and disappeared down the path.

“I have an heir, at last,” stated the Chief, ignoring his wife’s outrage, as he picked up the crying child and left the room, followed by the priest.

He passed Uilleam in the corridor. “Find my son and bring him to me.” He ordered. Uilleam bent his head in acknowledgement, but headed for Kaitlin’s rooms instead.

“We must create our own child.” She told him, and pass it off as the Chief’s.”

“What of the boy?” Uilleam asked.

“I’ll take care of him, with poison.” She promised, “And reward you well when the old man dies.”

A dark shawled Ruis waited in a dark recess near Kaitlin's chamber door as the night grew old. She was not surprised to see the woman emerge, a dark cloak wrapped about her. Kaitlin slipped down the corridor, down the stone stairs, down the hall to the scullery. Like a shadow, Ruis crept after her, surprisingly agile for an old woman.

Kaitlin exited the scullery door into the kale yard. Ruis halted just inside the door – she heard hushed voices. She peered around the door jamb and saw Kaitlin in Uilleam's arm, their faces locked in a long kiss. They broke apart and started for the postern door, leading to the field beyond the stronghold. Kaitlin brought out a ring of keys and unlocked the iron-bound oak door, and they crept through.

Ruis followed them, freezing into a dark stillness whenever the duo looked around stealthily to make sure they were unobserved. They soon descended into the woods, and followed a dark path, Kaitlin leading her anxious suitor. Ruis slipped from tree to tree behind them, her wood-wise eyes missing every brittle twig. Turning on a side path, the couple skipped up the narrow path, which led them to an old ramshackle woodman's hut. With one last look behind, they slipped inside and disappeared.

Ruis grinned to herself, as she turned back for home, for she knew what Kaitlin did not. It was not her aging husband who was infertile. There would be no child. Then a line of worry crossed her weathered face. But Robeart's child was in danger.

Uilleam left late the next morning, with a squad of men who were loyal to the seductive Kaitlin rather than the old laird. Their mission was to find Robeart and kill him, before he could reunite with his father. The gillies would have to be killed too. Kaitlin had told him to search the area near the battleground, for the strange island was said to be somewhere in that district, and she was sure her mad stepson was still searching for his lost love there.

Father Callum climbed the hills to the old Culdee hermitage. He spied Hamish among the heather, and called out to him.

"Where is the young lord?"

"In the hills, hunting."

"Find him and bring him to me. Quick now."

Hamish found Eoin and Robeart stalking a deer in a valley between the rolling hills, and called out to them.

"Quiet!" hissed Eoin, waving him back. The deer sensed the motion and bolted away

"It's the priest." Hamish called back, "You're wanted. It seems there is news."

The two men scrambled over the rocks like two healthy young bucks. But close up, Hamish could see the haunted look, ever present on Robeart's young face.

"My father?"

"I don't know."

They met up with the priest at the cave entrance. Father Callum embraced Robeart warmly.

"Is Father dead?" Robeart asked anxiously, fearing the worst.

"Not at all. Not at all." The priest reassured him, glad for the look of relief on Robeart's face. He felt another spurt of anger at the cruel Lady Kaitlin for keeping a loving father and son apart. "You're father is asking for you. You must come back at once."

"And lady Kaitlin?" Robeart asked suspiciously.

"For once, she has nothing to say about it."

"Come," Robeart ordered his gillies, and they began their long descent from the hills.



Robeart was shocked to see a wee boy in his father's arms. Had Lady Kaitlin given him another son at last, and his people feared to tell him?

"Greet your son, boy." His father told him, holding out a struggling Murdoch.

"My son?" gasped Robeart in disbelief.

"Your son by the Witch Woman, Aisling. She says he has a twin sister as well, though she's keeping the girl on her island." Then he put his grandson down and held out his arms, "We have been estranged too long, my son." And they fell into each other's arms. Neither realized that they were being observed by an angry Kaitlin, who stood in the shadows of the large hall.

"Where is Aisling?" Robeart asked.

"We sent her back." And Lady Kaitlin stepped out of the shadows. "We all saw her, with her eldritch hair and eyes. It is her curse that makes me barren. She has no place here."

The haunted look had come back into Robeart's eyes. "I must find her."

"Your place is here, son." His father reminded him, "You have your own son to mind now."



The old man never seemed to tire of his grandson, and the two spent hours together, fishing, hunting, playing games. The boy missed the stories from his island, and so his grandfather told him stories of the heroic MacDonnells. Every moment they spent together infuriated his malicious wife.

"He's the child of a witch, and he has ensorcelled you, my lord. How do you know he is really your grandson, you only have her word for it!" she nagged.

"Look at him – he is Robeart's to the core."

"Or is it a part of her magic to make him seem so? Is it not her curse that has kept us barren? Did she not drive your son mad?" Kaitlin insisted, but he would hear none of it.

A sly look came into Kaitlin's topaz eyes. She decided to change her tactics and made an act of conciliation toward her resolute husband. Kaitlin offered to send a request to her mother for a nursemaid for the child. The old chief agreed with relief, hoping at last for peace between his wife and his son in the Glen Garry stronghold.

Uilleam was dispatched with a message to the Lady Campbell and after a few days time, arrived with a sly, slatternly young woman, Ceara.



Robeart watched his son with wonder, every moment aching for the boy's mother. He wondered what his daughter was like, dark like himself, or fair like his Aisling.

Like a watchful ghost, Robeart shadowed the boy and his grandfather wherever they went. He did not trust his step mother. He had a vague sense of unease.



"Any sign?" Uilleam asked her anxiously, glancing at her belly.

“None. But I swear by all the powers, that neither Robeart nor his bastard shall inherit this land. It is time to end this farce.” She thrust out her chin imperiously, “I’ll make sure that I am Laird Alisdair’s only heir.”

Ceara was more interested in the colorful array of jewels and fine clothes in Lady Kaitlin’s chambers, than she was in her charge, a mere bastard of the Laird’s mad son. She fingered a gold torque longingly, finally winding it around her neck, and admiring the effect in the polished copper mirror, when her mistress walked in.

Ceara quickly ripped it from her neck and was about to stuff it back in Kaitlin’s jewel box, when Kaitlin held up her hand, “I have a task for you. And in exchange for your allegiance, and your silence, the torque will be yours.”

Ceara’s eyes widened greedily and reached for the torque once again . . .



Kaitlin left the woodland hut with her basket in the gray light before dawn. She knew exactly what she was looking for.

Along the River Garry where the forest crept near, she remembered seeing the occasional poisonous mushroom. She had been taught long ago by her mother what to look for, and what it did. Approximately twelve hours after ingestion - severe abdominal pain, vomiting, cold sweats, diarrhea, ending in death. Not a pleasant way to go, she smirked. She found what she was looking for – a circle of mushrooms – like a fairy circle of death.

A large raven ominously cawed a warning from high in a pine tree. She ignored it and carefully collected her treasure and placed them in the basket. It wouldn’t do to poison them all at once. They must suspect the plague. First the child. Ceara would bring the boy to her in the field.



“My tummy hurts” wailed Murdoch, clutching his stomach with both hands. His grandfather picked him up and hugged him. The boy was shivering, although it was not cold “Here, we’ll put you to bed.”

The new nursery maid was nowhere to be found. Alisdair sent for Ruis.

“He’s complaining of his stomach. See what you can do.” The old man ordered, then left the room.

Ruis put her cool hand on the little boy’s hot forehead.

“What did you eat, my love?” She inquired gently, suspecting food poisoning.

“Magic Faerie buttons.” He gasped between bouts of dizziness and nausea. “She said if I ate one, I could fly away to see my mama . . .”

“Faerie buttons? Who said? What do you mean?” But the boy could no longer talk. She sent for Father Callum.

“What’s wrong with him?” the priest arrived and asked anxiously.

“He’s ill. I think it’s something he ate. He told me something about magic Fairy buttons that could make him fly.”

The priest shot her a puzzled glance, and said slowly, “I was giving last rites to Old Thomas in the village last night, God bless his soul, and didn’t come back ‘til near dawn. Then I saw Lady Kaitlin walking with Murdoch up in the field. She gave him something from her basket, then Ceara fetched him back inside, and Kaitlin went off into the woods. I thought it strange that she . . .”

Ruis turned white. “Kaitlin . . . Fairy buttons. Oh, heaven help us! I think she gave him mushrooms – poisonous mushrooms!”

“That’s fatal, especially in a little . . .”

“GET HIS FATHER” screamed Ruis, gathering the boy into her arms.

Ian and Hamish were waiting with the horses. Robeart leapt on the Laird’s swift black stallion and reached for the limp and sweating body of his child.

“Ride like the wind.” The priest told him.

The stallion outdistanced his companions by a league. The wind whistled through his ears like a screaming banshee. There was only one hope for his child, and himself. He had to reach the wharf and ring the bell.



Ruis noted that Ceara was wearing a gold torque around her neck, showing it off to the men of the Laird’s garrison. Ruis hurried passed her and headed toward the woods.

Just as she’d suspected, she discovered the basket with the remnants of the mushrooms in her ladyship’s secret trysting spot. She turned the fungi over carefully and examined them closely. She was satisfied that they were of a poisonous variety.

Her face grim, she returned to the stronghold, with the mushrooms carefully concealed in her kerchief.

Ruis peaked into Kaitlin's chambers, and noted that the lady was languishing in bed, tired from her early morning's lethal chore.

"What do you want?" Kaitlin snarled on spying the soothsayer in the doorway.

"My lady, I was just noticing the fine golden torque that young Ceara was wearin' around her neck." Ruis crept in humbly.

"Well, what of it? Where is she, anyway?" Kaitlin demanded. "She should be attending the child."

"Visiting the garrison, my lady, showing off her new treasure." Ruis sighed. "She told me that Lord Robeart took the child off to visit his mother early this morning."

"I see." Kaitlin's eyes gleamed with triumph. "Well, what do you want?"

"I've served you well, and you've never given me such a treasure." Ruis complained. "And I am getting old, and my sight is failing."

"Ceara pleases me well. You only bring me bad news. I have no need of a soothsayer today. Be off with you." Kaitlin dismissed her and turned away.

"I have other powers . . ." Ruis said softly.

"What powers?" Kaitlin turned back, her eyes narrowed.

"I know the craft of the wise," Ruis leaned close and whispered, "although it would be the death of me if his lordship were to know."

"The craft of the wise? Are you a witch?" Kaitlin's interest had quickened.

"I know a little of the old ways. I know, for instance, a potion that could make you fertile."

"Why did you not bring this news to me before?" Kaitlin demanded angrily.

"You were never known to reward your servants before now." Ruis admitted, "You have a set of fine gold bracelets that would comfort me in my old age. Surely if you bore the Chief a new son, you would be generous to me."

Kaitlin's eyes gleamed with malice, "Bring me the potion. If I bear a son, you shall have my gold bracelets to secure your old age."

Ruis bowed out and disappeared.



“You’ve made the potion?” Kaitlin asked Ruis.

“Yes my lady.” And she handed over a goblet containing the potion, made from cow’s milk, honey and pureed mushrooms. “You will know the pangs before you know it.” Ruis promised.

Kaitlin grabbed the goblet out of the soothsayer’s hands and greedily drank down the potion.



The stallion thundered beside the River Garry, galloped across the valley, leapt over thorn hedges, sped between the hills. Robeart guided his mount by heart, for he knew every step of the way. He prayed that the island would appear before him, that Aisling would be there. He passed the battleground where he had been wounded so long ago, and saw the village ahead. A lone herdsman was prodding a flock of sheep along the road. The black stallion slid to a stop, steam rising from its nostrils.

Before Robeart could gasp a word, the herdsman pointed to a gap in the woods and instructed, “Follow the path until you come to the lake. At the wharf, ring the bell.” He turned back to his sheep.

Robeart turned his horse and fairly flew down the path, clutching his son, bending low, avoiding branches.

Then he saw the mist above the trees, and knew he was close. The path ended at the wharf. Robeart leapt from his horse, stumbled, still clutching his limp son, and reached under the bell for the clapper. He rang the bell with every ounce of strength he had left in his body. While he waited, he sang the song that had filled his head for the last three years,

Beautiful dream,
My love, my Aisling
Memories of you
Make my heart sing . . .

And the barge came from the mist. Aisling moored the barge and took up her son without a word, over the boy’s fevered head, her eyes met his father’s.

“He’s been poisoned – mushrooms.” Robeart gasped. She closed her eyes in dismay a moment, then nodded her head, “Take the poll, go straight into the mist and hold her steady.” She told him.

In her mind, she sent a fervent prayer to her healing guide, “*Abhall, be with me now.*”

Huathe and Draighionn were waiting at the wooden pier. Huathe held Muirne’s small hand. When she saw her brother’s unconscious body, the child started to cry.

“Hush now, Muirne.” Draighionn admonished her, “We have work to do.”

They traveled fast to a small storage shed near the wharf, not wasting the time to journey to their woodland cottage.

“Start a fire.” Huathe ordered Robeart, who quickly gathered wood and peat together. He struck his flint against stone and caught the tinder on fire, and fanned the fire into a healthy flame.

“Emetics” Draighionn ordered, and her sister searched her basket for lobelia and vervaine, and prepared a decoction in a copper pot over the fire.

“Cold water.” Aisling pointed to a heavy iron cauldron, and Robeart quickly took it to the shore of the lake and filled it, lugging it back up to the shed.

They cooled the decoction with a little water, and with a wooden spoon, forced liquid into the boy’s mouth. The liquid spilled out of his mouth, he could not swallow.

The three women and Muirne took hands and sat in a circle around the unconscious boy. Then they began to chant the ancient Gaelic incantation:

*An ainm Athar,
An ainm Mic
An ainm Spioraid,
Tri nan tri . . .*

“Touch him, Muirne” Huathe instructed. Muirne let go the hand on either side and crept to her twin brother’s side. She placed her hands on his tummy and closed her eyes in concentration.



Robeart stood outside the circle and watched in wonder. With the three women holding hands and chanting incantations, his three year old daughter spooned another

mouthful of liquid into her brother's mouth. This time he swallowed. She fed him another mouthful, and he swallowed again.

Sweat was pouring down the faces of the three older healers, mixed with tears. Robeart knelt and reached for Aisling's hand. Draighionn let go and pulled Robeart into the circle. Though he could not repeat their incantations, he bowed his head and prayed from every fiber of his being that his son would live.

They were interrupted by a seizure of coughing, followed by violent vomiting. Murdoch vomited up the fetid contents of his stomach, then he started to cry heartily.



Robeart sent his gillies back to the clan's fortress.

"Will you be coming back again, young lord?" Hamish asked him tentatively.

"When my son is well enough to travel." He told them. "Take the stallion back easily. He nearly ruptured his heart to get me here on time." And he stroked the dark nose of the glistening black horse gratefully.

Murdoch was fed a blend of marshmallow, comfrey, borage and oats - demulcents to heal the mucosal lining of his stomach; stewed apples for nourishment; and chamomile tea to sooth the irritated bowels. Robeart watched his young daughter deftly spoon feed her twin brother.

"She's a born healer." Huathe told him fondly.

"Like her mother." He agreed.

Murdoch was a sturdy child and recovered well. By the fortnight, he was well enough to travel.

Robeart sat on the wharf staring into the mist.

"What troubles you, son?" Huathe was suddenly beside him.

"Is there a way to live in two worlds at once? How can I leave her again? How can I separate my children?"

"There is only one true bridge between the worlds."

"Do I need to near kill myself to find her again?"

"The bridge is love, Robeart. To you and your son, the path will always be open."

Huathe kissed him gently on the brow, and left him on the pier, wondering at the two swans, a black and a white who glided out of the mist, followed by a clutch of black and white cygnets.



And thus it came to pass. The young lord and his son returned to clan, to the joy of the old laird and his people. But many were the times when the two galloped their mounts on the path along the River Garry, and no one dared follow them. They could be gone for days, or for weeks.

When the young Laird Murdoch came of age, his grandfather was ancient, but still alive.

“It is time I passed the leadership on to you, my son, for I am soon to join your mother in the other world.” The old laird told Robeart.

“You once said that Murdoch would be your heir, not me.” Robeart reminded him.

“That was said in anger, a long time ago, before the death of your step mother.” It was seldom that anyone mentioned the Lady Kaitlin anymore. There had not been many that grieved for her. And those that did had hastily left the clan upon her death.

“But I will hold you to it, none the less, Father. Murdoch is young and able, and I wish to join Aisling and Muirne on the island, and remain there until the end of my days.”



It is said to this day, when a black and white swan sail together, it portends a marriage of true love among the Glen Garry MacDonnells.

. . . And it is also said that if you are in desperate need, you can still find the wharf, and ring the bell in the oak tree.