



The Phoenix & the Flame



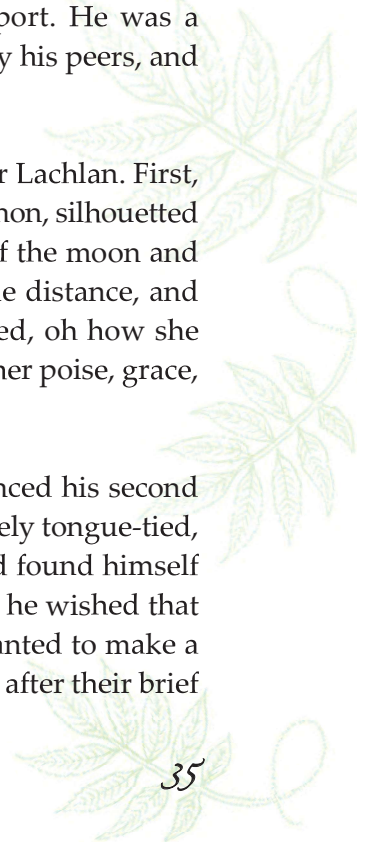
Part 1

Lachlan and Rhiannon first met on the night of the Summer Solstice when life was full of promise, and filled more with dreams than memories.

Rhiannon was a beautifully graceful young woman with smooth clear skin and eyes big and bright - all for the moon. With long, shimmering jet-black hair, she cut a striking figure and looked quite the fairytale princess. When Lachlan first clapped eyes on her, he was completely bewitched. Strong and athletic, Lachlan excelled at sport. He was a confident young man, gregarious by nature, well liked by his peers, and driven by the fire of the sun.

On that fateful night, a series of surprises was in store for Lachlan. First, and most profound of all, was his initial glimpse of Rhiannon, silhouetted against the night sky and illuminated by just the light of the moon and the stars. Her gaze was settled somewhere in the middle distance, and her face a study in peace and stillness. When she moved, oh how she moved! It was as if she glided o'er the ground, such was her poise, grace, and impeccable balance.

When Lachlan was introduced to Rhiannon, he experienced his second surprise of the night. He was speechless. He was completely tongue-tied, and didn't utter a single word. He felt his face blush and found himself staring at his feet. Never had he felt this way before and he wished that the ground would swallow him up. He had so much wanted to make a good first impression with Rhiannon, but, as they parted after their brief



encounter, he was convinced that she would think him a complete fool. He could kick himself.

Lachlan's third surprise of the evening was, thankfully, altogether more reassuring. Far from making the poor impression he assumed he had made, Rhiannon had found Lachlan's shyness to be endearing. She parted from their brief encounter intrigued and wanting to know more about this man, who was renowned for his sporting prowess and who, she had wrongly assumed, would be confident and arrogant.

As time would tell, Lachlan was anything but arrogant. He was a humble young man the day they met, and remained that way throughout the wonderful thirty years that he and Rhiannon subsequently spent together.

A love such as theirs is a rare and precious thing. It unfolds naturally like the course of a river. Sometimes it is intense, dramatic and intoxicating, other times more mellow and meandering, but always unerring in its unfolding, fulfilling its destiny moment by moment, as it flows ever onward.

All earthly loves, however, are subject to the cycles of life and of death, and the lives and loves of our hero and heroine, Lachlan and Rhiannon, were no different.

And so our story begins now - at the end so to speak . . .

With her love now torn apart, those days of joy seemed a distant memory for Rhiannon.

Seven years and three months since the death of Lachlan, her lover and soul mate, Rhiannon sat alone, a pale shadow of her former self. The change in her was so profound that she was now barely recognisable as the same woman who had had so much vigour and vitality in the thirty years they were together. She looked frail, her heart broken and never mended, and her spirit weak. Instead of poise and grace, tension and fragility now characterised her.

Hunch-backed, a brittle bag of skin and bones, bearing a gaunt hollow expression and deep-set haunting eyes, the once beautiful and vibrant Rhiannon rocked perpetually back and forth, as she sat on a rusted, old,

cold, metal bench in the middle of a dark, dank and dusty living room. The curtains were permanently closed except when friends and relatives visited, as to their eternal credit they consistently did throughout the years that Rhiannon suffered. Each tried in their own way to lift her spirits. None succeeded however, and Rhiannon still grieved Lachlan's passing.

In the time since his passing, Rhiannon had withdrawn deeper and deeper into her own private world and she steadfastly refrained from doing all the things that they had enjoyed as a couple.

They had loved the outdoors, and so she now virtually confined herself indoors and, if for any reason she had to venture out, she would make a particular effort to avoid the places where they had loved to wander. She avoided anything to do with the coast, as the sea was where Lachlan had worked and made his living. Especially, she avoided the Ash wood at their home at Cuithechan nan Uinnseann, which Lachlan had loved, and where she had worked and collected materials for projects, inspired as she so often was by Lachlan's infectious enthusiasm.

Lachlan had had a remarkably difficult and demanding early life, but his story is not one of pity, but one of determined optimism in the face of adversity.

He was a tiny wee baby, less than half the weight of an average child, with a weakness in his joints, in particular in his knees, and with one leg an inch or so shorter than the other. He was slow to start to walk and in the first few years moved awkwardly, falling and breaking bones in both his legs more than once. The other children would often tease him and sometimes throw sticks and stones at him, but Lachlan was strong in spirit, even in those early years. His ordeals as a young child served only to strengthen his resolve to be himself and to believe in himself.

One spring, whilst Lachlan was still young, a group of travellers arrived in the area and set up camp. Among their number was Freeman Tod Flynn, a great healer. Here was no ordinary healer, no, Freeman Tod Flynn was the most famous and most powerful of all the healers in the travelling community.

Young Lachlan was irresistibly drawn to their camp by the sound of laughter and music in the evening, and by the naked flame of the fires that sparked and crackled through the night. The travellers' skills were many. Often they would take seasonal work as handymen and women, or they would work on the land in the fields and in the woods, but Tod Flynn and a few of his close associates pursued a different path. They were performers, acrobats, jugglers, clowns and dare devils, men and women with great dedication and extraordinary freedom. Day after day they would practise the same exercises and routines, approaching each session as if their very lives depended on it.

Throughout the season, the young Lachlan watched the way the travelling people approached each and every day, and even as a young lad, he could tell that they had something in their lives that he wanted in his. He noticed that many of Tod's close friends often seemed to have a glint in their eye and, importantly for our tale, Freeman Tod Flynn had noticed that the young Lachlan possessed that very same glint in *his* eyes.

The old healer felt, that in young Lachlan, Cuithechan nan Uinnseann was blessed with an extraordinarily strong and pure spirit. Early in the summer that year, Freeman Tod Flynn determined to invest his time and energies into nurturing the young Lachlan towards fulfilling his potential. He introduced Lachlan to the core balance and flexibility exercises that all the performers practised. He also emphasised the importance of a settled mind to complement a relaxed, but attentive, body.

Lachlan's attitude to his training was so impressive, that Freeman Tod Flynn determined to make use of an old tradition. He had heard of it from the elders when he was a child, but he had never seen it performed in all his years as a healer. He would perform a re-birthing ceremony in which he would endeavour to heal Lachlan's brittle and often broken bones. The old tradition made use of, and indeed depended on, the strong-flowing life-force present in a young Ash tree.

Cuithechan nan Uinnseann was home to one of the region's finest Ash woods, with the Ash trees accompanied by Hazel and an occasional Alder, all growing where the ground was both a little moist and a little rich. The canopy of the Ash trees, though large and often rambling, was never dense. They were late to dress themselves in leaves in spring and quick to lose

them in autumn. Even in full leaf at midsummer, the light penetrated well onto the forest floor. That light, and the rich soils, created the conditions for a wide range of wild flowers to flourish, as well as a lush arrangement of mosses, ferns and lichens. Some of the red haired old fox, Tod Flynn's, favourite plants grew here, and he took that to be a good omen, for it suggested to him that this was land that had been woodland for a long, long time. The sweet-scented Woodruff that his wife Florence dried and hung around the house for its aroma grew here, as did the more pungent, square-stemmed, purple flowered Hedge Woundwort that, as a healer, Tod valued because of its huge range of medicinal uses.

Wrens, Robins and Blackbirds, all had homes in Cuithechan nan Uinnseann, as well as Willow Warblers and the gentle Woodcock. The pink-chested Bullfinches feasted on bunches of ash keys that hung on the trees through the winter, before setting seed in the spring winds.



The pink-chested Bullfinch

Freeman Tod Flynn knew of an Ash tree that would be ideal for the ceremony. It grew close to the oldest and wisest of the Ash trees that were at the very heart of Cuithechan nan Uinnseann. He thought it likely that it came from the seed of the ancient tree he knew as One-eyed Auld Frain. It had suffered a large split in the trunk when hit by lightning earlier in the year, but remained as vigorous and full of life as ever. It was ideal. Tod decided that on Midsummer's morning, when the power of the sun was at its strongest, he would perform the ancient healing ceremony with Lachlan.

As the sun came up on the morning of the longest day of the year, Freeman Tod Flynn began an incantation asking Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life, that connects the visible and the invisible, for protection and grace. Lachlan prepared himself. He breathed deep, strong and true, and on a subtle cue from the healer he drank a teaspoon of ash sap.

As Lachlan was taken from his seat beneath One-eyed Auld Frain, he said a silent prayer of his own, before Freeman Tod Flynn passed him through the cleft in the young Ash tree. The two sides of the cleft were then tied closely together and as the tree healed, so would young Lachlan whose fate was now bound up with that of the tree. Though it was a short ceremony, it was conducted with reverence, and that reverence resonated in the wood at Cuithechan nan Uinnseann long afterwards. In the months and years to come, the faith and wisdom of Freeman Tod Flynn, the old healer and travelling man, was to bear fruit.

Lachlan was living proof of the Ash tree's ability to heal. Close and intimate contact with its strong, flowing energy made new connections within his body, and those new connections allowed his body to heal. Lachlan was invigorated in a way that no one would have believed, had they not witnessed it with their own eyes. He now showed strength and flexibility, adaptability, and a capacity to take heavy knocks, all characteristics the Ash tree itself was renowned for.

That strength, flexibility, and adaptability was to serve Lachlan well in the years to come, but he would remember that it had not always been so.

Part II

Despite the many successes, sporting and otherwise, that were to come his way, Lachlan never forgot how he had felt before the ceremony that he came to regard as his re-birth. Although his confidence grew, he remained humble, and felt forever indebted to Freeman Tod Flynn, the healer, to *his* Ash tree, to *all* Ash trees.

Ash trees to most folk's eyes were dull and grey, but in Lachlan's eyes they showed realms of colour. Greys and greens, for sure, but he also saw sandy browns, ochre, rust, peach, even hints of pinks and silver.

Lachlan loved the energy of Cuithechan nan Uinnseann, and was often invigorated by it. Throughout the course of its life you can sense the urgency of the Ash. A tall tree, on occasion as much as fifty metres and among the tallest trees in Europe, the mature Ash is a mightily impressive sight. Rarely symmetrical, and often somewhat ungainly, the lopsided Ash casts down its long, low-sweeping branches that head off every which way. With smooth, gentle curves, interrupted now and then by sharp ninety degree bends, they finally turn upwards to face the sky with big, black buds boldly leading the way.

The buds of the Ash are black. They are very black, but if you look closely, some have a slightly burnt tinge to their edges. He thought they were like the burnt wicks of candles and appropriate for a tree whose form was like that of a giant candelabra.

The young Ash grows fast and straight. These smooth-barked young saplings, that grow where the wind took their parent's seed, where sunlight encouraged the seeds to germinate, and where the seedlings escaped the attentions of grazing animals, develop stretch marks, the beginnings of what will later become deep, vertical ridges rippling down the trunk. Lichens, some of them rare, begin to form on the trunk, and moss settles in at their feet. With the passing of time, they evolve into magnificent, if a little dishevelled and meandering, giant, colourful candelabras brimming with life.

One-eyed Auld Frain, the oldest and wisest of the Ash trees, grew in the heart of the wood and, like many of the ancient trees of its generation it clearly had its own individual character. It was utterly unique.

Where it met with the ground, the trunk of the tree was thickened in girth and splayed its feet. These provided a broad-based platform not only for the trunk and branches above, but also for a network of adventurous roots that spread widely, gathering goodness from the soil. A few fresh shoots sprung forth from those roots right next to the main trunk.

The base of the tree was covered in moss, moss that also clothed the adjacent stones and accentuated the sense of the tree's splayed feet. The main trunk, mostly hollow, had an arch-shaped cavity at its base in which a Pine Marten lived. Its limbs were riddled with other cavities, where branches had snapped and left small round holes, with knuckles of thickened wound-wood around them like hollow eyes, and here tiny Pipestrelle Bats roosted.



Auld Frain, oldest and wisest of the Ash trees

He cast his eye further up the main trunk of the ancient tree. The moss that covered the base of the trunk continued as you climbed up into the canopy. It settled well in the U-shapes between branches, from where delicate, beautifully formed ferns also burst forth.

“A grey tree?” Lachlan laughed.

At about five metres up the main trunk, One-eyed Auld Frain's one eye looked down at Lachlan, and he could have sworn that he could see the old Ash tree laugh with him and his one eye wink at him. It was a funny thing. Lachlan could see many eyes on Auld Frain and yet he very clearly had *one* eye, and Lachlan knew that it was always watchful.

Freeman Tod Flynn, the old healer, spoke of One-eyed Auld Frain as a ‘Phoenix Tree’ and as Lachlan's gaze took in its entirety he could see why. The ancient Ash tree had lost many a limb in its long life, either through dieback, leaving the tree stag-headed, or by being torn from the tree and dropped onto the woodland floor. On each occasion, new young growth had sprung forth, offering hope and fresh life when things looked otherwise lost. Once he recognised the signs, Lachlan could see the work of the Phoenix, the power of regrowth, all through the woodland at Cuithechan nan Uinnseann.

Freeman Flynn told of an Ash tree in England, which was first felled by men about a thousand years ago to use as timber. The tree had re-grown from the rootstock, was felled again, re-grew, felled, re-grew every ten, twenty or thirty years, depending on what project the timber was required for. By the time he saw it, the thirty stems of re-growth had formed a circle of stems twenty metres wide.

What energy and what resilience!

The oars used for rowing, and the hurleys used at the hurling, were made of ash wood, as was the handle of Lachlan's axe. The inherent strength, flexibility, and shock-absorbing qualities of Ash make it the perfect wood for many uses. Indeed, of all our native trees only Oak is stronger and only Yew more elastic. However, Lachlan found out to his cost, that even Ash had its limitations as a timber when he used it for fencing posts, as their contact with the soil quickly rotted them.

Spring time in the wood



"Dense carpets of mid-green Dog's Mercury whose tiny inconspicuous flowers appear early in spring, and patches of Bluebells that put a wash of lavender through the wood, were interspersed with the yellow flowered Wood Avens, and Rhiannon's favourite small plant, Herb Robert, whose delicate pink and white flowers were set upon reddish-green stems."

Though he could use the tools that were made from Ash in a way that few before him ever could, he could not, much to his initial frustration, work the wood and *create* the tools he used. That skill, alongside many others, resided with Rhiannon. She was a hugely creative woman who worked relentlessly on one project after another, yet never seemed pushed for time.

Rhiannon's first carpentry and woodturning project came about just by chance when Lachlan broke one of his oars, just prior to a local rowing competition. She made him a replacement. It was a simple design, but magnificent to use, and like the woman herself, the oar was perfectly balanced.

Rhiannon was at her most content when deeply engrossed in a project, and when she worked with ash wood, she worked with love. Initially, this wasn't because she felt a particular affinity with the Ash tree, though in time that grew - it was because of her love for Lachlan. His intimate connection to, and reverence for the Ash tree was part of what defined who he was.

Rhiannon knew that it set Lachlan apart a little. She knew also that in some quarters he was considered a little eccentric because of it, but for Rhiannon it was what made him unique and she loved him all the more because of it.

Rhiannon loved springtime in the wood. The flowers of the Ash itself, though easy to miss, coloured the bare branches of the tree with their yellowish-green stalks and rusty-purple coloured tips, a while before the tree clothed itself with leaves. On the woodland floor there were bright green grasses that in summer showed tall, graceful, drooping flower-heads and there was an ever-changing show of wildflowers. Dense carpets of mid-green Dog's Mercury whose tiny inconspicuous flowers appear early in spring, and patches of Bluebells that put a wash of lavender through the wood, were interspersed with the yellow flowered Wood Avens, and Rhiannon's favourite small plant, Herb Robert, whose delicate pink and white flowers were set upon reddish-green stems.

Rhiannon's ancestors were Norse. She knew that the Ash tree was important to the Norse people, and that this importance was both practical and spiritual in nature.

Ash was known to have strong protective properties, and Lachlan himself was living proof of its ability to heal. Conscious of these qualities within the tree, and mindful also of her own concern about Lachlan's safety whilst at sea, Rhiannon had not only made Lachlan an oar out of ash wood, but had also used Ash when making a small totem for the front of his boat. Into it she had carved the image of a horse, its long mane flowing gracefully, like the ripples down the trunk on the bark of the old Ash trees, or like the ripples left on the sand when the tide goes out.

Rhiannon had a love of horses that was akin to Lachlan's love of the Ash tree, and she felt that in gifting him the totem, part of her would travel with him, and protect him whilst he was at sea.

In hurling Lachlan had become something of a legend in his own lifetime. His work at the harbour and his willingness to risk his life to help those in peril at sea, meant that he was well known and well regarded. Rhiannon though less in the public eye, was equally respected by those who knew her.

They had three children, the oldest a girl, and twin boys, who all grew into fine young adults, ready to have families of their own. Every season they would discover something new and fresh about the wood at Cuithechan nan Uinnseann. Ash tincture was used as a healing wash when any of the youngsters had cuts and sores and, when an adder bit one of the twins, the wash successfully counteracted the poison. Ever since that day, the whole family wore little ash amulets that Rhiannon carved immediately after the incident. Freeman Tod Flynn, the old healer and traveller, told them that snakes have a particular aversion to Ash, and if given the choice between slithering over ash wood or slithering through fire, a snake will choose fire!

The Ash tree played many important roles in all their lives. Rhiannon would invite prophetic dreams, at important times, by sleeping with ash leaves under her pillow.

With their first born, Mairead, they had buried her first nail parings and a lock of her hair under the old Ash tree and, sure enough, just as legend suggested, she developed the most beautiful singing voice that was strong and clear as a child, and was still stronger and clearer in adulthood.

When Mairead was older and first began to think of marriage and family, she picked an ash leaf and placed it in her left shoe. As she picked the leaf that was missing its end leaflet, she sang to herself, "Even Ash, even Ash, I pluck thee, this night my own true love to see, neither in his bed, nor in the bare, but in the clothes he does every day wear." Tradition suggested that in doing so, she would immediately meet her future spouse. That night she dreamt of a childhood friend she had always been fond of, who worked at the nearby stables. The next morning he came knocking at the door and her question was answered. Next, she waited until spring and when the Ash were flush with seed that year, she knew it to be a good omen - they would be lucky in love.

Years passed. Their family had families of their own and, by the time Lachlan passed away, he and Rhiannon had three children and four young grandchildren whom they adored. And the Ash continued to play a part in all of their lives . . .

Part III

That horrible, horrible day when Lachlan was taken from her still haunted Rhiannon, and she harboured a huge sense of guilt over Lachlan's passing, though in truth there was nothing that she or anyone else could have done to change the events of that day.

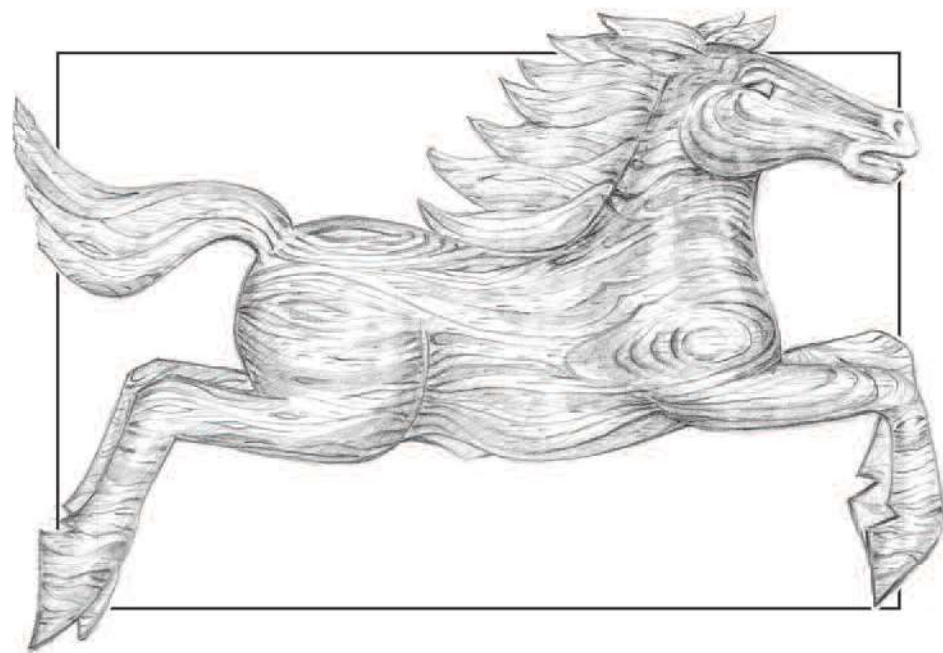
It was a gey dreich kind o' night with squally showers and winds coming out of the north and east that were gusting gale force. When the rain came, it came down in sheets - 'wetting rain', of that there was no doubt. The sea was playing host to some massive swells of water and occasional, huge, crashing waves.

It was clearly not a night to be caught out at sea, which was precisely where Lachlan was. He had always been at home on the water. All his adult life he had responded to any call of distress and either as part of a group, or on occasion on his own, he had often been involved in lifesaving rescues.

Quite naturally, Rhiannon had always worried about Lachlan's activities, but had supported his need to help those in distress. It was important to Lachlan, and she was proud of the courage that he showed. On the night of the Autumn Equinox, however, Rhiannon felt extremely uneasy. She couldn't place exactly what it was, but she had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Something was wrong, she was sure of it, and she pleaded with Lachlan not to go. It was more than just the fierceness of the storms that worried Rhiannon, though there was plenty in them to be worried about. It was the feeling she had in her bones that something terrible was going to happen.

However Lachlan would not be dissuaded. He reckoned he had seen the sea more angry than this, and anyway he felt a duty to answer any call of distress.

As he set out to sea, Rhiannon started to weep. The totem that she had carved out of ash wood from the old Ash tree, the graceful, free-spirited horse that represented her contact with Lachlan when he was at sea, and



Lachlan's totem, carved from Ash wood

that had sailed with him for near thirty years, had cracked - smashed on the rocks. The boat looked so small and vulnerable when compared with the vast ocean, and the massive swells of water breaking all around it, and it was being thrown about mercilessly as he tried to navigate his way out of the shallows, past the spectre of the sunken rocks over which the waves crashed, and out on to the open sea.

With the totem broken, Rhiannon feared that the boat would lose its gift to connect to the ebb and flow of life at sea. She feared for the boat and she feared for Lachlan.

She screamed with all her might for Lachlan to stop, but it was all in vain. He could no longer hear her above the noise of the crashing waves. He was gone.

Rhiannon sobbed uncontrollably. She feared the worst. Her heart told her that she would never see her beloved Lachlan again, and those fears proved to be well founded. Her intuition proved to be true, for that night was to be Lachlan's last trip to sea - a trip from which he was never to return.

Now, there are many tales to tell of what happened that night - too many to tell here. The sights that Lachlan saw, whilst at the mercy of the storms, and the heroics that he performed on other folk's behalf, were to become legendary.

That night there were many vessels in distress, and all the survivors and their families tell the story of a fearless stranger, a man possessed who had the power of ten men or more. He boarded one ship after another, when it was thought that all hope was gone, and with unnatural strength and uncanny skill, single-handedly navigated a route into a safe harbour, and saved the ship and its crew. Then he returned into the heart of the storm, searching for other seafaring souls in trouble.

These folk speak with a hushed voice and an air of reverence when they recount their experiences of that night and of their contact with Lachlan. His commitment to their well-being had touched them to the very core. Many of the children born to these families, since the time of his passing, now bear his name.

In all the years since, Rhiannon had been distraught with grief. She and Lachlan had been so close that she could not imagine life without him. The sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, that she had on that day, had never left her. She had known that something was wrong that night, and she had failed to stop Lachlan from going out to sea. She thought that it was her fault that he was now dead and she wished with all her heart that she had been taken instead. Until one day . . .

On the morning of the Winter Solstice, many years later, there was a knock on the door and the extended family made its way into the house to see Grandma Rhiannon. Young Lachie, the youngest of Lachlan and Rhiannon's grandchildren and a child that Lachlan had never met, lagged a little way behind the rest of the family.

He was looking for something on the floor of the woodland, but none of the other family had noticed. He so wanted to cheer up his grandma that he decided he'd bring her a present. He had picked up a couple of small twigs, dripping with lush lichen, that he thought looked pretty, for her to put in a vase, and he had also picked up a tiny wee log to put on the fire, a little 'yule log'.

Innocent and blissfully unaware of the significance of his actions, young Lachie ran gleefully towards the house with a big beaming smile shouting, "Grandma!" In the blink of an eye, young Lachie, with his gifts, stood in the heart of the house, next to his grandma, in front of the hearth and a gently burning fire that his mother had just kindled.

The wee log was the first piece of Ash to enter the house since Lachlan's passing, for Rhiannon had forbidden herself any contact with it. The Ash tree had been so intimately entwined with Lachlan's life that it was too painful for Rhiannon to see the tree, or the wood of the tree, when in her mind she felt responsible for Lachlan's passing.

As it slowly began to dawn on the rest of the family what was happening, a deathly silence fell on the room. For what seemed like an eternity, they all sat motionless and stared at Grandma Rhiannon and young Lachie beside her. Rhiannon, for her part, stared with a look of stupefied shock at young Lachie's gift.

Flames lapped round young Lachlan's yule log gift



"Everyone knew what excellent firewood Ash was. Unlike most other firewood, it has no need to season and can be burnt 'green'. Even its botanical name, Fraxinus excelsior, means 'most excellent bright fire'..."

More silence . . . Yet more silence . . .

And then finally Rhiannon's body began gently to tremble and shake. She sniffled a little, let out a sigh, and began to sob. She held out her hand to young Lachie and, with devotion in his eyes, her youngest grandson offered up his yule log.

Rhiannon held the piece of ash wood, stroked it, held it to her cheek and, as she placed it in the fire her daughter had set and lit, a single tear splashed upon its bark.

Immediately, flames began to lap up around the little log and before long, it was burning strongly. As the wood burnt, Rhiannon felt a release of pressure and a huge surge of energy.

It was as if she was being reborn . . .

Everyone knew what excellent firewood Ash was. Unlike most other firewood, it has no need to season and can be burnt 'green'. Even its botanical name, *Fraxinus excelsior*, means 'most excellent bright fire', and bright indeed was the fire and the flame that burnt from the yule log, that young Lachie had so innocently given to his grandma.

And long would that flame burn bright . . .

That night Rhiannon had one of her prophetic dreams, the first she had had since Lachlan's passing. In it, she felt as if she was speaking with Lachlan himself. He asked her to go to the heart of Cuithechan nan Uinnseann and visit One-eyed Auld Frain and the Ash tree, now universally known as Lachlan's Ash, that he was passed through as a youngster, and whose fate was intimately entwined with his.

When she woke, she knew she had his blessing to end her mourning, and though she was apprehensive about going out in Cuithechan nan Uinnseann, for the first time in so many years, she knew that she would go as soon as she felt strong enough. She was already feeling stronger and stronger almost by the minute as her own internal energy finally, once again, began to flow more freely.

Despite a little nervousness and apprehension, Rhiannon did venture for the first time in over seven years, to seek out Lachlan's Ash and One-eyed Auld Frain to pay her respects. She had heard that Lachlan's Ash had snapped near the base of its trunk, in the same equinoxial storms that had taken him, and Rhiannon wondered how she would feel when she came face to face with his beloved Ash.

As she walked through the wood she became absorbed in her surroundings and, in doing so, she became less anxious. Her movements became freer, her eyes became brighter, and her face looked much, much fresher. Memories came flooding back of Lachlan laughing, of her working with the grain of the wood and of springtime flowers. She was bombarded with images past and present and, before she knew it, she had arrived at the foot of One-eyed Auld Frain.

One-eyed Auld Frain, the dishevelled and meandering giant, oldest and wisest of the Ash trees, stood in front of her.

Rhiannon stood in awe of the ancient tree, and though she had seen it before many times, she saw it clearly today, as if it was the first time she had ever clapped her eyes upon it. It was profoundly full of life. There were worlds within worlds within worlds within . . . And right at this moment, Rhiannon saw wonder in all of them. The rich mottled mosaic of colour and texture captivated her, and the gentle yet vibrant energy of the moss and lichen communities invigorated her senses.

At about five metres up the main trunk, One-eyed Auld Frain's one eye looked down at Rhiannon, and she could have sworn that she could see the old Ash tree smile at her and his one eye wink at her. It was a funny thing. Rhiannon, like Lachlan before her, could see many eyes on Auld Frain, and yet he very clearly had *one* eye, and Rhiannon, like Lachlan before her, knew that it was always watchful.

A sense of wonder enveloped her. Overwhelmed with emotion, she had to sit down. And sit down she did, at the foot of the ancient tree.

After who knows how long, staring wistfully into the middle distance, just like she had done on that night, oh so many years ago, when she and Lachlan first met, Rhiannon finally stirred to the sound of the pink-

cheded Bullfinch cracking ash keys. It warmed her heart to see and hear the Bullfinch, and its presence gave her the final bit of courage to walk the short distance to see what was left of Lachlan's Ash. To her amazement, she didn't see the single-trunked tree that she remembered! Rumours that the tree had snapped near its base were true. The old trunk lay near its snapped stump, decaying slowly, releasing its goodness back into the earth that had fed it. In its place stood seven young, fresh stems, each about eight metres tall that had grown from behind where the trunk had snapped, and they were already home to a family of Bullfinches - Lachlan's favourite birds.

She knew now that life could, and should, continue beyond Lachlan and that she should be part of it. She knew also that, in many ways, Lachlan would continue to be with her. She invested all her energy into the generations coming after her and always, of course, she held a special place in her heart for young Lachie who had rekindled in her the joy of life.

The Enchantment & Charm of Beithe na Mòine

Part 1

Freya, like most of her kith and kin, had grown up in a simple home. Though simple, her life was extraordinarily rich. Don't misunderstand. Freya's grandparents were not great landowners, nor were they wealthy business people. No, born of a long life, a love of each other, and a love of the land, theirs was a richness that money just can't buy.

Freya loved her grandparents deeply. From a young age she felt treasured by them and loved her time with them. Their every moment together was something precious.

For one so young, Freya had already experienced tremendous suffering and loss. Whilst still a little baby, her father Fearghas Fletcher, arrow maker and archer, had been sent off to fight in a dispute over clan territory. Shortly after that her mother, the fair, sweet and loving Fionagh Hepburn Fletcher just disappeared, suddenly and without warning.

Grandpa and Grandma McGregor thought that Freya's mother, Fionagh, had been kidnapped by the Sidhe, tall, luminous creatures that frequented the Birch woods of Beithe na Mòine. They reckoned the Sidhe were probably in secret partnership with that most disreputable of faerie folk, the Ghillie Dubh.

Now, *most* people in the local community thought this plainly ridiculous for, of course THERE ARE NO FAERIES! Of the remaining souls, those willing to believe in the faerie realm, many were clearly wary of all faerie