

## THE ENCHANTMENT AND CHARM OF BEITHEACH NA MOINE

When Freya's mum, the sweet and lovely Fionagh Hepburn Fletcher suddenly went missing, grandpa and grandma McGregor thought it likely that she had been kidnapped by the Sidhe; faeries who frequented the birch woods of Beitheach na moine. And the Sidhe, they reckoned, were probably in cahoots with that most disreputable of faerie folk, 'Ghillie Dhu'.

Grandpa and grandma McGregor knew that Freya had 'the gift'; of moving seamlessly between the human and faerie realms. They loved Freya; and would help her fulfil her destiny.

Carpenter Barclay MacGregor prized the hard-wearing timber birch produced, and the cleansing protective qualities it offered. In winter when the trees, stripped to their bare bones, radiate a light purple aura, he would decide which ones to harvest, to turn into something useful and beautiful, such as the birch cradle he made for Freya when she was first born. He valued the bark of the birch too, which was better tinder for fire than anything else he knew, and that he used, as a finishing touch, when making furniture.

In Autumn, when the birch leaves turn pale and golden yellows, then fall from the tree to become part the soil, and when the profusion of fungi makes clear the cyclical nature of life, Beatrice MacGregor felt at her free-est.

Some birchwood fungi, like the chanterelle are edible; some like the black-cruled Birch Conk you can make a purifying tea from; and of course, the bright red and white spotted Fly Agaric, was the inspiration behind many a faerie tale.

For Freya . . . it was spring that made her heart sing.

She loved to see Redstarts, and Willow Warblers nesting, and she adored the procession of spring and early summer flowers that lit up the woodland floor; primroses, violets, long stalked wood anemones, and the delicate wood sorrel, that tasted of vinegar.

On the morning of the festival of Imbolc, as the first stirrings of spring were germinating in the belly of the earth, Freya sat at the foot of the ancient birch 'Mathair na moine' and gazed in awe at the venerated lady of the woods.

At that moment, the Sidhe, two metres tall and luminous, appeared behind her, as if out of the old tree itself, and whispered her name.

Freya turned to face the Sidhe, and bravely asked "Where is my mother, and what have you done with her?"

And they responded . . .

“Some seasons past now, your mother Fionagh, and her twin sister, your Aunt Constance, were walking at Beitheach na moine. A patch of glossy woodrushes glistened in late evening sun, and a nearby burn sparkled as it danced its way through the wood. Your mothers heart was full of the joy. Aunt Constance simply barked, ‘I hate it in this wood’.

To hear our home talked about like that so enraged Ghillie Dhu, who as you know has little regard for Humans, that he set out to ensnare Aunt Constance into eternal service of the Tree spirit.

But . . . He made a *terrible* mistake, and ensnared your mother, the fair and lovely Fionagh Hepburn Fletcher, instead.

A few weeks later, Freya, had a disturbing dream. Her grandparents were walking in Beitheach na moine. The Birches, however, were not their usual shimmering silver and rusty bronzes, but an unnatural, sickly green.

She woke, knowing that the two people she loved most in all the world, were near to death, and as they passed away within moments of each other, they whispered to her, “Do not fret, darling young Freya, we will be fine. Believe in yourself, trust yourself, and be *everything* you are destined to be.”

Freya knew that to do that she had to be clear of thought and pure of spirit. Each morning, between the Spring Equinox and Beltane, she visited her spiritual companion, the elegant birch, and drank its healing birch sap. Then she fasted, rested, and spoke little, if at all.

On the day of her eighteenth birthday, a few days before the Mayday celebrations, Freya, once again sat at the foot of the venerated old lady of the woods, Mathair na moine.

Safe in the knowledge that she was protected by the birch charm that her grandparents gave her as a new born baby, she spoke again to the Sidhe.

“I have a proposal for you that will allow my mother to be set free from Ghillie Dhu; And will allow your traditions to be maintained.’

‘On Mayday, after the Beltane celebrations, I will return to this place, ready to begin my eternal service to the tree spirit. At that point I would expect that my mother, Fionagh Hepburn Fletcher be released and allowed to return to the realm of Human Beings.’”

Much to Ghilie Dhu’s disgust, the Sidhe agreed to Freya’s proposal – they quite liked the idea of someone *volunteering* to live in service of the tree spirit

On the eve of Beltaine, Freya, in a prophetic dream, saw her grandparents' resting place, and upon their graves grew two of the most beautiful Birch trees she had *ever* seen, entwined together, and covered in raspberries and brambles.

She knew then that death had not divided her grandparents Barclay and Beatrice McGregor, and feeling profoundly happy, Freya joined in with the Beltaine celebrations of fertility and life!

In the morning; she made haste to 'Beitheach na moine' and 'Mathar na Moine', ready to begin her eternal service to the tree spirit. Her mother, the fair and lovely Fiona Hepburn Fletcher, was then freed, to live out her natural life in the realm of Human Beings.

The air was pure and fresh. A short, heavy shower had just passed, and water droplets danced on the ends of twigs and branches and sparkled with all the colours of the rainbow. For Freya the Birch woods were fragrant and enticing. It was a beautiful day, and for both women, who might now, on occasion, be able to see each other, it felt good to be going home.