

Heath and the Dragon



By Heather Lore

For my twin brother Heath, and for me.

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Adaptation of a West Highland Scottish Tale
called *Fraoch and the Water Dragon*



Now, Heath was a fine man, handsome and true. A warrior young and strong. He was half-mortal for his mother was Be Find of the Sidhe, the Veiled Land.

Queen Maeve grew gravely ill and none in the clan could heal her. Findebair, her fair daughter, summoned Heath to her mother's side.

“Heath, I lay dying. You are the only one who can help me. You must go to the island and bring me back some magic berries,” the poor queen said to him, “If you bring me the berries, you may marry my daughter, Findebair.”

Heath agreed because he loved Findebair. No one else in the clan dared to go to the island. Since his youth, he had heard the stories of the fierce dragon who guarded the island. On clear days, the smoke from its fire could be seen rising above the trees. Findebair followed him to the river.

“May your mother, Be Find, watch over you, Heath. May your Aunt Boann, the great river, carry you safely,” said Findebair. She handed him his sword which he sheathed and kissed him farewell.



Heath dove into the current and Findebair watched him cross the water to emerge onto the shore of the island. Findebair sat on the sandy bank and waited for him to return.

Heath made his way through the undergrowth and pines on the island. Screened from the view of the shore by the tangled pines and shrubs was a grove of tall, knobby stalks with light green leaves shaped like long blades. They were amassed together so densely that Heath could not easily force his way through them. He drew his sword and attempted to cut through them.

Suddenly, one of the stalks crashed down onto his shoulder as if an invisible intruder had wielded it, and Heath whirled around to see who had landed the blow. The breeze shivered through the grove, and his heart pounded in his ears.

Another stalk slapped against the backs of his knees and sent him down to the ground. He dropped his sword and caught himself with his hands before he fell completely. Swiftly, he retrieved the blade and stood squinting in the shadows. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up because he could feel that he was being watched.



Through a break in the stalks, in the shadowed recesses beyond the clearing, Heath saw a flicker of fire light. He dropped to his knees in the sand just as a jet of rainbow-hued flame came scorching across the clearing. The flames streaked over his head and then died on the air.

Heath fought his way forward through the encirclement of the strange stalk forest. He hacked away at the plants till they yielded to him. The dragon was surely pursuing him from behind. He glanced nervously at the sky partially obscured by the tips of the pines. Perhaps, the great beast had taken to the air.

At the edge of the grove of foreign stalked plants, Heath found himself standing in astonishment in front of a peculiar house. Its roof was unlike any structure he'd ever seen. Its center had a high point which sloped down the sides to end in upward turned curls at the ends. On either side of the dwelling, there were carvings of great winged beasts and clawed monsters the like of which had never been told in even the most enchanting tales. There were mats woven of thin versions of the strange stalks from the grove on the ground outside the structure. Smoke emerged in curls from the roof of the building.



A sharp pain pierced him between the shoulder blades, he collapsed to the ground and lost consciousness. When he awoke, and his eyes had adjusted to the light, he realized that he have been taken inside the building. Where Heath lay on a mat on the floor, an old man sat cross-legged beside him.

“What is your name?” the old man asked him. The old man had almond shaped eyes like a cat and a thin braided long white beard. His head was shaved clean of hair. He wore a blue cloth robe embellished with delicate blossoms.

“My name is Heath. How is it that you speak my language? You are obviously not of this land. Are you the one who planted the grove? Are you the dragon that my people fear?”

“So many questions. Why have you risked your life to come here?” the man asked him.

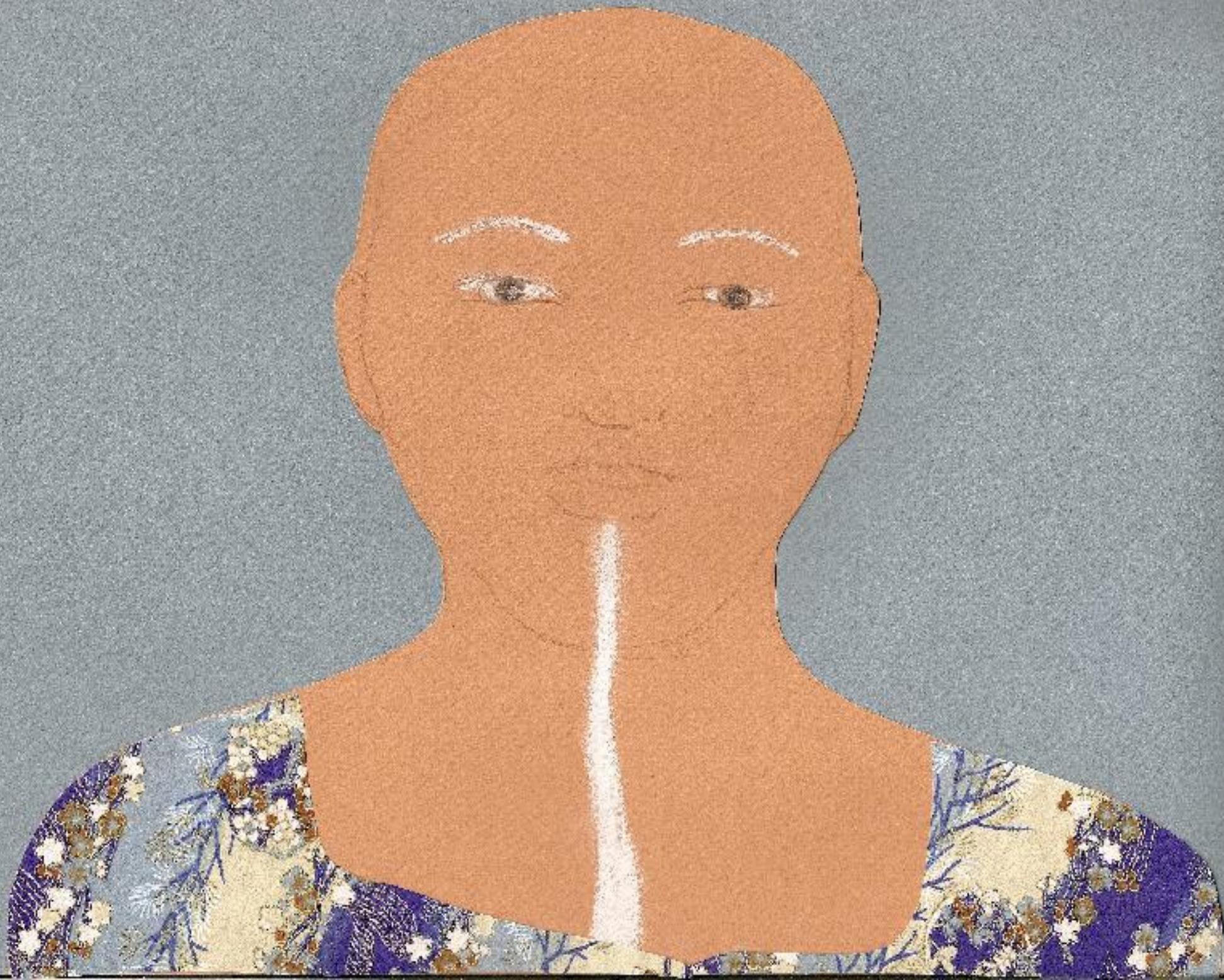


“My queen is dying. She needs the berries which grow on the island,” replied Heath.

“The plant is called bamboo. It is used for many things not the least of which is a sturdy, flexible fighting staff. I will give you the berries, and I will come back with you and heal your queen,” replied the old man, “In my country, great warriors are called dragons. Years ago, my emperor sent me here on a false errand. He had learned about the healing power of the berries and pretended to be interested in acquiring them. I was to capture the island and await the arrival a great army. Word reached me from a trusted friend that the emperor had declared me a political enemy of China, my land, and banished me to the island. I was once a respected and fierce fighter in my own right. Heath, know this, warriors—even dragons--are expendable. It is the nature of being a warrior.” He shook his head sadly in remembering.

“How do you make the magic fire of so many beautiful colors?” asked Heath.

“That I will show you once we heal your queen. Get up and gather your things. We must hurry,” replied the old man.



Findebair met them at the shore. She was certain that the old man was an evil spirit who had simply changed forms from a dragon to a man. She had never seen anyone who looked like him. Heath assured her that the man was a healer as well as a warrior and told her about the emperor's betrayal. Findebair relented and took them to see the queen.

The old man made a syrup from the berries and gave a cup of it to the queen. She drank it, and by the next morning, her fever had broken. She was sitting up in bed and laughing merrily. Queen Maeve called Heath to her and thanked him for bringing the old man to heal her. Then, she summoned the old man. She declared the island his safe haven and invited him to come and go within her realm as he pleased. He offered his healing services to the clan as well as his warrior training.

Heath and Findebair were to be married as the queen promised. Many parties were held in celebration of the queen's good health and the betrothal of her daughter to Heath. At the wedding celebration, the old man waved Heath over to him.



“Now, I will show you the special fire,” said the old man with a wink. He touched a flame to a strange sticks which flew into the sky. The sticks exploded into brilliant colored sparks like giant flowers. Everyone cheered.

“I don't care what anyone says. I still say that he is a real dragon,” whispered Findebair to Heath, but she did smile at the old man in thanks.

“What do you call those lights in the sky?” asked Heath.

“Fire works,” replied the old man.

“Cheers to the water dragon and his glorious fire flowers! Cheers to the Queen. Long live Queen Maeve!” shouted the people.

Heath went on many other wondrous adventures. The old man became an advisor to the queen, and many great tales were lost to time about them all. When you see pretty lights in the sky, think of the young warrior and the wise water dragon. It would please them to be remembered in that way.

