

The Healer's Oath

by Roberta Kelm

"Would you like more lemonade, Andrew?" Colleen MacEamonn asked the young Healer.

"Yes, please," Andrew FitzPadraig said, looking away bashfully. He always became nervous whenever Colleen was in the vicinity. Her reddish-blond hair and laughing blue eyes were never far from his thoughts. Years ago, he had dreamed of courting her, but his Healer's studies had kept him far from home. By the time he was commissioned and returned to the village, she had already married Richard MacEamonn, the elder brother of his best friend Michael.

As if in response to his thoughts, Michael entered, followed closely by Richard. "I honestly think it would be a good idea," Michael was saying.

"And I disagree," Richard replied. "Certainly, we *might* be able to double the production of the grape harvest by reducing the pruning, but at what cost to the quality? Our grapes are already known as the best in all Gwynedd; the wines produced rival even Fianna's finest." He shook his head and scratched his dark beard, his brown eyes hard. "You're always filled with these grand schemes, Michael; it's a good thing I was Father's eldest and heir."

Michael grimaced where Richard could not see, his shields rigid. Andrew had never seen his friend so upset. "Okay, you win, *BOSS*," Michael said. "Andrew and I are going out hunting."

"And there you go off gallivanting when there is work to be done," Richard began.

"I thought fresh goose would be good for dinner," Michael said, grabbing a loaf of fresh bread from the counter and brushing a shock of light brown hair from his eyes. "Come on, Andrew; you can keep me company while I shoot, and make sure I don't fall off a cliff or something, as much as my brother would prefer it." He left the room before Richard could respond, Andrew followed close behind.

They reached the lake above the vineyards. At that height, one could pick up a breeze wafting from the harbor at Desse, making it a cool place to spend a warm day. All the way there, Andrew had tried to read his friend's feelings, but his shields were still rigid. That disturbed him; he'd never seen Michael in such a mood before. Letting the horses graze, Michael threw himself down under a tree and tore the loaf of bread in half. Offering one half to Andrew, he took a big bite out of his half, washing it down with a swig of ale from his flask. "A mere accident of birth, and he feels entitled to lord it over me," he said morosely. "And today was the worst."

"What happened?" Andrew said. "I know you were disagreeing over the care of the vines."

"Oh, that was just a small part of it," Michael said. He held out his hand. "Here, Read what occurred today in the fields."

Andrew effortlessly entered into rapport, an ease built over years of trust and friendship. He saw what occurred; not only did Richard disagree with Michael over how to take care of the vines, but he said that Michael might need to consider leaving the estate. "Colleen and I want to start a family," he had told his younger brother. "We don't need a worthless uncle corrupting them, or his friend mooning around my wife. At least Andrew has a worthy job as a Healer though, something you'll never have. I think I've more than fulfilled my obligation to Father to take care of you; it's

time you took care of yourself." So, it was obvious, Andrew said silently to Michael, preparing to break rapport.

But before he could withdraw, another vision entered his mind, that had crossed Michael's; a vision of murder. Andrew pulled away quickly, the snapping shut of his shields nearly audible.

But Michael knew what Andrew had Seen. "It would be quite easy," he said softly. "A freak accident, perhaps in the barn during harvest time...something you would be unable to Heal..."

Andrew shook his head. "I can't do that," he said. "My Healer's Oath...I swore to do no harm to anyone...I can't use my gift to kill..."

"You wouldn't have to kill, just to not heal," Michael responded. "I'll take care of the accident; perhaps you could just delay arriving, your horse comes up lame, or you were busy with another call." Michael smiled, an evil smile to Andrew, his blue eyes sparkling. "I would have the estates...and after a suitable period of mourning, I would encourage Colleen to marry again. And who better to marry than the young Healer who has loved her for years?" He gazed at Andrew. "I could make her a gift to you of sorts."

Andrew's mind reeled. To marry Colleen, He shook his head. "...I can't, Michael," he said. "And if anyone were to Read what you have in mind."

"As long as I give no reason for a Truth-Read or Truth-Say, I'm perfectly safe," Michael said. "Just consider what I offer. I would be generous, of course, to the husband of my dear sister-in-law as well as my best friend." He got up. "Let's get back."

"What about the geese?" Andrew said.

"That was just an excuse to get out of earshot," Michael replied. "I'll say that none came within bowshot range; that should please my penurious brother who wouldn't want a precious arrow wasted."

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That night, in bed, Andrew tossed and turned, remembering what he had Read in the mind and heart of his friend. He knew he should go to the constable, reveal his fears; he didn't know if anything could be done, but at least Michael would be watched closely. And he could not use his gifts to kill...the haunting harmonies of the Adsum Domine echoed in his ears, as was sung at his commissioning at St. Neot's two years ago:

*Adsum, Domine: Ad ministerio tuum consecratur,
cum viribus conservare aut interficere cingtur.
Duce et regere servum tui, Domine, ab omnibus tentationem,
ita ut honor purus et donum meum incontaminatus sit.*

*Here I am, Lord: Sealed unto thy service,
girt with strength to save or slay.
Guide and guard Thy servant, Lord, from all temptation,
that honor may be spotless and my Gift unstained...*

The tune then changed, to a lively dance melody. It was a month later, and the village was holding a dance to celebrate his return as a commissioned Healer, replacing the old Healer who had just recently died.

Colleen had looked even more radiant that evening; her reddish-blond hair pulled back in an ivory comb shaped in the form of butterfly wings, her blue eyes twinkling. Andrew stood watching her, tongue-tied as always despite the fact that he was now a Healer, one of the most respected professions.

His opportunity came when he noticed something left on the floor after a dance; a lady's left dancing slipper. It was Colleen's. Picking it up quickly, he approached the young woman. "Excuse me," he said softly, "I believe you lost this..." As he handed the slipper back, their hands met briefly; he thrilled to her touch.

"What is this?" Richard's voice had interrupted them.

"The Healer was merely returning my slipper," Colleen had replied. "It appears the ribbon ties may be worn; I'll see if I can repair them."

Richard had stared hard at Andrew. "Thank you for your courtesy to my wife, good Healer. And congratulations on your commission. I admit, I didn't think you had it in you to finish, just like my younger brother and his studies."

Andrew did not reply, he simply moved away, gazing at Richard escorting Colleen away from the festivities. His Colleen...the light of his life...married to another...

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In the morning, he arose, and wrote a single word on a parchment. He then summoned a courier. "Take this to Michael MacEamonn," he said.

The single word: "Yes."

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It was three months later, at harvest time, when Andrew received a summons from the MacEamonn estate; there had been an accident, and Richard MacEamonn was near death. Despite his promise to Michael, he rushed to the estate as quickly as possible; he was told that Richard and his brother were in the barn.

It was too late however; Richard was dead, a bunch of grapes in his hand. Michael stood over the body, a hammer in his hand. "What is that?" Andrew asked his friend.

"Why, a hammer, of course," Michael replied. "Unfortunately, he was still alive after I pushed him from the loft there " He pointed upwards to the high loft. "And although you promised, I didn't want to take a chance that you might back out. So, I ensured that the job was complete with a couple of blows to the back of the head." He looked at the instrument of death in his hand. "I suppose I should dispose of this. And no one need know about this...NO ONE," he reiterated. He reached down and took two grapes from the bunch laying in his dead brother's hand. "Grape?" he said, offering one to Andrew casually before popping the other in his mouth.

As was standard in accidental deaths, the human constable conducted an inquiry, but none doubted that it was a tragic accident. As the Healer at the scene of death, Andrew was called to give testimony.

"By the time I arrived at the estate, it was too late to do anything. Richard MacEamonn was already dead. I examined the body..." he hesitated briefly, not looking at the grieving Colleen, dressed in black and sitting near the front of the gathered townsfolk, but glancing briefly at Michael. He took a deep breath. "The injuries suffered were consistent with a fall from a great height, including the possibility of striking his head on the ground with great force."

An assistant to the court brought forward the Gospel book. Andrew laid his right hand upon it and recited the standard Oath by rote: "This do I swear by my gifts of Sight and Healing, and may my gifts fail me in my hour of need if I tell not the truth."

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After six months, Andrew began a gentle wooing of Richard's young widow, Colleen. The young woman still grieved over her husband, but was touched by the young Healer's concern and kindness. One year after the accident that had claimed Richard MacEamonn's life, carrying a single white lily (Andrew's favorite flower), Colleen and Andrew were married.

As a wedding gift, Michael MacEamonn gave them the land surrounding the lake above the vineyards. "There is plenty of land there for your own house; a perfect place for a growing Healer's family," he said with a grin.

Construction on the FitzPadraig house began in the spring. In midsummer, Andrew suggested an outing to survey the work. "It's too warm here in the valley," he said. "It would be nice to get out."

"Will it be safe for the baby if I ride?" Colleen asked nervously. She was just three months pregnant, expecting their first-born son; Andrew had joyously confirmed that it would be a boy.

"You're not that far along, my love, and I'll be with you in case of any mishaps," Andrew replied, his arms surrounding his wife from behind in a tender embrace. "Just wear the new sunhat I brought home for you; I would not want you to suffer heatstroke."

"Even though I look absolutely horrid in it," Colleen replied with a laugh. "But I will take the wise advice of my Healer." She turned in his arms and kissed him lightly. "Ah, I do love you, Andrew."

"And I you, my sweet Colleen," Andrew replied tenderly.

They rode slowly up the pathway leading to their soon-to-be new home. The construction was proceeding well, though no work was being done that day; there had been a small delay in the materials required for the beaming work, so the roof could not be completed yet. They sat in the shade of a tree and surveyed the progress, munching on bread and cheese that Colleen had packed, and touching and kissing gently.

Colleen sighed. "Richard would never come up here with me, he was always so busy with the vineyards. I'm so glad there were no Calls for you today, and you could spare time for us."

"It is my pleasure, my love," Andrew replied, his heart in his eyes, as he took his wife's hand in his and gently kissed her fingertips.

Colleen shivered and pulled her silk scarf (blue, to match her eyes) closer around her neck. "It's getting cool," she said. "We'd best get back."

"Aye," Andrew replied, "I wouldn't want you and the baby to take a chill." He stood and helped Colleen up, then assisted her in boarding her horse.

They began the long journey down the hill...when something spooked Colleen's horse. The horse reared...and Andrew saw something fly through the air; the left horseshoe had somehow come loose. Hold on, Colleen! he Called silently as the horse reared, getting off his own mount and trying to reach the wildly thrashing beast to calm him. But Colleen's grip slipped...or perhaps she panicked and tried to dismount. In horror, Andrew witnessed as his wife was thrown several yards away.

With no regard for either animal, Andrew rushed to Colleen's side. "Hold on, my sweet," he said, "at least I was here and can Heal you." He surveyed the damage: broken ribs, punctured lung, massive internal bleeding. It was bad, but not beyond his capabilities. He settled into trance, to summon the Healing powers... and they were absent. Perplexed, he concentrated harder...nothing. Panicking, he looked up at the sky, willing the Father to aid him.

...and the words came back to him from months previous, taunting him: "and may my gifts fail me in my hour of need if I tell not the truth."

Stricken, he looked at his wife. With a gaze of horror and comprehension, Colleen realized what was happening. Somehow, she too remembered that day...a light of realization hit her eyes, what had been done before her eyes dimmed altogether, forever.

Andrew took the silk scarf from his dead wife's neck and buried his face in it, weeping bitter tears for the loss of his love...the loss of his gift. He looked to the sky for forgiveness, for comfort; finding none, he cried out in pain, in anger:

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

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If you ever travel the road from Desse to Rhemuth, you will pass by the remains of a vineyard. Once it thrived, producing the finest grapes in all Gwynedd; but overuse and lack of pruning had lowered the quality, and weakened the vines leaving them susceptible to the Black Vine Disease that decimated vineyards throughout the 11 Kingdoms early in the reign of King Imre of Festil.

Above the vineyard stands the shell of an unfinished house, by a lake turned to a mucky swamp. Most people of the area avoid it, for it is said to be haunted. But whether you put much stock in ghosts, it is true that if you happen to be there on a night when the storm winds blow off the harbor at Desse, you can hear what sounds like a man crying, mourning the loss of something precious that is gone forever...