

The Four Sisters

By Potia, 2003

Once long ago when the world was young the tribes of the land gathered for festivals and trade in their local areas. Once in every nineteen years the tribes gathered from across the whole land for a month during the summer. At these gatherings the Summer Solstice celebrations took place, trade agreements were renewed or renegotiated, and treaties were sealed before the Gods. It was at such a gathering that the wives of the chieftains from two of the tribes came together under the care of the Druids for they were near their time and the omens were confusing.

One of the tribes was from the far north, the people of that tribe were short in stature and dark of eye and hair but among the fiercest of the warriors of the lands, they were called the People of the Winds. The other tribe was from the South, the people were tall and fair and among the most skilled artisans of all the peoples, they were known as the tribe of Three Wells. Both tribes were very highly regarded by their neighbours and the wisdom of their Druids and leaders was highly valued. So it was that the peoples were concerned about the two women who were both Priestesses in their own right.

The omens spoke of loss and joy, of sacrifice and of service. The omens spoke of great love and also of great fear and great change. The Druids did not know what to make of this save only that the women must be well cared for until all should be made clear. The Solstice night came with great storms and in the midst of this both of the women went into labour earlier than had been expected. Due to the storms many of the Druids were out helping the other people staying at the Gathering as loss of life at this time would have been deemed an omen for great disaster. And so it came to pass that there was but one midwife with the labouring women with two young trainees.

In time the women each brought forth a child within minutes of each other. The midwife hurried from one to the other and instructed the trainees in the care of the new lives. Much to the surprise of all the events of that stormy night did not end there and a short while later both women gave great cries and each bore a second child. Great was the confusion in the birthing hut as all four babies were cleaned and given into the arms of their mothers. All four were daughters and the midwife was greatly relieved when all settled down and she knew that the mothers and the daughters would survive.

As the storms outside ended the two husbands returned and learnt of their double joy. The word was sent out and all the tribes rejoiced at such a blessed event and as was the custom they also mourned for the lives that had died in the Summerlands so that these four may be born into this world.

When the Druids sought the meaning of this event the omens were still unclear but this was not revealed to the families themselves or to the rest of the tribes but kept within the confines of the Druids.

In time the women made their farewells to one another and rejoined their tribes as they each went their own way and returned home each carrying two newborn daughters.

Far in the north in the warrior tribe of the Winds the twin daughters born to that tribe grew and flourished. One daughter, Kestrel, took after her parents and was short and dark like them with a fierce spirit. The other, Lark, grew tall and fair and was gentle in her nature, so much so that as she grew older the other children of the tribe teased her for being too soft to ever be a warrior. Their mother watched and wondered as they grew, remembering the tall fair woman who had given birth beside her on the same stormy night.

Kestrel and Lark although nothing alike in looks or spirit grew ever closer to each other. Lark aided Kestrel in anything requiring delicacy of touch and gentleness while Kestrel protected her sister from the cruelty of the other children in the tribe and aided her in learning to use the weapons of the tribe which were so hard for her.

As they neared adulthood Kestrel pledged herself in marriage to a young hunter of the neighbouring tribe. Lark although attractive had no suitors as she was deemed too soft by most of the young men in the area and she decided that she would dedicate her life to the Gods and join the Druid enclave when the tribes next gathered. In the meantime she was apprenticed to the local Druids and she began her learning and was praised for the swiftness of her understanding.

Far in the South another pair of twins also grew and flourished. One, Lilly, grew tall and fair like her parents and the other, Rose grew less and was dark of hair. Lilly showed talent at the artistic skills of the peoples of the Three Wells but Rose was as prickly as her namesake. She was fierce of temper and excelled with weapons.

Rose was a lonely child because apart from her loving sister Lilly the other children in the tribe found her strange and frightening. Lilly comforted her sister and helped Rose learn some of the arts deemed important by their people. In turn Rose helped Lilly learn to use a weapons so that she might better defend herself if the need arose. And their mother watched and wondered remembering the night of their birth and the dark fierce woman who had shared the birthing hut with her.

As Lilly and Rose grew to adulthood many suitors came to seek Lilly's favour but the young men of the area were too nervous of Rose and her independent ways. Rose sought out the local Druids and asked them to teach her while Lilly chose from among her suitors a young smith.

The time came for the tribes to travel once more to the Great Gathering. In the north Kestrel and Lark were almost nineteen and at this gathering Kestrel would marry and Lark would join the community of Druids to continue her learning. In the south Lilly and Rose were also preparing to travel. Rose would join the community of Druids while Lilly would marry. Their mothers were also filled with trepidation as now they would be able to find out whether the fear they had held secret in their deepest hearts was fact.

The journey took several weeks for both tribes. They were among those who had the furthest distances to travel to get to the Great Gathering but eventually they travelled the last stretch across the Clyde to Arran and the place of Gathering on the west side of the Island.

After all the tribes had arrived and settled into their camping grounds, the first of the formal events took place. All those who were pledged to marry at this festival were asked to come forward and state their name and tribe. Many people would wait for the Gathering to marry if it was possible as it was thought to bring extra blessings to the marriage. Kestrel of the Tribe of the Winds and Lilly from the Tribe of Three Wells were among those who had waited. Kestrel was the first of those to step forward and when she did a gasp of shock and amazement went up from the Tribe of the Three Wells. Then a moment later Lilly stepped forward and a similar gasp ran through the Tribe of the Winds. Kestrel and Lilly turned and saw each other for the first time, both gasped and reached out to the other calling them by their other sister's name. Both looked confused when the other denied that name. The shock was magnified when Rose of the Winds and Lark of the Three Wells stepped forward towards their sisters. Kestrel gazed in wonder at Rose who looked exactly like her and Lilly gazed with equal surprise at Lark. Ripples of surprise ran through the surrounding crowd and

the Druid in charge of the ceremonies had to strike her staff several times on the ground before there was quiet.

The mothers of the two sets of twins stepped forward, both with tears in their eyes. They spoke in turn of the night nineteen years ago when they had both given birth to twins within minutes of each other. They told of how there was only one midwife with two apprentices. From among the Druid conclave a woman stepped forward, she introduced herself as one of the apprentices from that night. She told of the rush and confusion when the twins were born, of how she and the other two rushed to get the babies cleaned up and to their mothers. She confirmed that it was possible that the babies could have been muddled up.

Another Druid stepped forward and declared that given the events that had just taken place the rest of the evening's ceremonies would be postponed and both sets of twins and their immediate families were asked to attend the Druid camp.

By now it was obvious that there had been two identical twins born on that stormy night nineteen years previously but that they had been muddled and each mother had gone home with one daughter of her own blood and one from the other woman. It was a great shock to the girls to discover that the sister they had grown up with was not of their blood and that instead they had a mirror image who had grown up with another tribe. It was less of a shock to the mothers because each in their hearts had feared that possibility. The fathers, however, were as shocked as the girls but as they watched the four girls they realised that this was the truth.

All of them talked through the night in the privacy of the Druid camp. Counsellors were on hand if they wished to speak with them and it was made plain to all of them that the counsellors would remain available to them for as long as was needed. By the morning there was one thing that was apparent. All four girls wished to go ahead with the plans that they had made for their futures, two to marry and two to join the Druids.

Among the Druids that night there was also much talk on the omens that had been seen in the run up to the births. Some said the loss and joy was now explained. Others argued that while that might be the case the sacrifice and service had not been made plain, nor had the fear and change. Still others argued that what greater fear could there be than a mother's over the suspected loss of a child and what greater change than to discover those you thought of as family were not your true family. The debates went on. One thing that was agreed on was that all four girls and their tribes should be observed and the major events of their lives recorded.

The changes begun in the key families of the two tribes affected the rest of their people and the tribes of the young men that Kestrel and Lilly were to marry. Individuals who normally would pass each other without a second thought stopped to talk. Warriors from the Tribe of the Winds sought out the artists of the Tribe of Three Wells to talk. Everyone involved wanted to learn more of the girls that had grown far from their blood kin and it seemed as if everyone from all the other tribes wanted to know more of this unusual situation and those involved too. By the time the wedding festivities were to take place the two tribes of the twins had negotiated treaty arrangements even though there was great distance between their lands. In effect this linked more than the two tribes involved.

Lilly and Kestrel had already asked their sisters to be attendants for their weddings but now they all agreed that each bride would have three attendants, the sister they knew, their true twin sister by blood and the twin of the sister they had grown up with. The young men they were marrying were in agreement. The weddings were a time of great joy for all of the tribes and many that did not

know any of those involved attended the celebrations out of curiosity but that only enhanced the standing of the couples involved and their tribes.

And so it was that the talk of this Gathering was of the twins, their lives and their futures. It surprised many that Rose and Lark chose to continue with their previously chosen paths of studying with the Druids. Many had thought that Rose of the Three Wells would travel to the north with Kestrel of the Winds to learn of her birth family and that Lark of the Winds would travel south with the people of the Three Wells but both told those who asked that they had chosen their paths and that while they glad to discover a birth family they had not known of they would continue to study with the Druids.

The Solstice came and went and the tribes began to depart for their homelands. There were many tears shed by the four girls as they knew it would probably be many years before all of them were together again and they now shared a special bond with one another. There were also many tears shed when Rose and Lark said their goodbyes to the families they had known and watched them depart. For Rose and Lark were to stay on Arran and learn more of their chosen crafts.

As time passed Rose of the Three Wells, who should have grown up in the Tribe of the Winds, and Lark of the Winds, who should have grown up with the people of Three Wells, spent much of their time together. They told each other about the sisters and parents they had not had the chance to know. They spoke of the customs and ways of their home tribes. They grew to love each other and recognised in the other many of the traits they had known in the sister they had grown up with. Rose was taught many of the sacred fighting arts of the Druids for those who would bring peace must be able to defend themselves in the midst of war. Lark was taught the skills of the healer and herbalist, how to save life and how to bring a merciful death using poisons for sometimes the best healing is a swift and painless death. The two began to travel in the local area together Lark bringing healing to wounded bodies and Rose bringing healing to battling tribes. They began to gain a reputation and with it a nickname, "The Sisters".

While it was not possible for Rose or Lark to visit either Lilly or Kestrel it was possible to gain news of their lives. Traders often brought news as much as they brought goods and there were travelling Bards and Druids who also brought news. So it was that in the fullness of time Rose was sent word that Lilly had born a son and that both mother and child were doing well. Lark also received word of Kestrel who gave birth to a daughter. When Rose and Lark exchanged the news they had both received from their homes they realised that their sisters had given birth within a few days of each other. They both rejoiced at the good news from their families and both chose to send gifts for both of the new born children.

In the north Kestrel and her husband lived well. Kestrel's husband was a young and talented hunter and as time passed his skills improved until he became the chief hunter of their tribe. His parents were advisors to the Chief of their tribe so they were all of high status. Their first child was named Rose in honour of the sister Kestrel had only known for a few months, her true twin. It was an unusual name for the northern tribes but the story of the twins had gathered a great deal of attention and many approved of the choice of name. Kestrel herself continued her studies in warrior arts but while her daughter was so young she concentrated on studies of strategy and tactics. After a couple of years Kestrel had a son and two years after that another son. Kestrel and her husband were considered very lucky as all her children flourished and grew strong.

In the south Lilly's husband increased his skills and in time became the Chief Smith of their village. Lilly developed into a talented weaver and scenes from stories of twins often featured in her work. Lilly and her husband also had several children, a son first, followed by a daughter (named Lark after Lilly's true twin) and then they had twins of their own, both boys and as alike their father as

boys could be. Lilly's family was also considered very lucky for the same reasons as Kestrel's family in the north.

Time continued to pass and life was good for the tribes of the land. Most people gradually forgot about the strange happenings of the twins until the time came once more for the tribes to gather. By this time Rose and Lark had completed their training and were as close as sisters. Lilly and Kestrel had missed their sisters but had been heavily involved in the life of the tribes and in bringing up their own children. All four of them were very excited about meeting up again after all this time.

The Gathering was bigger than it had been in a few generations. The last nineteen years had been prosperous for most of the tribes. Many more children had survived and many of the older generation were still living. And at last the two sets of twins would be reunited once more.

When they met and were seen together the stories of what had befallen them were told round the fires once more and the fame of the sisters increased. The nickname that Rose and Lark had been given was now expanded and applied to all four. They began to be known as "The Four Sisters". They spent as much time as they could together during the gathering catching up on the events of each other's lives over the last nineteen years and getting to know each other's families and friends. Their tribes also spent a great deal of time together renewing the bonds they had made and that had been reinforced by traders carrying news and goods between them.

Rose and Lark had decided that they would continue working together and that after the Gathering they would travel north and spend some time among the northern tribes and then they would move to the south for a while. In this way they would be able to spend time with both Kestrel and Lilly. So when the Gathering broke up three of the four sisters were able to travel north together, two having grown up together in the Tribe of Winds, the other having grown in the south but carrying the blood of the northern tribes. Rose found that she felt very much at home in the lands of the north and thanks to the stories Lark had told her of the ways of the north she was able to fit in culturally as well as looking the part. For Kestrel it was a time of great happiness to have both of her sisters with her.

After a three years travelling and working among the northern tribes Rose and Lark made their way south. They travelled with traders when they could and by themselves when they needed to. It took them a year to travel down as they stopped a few times on the way and spent a couple of months with tribes that needed their skills. When they arrived at Lilly's tribe the welcome they received more than made up for the trials of the long journey. Now it was Lilly's turn to get to know her twin and to feel the happiness of having both sisters with her. They spent three years in the south, much of it getting to know the tribes that Lark would have grown up in had things been different and then they were called back to the Druid enclave on Arran.

There were troubles arising in the lands and the skills Rose and Lark had worked so hard to gain were in need for more serious matters. Over the next few years the lands saw a time of invasion and wars coupled with years of bad harvests and more illness than had been seen for a number of years.

One spring in the North there were raiders along the coasts that struck inland taking slaves when they could, stealing goods and causing havoc when they couldn't get slaves. The warriors of Kestrel's tribe fought bravely and defeated the raiders against them and in their turn they aided their neighbours but in the process the Northern tribes lost a number of the crafts people they had including a few warrior-smiths. That winter there were a number of illnesses and many of the oldest and youngest of the Northern tribes were taken to the Summerlands. Among those taken were some of the few remaining artists and teachers of crafts. The tribes in the North now had a

shortage of crafts people and those with the ability to teach such skills to the young that showed talent. It was Kestrel that suggested that they send to the Tribe of Three Wells, the ones their tribe had a treaty with and ask if there were any teachers willing to come north to teach for a while. It was agreed that this was a good idea and a deputation was sent south as soon as the weather was good enough including a small number of young warriors under the command of a more experienced leader. Among the warriors that went was Kestrel's eldest son keen to learn more of his aunt's tribe.

At mid summer of the year following that of the first raids in the north, the deputation arrived to find that enemies from further south had recently attacked the Tribe of Three Wells. They had just managed to hold off the attackers but in the process many had been injured and a few had died. Among those who had been severely injured defending their tribe was Lilly's eldest son. In spite of this Lilly was glad to meet Kestrel's son as she also considered him a nephew even though the blood relationship was between Kestrel and Rose. With so many of the men of Lilly's tribe injured the tribe were in danger of staving that winter as there were not enough healthy bodies to gather in the harvest for the winter. The arrival of the deputation from the north was seen as a blessing of the Gods as all of them helped in both defending the tribe in the few remaining attacks that summer and in gathering in the harvest.

It was quickly agreed that artists and a couple of smiths would travel north with a small number of the warriors to escort the deputation while the remaining ones would stay to help. Kestrel's son was one of those who stayed in the south. It was also agreed that once they arrived in the north they would ask if more warriors would come south as it was unlikely that the troubles would end with the attacks of that year.

Those travelling back to the north arrived just before the worst of the winter weather began and it was a bad winter that year and again there were deaths due to illness although much fewer than the previous year.

In the south it was also a bad winter and several of those that had been injured during the attacks in the summer moved onto the Summerlands. Sadly Lilly's son was among them but Kestrel's son became closer to Lilly's family as he did all he could to help them in their grief.

The following spring saw a renewal of attacks in both the south and the north but in spite of this a few warriors were spared from tribes in the north to travel south to fight beside those they had forged treaties with. The smiths and crafts people of the south that had travelled north forged weapons and created other goods that were needed in order for the north to survive against the invaders that plagued their coasts as well as sharing their skills with those who had the will to learn. The bonds forged from the mistakes made in the birthing hut all those years ago were bearing a new kind of fruit and the Druids worked hard among them all to reinforce old treaties, make new ones and to heal those injured in the battles in body, soul and mind.

The raids in the north continued on and off for a few years and although most raiders were beaten off there were those among the defenders that were injured or killed. In the south the attacks on Lilly's tribe continued for another two years but were followed by a couple of years of bad harvests and harsh winters with much illness. The tribes of the land suffered for many years before peace and plenty returned once more.

By the time of the next Gathering all four sisters had known a great deal of loss and hardship. Lilly and Kestrel had both lost family to both the sicknesses and the wars including their husbands. They felt old and their remaining children had families of their own and did not need them although they were welcomed by all of them any time they chose to visit. Kestrel's eldest son had stayed with

Lilly's tribe and married her daughter Lark forging another link between the two families and between the two tribes. During the Gathering the bonds between the families and tribes were once more renewed and because of the hardships all had suffered the bonds grew stronger than ever before.

Rose and Lark had not known the pain of losing partners and children but they had lost close friends, family and colleagues during the years of hardship across the lands. Because of their experiences and their skills Rose and Lark were asked to become involved in training the next generation of Druids on Arran. By the end of the festivities Lilly and Kestrel had decided to remain with their sisters on Arran. For the first time, apart from at the Gatherings, all four were together and they would now remain together. They spent many hours in each other's company sharing the knowledge they had gained, learning more about their other sisters. They were happier than they had been for a long time, since before the wars.

Once the other Druids realised how skilled Lilly and Kestrel were they were also invited to teach and for several years the Four Sisters taught in the Druid schools on Arran. Rose taught the special warrior arts of the Druids, Kestrel taught tactics and strategy, Lark taught healing and herbal skills and Lilly taught weaving skills and also how to recognise different types of cloth and their origins. All of these skills were valuable ones although it was rare that the sisters had any students in common. Between them though they passed on their skills to a large number of those attending the schools. Gradually as they grew older the number of classes they taught were reduced until they spent time with only a few specially gifted students.

Then one day about three years before the next Gathering was due to take place the word went out to the north and south to come to Arran. The Four Sisters had died within days of each other and the tribes were called to do honour to their names. The memorial rites were the greatest the gathered tribes had seen for a long time. The story of the sisters had touched the hearts of all who had known them and many who had not. The story was told of the omens at the births of the four sisters, how omens had spoken of loss and joy, of sacrifice and of service, of great love and also of great fear and great change. All agreed that the omens had been fulfilled. The lives of the Sisters had tied together two tribes that once would have not had much to do with the each other so far apart were their lands. There had been wars and loss of life but there was also the renewal of peace and strengthening of bonds between the tribes of the lands. The lives of the Four Sisters had influenced many more than those of their own tribes and great changes had come but life was good once more.

In memory of the twins four trees were planted side by side near the sacred circles, two Beech trees and two Hawthorns. The trees grew well but also did something rather strange. One of each type of tree grew so close to the other that they fused together and began to look like a single tree. All who saw this marvelled at it and the fame of the Four Sisters spread even further in death than it had in life. In time the knowledge of the story was lost and with it the reason for those particular trees but the trees self-seeded and through the years two beeches would always grow entwined with two hawthorns near the stone circles of Machrie Moor on Arran.

Today all that is left of the Gathering place are the circles and all that remains of the story of the Four Sisters are the trees, still growing there if you know where to look.

You might ask where this tale came from if the story died so long ago. Well, there are still Druids, and trees still whisper their secrets on the winds to those who listen.