

PETER J
MERRIGAN

FREE




Hearts
of
Stone

THE PREQUEL STORY TO *THE AILIGH WARS SAGA*

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 A PREQUEL STORY TO 
THE AILIGH WARS SAGA

Born in Derry, Northern Ireland, Peter J Merrigan was first published at the age of 17 in the Simon & Schuster anthology *Children of the Troubles*, edited by Laurel Holliday. His first novel was *The Camel Trail*.

Following a Bachelor of Arts in Writing and English from London, Peter spent nineteen years in England as a marketing and advertising professional before returning to his native town. He lives with his husband in Co. Tyrone.

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Before the war . . .



At the handfasting ceremony of his parents, before Áed was born, the tribe's druid spoke of an event that would consume one and set another free. Airic, a smith renowned for his meticulous attention to detail, and his bride were left bewildered by the omen and had no understanding of its meaning. Even the druid, older than the trees they had cut for the building of their settlement, could not clarify his warning. Doirean was convinced that the druid's words were a warning to them that war would come. Airic would be forced to set aside his business and take up arms. She said, 'You'll be killed in battle and consumed by the earth on which you fall.'

'And you'll be set free?' Airic asked. 'Free from me? What good comes from that?'

Doirean shrugged and returned to her sewing. 'The druid didn't say it would come to good, only that it would come to pass.'

Airic had laughed. 'If I burn in a fire tonight, you'll be set free of me, too.'

'Consumed by fire,' Doirean said, her eyes widening. She hadn't considered fire and that only added worry to her

already considerable burdens. Every night, when they had eaten and bathed, she prayed to her bountiful gods for their blessings upon her husband, beseeching their protections against ill omens. She had Airic check the conical thatching of the roof every morning to avoid leak, and it became her ritual, when the noon sun was high, to run her hand along the walls to ensure the hazel framework was still secure. She listened to the bards that came and went from their settlement so that she could recount, word for word, their full repertoire of poems and songs that spoke of magnificent deeds abroad, of great kings and bloody battles. She asked the druid for advice on this poultice and that, in preparation for the dressing of wounds that had not yet transpired. So intent was she not to let the druid's predictions come about that she insisted to her husband, in bed each night, that she would not let him go to battle without her at his side. He was taken with her devotion but laughed until she slapped his face and made him vow that he would heed her words, and vow it on the life of their firstborn.

‘Speaking of a firstborn,’ Airic said, and he took his bride’s thin waist in his enormous hands and lifted her upon himself. But as soon as Airic was asleep—spent, sweat-damp and snoring—Doirean would climb from their bed and draw a rune on the floor and she would rise before her husband in the morning and rub it away so that he would not see it.

Doirean, so utterly consumed in her worries about the future of her house, had scarcely noticed the passing of their handfasting term, a year and a day since their commitment to each other. Their engagement was over, and

their marriage would ensue if both were agreeable to it. Doirean sought out the druid and asked him, in confidence, if she refused the marriage would his words still come to fruition. The druid closed his eyes for a moment and nodded. 'It is too late. One will be consumed, and one will be set free,' he said before disappearing into the chieftain's great hall.

It was for that reason and that reason alone that Doirean committed to her marriage to Airic. If their union had already been doomed since their handfasting, and nothing now would change the outcome, she would consent to the marriage and hoped only that she would be the one consumed, and Airic would be set free of her. She held his skill as an ironsmith with such high regard that she dared not contemplate any other option. War would not come to them, and Airic would not be forced to take up arms. She committed to him on the understanding that she would be consumed by death and that he would survive without her. He would marry again and give many children to the tribe from as many wives as he sought. He had paid her bride-price to her father and upon her death Airic would continue his duty to her father's family regardless of his newer wives, even if she had not borne him a child. And so she stood before the druid in the dress that her mother had worn at her marriage, with a golden torc on her head, fitting so comfortably that it may have been woven into her hair in liquid form, and she faced the sept's ironsmith and vowed her life to him and closed her eyes as he vowed his life in return. And as he held her that night in their bed, she could taste death's breath as he loitered for her at the foot of the

bed by the smouldering hearth.

Two days later, when Airic had risen early to hammer the life out of his metals, she crawled from the bed, clutching her stomach, and vomited in the doorway the entire contents of her gut. She told her mother that she had not recovered from the gluttony of their wedding feast, but when the same thing happened the following morning and the morning after, she sought the druid's help. 'Is this it?' she asked him. 'Am I dying now?' And the druid touched her neck, her forehead, and then her stomach, and he smiled at her and said, 'A heart beats within you that belongs to your husband. I think you will live.'

Pregnancy did not agree with her. As well as inspecting the thatching, touching the walls and drawing runes on the floor, she wore a wide, bronze torc around her belly that Airic softened and adjusted for her once a week so that it would fit snugly as she grew. It was wide enough to protect her unborn child from outside harm, but soft enough not to harm him as she wore it from morning to night. She wore it as a battle shield against the trials of everyday living and, in the evenings, she sang to her belly the poems of the bards. She inspected their bed every morning for signs of blood and measured, by the width of the gap in the front of her torc belt, the days that passed until her birthing. She spent her days cleaning and mending Airic's working clothes and sewing garments for her unborn child, knowing for a certainty that the birth would equate to her death. The druid's words would come to be, and Airic would present the child to the tribe without a mother. When she departed this life he would take another wife and the child would be raised a

smith like his father.

It was with a sentimentality of longing that she rubbed her swollen stomach and not, as every mother in the settlement assumed, the tender caress of an mháthair in joyous expectation. Sorrow filled her days and darkened her long nights as she bore the hours in a solitary vigil, counting the grumbling snores of her husband until the birds brought the morning sun to stretch languidly across the floor with the dogs. Each morning, her final days of pregnancy came with an increased dread that this would be the last time she smelled her husband's distinct scent or saw the golden sun rising over the rowan trees. No longer would she hear the beating of Airic's hammer on metals or the hiss of smelting iron as it was doused in water. In those days, she saw everything, determined that the world around her would make an impression on her senses and carry from her memory into that of her child. When he was brought into the realm of waking, he would know without doubt that his mother had loved the long grasses and the tall trees and her husband—most of all her husband. Since the day after Beltaine, when they had ratified their marriage, until the night of Samhain when the entire tribe marked the end of harvest, Doirean studied the strong lines of her husband's face so that, in the end, she would carry that image with her into the Otherworld.

As the tribe celebrated Samhain from sunset to sunset, Doirean, with the help of the sept's midwife, variously walked the breadth of her home and knelt forward in the grips of contractions. 'Fetch my husband,' she asked of the midwife.

‘Not until the child is born,’ the old woman said.

‘I need to see his face,’ Doirean insisted, but another contraction ripped her stomach and she cried in pain. ‘This isn’t right,’ she said. ‘There’s something wrong.’ She knew that the moment the baby screamed his way into the world she would die without ever holding his tiny body against her breast. She would have sought a way to prolong the pregnancy if such a way existed, but all she could do was accept the inevitable and whisper her goodbyes to the child who was grotesquely working its way from her body.

‘Push,’ the midwife said.

Doirean leaned further forward and gritted her teeth as the midwife held the back of her labour dress aloft with one hand and sought between her legs with the other. ‘One last time,’ the midwife said, and then the dress was lowered and the child was lying on the bed and the midwife said, ‘There we are, all done, all—’ and she stopped talking. Doirean maintained her forward position, still in pain, sweat stinging her eyes. Outside, she could hear the crackle of the fires and the cheers of drunken men.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked with barely the strength to look over her shoulder. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’m sorry,’ the midwife said. She held the baby up, its head and its arms lolling back without support. ‘His soul never made it.’

‘No,’ Doirean whispered. ‘Not him; it should be me. Take my life and put it in him.’

The midwife wrapped the tiny body in a blanket and said, ‘I’ll fetch Airic. He should be here.’

‘Wait,’ Doirean cried. ‘Oh, gods, what is happening?’ A

sob ripped from her throat as a pain gushed from her stomach and the wrenching cry that came from her was enough to be heard by the carousers in the field. She clutched her stomach in pain as the midwife lifted her dress and tapped her legs.

‘It’s another,’ the midwife said. ‘A twin. Push.’

Doirean had neither the strength left in her nor the desire to see a second child torn from her body without life but, against her cries, the midwife insisted she push harder. When the child cried and Doirean heard it with her own ears she was waiting to die, sure that at any moment her life would be taken. She fell to the bed among her blood and excrement and watched with exhausted attention as the midwife tied his cord and wrapped the crying child in a blanket.

‘He is weak,’ the midwife said, ‘but he is alive.’ She placed the boy into his mother’s arms. ‘I will call for Airic and the druid,’ she said.

Doirean took her arm. ‘Please,’ she said, keeping her eyes on her boy. ‘I can’t bear it. Take the other one out of here. Without its soul it will only be buried in the outer graveyard and I would not agonise Airic’s heart this night. Tell the druid, but let me speak to my husband about it alone. Let him meet with his living child before he learns of this other tragedy.’

The druid inspected the boy and conferred with the midwife. He was wrapped in his embroidered blanket and passed three times over the fire from the midwife to the father. The old woman whispered her words of blessing, and then Airic walked him three times around the hearth

with more words from the midwife. A coin was dropped into a wooden bowl that Airic had carved and warmed water was poured into it for the child's first cleansing.

A fever inflamed him and he was named quickly, for the protection that a name would give him. Áed Branath, son of Airic, was almost certain to die from the fever, the druid told Airic, but he bathed the child in a solution of brooklime, oatmeal and buttermilk and wrapped him in his blanket. He passed him to his mother to hold and to feed. 'Let him suckle as much as he is able and a little of your spirit will enter him.' Outside, away from the distressed mother, he said to Airic, 'If he survives the night, you will be sure he will live. He has been named, and he has been bathed in a healing ointment. There is little more to do but to pray to all the gods of Éirinn.'

Airic returned to his wife and child and in tears she told him of the fulfilment of the druid's words, that one was consumed and one was set free. Áed will live, she told him. And his nameless brother, he who was born without a soul, would be given a burial in the outer graveyard and never spoken of again. The pain in her chest was for that lost boy, a soul wandering the Otherworld without ever knowing the truths of a body. Airic knelt beside her and held her hand, brushing her damp hair from her face. He tied a stone around Áed's neck on which the druid had carved a rune, a symbol of strength, and he told her of the Samhain festivities and the promise of a short winter. The harvest would be good this year. When the morning songbirds stirred them, and the druid returned, Áed lived still and his fever was broken.

As was tradition, the stillborn was placed in a torran in the outer graveyard, outside the main settlement, marked only with stones. Airic was not present; to be there might affect his ability to sire further children. The spirit would return to the Otherworld to meet with its soul and it would be happy again. Doirean touched Áed's forehead with damp earth from the ground. When he was first brought from their home, he was carried up an earthen mound that had been built in front of their door so that his first movements after his birth were upward in the way that his life should follow.

At Áed Branath's welcoming ceremony, Airic and Doirean took to the centre of the gathering and he was named aloud for everybody from the sept to welcome him. Gifts were given to the grandparents and songs were sung. He was welcomed as a family member of the collective sept and when they heard that his cry was healthy, the women laughed and kissed him, and the men drank and slapped Airic on his back. For the good of the child, the men brought their worn tools to Airic for mending, paying into the family coins that would see the child well in his future. A mobile of alder branches was hung above the boy's cot for protection from dark spirits, and for the first two weeks, Doirean barely slept as she watched over him.

At night, Airic would call to her to come to their bed and she would nod, lingering further at the side of Áed's cot, rocking him gently, content to listen to his breathing.

'You will sleep in the day,' Airic said, 'if you dawdle at his side any longer.'

'He is the most beautiful boy in all the world,' Doirean

told him.

‘He will still have his looks in the morning.’

Doirean learned to leave his side for longer moments, rising to feed him in the night when he cried for it. She cherished those intervals, sitting just inside the open doorway, listening to the suckle of his sweet mouth and staring into the darkness of night when all the colours of the world were leached from the land and the trees were dyed in shades of blue, and she wondered at the tranquillity of a settlement at rest. As he grew, it was clear that his birth fever was not the beginning of a plague of weaknesses, and he was quick to his feet, shouting *mamaí* and *dadaí* as he chased after one or both parents. When he was old enough to understand the consequences of touching heated metals and could control himself, he was brought into Airic’s workshop to witness and study the art of forging.

When he was four years old, a tribe to the south sought to overtake their lands. The overking of the north, ruler of the Ó Mordha tribesmen, brought an army of his best men through Áed’s sept. They stayed for a day and a night before advancing further south to vanquish the retched southerners.

While they stayed, Áed’s chieftain entertained the warriors in his great hall, holding a welcoming feast for all. The druid, who had been convalescing in his *brú* hut, too old and too tired to work, was carried out on a chair and he conducted a blessing ritual over King Déaglán’s men. His tanist, a cousin who would succeed Déaglán’s throne upon his death, was a tall and imposing man made of muscle and hair.

During the feast, while Áed and the other boys of the sept ran riot around the bonfire, the tanist, Oisín, planted his sword in the ground and asked for quiet.

‘We march south to battle against a soft rival. We will win quickly and there will be no more threat to your borders. Any man among you who is willing, pack your sword and join us.’

When Áed raised his hand, everyone laughed.

‘Not yet,’ Oisín said. ‘You are too young, even against the pathetic southerners. But hear me, one day you will be big and strong enough to fight. So long as you listen to your father and obey your mother. No one is every too big for a smacking.’ He winked at the boy and continued to talk to the adults about the coming battle.

Áed, blushing even as he laughed, took up his wooden sword and followed the other boys into the fields to play.

One day he would be big enough. And one day he would fight.

Of that, he was sure.



I hope you enjoyed this prequel story to the *Ailigh Wars Saga* novels.

The following books from the series are available now from all good retailers:

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