

The story of Etain and Midir

Midir was a king of the Tuatha de Dannan; proud, handsome and regal. His wife was called Fuamnach, and was his equal in every way, herself the daughter of a king. She was a good wife to Midir, she looked after him and their children and foster-children well.

One of their foster children was Aengus Óg, the god of love. He was a 'dotie' child, which means their favourite child, and through the years that they raised him, they fell ever more in love with him – as you would, with a love god. When he grew up, and moved away to his own home, they were bereft, and Midir especially missed him terribly.

One day, he decided to pay Aengus Óg a visit. On his way, he met a beautiful young woman. She told him her name was Etain, and the moment she looked into his eyes, he fell in love with her, and she with him. The two of them spent a year and a day at Aengus Óg's house at Brúgh na Boinne, living as husband and wife. Eventually, Midir decided that it was time to go home, but he could not bear to be parted from Etain, and so he brought her with him.

As you imagine, his wife Fuamnach was furious. Using magic, she transformed Etain into a pool of water. Then she conjured up the wind to dry it up. But the steam from the water condensed into a butterfly which flew to Midir, and wafted him with its wings. Beautiful music came up from its wings, and a beautiful scent, and Midir recognized his love, Etain. From then on, everywhere he went, the butterfly perched on his shoulder, and the two of them were never seen apart.

Fuamnach was not having this. This time, she conjured up a magical storm which dragged Etain away from Midir. She was blown and buffeted for many years, until at last she found herself at Brúgh na Boínne, near the house of Aengus Óg, who recognized her, and built a room of glass filled with flowers especially for her, where she would be safe. She lived there

for some time, until one day, the storm which raged outside her glass room caught her again and blew her in through the high window of a royal palace and she fell into the Queen's wine cup. She swallowed the butterfly, turned to her husband, the King, saying "I am with child." Nine months later, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, which they named Etain, a mortal child with no memory of her previous life.

Now, the High King in Ireland, Eochaid, at that time was told by his advisors that he needed to find a wife. He heard rumours of this beautiful girl, Etain, and of course, when they met, they fell in love and were married shortly after. It all seemed perfect.

And then, of course, magic intervened and Midir, having searched for Etain for three hundred years, appeared in the High King's palace and told her of their great love and how he would never let her go.

Immediately, Etain said No. She was after all, a married woman. But he persisted, saying that if he could get her husband's permission, would she go with him ? She gave a hesitant Yes.

The next day, Midir challenged Eochaid to a game of chess. The High King was so confident in his skills that he agreed to wager that the winner could claim any gift he asked from the loser. Of course, Midir won, and demanded that he be allowed to embrace and kiss the king's wife, Etain.

The High King was annoyed at the cheek of this request so asked for a month's grace to consider this. Midir agreed. Eochaid had no intention of agreeing to Midir's request and spent the month preparing his army. On the day that Midir returned, he found the whole army surrounding the castle, with Etain deep inside under guard. But, as the King of the Tuatha de Dannan, he entered by magic, embraced Etain, and the moment he put his arms around her, she remembered everything, especially that Midir was her great love. She kissed him passionately, and as the king and all his men watched, Etain began to shine with the light of the immortals. They rose off the ground, and floated out of the window, never to be seen again. Eochaid, broken-hearted, spent the rest of his life digging up every fairy fort he came across, in search of his lost love but they had disappeared forever.