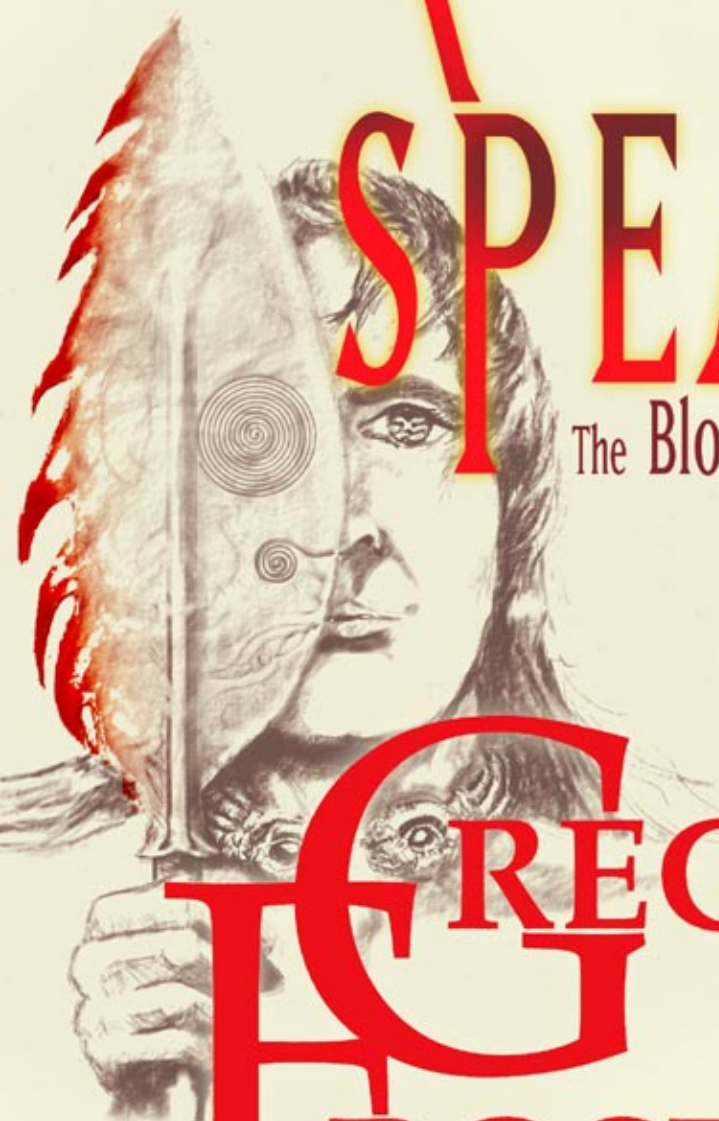


CRIMSON

SPEAR

The Blood of Cú Chulainn

GREGORY
H FROST



**Crimson Spear:
The Blood of Cu Chulainn**


by

Gregory Frost

All characters in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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Dedication

**Two dedications for these two books:
First to My Muse, always.
Second, to the warriors
of AANA, who teach me-
Osu!**

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Preface to CRIMSON SPEAR edition.

Crimson Spear: The Blood of Cú Chulainn comprises two previously published novels, *Tain* and *Remscela*.

The two books derive from the Ulster Cycle of Celtic mythology, known also as the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (tahn bo koo al' nyah). It is the story of a cattle raid upon Ulster Province perpetrated by the royal couple of Connacht, its neighbor, and defense of the province by its semi-divine hero Cú Chulainn.

He is a hero in the most traditional, Joseph Campbellian sense—his mortal mother was whisked away by a god, and he is their product. And like any traditional hero, he has his Achilles Heel. In fact, perhaps because he's Irish, he has more than his share of them.

The *Tain* is the single surviving example of Irish Celtic epic at the level of a Beowulf, or a Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Although there are other stories, such as the Book of Invasions, these are often apocryphal histories, and do not reflect the life of the Celtic peoples as does the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. The story is set in Bronze Age Ireland. The gods are specific to the time and place. But how old are the stories themselves? This no one knows. No single intact version of it survives, and all representations of it have been knit together. What we have was copied down by scribes, no doubt from oral recitation. The monasteries became the repositories for the secular tales; and no doubt many more were lost to us, courtesy of the Vikings who had an annoying habit of eradicating every monastery they came across.

The earliest extant version exists in the *Leabhar na hUidhre*, the Book of the Dun Cow, produced in the early 12th century. It and other manuscripts make reference to materials dating from the 7th century, and the tales are themselves very much pre-Christian. Much of the material is fragmentary at best. For instance, one, called Version C, consists of just two pages. The interrelationship of the fragments has long been debated and will likely never be resolved since there is no "first draft" to compare them against.

When the actual events might have occurred has been estimated at between 100 and 500 B.C. There is, however, some evidence that the stories may be even older and not Irish in origin at all. Archaeological evidence, in particular the Gundestrup cauldron recovered from a peat bog in Denmark in 1891, suggest that elements within the tales, if not the tales

themselves, were well known on the European continent. And anthropological studies into the elements of the tales have found many correlations with more ancient stories from India. Some speculate that the stories moved with the Indo-European migration across Europe and to the British Isles. Whether or not that is true is consideration for serious scholarship elsewhere.

In researching the surviving stories of Cú Chulainn and his adventures, I began with Thomas Kinsella's excellent translation. Rather than attempt to copy or parrot something that is likely the best translation that will ever be, I tried to reflect, in this rendition, the comic, the mad and fantastic aspects of the stories. To recreate this atmosphere, I have thrown in contemporary references and assorted anachronisms as they seemed appropriate.

Two terms that occur repeatedly in this volume should be mentioned here. The first is *geis* (*geisa*, plural). This was an adjuration upon one's honor. A *geis* could go either way: it could compel someone to perform a certain act or, more commonly, it might prohibit them from doing something. The weight it carried is nearly inestimable, and the *geis*, occurring many times in the Celtic tales, always represents a turning point, a key element, in the story. The person uttering the *geis* is inevitably someone magical, most often a Druid, which gives it religious significance as well. So strong was the belief in the power of it, that a person might die from their awareness of violating it. This suggests as well the power that words had to these people—much more than we recognize now.

The other term is the word *Sídhe*. The *Sídhe* were a magical race that had gone underground. It was imagined they lived in caves and hillsides, in fairy mounds, called *síd*, which can still be pointed out to travelers in Ireland. Their behavior toward mortals is often capricious; they play cruel tricks. They were known to steal people from their homes to their Many-Colored Land where time stood still.

There exist within the body of the Ulster Cycle stories that do not directly pertain to the raid—the subject of the first part of this edition, but which include many of the same characters, and these stories are sometimes referred to as the *remscéla* (rem shkae' la), or pre-tales. In using that scholarly term for the title of the second half I took something of a liberty with it, using it as an expression of all the tales that are not specifically about the infamous cattle raid.

Some of them I found in sources such as Lady Gregory's *Cuchulainn of Muirthemne* (1902) and *The Ancient Irish Epic Tale Táin Bó Cúalnge*, by Joseph Dunn (1914), which are themselves culled from many earlier sources—manuscripts ranging in date from the twelfth to the nineteenth century.

In researching the material, I found that certain stories, separated from the main body of the *Táin*, began to form a story of their own, that of a young hero who has seen the shining event of his life while still a teenager

and now has nothing to look forward to, and who knows this. Following his stand against Connacht, Cú Chulainn sinks into a slow decline during the seven years that Ulster and Connacht remain at peace—a decline that eventually leads him into madness—into depression and hopelessness and guilt. He is a weapon of war at war with himself.

Where dominance is the thread running through the first volume, the state of—and fall from—grace colors the latter one.

There are fragments, further stories, from the manuscripts that still remain unrevised: the death-tales of many of the characters; the story of how Conall Cernach got his crossed-eyes, by allowing blood from a magical severed head to drip on him, or of how all of his lovers subsequently became cross-eyed when they fell in love with him; and of Cú Chulainn's little-known other wife, Ethne. These are all interesting and worthy tales, but they did not contribute to the substance of these stories and were left out. The serious student of Celtic lore will want to track them down.

Finally, a note on the text as regards the canonical hours represented in the Remscela volume. In the daily life of a monk, all events were ordered around the seven observed hours. As used herein they are as follows, with times approximate:

matins or lauds: first light

prime: sunrise

terce: third hour, midmorning

sext or meridies: noon

nones: mid-afternoon

vespers: sunset

compline: seventh and last, at nightfall.

I close the introduction then by reciting as an ancient bard might have done, the words most appropriate for beginning this tale:

“Once upon a time when there was no time . . . ”

TAIN



PROLOGUE



1. In the Feast Hall

The boy stood halfway up the green hillside, glaring down on all he saw. His stiff body was as thin as a hazel sapling and his hair, combed straight back and fanning across his shoulders, was so bright it could have been dyed with saffron. His large contemptuous eyes echoed the sky's blue, but were wet with stinging tears of resentment. His cheeks burned bright red where his foster-father had slapped and then backhanded him. A rusty taste of blood tainted his saliva. He looked for all the world like an enraged young god: like Lugh of the Long Arm, the Sun, cringing the Fomoiri with his anger.

Rough stone steps under his worn sandals led up to a round feast hall whose thatched roof was visible just beyond the crest of the hill. Below, the stones divided the hillside, their discontinuous line extending past a dozen rickety round huts down to the valley where the objects of his hatred—his foster-father and brother—waded waist-deep in sheep.

At sixteen, Senchan was just a year shy of acknowledged manhood—of release from the bond of fosterage—and he had no idea who he was or what he was meant to be. His training had been left to chance, his growth to undernourishment, his brain to rot. His whole life it seemed had been robbed from him.

When he was a year old, his blood-father had fobbed Senchan off on Selden Ranoura, the ill-tempered man whose handprints had tattooed Senchan's face on this and so many other occasions that the sting never quite stopped. His blood-father was a minor king in a world where minor kings were as plentiful as pimples, as distinguished as acorns. Life had changed on the island since the time when kingship mattered; the past lay buried beneath the steady and importunate tread of Christian soles; they who came to Ireland last of all invaders, neighboring ages after all island cultures had been assimilated.

Gods and kingships alike were eradicated; goddesses were forged into saints, given new faces, new attributes. Still, some few aspects of the old society hung on tenaciously and forced the new order to adapt.

One such ancient custom was fosterage. It took two forms:

that of affection and that of payment. In Senchan's case love never for a moment entered the bargain. In return for accepting the burden of his tutelage, Selden received four head of runny-eyed cattle given to explosive, toxic farting. Not much in the way of payment for fifteen years of tutelage. Selden had long ago ceased to exercise his responsibilities. He found instead that he preferred to train Senchan as a whipping boy.

With just one more long year to go, Senchan was determined to grit his teeth and withstand his torments silently, proudly. Few alternatives presented themselves. The old saying went that there were three ways to terminate a fosterage prematurely: Death, Crime, and Marriage. Senchan had no intention of dying. A criminal act he held beneath his dignity as the son of a king, however thin the royal blood running in his veins. And thus far he had yet to find anyone to wed. Selden's daughters had more bristles on their numerous chins than all the boars in Meath. Till Senchan earned the rights of a man he must abide; then he would repay Selden for all the ignominies shoveled upon him, for the bruises and the welts. Until then, his silence must continue. But the anger, the rage rising like a sun inside him, needed a safe means of release. And so, periodically, he sneaked off to vent his anger in the empty feast hall—where, in fact, he was forbidden to go until the ceremonies of maturity took place ... which added a certain sweetness to the act.

In the center of the feast hall stood an octagonal arrangement of copper and brass screens that reached nearly to the ceiling. Their hammered surfaces revealed triskeles the width of a hand, spirals and trumpets, and faces—some hideous, others impassive. Old gods, stripped of their worth. Of them all, Senchan knew the identity of just one—an antlered character squatting cross-legged on the panel facing the doorway. This was Ruad Rofessa, also called the Dagda, which meant “the good god,” although the Dagda had come to symbolize all forces satanic to the builders of monasteries. These screens were remnants of a pagan past, their value stamped out. Now they simply surrounded the central hearth to act as a chimney for peat smoke. Today, as Senchan stole inside, they had forsworn even

this duty. The interior of the feast hall was clouded with smoke as thick as stirabout. Shields hung on the walls glimmered dimly like the eyes of nocturnal monsters.

Senchan always found this place eerie, but never more so than today. Often he had thought someone sat beside him in the dimness listening to his muttered curses, his promises of evisceration and castration for both fathers, all brothers. He long ago rescinded all ties to this family. His few friends understood his intolerable situation, but they could only pity him. A mother might have soothed his blistered soul, but Selden's wife had died long before Senchan arrived, and the old bastard's squalid whore sided with Selden in everything.

"I hate you all," he hissed defiantly and plunged deeper into the dimness. The sound of it echoed around the empty hall as if the walls had sighed. "My spit should burn you. I could dig out your eyes with my *fingers*." He went down on his knees and gouged the ground. "He has no worth. He measures his value in words tied to his tongue, so he can use them and reel them in again. Nothing but deceits and boasts. Why does he hate me? What choice did I have in where I went? He blames me! Oh, *God*, I hate him. His daughters I'll make shave their hairy chins in the foamy blood bubbling on his lips, while I watch him die and *laugh!* For all the times, I'll—I'll ..." Senchan's fists pounded dents into the dirt. He pounded and pounded until his rage was spent, then lay there, a swollen-eyed rag totem in a linen tunic. Ultimately he knew he would perform none of these things, which knowledge served only to amplify his useless fury. Not that he was a coward, but he was likewise no fool, regardless of what Selden called him. To slay Selden would bring the entire settlement out after his blood. Unfortunately, among all the other skills neglected in his teaching was the handling of weapons, and how long could he last when he cannot even fend off a blow? One hour? Two? He cried to the earth. He was trapped within traps within traps.

There came a soft scraping sound.

Forgetting his misery, acting by instinct, Senchan rolled across the floor and dove beneath a congeries of furs. He wriggled in amongst itchy leather that smelled of vintage sweat. His head emerged just enough to peer out. He sniffed, dabbed dirty fingers under his eyes, inadvertent makeup. If they saw or heard what he said, he was doomed in any case—a violator as surely as if he had raped his own estranged mother. Selden would beat him to a cripple for being in here. But the feast hall looked empty. Possibly brighter than when he entered—could the smoke have thickened? He started to suggest to himself that it was just imagination that had made the sound, when the room grew brighter still.

Like a birch tree stuffed through the chimney hole, a shaft of pure white light shot down into the area enclosed by the screens. Heart pounding, his mouth tasting like bloody brine, Senchan tried to account for it, but knew that no errant beam of light could do that. The scraping sound began again. The ground beneath him shuddered.

The screens were parting.

Where they divided, brilliant light burst forth in a knife-edged line across the floor and up the pile of furs. Senchan's blue eyes sparkled with divine radiance. What was happening? He could not guess: it was like some scoffed—at tale of fairies and will-o'-the-wisps unfolding before him. He burrowed back further into the furs. Just one eye remained exposed, a single sapphire in a fuzzy niche.

What that one eye beheld left him in no doubt that the last beating he'd suffered had rattled his brains.

Inside the parted screens, on top of the smoldering bricks of peat, squatted an enormous black cauldron. Rings as big around as his wrists hung from its lip, and triskeles and figures much like those on the screens decorated its bulbous sides. It was the immensity of this vat that had pushed apart the screens. The thing seemed to have grown up out of the fire, to have swelled into being all at once. Were that all, he could almost have accepted it. But perched on the rim, as if someone lay inside the vat luxuriating in a hot bath, were two bare feet, soles wet and as pink as baby flesh. And the toes wriggled.

The feet slid down, out of sight, splashed. A lifetime of moments passed. Then a head began to rise up where the feet had been, the light grown so bright that the color was bleached from hair and skin—it was a face of chiseled chalk, a face of rigid bone, of death. Its wide eyes did not scan the room, oh no. They stared straight into the heap of furs, right at him. The nose was bent, maybe scarred across the bridge. The beard-ringed mouth when it appeared was grinning. A finger popped up beside it, crooked and invited him to come on out, no good hiding from *this* apparition. The spectre also had a voice, one full of life, lust and humor. The voice said, "Senchan, Senchan—I spy Senchan," a man sing-songing a child's decree.

The furs trembled and shook.

2. The Ancestor

Down in the dark of the hot moist furs, Senchan rocked with uncontrollable laughter. Even so, a faint exhortatory voice cried out in his mind that he should not be acting this way—just a second ago he was frightened, wasn't he? But he couldn't contain the urge to laugh. He lifted his head and, with it, a huge piled cap of furs, and peeked out again.

The man in the cauldron disappeared below the rim with a splash, but the top of his head bobbed into view every few moments. Senchan heard gargling, followed by a spume of sparkling water. With the greatest of care, the boy burrowed like a timid mole out of the furs and began to crawl on elbows and knees across the smoky room. Discovery! The cauldron wasn't black at all, but copper gone glaucous, thick with verdigris as

if dredged up out of a lake this morning. That old devil, the Dagda, sat in cross-legged bas-relief inviting the boy to pause and chat beside the fire.

A particularly loud splash sent a huge wave breaking over the rim above. Senchan had a moment to see it, but no time to crab away before it drenched his head and neck.

He got up on his feet, all fear and humor forgotten. The water should have turned to steam, he was so mad, stinking of those furs, dripping like a sheepdog. The man in the cauldron just floated, complacently naked. A bit of mockery was suggested by the look he tossed up to Senchan. What lustrous eyes! They were probably blue, but seen in this light the irises were barely distinguishable from the whites. As if acknowledging this problem, the light dimmed immediately, enough to let some color bleed in. The bather was revealed as flesh and blood rather than ghostly vapor. His hair was blond streaked with red, pulled back and drawn to the side of his head, behind his ear. A small filigreed device like a thimble-cup held it there, by what property Senchan couldn't imagine. At the man's throat, a thick silver necklace duplicated the fine work of the thimble-cup.

The overall impression the bather gave was of emaciation, dissipation: puckers of skin rode the recesses below his eyes; his cheeks were drawn, with fine lines in the hollows and around his bearded mouth. His body was pale, almost fish-belly blue; freckles stood out like pebbles on a beach. Below his navel was a round dark scar, looking slick and fresh. The bather, however, appeared not the least bothered by it.

"Who are you?" asked Senchan, no longer angered or scared. The bather had leached away his emotions with those moon-eyes and that smile full of irony and the promise of great japery. "My name," the bather said, "is Laeg mac Rianganabra." His tone suggested that Senchan ought to be impressed. The pale eyes searched him for some reaction and he grew uncomfortably embarrassed, enough that he had to look away— up.

"I shouldn't do that were I you," Laeg gently warned. "Often they prefer to keep a distance and would rather you didn't pry. They could for instance make you blind." He paddled up near Senchan. "Me, they keep blind drunk, which is not quite the same but does alter one's perceptions as unconditionally."

"Who are *they*?"

"What do you think of this gravid pot?" He slapped the rim. "The Druids used to bring dead warriors back to life in this very cauldron, back before the magic faded ..." He inhaled deeply through his nose, which *did* have a wicked scar across the bridge. "Good for the mind, a humid air is, especially a mind besotted for centuries. Are you aware that you have battle-dye under your eyes?"

Confused by this question, Senchan reached up and dabbed the hollows of his eyes, then saw the dirt on his fingertips. He made fists and rubbed hard at his stinging cheeks. Defiantly, he said, "Don't you answer people's questions?"

Laeg abruptly ended his deep breathing exercise. “Lugh’s nuts, lad, don’t you recognize a visitation when you see one? Or do you perhaps stumble upon my likes all the time? Seen a lot of pots like this?” He rapped the side and the cauldron bonged like a monastery bell.

“Of course not.”

“Fine.” He stretched out in the water once more. “Ask your critical questions then. I’m prepared to answer all inquiries.”

Senchan repeated what he had already asked.

“They,” replied Laeg, “are the *Sídhe*, the people of the mounds. The mounds also are called *síd*. The *Sídhe* live in *síd*. Naturally. I trust that clarifies everything?”

Senchan looked blank. Laeg might as well have quoted Tacitus at him. The joy went out of the man’s eyes; the light surrounding him dimmed. In the cauldron, steam had ceased to wreath off the water. Softly, almost fearfully, he asked the boy, “What is this at my throat?” His hand closed around the thick silver necklace. Senchan could only shake his head. Tension replaced the steam. “This is a *torc*. It is the symbol of the Dagda, lord of all animals, of forests everywhere. It girds the soul and binds us to nature, to the world, to the gods . . . nothing, I see it in your eyes,” pondered for a moment, then, “What about Druidry? Macha? Tell me at least that you know of Cu Chulainn?”

“I think, it means someone’s dog?” hazarded Senchan, hysterically hopeful.

Laeg stared at the hole in the roof. “You were right, he *doesn’t* know,” he said. Then, his eyes rolled up and he slid down into the water, turning to float there like a corpse, longer than was possible. Senchan fidgeted until he couldn’t stand it any more. He reached in, grabbed the body by the hair. It listed, then rolled over. In those few seconds the face had already begun to decay, the skin become yellowish, puffy. Senchan gasped and dropped the head. It sank out of sight. “No!” he cried. He thrust his hand into the milky water, grabbed the hair again and pulled, but looked away before everything below the eyes was revealed. Those eyes stared straight up but did not see him or anything else this side of the grave. “Please,” he begged. “Stay up, wait.” He towed the body to the edge of the cauldron and hung it from the rim by its dripping chin. “I’ll be back. I’ll get Selden and the others to help.”

With a clot in his throat, he turned away.

“*Stop!*”

Senchan halted. His head hunched down—he didn’t want to look back at that ghastly face, but finally he did. Laeg was whole again. Senchan’s mouth dropped open.

“Surely not Selden?” Laeg continued. “That overbearing, solipsistic, base and vile example of the slug in human form? Think, Senchan, what he would do to you if you dragged him in here for *any* reason. Skin you, I don’t doubt. Take your head and crush it in his fat hands like a grouse egg.

“And you,” Laeg said as he rose up like a sea god, “you’d like to do the same to him, wouldn’t you? Like to grab him by the balls and make him obey your every whim; like to beat his stubbly face to a purple dough. Wouldn’t you?” He gripped the edge of the pot to lean forward at Senchan, who was too stunned to move. “Well, you *ought* to feel that way! He’s a domineering swine. *His* like have caused all our deeds to be forgotten. He’s *chosen* to be dim-witted, actually *chose* it, you understand. It couldn’t be worse if the fornicating bastards all inbred! History’s twisted up like this neckring.” He grabbed fiercely at the torc surrounding his throat, and in so doing lost his balance and fell with a great splash back into the tub. With orange hair dripping gray water, he eyed Senchan balefully. “And what’s most ignominious of all is that your foster-father is descended from *my* line.” He reached out then toward the hesitating boy and Senchan returned to him as if tied by an invisible thread. Laeg gripped Senchan’s shoulder. “It’s you I’m for. You’re young, you can be shaped. A destiny awaits you, but you’ll have to go backwards to get it. Future answers lie in past deeds, Senchan. I’ve come to give you what that wormy descendent of mine can’t—purpose and direction. A reason to be.”

The shaft of light flared up. Senchan came out of his trance into blindness as if a white sheet had shrouded him. Behind him the copper screens swung shut; he heard them clank together, turned and ran, sightless, at the sound—two steps and *clang!* he found them with his nose and chin.

He sat down.

From behind, Laeg’s voice whispered into his ears. “There’s no escaping destiny, lad. You were yoked to yours the day Selden accepted those flatulent cows.”

Hands cupped over his bruised nose, Senchan noticed water dripping onto his shoulder. He asked, “What’s happening?” and was surprised at how calm he sounded.

“We’re traveling.”

“I feel sick.”

“Myself, as well. A good ale would have helped settle our stomachs. I’ve asked a dozen times before, but they never think of your needs any more than they consider your pride. Why, I once saw a fellow—he had stumbled upon a *sid* at night by accident, obviously didn’t know where he was—suddenly pop into the middle of a *Sídhe* feast, both feet in the meat platter. And his pants down, tunic up, displaying both cheeks most rudely.”

“What happened?” asked Senchan, his queasiness and bruised chin forgotten.

Laeg cast him that mocking glance. “Well, we all stood up and clapped.”

Senchan eyed him askance. *Well*, he had said. Didn’t that mean that this man was one of those *Sídhe*? If not, then what else could he be? The screens shook, then rattled as thunder filled the air and Senchan cast speculation aside. “We’re stopping,” said Laeg.

3. The Circle of Stones

The light vanished so fast that Senchan and Laeg both gasped and looked up, snow-blind to the normal light. Above them now was sky—a great cloudy swatch the color of an oyster. Senchan pushed one foot against the cold copper screen in front of him. The screen dragged in the long grass, but opened. Through the slit he could see a sliver of gentle slope, a field not far below in which stood a huge dark rock. Laeg hissed like a firestone dropped in water. Senchan looked up at him looming above and could see his coloration clearly now—the face, the orange freckles, the hair, and the clothing. When had he put on clothes? Maybe they had just appeared on him. After everything else that had happened, Senchan wouldn't have been at all surprised. The clothes were similar to his own clothing, but different in design. Laeg's tunic, for instance, was muslin white, but with a pattern of green chain links woven in, and sleeveless in structure. The edges actually seemed worked in gold. His knee-high boots—Senchan had to twist around to see them—were nothing more than wide strips of cracked leather wound around his feet and calves and tied down with thongs. They looked as if he had worn them since the Creation. Tight, quilted leather breeches were tucked into the boots. Four bracelets encircled his left wrist, all similar in design to the thing he called a torc. His stringy arms were criss-crossed with scars.

All the while Senchan studied him, Laeg had not taken his eyes off that stone out on the field. The boy dragged himself up finally. Even then Laeg seemed to stare through him to that stone. Why? Senchan shoved the screens further apart.

The whole picture was of a wide plateau decorated with a ring of standing stones. The cauldron and screens perched on a knoll above the stones. Beyond them the ground disappeared down into a valley; far away, small dark hills clustered, patchy with the grayness of limestone.

“Where are we?”

“This is Muirthemne Plain. I hadn't—” he had to clear his throat “—hadn't seen it since long ago, right after the Wars when the Sídhé assembled the ring.” Like one possessed, he drifted past Senchan and down the hill. Once again the boy was reminded of a spirit, not a corporeal man. And Muirthemne Plain? He knew of such a place, in the southeastern part of Ulster Province. But was it possible they had travelled that far north? How? The screens shifted slightly. Hinges groaned. He decided it might be wise to follow Laeg rather than have one of those things fall on him.

Laeg strode into the circle, straight to the immense black rock in the center. He pressed his whole body against it, ran his palm down its one smooth face as if caressing a lover. His fingers found and traced a wide gouge in the center. Senchan followed as far as the edge of the ring, but hesitated to enter the circle. Places like this were scattered all over Ireland and, the story was, they were haunted.

Eight stones composed the outer ring, some half his height and others higher than his head. None of them resembled any other, which seemed to Senchan very odd. Rings that he had seen before had always been composed of similar stones. He crept along the periphery, careful to stay outside the ring. The stones looked as if the centuries had not worn, had not even touched them.

When he finished the circuit, Senchan had discovered that the stones shared at least one trait. All of them bore peculiar indentations—lines scratched down one face, some horizontal, some diagonal. He wondered if perhaps the stonecutter was inexperienced with a chisel.

“Do you read Ogham?” asked Laeg, so close by that Senchan jumped at the sound of his voice.

“Read what?” the boy asked shakily.

Laeg pointed at the chiseled lines along the stone. “This. Ogham. Druids’ alphabet.”

“You mean this is writing?”

“Druids controlled written words for as long as they lived. Words were power, weapons that could penetrate deeper than any blade, imparting wounds that never healed. Druids kept writing a secret so that words would carry weight, the weight of truth. Such truth died on the day writing became known. Now it isn’t your word, it’s your signature, that carries that weight. Yes, it’s writing.”

“But we still have words.”

“Empty words are all you have, flung by fools who lack the subtlety of mind to recognize the force of a *geis* or a riddle or a threat. Druids knew all that. They made laws—”

“But they s-sacrificed *children*,” Senchan stammered. “And worshipped the Devil!”

Laeg laughed. “So rules the newest order. In truth they sacrificed no children of which I’m aware. Criminals, yes, but what do you do with a murderer? Teach him to fish? And your evil Prince of Darkness hadn’t been invented yet so how could they worship him? Lies boy, all lies—even if, perhaps, well-meaning ones.” He stopped speaking then, remembering suddenly through a vision how he came to know so much of a life that did not come into being until after he had departed this life. He saw in his mind’s eye a circle of women there in Magh Mell. The women were all speaking at once in their secret tongue the words winding, weaving in and out. Now it was as if his brain was a loom and the patterns of their speech were becoming comprehensible. He reached up, touched his temples. They told him that a new order had arisen, one that wanted all the magic in the world to belong to its god. That order had devised stories to repudiate Druid knowledge. “This is not new,” the women had told him. “It has happened since the first time a new people conquered an old. It happened to the Fomoiri, to the Fir Bolg, to us. Our secrets are hidden from the

Druids just as their knowledge is forever lost to the Christians. The head is always cut off before the tongue can tell its tale.”

He repeated this last statement for Senchan but the boy disappointed him once more by not comprehending, requiring further elucidation. “The new order hounded the Druids. Some were even tortured and burned. The new society opposed them and it’s society that’s let the knowledge be lost. The few survivors remember scraps. No more.” How odd he felt saying this, recalling the women chanting. He had thought them part of a drunkard’s dream.

“Do you read it?” asked Senchan.

“Very little. But I know these *stones* as if I’d carved them.

“What do they mean?”

“I can’t tell you that—I have to show you. Come.” He got up and led Senchan to the highest point in the circle, also the smallest stone. “This is the *first* and the last stone,” he explained, “the beginning and end of the circle. It’s called the Pigstone. You see how it’s fissured down the center? How the two dissimilar halves fit together?”

“Yes.”

“You must touch it. Here, like so.” He took Senchan’s hands and pressed them into the Ogham notches. “Close your eyes and clear your mind.” Senchan obeyed, but warily. Then, a moment later his eyes opened wide and he looked at Laeg with startlement and wonder. Laeg smiled. “You felt it, didn’t you? The words have power still, provided one knows how to find it. Again, close your eyes.”

Senchan wasn’t sure he liked this, but he obeyed. Laeg began speaking to him, softly. “Your hands are on the hearts of two men who were not men.”

Senchan felt a dull throb, monotonous, rhythmic, like the pulsation of the earth.

“Once those hearts were tissue and muscle, but two angry *Sídhe* kings turned them into stone.”

“How is that possible?” Senchan could not say for sure if he had spoken aloud, or if the thought had just echoed loudly in his head. But Laeg answered him, a voice very close now, hot upon his ear.

“I’ll tell you. It happened in the following manner and because of it thousands of people died in combats and old enmities burned like sulphur. One hero was made and more unmade. And all because of pigs.”

Senchan fell away from himself, entering another realm of time and place. Seasons swirled around him, through him. He saw himself as if he were someone else, standing on the hill slightly above the circle of stones. He saw Laeg take his arm and gently draw him forward. The stone that he hugged became soft, then misty, and he passed through it.

He became the beginning of the tale.

“There were once two pig keepers ...

Part One



I. THE PIG-KEEPERS' TALE

1. The Mast

There were once two pig-keepers named Friuch and Rucht, charged with maintaining the pig-herds of two *Sídhe* kings.

Rucht, whose name meant “the snort of a pig,” was short and so stout that a rope tied above his belly was the only thing that would hold up his baggy woolen trousers. His hair, which was the color of oak leaves on a cloudy fall day, sprouted like a tangled bramble bush from his scalp. Seen from a distance or amidst his huge herd of pigs, Rucht looked like a bulbous primeval plant root animated by some mischievous spirit. His pouchy eyes never quite agreed on where they were looking and his broad lower lip jutted out as if he had stumbled into eternal cogitation.

Rucht's dearest friend in the world, Friuch, could not have been more unlike him. Friuch stood lanky like some overgrown corn dolly—an assemblage of twisted stalks and chaff, a being formed of husks. His large eyes were button-black and he had the gums and teeth of a horse.

In manner the two keepers were also completely polar:

Rucht, the cogitator, was ponderously slow to take action, while Friuch leapt into it with hardly any thought at all.

What allied them took root far deeper than such strong contrasts in appearance or action could reach: both keepers were the offspring of couplings between *Sídhe* women and mortal men, between the magical and the mundane.

Friuch and Rucht were only half-*Sídhe*.

Though they remained in the land of the *Sídhe*, they lived as conspicuous outcasts in that magical society. Nevertheless, by their own rules the *Sídhe* were responsible for the two half-breeds and so each had separately been charged with the task (an estimable and, to some, enviable task) of caring for the *Sídhe* pigs. In this role they could live alone, removed from all detractors and secure in the knowledge that in their segregation they served their masters well.

Their meeting had been a happy accident. Each found in the other a curious comfort. Over many reunions, this comfort changed to deep friendship that had abided throughout the long periods when the two were apart in the service of their masters. Their isolation recessed every fall as the

first breath of winter drove the green souls of the trees into rooting hibernation and forsaken branches released their seed, burying the land in a mantle of nuts. This was the time of the *mast*, as this mantle was known to the pig-keepers. It was the *mast* that reunited them year after year.

In years when the winter winds shook harder in the north, Friuch closed up his house, gathered together his pigs, and headed north to Connacht, where Rucht awaited him. Other years the *mast* fell thickest in the south and Rucht would be the one hiking off with his herd, down into Munster where his good friend dwelled. Either way, one month a year, the two friends rejoiced in each other's company—talking and drinking and playing endless rounds of *fidchell*, a board-game with which they passed long afternoons.

The year the trouble began, Rucht had taken his pigs south.

Pigs are peculiar animals. They are remarkably clean by nature and can be as attentive and affectionate as a fine hound, never mind that they are being raised and fattened only for slaughter. Sídhé pigs were even more alert and peculiar than most. For one thing, they could expand to at least twice the size of the largest mortal pig. For another, they knew *why* they were being fattened.

“And that,” said Laeg, facing a cold, blustery fall wind, “is a tale in itself.”

2. The People of the Mounds

“At a time before our people came to Ireland, there was a clash between two primordial races of beings for the right to dwell here. Their names are forgotten to us now save for those few heroes and kings whose stories became part of our legendry. Both sides might have lived on the isle, but neither could abide the other. After an eternity of wars producing a flow of blood so great that it raised the level of the seas, one tribe chose to abandon the isle with honor and dwell elsewhere. They knew that if the fight continued, both peoples would go on battling until no one was left, until the ground was no more than broken spears and shattered bodies. And so these people gathered together in small groups on designated hill-tops—all at the same moment, for they could communicate over great distances like lightning across a stormy sky—and they passed down into the *side*, the pregnant bellies of the earth. For this reason, they are called the Sídhé, the people of the Mounds. Their world is near invisible, like fortresses of glass, and only upon your entering one or their passing out from it can you see them. Because of their honorable sacrifice in the face of defeat, the god Manannán threw a great feast for them in Magh Mell, with meat carved from his enchanted pigs. One bite of this meat made

each of the Sídhe immortal; that was Manannán's gift to them. In his honor every year, while mortals offer sacrifices to the Dagda on the Samain day, the Sídhe slaughter a pig feast to remember Manannán, the Son of the Sea."

For a moment Laeg paused, then added, "You'll hear more of Manannán another time, for, though he was a god, he had a blind side called Fand. She was his wife and she is part of this tale, too, but much later ..." Senchan, he could see, had stopped listening to him; instead, the boy was staring past Laeg, along the rough path that cut through the woods behind them. Far up that path, a squat figure was waddling towards them. Like a pack of dogs, a herd of pigs surrounded the figure and trotted along with him. From the images that had dazzled him while Laeg spoke, Senchan recognized that figure. A smile crept across his face. He and Laeg moved off into the brush to let the pigs and their keeper pass by, then set off after the milling herd into the darker depths of the forest.

3. The Aer

Rucht led his pigs along the murky forest path. Autumn wind drove the lower clouds like boats across the sky. The dense woodland oaks flailed naked branches madly as if to grab the scudding clouds. Acorns clacked around the trundling pigs, who shoveled the path clean as they followed their squat master.

One pig, attracted by the smell from rotting piles of acorns nearby, went off toward the woods. Rucht saw her. "Legan!" he called, with a voice as rough and bubbly as a thick cooking stew, "the forest's full of frights for the likes of you." The pig ignored his warning. He shooed the rest of the herd on and went back for her. She had snuffled her way into a huge pyramid of mast. Rucht considered her for a few minutes; then he mumbled a brief chant and faded from view, like a rainbow after a rain. Where he had stood, a bright ball of light rode for a moment on the breezes. Then it sank into the layers of leaves and nuts on the ground. These bobbed up as the hidden ball of light moved beneath them. Legan remained hedonistically oblivious to this until the pile of nuts she was devouring suddenly exploded in every direction. Flying leaves sizzled and burst into flame. Legan skittered back, off-balance, and fell over on her side, but quickly stabbed her stubby feet into solid ground and pulled herself around. Up, she took off squealing, back to the safety of the herd, which had wandered far down the path by then.

A swirl of singed leaves drifted down around the bulky figure of the pig-keeper as he reappeared. Legan turned around to give him a resentful and wounded look. Rucht only smirked, "You'd rather be lost to us? To abandon you to your pleasure would mark me as more pig-headed than

you, old darling.” Legan snorted. Rucht guffawed from the belly; a sound that had been known to break up brawls.

He resumed his walk and, when he had caught up with the herd, lagged behind to ensure that no others tried Legan’s trick. Who knew what fiendish, ravenous creatures dwelled in the depths of that dark forest? What invisible eyes watched from the shadows?

In this state of unease, Rucht drove his herd on to Munster. Yet, long before he reached his destination, the apprehension of wood sprites and demons would be slain by the ganghooks of a hundred verbal barbs that snagged and shredded his brain.

Rucht’s daily hikes always came to an end at a well-chosen *sid* where his pigs were treated like gold and he was accepted as an honored guest—except that there were inevitably a few among the crowd who disdained their half-human cousin, seeing him to be the bastard product of their own queen’s lustful peregrinations. These few envied Rucht his job and his close friendship with Friuch; and it was these few whose goal became to crack open a permanent rift between the two allies. Most of their jibes rolled off Rucht’s back like water off a duck: “Rucht the Ruin, Seer over Sows, shifts his shape to hide his many mortal blemishes.” That stung a little but he had no illusions about who or what he was. So they tried another: “The keepers of boars—boorish keepers both—Snort and Snout keep us bored.” Well, that only set him laughing his infectious laugh, and the entire population of the *sid*, their faces glowing red from hidden fires, caught the hilarious contagion. Only the coldest of hearts, the wretchedest of minds, remained bent on their initial purpose. Again they tried, and again and again. Rucht, like any mortal man, had his weak spot, his one soft bruise of doubt. It was inevitable that, sooner or later, someone would stick a dagger there.

“Pride take you in your magic. So generous is Ochall Oohne with his gifts, and Boeve with his for Friuch. Tell us: which of you works the greater wonders?”

Like nasty children, once the detractors realized that this point of contention truly bothered Rucht, they focused on his pain. Who was the stronger of the two? they asked him. Which half-breed *could* beat the other in a contest? they demanded to know. Who had more *mother’s* blood in him?

Their cruel queries sharpened off him like a knife off a whetstone. With each pass, the blade cut finer and closer to the bone.

Rucht began avoiding the mounds, sleeping instead in groves, sheltered by trees and chill winds. One night the pig-keeper spent with a deer-man, who had antlers tied to his head as he danced in his grove, celebrating the Dagda, and who starved himself into delirium. The deer-man babbled throughout the night, hopping in circles round the pigs. The sleepless keeper lay trapped in the deer-man’s circles and struggled all night with the question that bored into him.

After that, Rucht resolved not to speak to anyone at all—but too late: The damage had been done the moment the question had been asked. He could not stop wondering, doubting, sizing himself up against his friend. Rucht in his distress could not realize then the extent of what had been done to him.

Friuch, on the other hand, could. He laughed at what his squat friend confessed to him. “Rucht,” he replied placatively, “can’t you see what they’re trying to do? They’re envious of every grand thing we have, right down to the good leather on your feet. They hate us both—we’re not like them. For years they’ve baited you, just as they’ve done to me every time I come to visit you—you never gave it a thought. Why now?” He leaned back against the stone wall of his hut.

“But who is *better*?”

“Who cares? Will it grind your grain better? Will it fatten the pigs?”

“I care.”

Friuch eyed his friend and apprehension dripped into the pit of his soul. Here before him stood a new man, one whom he had not previously encountered, and one Friuch did not care to be with just now.

He left and went off into the woods alone. Surrounding him were the herds of pigs, whuffling and devouring everything in sight. He sat down amongst them, spindle-thin amongst all those fat bodies. The afternoon drifted away as he pondered. His friend meant too much to him for this to divide them. It was bad enough that the Sídhe of Connacht and the Sídhe of Munster had had a falling out long ago and that the friendship he shared with Rucht defied a dozen ancient restrictions. Most of the people didn’t care, anyway—the curse of the whole schism was that neither side could even recall where their differences lay. Perhaps it had been a dispute such as this. Ochall Ochne and Boeve might have vied for supremacy, their client—companions splitting into factions—sides that had remained long after the fires of the conflict flickered out....

Friuch shook his head and returned to the problem at hand. How was he to salvage and patch up his friendship? How could he give Rucht back his self-assurance? He could let Rucht win a contest, he supposed. Just a simple contest—

Friuch sat up straight; pigs grunted and shuffled back from him. What a *wonderful* notion. Why not silence all the taunting tongues permanently for both of them? He climbed to his feet and ran. His gangly legs carried him in great leaps over the squealing clusters of panicked pigs.

“Rucht!” he cried. “Rucht, I’ve found the answer!” His friend waddled out from the round stone hut. Friuch put his hands on Rucht’s shoulders and explained his plan. “What we have to do,” he said, “is act out a contest of skill! We do the same thing, the same way at the same time, thereby proving to anyone who cares to know that we’re of equal prowess. And I’ll tell you just what, too.” So Friuch explained the details of the idea that had burst upon him. Rucht listened, his baggy eyes lighting up as the plan

unfolded. A brilliant scheme! Rucht excitedly dragged Friuch off to the middle of the forest, where, as Friuch had described it, the contest would take place.

Back to back on that gray and gloomy day, the keepers chanted their spells. Their incantations mingled and twined like curls down a woman's back. Mist drifted out of the trees and spun around the two sorcerers as they spoke. Mist enfolded the whole of the forest. Around them, sensing the clash of forces, their pigs squealed and ran about in panic until, at last, the chanting stopped. The mist rose, fading, as if chased away by sunlight.



Standing on the hillside above the two keepers, Senchan looked on, dismayed. Laeg sat beside him, against the bole of a tree, nonchalantly picking burrs off his trouser legs. "So," he said contemplatively, "you think the spells took? Think they will dazzle the *Sídhe*?"

Senchan's face scrunched up even more. "But nothing's changed!" he cried. "You made it seem as if something fantastic was going to happen."

Laeg cocked his head. "Oh, but it has. Look at those two poor creatures." He gestured to where Friuch and Rucht were dancing in circles. "They can't *see* anything more than you can, but they know it's happened. You, being a product of Selden's world, must needs see it or it isn't there. What is invisible does not exist, isn't that so?" He got up, brushing leaves off his backside. "Such thinking spells inevitable doom for the tale tellers before long. The loss of imagination." He sighed. "Well, let's go."

Senchan glanced down at the two keepers again to hide the look of pain on his face. He did not understand Laeg's admonishment. It wasn't fair to pick on him for things he couldn't help. Selden hadn't even taught him what he was supposed to know, much less the code of life from some other time. And, anyway, why should he consider it important? Sooner or later he was going to be put back where Laeg had found him, and what good would all of this be then? Frustrated, he turned away from the scene below. "Where now?" he asked.

"Further onward." Laeg started up the hill. "By then the charm will have taken fully, the *mast* will be consumed, the forest denuded, and the pig-keepers parting. At which moment in time, the feast of *Manannán* will be a fortnight away."

The two figures climbed until the sounds of celebration faded away and the forest became silent and empty under a stone-gray sky.

4. Banishment

By the time Rucht bid farewell to Friuch and set off for Connacht, the full effect of Friuch's spell had unfolded for all to see. Rucht herded his pigs into a *sid* every night at first, to show off the spell. The reaction of the *Sídhe* was not, however, what he had anticipated, the result being that his shored-up self-worth was newly shattered.

They laughed at him.

Word of what Friuch had done travelled no faster than Rucht, and each night he shocked the inhabitants of a new *sid* and was in turn mortified by their derisive welcome.

"You chose a sorry day to visit Friuch," they goaded him, "for he's surely shown his superior skill, *old darling*."

"Not so!" cried Rucht. "I've done the same trick upon him!"

But the same *Sídhe* who had set gleefully upon him a month before scoffed at that, and teased and prodded and bullied him.

By the time he reached Connacht's southern border, he had come to avoid the *side* again and spent his nights in groves, with pine needles for a blanket and pine nuts for his supper. Now he would have relished the company of an errant Deer-man. It seemed that only someone mad from starvation would offer him any kindness. What he did not know, could not have known, was that word of his magic upon Friuch had followed after him like a skulking dog and that those who had mocked him now admitted, grudgingly, that the two keepers must have equal powers. Withdrawn from his herd, Rucht cursed Friuch's plan and Friuch along with it. When he made up his mind at last to undo the spell, he discovered to his alarm that he could not. No counterspell devised had any effect at all. Nearly hysterical, Rucht tried making spells up. Nothing happened. Nothing changed. Nothing.

The figure that drove his pigs into the Caves of Cruachan the day before Manannán's feast skulked glumly, head down, resigned to play the consummate fool. Awaiting him there at the mouth of the Caves, his master, Ochall, stood like a pillar of shadow with piercing raven's eyes. The tale of the pigkeepers' duel had caught up with and preceded Rucht to Connacht. Ochall Oohne had doubted it, or at least had wanted to. But now fury consumed him as he stared silently at the herd of transformed pigs waddling forth—waddling as the redoubtable spell had wrought them. They were small, scrawny things without a trace of meat upon their bones. Their rough hairy hides hung so loosely on their ribs that, had it not been for their telltale snouts, they would have been unrecognizable as pigs.

“So this,” growled Ochall Ochne the Sídhe king, “is what comes of breaking ancient geisa through leniency. This, my punishment for letting you commingle with our enemies!”

“I—I did the same thing to Friuch’s herd,” Rucht replied apathetically; he had said it so many times lately.

“Then at least we’re not to be the laughingstock of Boeve’s Sídhe—though that mitigates your position only one degree with me. Our feast is tomorrow. Everyone knows the tale: you’re equals, how thrilling. Now change the pigs back.”

“I would but I can’t.”

“You don’t know Friuch’s spell?”

“I thought ... that is, I *heard* him, but ...

“Well, then, move off,” his king commanded. “I’ll deal with it.” Ochall pushed past Rucht. The pig keeper stumbled to the side of the cave and covered his face.

The shadowy Sídhe king spun his magic around the pigs to reveal the spell that bound them. It appeared before him as a luminous cord, woven round the animals, Ochall Ochne hissed and glared back at his pig-keeper. The enchantment had knots tied all along it where Rucht’s simultaneous spell had violated, deformed and melded to Friuch’s, as Friuch’s had to his. A master seaman could not have unraveled those knots in a thousand years of untying. For all his great powers, the Sídhe king of Connacht had no hope that he could do better. The feast this year was going to be grim, the sea god’s gift shabbily celebrated. The glaring shadow swelled.

Rucht saw that his master could not change back the pigs, and his disgrace became a secondary concern, dwarfed by an all-consuming fear for his life.

A chill wind swept over him. It froze him in an instant, the brush of the shadow, and he knew nothing again until Ochall lifted the numbness away. Then Rucht discovered that he no longer stood in front of the Sídhe Caves of Cruachan. A dark, incarnadine place surrounded him. It sparkled dimly as through smoke. This was the *sid* on Femen Plain—the *sid* of Boeve in Munster. The two kings faced each other like two tall black trees. They spoke in an ancient tongue that Rucht did not understand though he heard every word clearly—a language that has not been spoken in daylight since the time of the Tuatha de Danann. Peering into the shadows, Rucht spied Friuch standing paralyzed beyond the two kings. Friuch looked as fearful and helpless as he felt. *We are doomed*, thought Rucht, and he found himself unable to grieve for Friuch. It was as if the spell worked over the pigs had also affected him, withering away that part of him that had cared for his friend. Now he had no friends—not even himself.

The voice of Ochall Ochne suddenly rang through the cavern, and the walls brightened and spat red sparks with each sharp word. The enormity of The Punishment was revealed.

“We have decided. You are forever banished from us. The simple task you both lived to fulfill proved too ambitious for your human halves. You have shamed your teachers, but worse, your own people: there can be no feast in our lands this year. We are discredited in the eyes of Manannán—you’ve broken our *geis* to him and can offer no fitting retribution. So we must try to mollify the Sea by playing havoc upon the land. This we will do through you and that is your sentence. Seven times you will be shaped by us, seven destructive forms of our choosing. Our retribution.” The two kings retreated into darkness. Rucht stared at Friuch staring at him: farewell in a glance.

The blood red world blasted them away.

5. Shapes of the Sentence

Samain was the most awesome day of the year in the mortal realm. It existed between the end of the old year and the beginning of the new: a day removed from the harness of time and the natural order of things. On *Samain* eve the forces that separated the dead from the living dwindled until those two planes merged. In the dark of that night, the dead emerged from their tumulus graves. Skulls kept as prizes of war began to chatter; demons sailed the skies on horses of sunset; Fomoiri—the ancient, banished race of giants—rose like mystical isles out of the sea. The three Daughters of Murder—Morrigan, Nemain, and the Badb; called collectively *the Morrighu*—ruled that time out of time as a triple threat of madness, terror, and battle-frenzy. The three sisters were said to appear, to those misfortunate enough to encounter them, as large ravens. So, when on *Samain* morning the entire populace of Cruachan fort awoke to the cries of two huge black birds, the people thought they saw their doom in the sky.

But they soon realized there were two birds only, and these birds were ugly and deformed.

The birds squawked and clawed at one another. Feathers fell like pieces of night, covering the crops. Blood sprinkled across the plain, and where it fell, whatever grew there withered, whatever stood there fell over and died. The people of Cruachan decided they did not like these birds very much.

Warriors, men and women both, charged out bellowing onto the field. They heaved their spears and cast sharp stones from their slings. Every shot went home; but though a hundred spears impaled them, the birds did not even falter in their combat.

For the next year, each morning, the birds returned at dawn, magically made whole again. Every dawn brought their squawking. Every sunset left Cruachan Plain decimated, empty of life and littered with the corpses of

cattle and pigs that had strayed there. The inhabitants of the fort had to transport their food from over the hills to the south. Meantime, they sacrificed to every god known to every person who dwelled there—and Cruachan contained people from all over the isle, who worshipped hundreds of individual and tribal gods. The myriad sacrifices went on and on, through winter, then spring and summer. When the calendar came round to Lugnasad festival, the Druids doubled their traditional sacrifice to *Tailtu*, the goddess over all nature, in the hope that she had power over the demon creatures. The birds fought right through the offering, and no force of nature came to lay them low. In great distress, the Druids retired from the festivities, if festivities could be used to describe so subdued a gathering.

And then, one morning, the birds failed to appear. Warriors crept out and scanned the horizon for a sign of them. The birds had vanished. By the second day it became apparent that they would not return.

The people threw a big feast.

On the same day that the two birds did not appear at Cruachan, two monstrous black birds showed up over Femen Plain in Munster and wrought similar havoc there. No one could harm these two creatures, either. Eventually, the story of the two northern birds trickled down to Munster and the people of both provinces came to regard them as the very same birds. This did not make anyone in Munster very happy.

When the second year ran to its end, Ochall Ochne sent his steward, Fuidell, to Femen Plain. At Fuidell's approach, the two birds changed back into two pig-keepers; although, to the eyes of the mortals, they simply ceased to be. The pig-keepers' naked bodies were torn and bleeding; their eyes had become hard and black. Fuidell was reminded of his master's glare. He went forward with small, reluctant steps. Friuch saw him first. "No greeting for us?" growled the spindly keeper. "Not for those who wage war in their spirits and feed from the live corpse of their companion in exile," said Rucht.

Fuidell did not know these men. He feared them but feared his master just that extra bit more; he made himself ask them the question that Ochall Ochne had sent him there to ask. "What have you done in your first term?"

"No good," both keepers replied.

Their apparent joy in this saddened Fuidell. He understood that such was magic that it encompassed dark and unforeseen consequences—unforeseen at least to him, though his master might have known well what the keepers had become. Fuidell addressed them again. "You know what you'll be next?"

"Water creatures," the keepers replied, "but kept, we know, from the seas lest we offend Manannán again. A year of fury we'll fight in the Shannon, then a further year in the Suir." Rucht added, "Best warn them not to wash their clothes on the days we come by.

"Done," said Fuidell, and the two vanished from Femen Plain.

When two more years had passed they were transformed into two stags that ravaged the forests with their battle for supremacy. By the end of that period of exile, they no longer remembered their first identities. Hatred of one another shaped their lives. They became two warriors and fought a year in the north, following it with a slaughter in the south. Rinn and Faebur—Point and Edge—the people named them. Their struggle leveled mountains just as their combat as water monsters had flooded lowlands and their time as stags had stripped forests. It seemed to the *Sídhe* who observed them that the two became more evil with each incarnation. Uncaring, the warriors fought on. One would cut off another's arm and that severed arm would continue to move, to try to kill without direction until magic re-attached it at night. Sometimes the warriors were so eviscerated by then that their rib-cages lay open and empty to the spine; but they fought on relentlessly through the two years.

Then they became phantoms and spent their time trying to terrorize each other, assuming demonic shapes with a hundred eyes or rotting, chittering corpses the height of a house. Whole towns fled in panic at their horrible approach.

Next they transformed into dragons—flying dragons, a sight never witnessed since in Eriu. They were made of ice and breathed such cold as to freeze fish into place in a lake with one pass. Winter came early and lasted through the summer those two years.

Then at last the time arrived for the pig keepers' final transfiguration. The *Sídhe* kings chose to turn them into something that would no longer terrify anyone. The change took place in an instant. Two dragons winging across frozen countryside burst open; blood and meat sprinkled down like red rain and, within this rain, fell two tiny yellow maggots. One of these fell into a river—the Cronn—in a part of Ulster province called Cuailnge. The Cronn is a major source of water there, feeding hundreds of springs. The maggot drifted helplessly into one of these springs and from there to a feed trough where it was devoured by a cow. The cow belonged to a farmer named Daire mac Fiachna. The other maggot plunged into a well in Connacht, where it was unknowingly removed in a bucket and fed also to a cow—one belonging to the Queen of Connacht, Maeve.

The punishment had ended—the *Sídhe* had new pig-keepers (both of whom were admonished not to repeat their predecessors' mistakes). What had not ended was the power of malice steeped for so long in those two souls, a power greater than the kings of the *Sídhe* appreciated. A power that, as Fuidell and others of the *Sídhe* had suspected, could bleed into and influence the mortal world around the two.

The two cows that had eaten the two maggots became mysteriously pregnant. Each, on the same day, delivered up a bull. The bull of Cruachan grew into a blood-red beast named Finnbennach after the whiteness of its pointed horns; the bull of Cuailnge was its exact opposite: a dark brown with black horns as shiny as iron, Daire mac Fiachna named it the Donn

for these dark traits. The owners learned, individually, to be wary of the prize bulls. The monsters had nothing in their hearts save anger and frustration at being kept apart from a decisive confrontation. Their single relentless question pushed its way into the world. *Who is more powerful? Who?*



Laeg and Senchan stood at the rail of the pen that held Finnbennach and the rest of Cruachan's cattle. The bull stood scant inches away, allowing them a rare view of its red eyes. Senchan had never seen anything so full of malice. The eye showed white at the edges and it rolled around in a frenzy of pent-up hatred. The eye drew him into its bloody core; he began to hear a shrieking, like the voices of souls in torment. He thought he must be tumbling—the ground had tilted, the plain rolling him along ...

“Come along, boy—wake up!” Laeg's command cut off the shrieking.

Senchan trembled, found himself pressed against the rail. He avoided looking at the red bull again as he climbed down. “Powerful, isn't it?” said Laeg. “And that's just what all of this is about. Who is more powerful? Friuch or Rucht, Faebur or Rinn, Finnbennach or the Donn? It is a question that thrives in the heart of every argument, every fight, every war, that man creates. The cause of every conflict that ever was. It's even at the core of your struggle with Selden.”

Senchan twisted around to stare at Laeg. “But, but that's not so. He *knows* I can't do anything to him. He *knows* he's more powerful.”

“Does he? True enough, he's more forceful, more violent. But not because he knows he's more powerful. No, no. Because he fears your coming of age. Selden's sure to lose what little power he has over you the moment you walk out of your manhood feast. Then you're his equal and he can no longer abuse you without risking dire consequences, such as death. You're more clever and wiser than he'll ever be despite all the training he's withheld from you. You just don't know it yet. Soon, though, you'll defeat him. With your mind, with your wits.”

“But—”

“Not now.” He took Senchan's arm and turned him around.

There, in the middle of Cruachan Plain, stood the ring of stones from Muirthemne. Right in front of him, the pig stone rose up. But now it was in two pieces. The top had cracked where the tiny fissure had been, and the sheared-off portion of it had slid off and impaled in the ground beside it. A distance the width of his foot now divided the two parts.

“Powerful,” Laeg repeated. “We'll come back to this stone again before your journey's done. You can be certain that the world did not leave those two alone for long. The next stone is ready now. It's time to go on.”

He led Senchan along to the second stone on the right. This one was a sharp and sinister-looking spire of rock. Near the tip, two sets of spiraling rings were carved. Senchan reached up and brushed his fingertips lightly over the indented circles.

Behind him, Laeg said, "The twin forts of Cruachan. The home of Maeve and Ailell. She is the rock, you might say."

"And Ailell?" asked Senchan, hardly aware that he had spoken. His fingers slid down from the spirals and lodged in the Ogham notches cut into the stone's edge.

"Ailell is the hard ground beneath."

Across the plain, the wooden walls of two fortresses rippled into view through the heat. Senchan's vision became dotted with black specks. The heat was wasting him. He tried to tell this to Laeg but could not make any noise. "This tale begins in bed ..."

One of the black specks swelled up and blotted out the view of the fortresses. Somehow, miraculously, Laeg managed to remain. Senchan stumbled toward him and stepped through the black disc into a wide low room.

II. THE TALE OF DOMINANCE

I. Pillow Talk

Not far from the caves in which the *Sídhe* of Ochall Oohne dwelled two large round fortresses stood. A great timbered wall enclosed them in a still larger circle, and the whole enormous ring was called the Rath Cruachan. It was here lived the king and queen of Connacht province.

The king, whose name was Ailell, lived in some discontent, and though he had the will to suppress his peevishness, it lurked in him at every waking moment.

Recognized as he was as king of all Connacht, Ailell knew himself to be a *fer for ban thincur*—"a man under a woman's thumb." This did not mean that he regarded his wife as an enemy—far from it; he loved Maeve as deeply and unselfishly as any man could love a woman. Nevertheless, her unremitting pursuit of supremacy did take its toll upon him. So much did it weigh upon him that lately it had seemed to Ailell almost as if another personality—a darkly ruminant personality—sometimes crept into his mind; sometimes a voice not his own whispered a cruel list of shortcomings to him. The voice could strike while he ate a meal or debated law or rode his great chariot. First it shattered his tranquillity, then it vanished, leaving the king dissatisfied and ill-tempered. But this morning, the loud presence had entered his thoughts, spoken its unwelcome message and then, to his great horror, settled in like some abiding lodger. Now as he made love to his wife, Ailell sensed vaguely the resurgence of that audacious presence. The dark voice grew louder, stronger, but he was in the grip of lust, too consumed by coition to hear it, much less blot it out. The perverse thing waited until Ailell came to the crown of his actions, till every bit of sense and awareness had raced from his head to the tip of his member. At that instant he lay open to unimpeded invasion, and the entity simply took control.

The king plumped down to catch his breath amidst the tangle of his wife's white-bronze hair that flowed over the whole of their bed like rills of ice. He looked at her over the one arm she had tucked beneath her head.

Satisfaction swam in her eyes, eyes with irises as pale blue as death. She waited for her husband to soothe her with his voice, then to reawaken her passion like a sunbeam unfolding a flower. He was known to her and to the world as “Ailell of the Honey Tongue” (though what that meant to her did not necessarily correspond to what the rest of the world thought of).

Tonight, however, no sweet words lay behind those beard-enshrouded lips.

He leaned up on one elbow and stared at her like a stranger witnessing her wondrous nakedness for the first time. A spark like cruelty flickered in his eyes and his lean jaw had a hard set to it; but his beard disguised some of this while the queen’s own languor blinded her to the fever on his brow that was not lust. She turned her proud pale face to him. Her eyes rolled up at the expectation of ecstasy that experience promised would follow.

“Is it not the case,” Ailell began gently, “that the wealthy man’s wife is a fortunate one? Would you agree that is so, sweet flower?”

Maeve’s entire countenance ossified. “Certainly,” she answered, bewildered, “but why bring it up here, now?”

“I was thinking earlier of my brothers and their queens and I came round to thinking about you, naturally, being that you’re superior to any one of them.”

“That is undeniably true. Still, I fail to see—

“And I realized in recognizing that superior design”—and here he paused to pass his fingers lightly across her breasts—“how much the better you surely are now than when we contracted to marry.”

The queen had now quite forgotten any interest in a second coupling. “Better in what way, dear Ailell?”

“Why, in all ways, my treasure. Before our marriage, all that was heard of you was that here was a province run by a woman who was, like her kingdom, plundered by all her neighbors.”

Maeve sat up, but forced down her anger in order to learn where this would lead. “How strange that I have never heard you mention this before. It seems to me that I wed you because you lack the meanness of a serf, the fear of a farmer and the jealous nature of a warrior. You are a man of even temperament and unjealous heart, both of which I know to be true from a thousand repeated occasions where lesser men would have revealed their baseness. Not you, Ailell—which is why I married you.” Then to add a sting of her own, she added, “And not Conchovor.” She went on, “Far greater your aspects to me than any *coibche* of pigs and gold you paid my father for the honor of having me. It would have been criminal for a treacherous or cowardly or wicked man to have married so generous and kind a woman as you have.”

“You see, by your own words—you’ve more to your credit just in my person than you had alone.”

He left her no choice with that statement than to defy him. “It is a well-known fact: my father was High King—no possessor of some rocky

piece of unwanted ground, but a true king. He had six daughters, and only one—the one they call Maeve—won a province by her great strength, ingenuity, and wisdom. If any plundering has been done ever, it has been my doing. Men from all over this isle tried to woo me. They recognized that I am sovereignty made corporeal. I had those I chose and have always done. You know very well, Ailell my dearest, that there has never been a time when I had finished with one warrior but that another stood eager and quaking in his shadow. So it will be for me always. Of all those—who would fill a dozen lists—I chose you for the reasons I’ve named. And who was it gave Ailell his wealth of clothing, his shining chariot, and that gold which he now holds up to me as proof of his ascendancy? It is to *me* the villain must answer when you are affronted. You are mine. If I am somehow better for that, I will accept it as so. What you need to remember is that you are no more than a single item among *my* many possessions.”

“That’s plainly absurd,” growled the king. “I possess you as well in like manner. We can’t count ourselves in this matter. At best we cancel each other. However, my fortune’s still the greater. Until you can prove otherwise, it’s Ailell still rules above you.” He smiled a smile that said he had made his count already and knew the outcome. Goaded by this, Maeve leapt from the bed. The bed rested on a platform in the center of their fortress, a pillar at each corner, gauze curtains strung between. A silver wand on a thong hung from a central beam of copper that ran overhead between the pillars. Maeve pushed aside a curtain, grabbed the wand and rapped it fiercely against the beam. A great echo as of a dozen invisible gongs rang through Cruachan.

Within minutes, servants of both parties filled the great chamber around the pedestal. Maeve waited until all were gathered. She scowled, and her arms were crossed beneath her naked breasts. Observing her, the servants were visibly moved.

“It is inventory time,” she announced. “Every piece of jewelry, every cup, every cow and sheep and dog we own is to be counted today, and the ownership of each thing noted by putting them on an appropriate list. One for the king and one for me. Each of you take a Druid with you and count carefully, I warn you. Then bring me the results that I may see who it is rules highest in Connacht.” She dismissed them, then returned to Ailell. But he lay sleeping like a carefree child.

The queen departed from the shared bed and marched to her own chamber, where she gave orders for a certain young warrior to be delivered to her. He was brought in as he had been found—naked and half-asleep. Then he saw Maeve in the fire’s glow with her eyes like liquid coals and her long thin face a goddess’s mask wreathed in a nimbus of silver hair aflame. The warrior came stiffly awake. Soon he gave himself over willingly to an ecstasy like no other waiting to greet him this side of death.

2. The Count

The queen had said “today,” but the tally in fact took many days while servants rattled off items and Druids notched the ever-growing lists. Maeve kept to her chamber and her pleasures therein; Ailell slept an unnatural sleep as if under some spell.

When finally one of the queen’s servants entered her private chamber to announce the completion of the inventory, her warrior had disappeared. Only his bracelets and belt remained, accompanied by the lingering perfume of sex in the air.

Maeve dressed in her purple robes, clasped at the shoulders by rampant gold birds. She went to the central room, found it empty. Ailell had awakened and gone out.

On the great walled plain of Magh Ai she found her husband among the Druids who had done the counting. He stood listening intently to one of them, and, as Maeve walked quickly up beside him, she heard the Druid say, “In all things listed, smallest to largest, you are equal.”

Ailell frowned. Maeve interjected, “Equals we have always been.” She was triumphant. The Druid scowled. “I had not finished,” he said. “Equal, I said, save for a single exception that defies us to judge it fairly.”

“Show us this exception now,” demanded the two contenders.

The Druid and his peers led a procession across the plain to where two cattle herds grazed in distinct, fenced formations that men had forced upon them. Among the cows, the Druid’s exception stood out like a mountain: a huge muscled bull the color of blood and with red eyes so angry that to catch their gaze actually stung. The bull’s horns were white and sharp as spears.

“Finnbennach,” the Druid announced. “He is a calf from the queen’s cow—there.” He pointed to the opposite pen.

“Well!” proclaimed Maeve with a sense of victory. Then she faltered. “But why, then, have you placed him with the king’s herd, you fools?”

“We did no such thing,” replied the incensed Druid. “In fact we tried to drive him across the plain, but he refused to go and his refusal was of such a nature that we’ve no intention of attempting to remove him again. Finnbennach has gone over to the king’s herd because he refuses to be led by a female, albeit his own mother. Thus we cannot yet decide in whose favor falls the bull.”

The king clapped his hands, turned on his heel, and marched off, grinning. Maeve went the few steps forward to the wall of piled stones that surrounded the herd. She confronted the bull, wishing it dead and slaughtered. For an instant those smoldering red eyes met her cold stare, and she saw in them what she had seen in the eyes of her husband three nights past. When the bull looked away, Maeve convulsed as if suddenly released

from some gravity. Unsteadily she turned back and found a servant behind her, awaiting a command, anticipating from experience a riposte from her.

“That bull,” she said, “has tipped the balance of my kingdom, and my fragile Ailell cannot bear such weight on his back.” The servant nodded vigorously. “It is up to me to take back the load and put things in balance again.” She mused silently for a time, then gestured with her head at the second fort of Cruachan. “Go and fetch MacRoath for me.” The servant bowed. “Send him to my sunroom.” As she said it, she felt the hot eyes of the bull, behind her, touch upon her again.

3. The Donn

The messenger MacRoath stepped warily into Maeve’s sunroom. He was a short man with uncommonly swarthy features. Great strength hid in his spare frame, but his arms were of unequal lengths from a childhood accident when a horse had fallen on him. Of all the men in Maeve’s service, MacRoath ranked among the best. He was a magnet for news and information and possessed the instincts of a diplomat. Nevertheless, whenever summoned by Maeve, he broke out in a cold sweat—he knew too well her capricious tendencies, her climatic shifts of mood. He could not count the number of people who had vanished after being called to the *grianan*, the sunny parlor. A mortal dread consumed him when he heard that she waited for him there of all places.

Maeve’s *grianan* was an immense chamber filled with beams and tricks of light. Trellises along which vines and ivies had been trained formed the ceiling. Portions of the roof had not been shingled but were filled instead with some translucent material of Druidic creation that reminded MacRoath of ice on a pond. The walls, likewise, were more flora than wood, and breezes set the ivies nodding as if announcing his arrival.

Maeve awaited him on a great spread of pillows behind gauze curtains sprinkled with gold. The fine curtains billowed sinuously in and out of the sunlight. It seemed to MacRoath that he had to enter a mystical realm of shimmer and smoke to reach her. Nor was this the first time he had thought that: secretly, he believed the queen had divine attributes. Certainly her lust was remarkable; unappeasable. What *did* happen to her lovers?

He drew back a sparkling veil and entered the circle of pillows. Reclining, Maeve looked up as if drawn out of deep thought. Then she smiled softly and asked, “Do you know of what has happened?”

“I’ve heard something of it, yes.”

Her smile turned bitter. “I must find the equal of that bull, MacRoath. I must match him, put him in his place.” He wondered, did she mean Finnbennach or Ailell? “You will go out,” she said, “search the whole isle if need be for a bull the equal or superior of that blood-red demon.”

MacRoth sat down. "That's unnecessary. I know of such a one already. Yes, and he's a little bigger by all accounts than the White Horn. In the province of Ulster—a farmer called Daire mac Fiachna owns a huge bull. Its color—how coincidental is your comparison—is said to be that of dried blood on iron. It has won a reputation as fierce as our own."

"This farmer, you know him?"

"Of him only," he replied humbly.

"Always." The queen smiled on him. "You must go there, then. Offer this Daire in return for a year's loan of his bull fifty yearlings picked—equally, of course—from our herds. Try to keep silence in your going there, but if the people of—where?"

"Cuailnge."

"If the people of Cuailnge should find out and they fear the loss of their bull, offer to give them a share of land on Magh Ai the size of this farmer's land. Also, if he will come here and care for the bull, I'll give him a place between my thighs with time enough to appreciate the gift."

Time enough to expend his life, thought MacRoth, at which point the gift stays given. He arose and left, thanking the Dagda that she had never offered to pay him in like coin.

The afternoon he spent in collecting the people he wanted in his entourage, then set out with them for the part of Ulster called Cuailnge—a peninsula of hilly land bordered by rivers, containing some of the best grazing land in all Eriu.

Several days later, they entered the region. Going ahead alone, MacRoth managed to learn the whereabouts of Daire mac Fiachna without arousing undue attention. He knew what his queen wanted.

The owner of the Donn had white hair unkempt and spread all across his brow. His white beard and eyebrows were prickly. His mad-looking eyes lit up when MacRoth identified himself.

"Such an honor," cried Daire. His voice was like a beehive. "Great messenger of the Connacht clans, heh. You *have* to come in. Why didn't someone run ahead and tell me, mmm? As it is, it's going to take some time to prepare a proper feast." He waved his hand at all ten of them to hurry in, at the same time screeching orders to his servants. MacRoth sent his retinue away and sat down alone with Daire.

"What's this?" asked the farmer. "Where's everybody gone? Well, the feast won't take half so long to prepare now." He scrounged some parasite from his beard and popped it between his nails. "So, why is it you've come to visit me, hmm?"

"The Donn."

Daire's whole body rocked as he nodded. "Word of the great gargantuan of beef has reached the ears of Cruachan, has it?"

"Obviously, but there's more to it than that. Queen Maeve would very much like you to loan her the bull. She has promised you fifty heifers in

return—one for every week she has the Donn in her possession. Think of the herd you could start with the Donn and all those cattle.”

“Can’t start any herd with *that* bull. Tried once. He damn near ripped the cow in two. Just that first teensy poke. Oh, it was a mess, it was terrible. Poor cow. We had to eat her.”

He fell silent. As he contemplated the offer he became more crafty, a shift in attitude that was painted across his face. “Besides, the herd I have would spill into the sea if I added to it much more. Manannán needs none of my cattle to complement his pigs, heh?” He burst out laughing. “So, what are fifty heifers to me?”

“I see. You would not want this bull out of your sight, is that it?”

“Not out of my sight, yes. Yes. No, I would not want to let him go that way. Yes.”

MacRoth leaned closer. “Then the queen proposes you come with the bull to Cruachan. She promises that, in return for your trust, she will welcome you with open thighs.”

Daire mac Fiachna trembled, just a little. He sat up rigidly to hide his excitement. His eyes started to water.

“Of course,” MacRoth went on, “if you’re worried about how the people of Cuailnge will react to losing their renowned Donn, we have an offer to placate them as well.”

“Oh, *sod* the Ulstermen. When can we leave?”

MacRoth sighed. “Would you mind if we had our feast first?”

Daire mac Fiachna nodded, bright-eyed, stuffed his beard into his mouth with both hands and began to chew.

4. The Best Laid Plans

MacRoth ate his boiled beef slowly, savoring both the flavor of the meat and the taste of easy victory. He had captured the farmer without the least effort. Privately, he toasted the queen for her unquenchable desire, safe at this distance from it himself. She made it so easy to ensnare people, men and women alike; such was her ubiquitous reputation and sway. She was a heady drink that brought thirst to anyone offered the cup.

The feast lasted late into the night. Daire sat on MacRoth’s left. He drank far too much, but hardly noticed, so busy was he in his imagined couplings with Maeve.

Meanwhile, the servants and attendants of both men had sampled various brews and fallen into drunken palaver. A Cruachan messenger proclaimed, “No better man lives than the owner of this house.” He hoisted his mug and splashed his own leg, which set him to giggling.

“That isn’t so at all,” argued another. “His king, Conchovor, is a superior man. The best in Ulster, it’s said. He’s made the crops bountiful and the beef savory and the wine flowing. And it’s good he doesn’t know about our li’l p-p-peregrination, because he would certainly not let that bull leave here. Then we’d ’ave to contend with the whole country.”

A woman in Daire’s household overheard this and excused herself from another conversation. She asked to what bull the drunkards referred.

“Why, to the Doon.”

“The Donn.”

“Absolutely. Everyone’s heard about it and MacRoth’s convinced old Daire-down—ha!—to cart it to Cruachan.”

“Which is a good thing,” added the other besotted Connachtman, “because we’d ’ve stormed in and snatched it from your master otherwise. So, come join us in a drink to your master. Here’s to ol’ Daire-down. May the cunning cunny of the Queen not gobble him up too quickly.” They laughed, a malicious sound, and collapsed against one another.

The concubine went straight to Daire, bidding him to leave the feast. Once they were alone, she shoved away his grasping hands and asked, “Is it true that you’re taking the Donn to Maeve?”

“Ah, Maeve,” pined Daire. He clumsily wiped spittle from his ragged beard. “Yes, it’s true. What’s it to concern you?”

“Are you aware that if you’d refused, that bunch out there would have slain us all and stolen the bull?”

“What? No! Not MacRoth.”

“Truly. I’ve heard two of the messengers with him speak the plan just now. Those two, there.” She pointed through the doorway.

“They’d kill us for my Donn? What?”

“Indeed they would. And, so, dearest Daire, think now what must without doubt await you in Cruachan. The thighs of Maeve have teeth, and everyone knows it.” The farmer’s lust withered at the image his concubine painted, just as she had intended. They had called him her *master*, how dare they? She was a legal concubine with a contract that made her Daire’s *ben urnadna*: his legal wife for a year. Well, they would soon regret treating *her* like a common slave.

In the morning the party from Cruachan awakened and prepared sluggishly to leave. MacRoth found himself with a thumping headache that made his eyes water when he bent down. Damn all wheaten beers, he cursed. One never should mix them with wines, even Maeve’s best imported. He stumbled about half-blindly through the smoky hall, unable to collect his baggage or his thoughts. It was the dreadful hangover that prevented him from noticing before everyone was ready that no party of Ulstermen had been assembled to accompany them. He considered at first

that Daire might be going alone, but that seemed so unlikely that MacRoth sent one of his people to have the farmer come speak with him.

“Why aren’t you ready?” he asked when Daire arrived. “Did you drink too much? We should get the Donn and go. Remember Maeve’s promise.”

Daire envisioned a lichen-covered cave mouth lined with razor teeth. “No bull leaves here today,” he said shakily.

“I thought you were so impatient to go. Those creamy queenly thighs await you hungrily, you know.”

Daire felt himself shrivel up. “The bull leaves no day at all. And if I weren’t a fair man, there’d be no Connacht messengers leaving here either, without their throats opened up.” He made a rasping sound and drew one finger sharply across his throat.

For a moment MacRoth suspected that the promise of sex with Maeve had undone the man’s wits. “Please explain this to me,” he said. By this point, the servants of both sides had surrounded the two. The outer circle belonged to the farmer’s people and each of them held a weapon, quietly drawn.

“You said that if I did not come willingly to Cruachan your queen would have come back and killed me, taken my Donn away by force!”

“I never said any such thing.”

“Not you personally, perhaps. But aren’t you answerable for all your people? I know I am for mine. Those two there”—he pointed out the drunkards—“proclaimed that very thing last night. What do you think of that, heh?”

MacRoth could not help but chuckle; he tried to disguise it as a cough. “When did a man of your station,” he asked, “listen to the voice of too much food and drink?”

Daire misunderstood this as a slur upon his concubine. “Men often murmur in their cups,” he muttered angrily, “what they dare not speak out loud, hmm? I’ve said all I’ll say. The Donn remains here. That’s final. And you go home empty-handed, though full-bellied, which is more than you deserve!” He swept back his wild hair with one hand, tilted up his head, and strode imperiously from the room.

MacRoth’s lips were by then so tight that the blood had been pressed out of them. He stared up from under his brows at the two accused messengers. Their inability to meet his eyes confirmed their guilt to him, but he found himself unable to unlock his lips to lambaste them. He closed his eyes and lowered his throbbing head.

5. The Return

This time, when MacRoth entered Maeve’s *grianan*, it lay dark and gloomy, contrary to its name. The thin curtains hung like a wall of mist or

woven spider's webs; behind it, the queen's shadow had the wings of a raven. "You returned with nothing," she stated. Her voice echoed all around him.

He did not even attempt to part the veils, having no desire to prove the contours true. "That's right," he said, then went on to tell the whole story, frightened all the while for his life because he had selected the men who had fumbled away the Donn. Would she know that? And, if she did, what would be his punishment? The wings of the shadow flapped. The ivies nodded in the dark breeze; now they accused him. He swallowed, then said, "And the foolish farmer believed their drunken lies."

"Lies?" said Maeve softly. "Hardly. It is well-known here, although you would not know yet. I have already made plans to take the bull by force. What care I how I acquire it?"

"But all Ulster will rise up."

"Undoubtedly, they shall. But we will find a way in and out, and if a few warriors are lost along the way, it's of no consequence so long as they belong to Ailell. Go now and tell Fergus mac Roich I wish to see him."

"Of course." She had let him off; he turned away, elated, but her sharp whisper froze his joy. "Before you do, however, MacRoith, I want some justice done." He stood petrified, breathless, awaiting her pronouncement of doom. The queen said, "Those two messengers, those drunkards—have their lips stitched together. And make the others who went with you watch."

"Yes. Immediately." He made a hasty bow, then hurried out of the parlor, breathing hard as if he had just run a race.



Senchan, like MacRoith, found the queen to be an object of terror. When MacRoith ran from the parlor, Senchan was close on his heels—or would have been if Laeg had not grabbed hold of him and jerked him up short. "There is no point in following him just now," Laeg explained. "What he's about to do will keep until you've been properly introduced to Fergus Mac Roich. And that introduction cannot transpire here." Laeg let loose of the boy, who, though listening, had been keeping his eye on the fluttering curtains across the room.

"Fergus is a unique man, Senchan." Laeg prodded him. "Pay attention, boy. I'm telling you something important. I said, Fergus is unique. His strength and courage are surpassed by Cu Chulainn alone. He's an Ulsterman, but he lives, as you now know, here in Cruachan, in the house of Ulster's bitterest enemy. The reasons for this are essential to your understanding of everything that's to follow." He shoved Senchan forward, out of the sunroom.

They moved along the corridors of dark wood, past rooms of every size and use: one a weaving room, one for baking, another an empty feast

hall not unlike Selden's. A fortress, it seemed to Senchan, was just many houses fit together.

Laeg passed him and maintained a quick pace that forced Senchan to hurry. Senchan wondered why he always did this. Sometimes it seemed to him that Laeg forgot he was even there, like the times when Laeg drifted into his trances. Then his lips would move as if he were repeating a silent chant. Senchan would stare at him, leaning close to try to catch the words but hearing nothing other than the soft smacking of Laeg's lips.

It was during those moments that time seemed to fly past. Senchan would turn from his guide and find himself in a new location or in the same place but at a different moment in the day. He wasn't honestly sure he knew why he allowed all this to go on, why he didn't run away. Except that he wasn't too sure there was any place familiar to run to. This was a world unknown to him, peopled with these incomprehensible, sinister creatures. That Maeve—she horrified him. What had she done to that poor soldier that left behind only jewelry? He shuddered to consider the possibilities. How to escape from the nightmare of it was what he most wanted to know; but it was the last question he would have dared put to Laeg.

The corridor turned suddenly. Laeg stepped aside.

Ahead of them, Senchan could see the doorway leading out of the fort. It should have been a rectangle of daylight at the end of the hall. Instead, only specks of daylight showed—where the massive stone that had appeared in the doorway did not entirely fit the frame.

The stone was a pillar of dark greenish rock with pale lines swirled through it. The whole of the surface that crowded the doorway was covered in a relief of runes. More Ogham writing laced the edge, continuing over the phallic tip and, presumably, down the opposite side. The ground around the stone had been pushed up, as if it had erupted there.

"Do you know the word 'internecine,' Senchan?" Laeg asked.

Senchan shook his head.

"It refers to terrible conflict within a single body where both halves of the body suffer mutually, for which reason an internecine conflict is generally useless, pointless." He paused for a moment, watching Senchan watching the stone. Then, instead of explaining his remarks, he said, "This is Fergus mac Roich's stone." He went around the boy.

"Where will we come out?" Senchan glanced back along the corridors, wondering again about MacRoith and, especially, Maeve.

"I don't know *that*," answered Laeg, impatiently. His voice sounded far off.

Senchan turned back to him, to no one at all. The hallway was empty, the stone like a giant's thumb pressed against the door. The walls of Cruachan creaked as if an unseen hand attached to that thumb had begun to squeeze the fort. Senchan could visualize it quite clearly. With a deep breath, he jumped forward and merged with the runes.

III.

THE TALE OF THE KINGSHIP OF ULSTER



1. Talking Heads

On the hilly eastern horizon a swollen red crescent of dawn inched into view and turned the white cowl of the Druid's robes into molten orange. His hazel eyes glistened with the light, eyes like those of a wolf, an impression further enhanced by his long, prominent nose and by the short brown beard that grew high on his cheeks. His curly hair swept back from a shaved tonsure—a clean line from one ear to the other over the top of his skull. His gold earrings glinted, his high forehead shone with the dawn's light, which bled slowly down his body until it embraced him from head to foot. At that moment he might have been a statue of red-hot bronze.

The hazy plain below him still lay in shadow. Flickering torches indicated a group of people gathered in the thin mist around the massive figure of a boar fashioned out of wicker. Inside it a bound man lay among small platters of wood on which the Druid had inscribed messages that some of those people down there wanted carried to their dead ancestors. Fire would bind those epistles to the soul of the captive. In death, he became their courier. He had been found guilty of rape, caught as he was in the act. That crime made him a superb choice for this sacrifice, a fertility rite. The people were, the Druid considered, most fortunate to have caught him.

Soon the whole disk of the engorged sun had cleared the distant hills. The plain below glowed pinkish as if heather had suddenly blossomed there. The mists rose away. Torchlight became redundant but remained.

The Druid Cathbad raised his arms, held his hazel wand horizontally above his head; above it, the crescent of the moon hung, tiny in the blue.

Loudly, he chanted, “The smiling eye of Belenos is open. It sees your sorrow, lack and loss. In his sight send the sacrifice across the plain. From red dawn to red isle, let blood be the road. From dry to wet, barren to fecund, out of death emerges a birth! Welcome, Belenos, and behold with what honor your people greet you!”

He lowered one arm, pointed the wand down at the wicker figure. The torches leaped into the air as if of their own will, bright fires arcing to land on or under the figure.

The bound rapist began to scream. Cathbad listened carefully, counting each separate cry. After nine, the rapist fell silent. A spout of greasy smoke appeared in the midst of the burning wicker boar. The Druid nodded with satisfaction. Nine was as good a number as could be asked for. No further divining would be necessary. The woman for whom those people had gathered would give birth now; she and her husband could rejoice in that certainty. A babe blessed by the sun, kissed by the moon. He drew signs of thankfulness to each of these celestial objects with his wand. The crowd below, comprehending, cheered.

Cathbad pulled up the hood of his robe and walked up the hill.

The cheers went up again, to him, but he did not respond; they had fed him, which was all the payment he asked, and the walk back to his tumulus, the mound enclosing his secret dwelling, would take all day. There were two *nemetons* to visit on the road, two sacred groves awaiting his blessing before any rites could be performed there. The ritual of consecration took hours and then he would have to wait while the fronds of mistletoe were tied to the trees ringing the grove. Only then would it be a proper *nemeton*; only then could he walk on. And then there was a disputation in Taitiu awaiting his judgment, for which he would have to don his black robes again, as he had while hearing the evidence against the rapist. Hopefully, this other matter would be as simple to decide. Oh, but this area had too many novices, not enough priests. He would be glad of a few more graduates to carry the load with him.

At the crest of the hill, the Druid paused and sniffed the air. He sensed something peculiar nearby and looked all around, but the two observers—the charioteer and the boy—were invisible to him, just a sense of warmth, a space where the wind divided and passed around. The hackles rose on his neck. Being a man of knowledge, he did not care for the things he knew nothing of. Finally, hefting his wand and the parcel containing his black robes, he moved on.

His thin hand, carrying the bundle, bore scars across the knuckles, recalling earlier times before Cathbad had devoted himself to the nineteen-year course of study that had brought him here. After awhile his arm began to ache and he switched the bundle to his other hand, took the wand in his right. He held it out for a moment like a sword, and he smiled distantly.

In his youth, Cathbad had been a war-chief, representing his king on battlefields too numerous even for memory to contain. He had *been* the king in time of war, carried the king's sword into battle. And it was that sword that had led him away from the field and into the arcane principles of the priesthood. Battle upon battle, he came to wonder why it was common swords bent when they struck and had to be straightened again before a second strike, while weaponry manufactured by the Druids remained straight and sharp after repeated attacks. He had seen so many men and women die because their blades had curled up like a triskele at the first deflection, leaving them helpless until they could pry the blade back. More often they were killed first. The secret of Druid manufacture had drawn him in like a fish on a line until he could think of nothing else.

Battle lost its meaning. Knowledge became more important, then all-consuming. To learn the reasons behind an act became more vital than to commit it. He gave himself over to Druid lore. His king found another champion.

However, in his quest for knowledge, he would go sixteen years before uncovering the mystery that had brought him to this brotherhood: that the Druid weapon-makers paid homage to Goibniu the Great Weapon Fashioner by pouring blood over each hot smoking tang. The God of Smiths, in reply to the offering, placed great strength in the blade through the blood. This revelation awed him, but as a Druid, never more as a warrior. "It is holier to believe than to know," he muttered absently. That was what he and the others told people outside the order. Certainly, that rule kept the secret safe within their grasp, and just as certainly no Druid believed it. But, then, warriors had no reason to know why a sword held its shape. For a warrior it was enough to know he could count on it. His skill lay elsewhere, his training lived in muscle and sinew. Druids stood between men and gods, a human bridge that kept both sides safe.

As he crossed the hills of southern Ulster and smelled the sea's breath far away, Cathbad pondered the choice he had made so long ago. He wondered what he might have become if curiosity had not compelled him to seek answers—if he had just been a simple single-minded warrior. Then, laughing at his own answer, he said, "A trophy." The rich joys of thinking carried him off, and the journey passed unnoticed.

Cathbad's mound lay in a forest near Loch Ramor the oak grove *nemeton* he presided over was half an hour's walk from there. A huge boulder, apparently a natural formation, hid the entrance to the tumulus completely from prying eyes. Only when one stood adjacent to both the stone and the mound on the right did the recess in the boulder appear and, within it, the opening into the mound. The only remaining opening was a smoke-hole in the crest of the tumulus, and the smoke rising from it on cold days had been used as proof of more than one tale of the *Sídhe*. That was just fine so far as Cathbad was concerned: it kept the curious at a safe distance.

By the time Cathbad reached the tumulus, even the smoke would have been invisible in the darkness. He wove his way through the forest by memory, brushed the stone with his shoulder as he passed from view behind it. Inside, he went about his business as purposefully as a blind man. A tallow lamp awaited his hand just where he reached for it in the blackness. He brushed his hazel wand across it. The lamp flared up, spitting and hissing like a contentious cat, and casting a hollow light about the cavern.

The walls of Cathbad's temple were covered with carvings, runes and drawings. One set of spirals represented his nineteen-year-cycle calendar. Another, the year divided into feastnights and lunar equinoxes. The rough floor contained a small rectangular hole in its center—a shaft that descended far below, perhaps to the bowels of the earth. Into it, the Druid threw sacrifices, old wands, and his garbage. Near the shaft stood a great black cauldron. Flanking it as they flanked the inside of the cave entrance behind him, two squared-off pillars rose up to the low cavern ceiling. The pillars contained six niches apiece. Each niche contained a severed human head.

As the tallow candle took life and illuminated the entire cavern, the heads opened their eyes and, yawning, looked at Cathbad. He ignored their gaze as he passed them. Setting down his bundle, he muttered, "Darker out than a Fomor's shit."

"Ooh," responded the heads, "that's *dark*." They appreciated his occasional bits of description of the world outside that they no longer played a part in. These were Cathbad's *vathi*, his seers.

With some reluctance, Cathbad straightened and asked, "What have you for me?"

"Riddles," answered a head by the door, and the session began. "A big future," said another, high up on the right of the cauldron.

Cathbad pinched his beak of a nose. He would have preferred to sleep before wading into their twisted truths, but the *vathi* would resent his napping after having awakened them and would babble out all sorts of insults at him. He would have to put a spell of silence over them, and he was much too tired to do that. Then he was sure that, later, they would tangle their riddles that much more—they had done so before.

Groaning as he squatted down beside the cold cauldron, he said, "All right, unravel your riddles." Casually, he tapped his wand to the base of the cauldron. A small fire sprang up, catching the peat bricks laid around the pot.

"Tell me whose immense future do we inspect tonight"—he rubbed his hands together before the fire—"and let's not waste our time with sniggering comments, please. I'm *very* tired. I'm doing this first only out of my deep regard for you. So, who are your conundrums about?"

Between pillars the heads exchanged gleeful glances. In unison they proclaimed, "You!"

Cathbad coughed and stopped rubbing his hands together. “Me?!”

“Mmm.”

“A future coming.”

“A virgin dethroned.”

“A king dethroned, too, yes.”

“And a charmed child on his seat.” Then, at some secret signal, the heads fell silent, waiting, watchful.

Cathbad drew himself back up on his feet, his vexation plain. “Is this some preposterous joke? I’m very near throwing the lot of you out into the night. I’ll let the wolves have you, you trophies for ravens. You’re fortunate I’m so weary or I’d do it this second, but don’t try me further.”

One of the heads giggled but stopped abruptly as the others glared at him. So what if the Druid had threatened to toss them out so many times it was ludicrous? This once he just might do it.

A female head stated, “A royal woman, daughter of the Saffron Heel and twelve foster fathers. She dwells on an isle not far but distant. Fierceness flows in her veins. Her army is full female all fuliginous in fashion. You follow?”

“*Fluently*, thank you,” he answered, only slightly mollified by the disclosure.

Another head took up the chant. “She wears no man, nor has she ever, though she’s worn out enough to have two daughters in tow. Yet it’s the son of her womb who rules seven years hence from his birthnight.”

“The father is a priest of great power with a nose to match. His wits are addled by half and he’s quite forgot how to play crown and feathers—”

“*You* could be buried beneath a hill, my little wit,” shouted Cathbad, “like Bran!”

The head pouted. “I say what I see, head-master. Don’t blame me.”

“Head-master,” Cathbad grumbled. “You say I am to locate a specific warrior, convince her to lie with me? To make a king?”

“Ah, he sees to the very core.”

“He does, he does.”

“A regular riddle-master, a mage of mazes, a whit of a wit—”

“Hold your tongue!” bellowed the Druid.

“I would, great Cathbad, but I’ve no fingers to clasp it.” The heads all burst into laughter at that. He had never seen them so audacious.

Frustrated, he marched out of the room. The laughter died quickly behind him as the heads speculated on what he meant to do. When he returned, they fell silent. He had changed his clothing, exchanging his robe for a white animal’s skin—a bull’s skin. He went to the cauldron again, but this time leaned over the edge and looked into it.

“Bull-dream! Bull-dream!” someone shouted.

“Hush!” admonished another; then, to him, “Wait, we’ll tell you straight.”

“Plain speaking,” assured the head below that one.

The Druid paused to reply to the room at large, "Thank you, no. I'll find out for myself the truth of what you say without playing the fool for a bunch of horseless headmen."

"Well, I'll be screwed."

"Not again in this life!" came the shouted rejoinder. The heads, as he had anticipated, began arguing and insulting one another. While they babbled like a feasting crowd, Cathbad set to work. He lit a torch off the cauldron fire, then went through an opening far back in the chamber that led deep into the caverns below. Here the walls were of cracked crystal, and stalactites hung down like rainbow ice. Here no wind had ever blown and the air smelled as old as the tales of the Tuatha de Danann. The bull-robed Druid went on, sure of his path, passing deeper into the earth's secret places. Creatures with blind, egg-yolk eyes skittered at his coming—things that had evolved without ever having felt the warmth of Belenos' Eye. Some hissed and fled, others stood their ground, sensing the immensity of the being passing by. Their tiny hearts fluttered in their watery bodies, revealing them where they stood. He passed them by, going on until the air had turned arctic and the trickles of water solidified. There he found what he wanted—a small ice-encrusted pot much like his cauldron. It contained a dark, frozen substance. After first wrapping tatters of the bull-skin around each hand, he grasped the rings on the pot and pulled it free from where it had frozen to the cavern floor. Then, grunting from the effort but alert and revived by the cold, he carried it away with him back through the corridors of eternal night, around and out like a small sea creature escaping from a nautilus. The torch, lying across the lip of the pot, rolled back and forth and threatened at any moment to set fire to his wrists.

The echoes of voices came to him first, long before he saw the light of the tallow. The heads were still slandering one another and, by the sound of it, tempers were flaring. It was no wonder, he thought, that they had led abbreviated lives. He entered among them again and set his cold burden into the center of the large cauldron.

The heads broke off their arguing. "What's that he's doing?" one of them asked the group in general.

"*Tarbfeis*," replied another, helmeted, head.

"What's that?"

"You must be new here," answered a head from below. "He does it now and again. His *bull* dream—reveals the identity of kings, the whim of the weather, the boils on a squatter's backside." The head snickered.

"Yes, but what's the secret?"

"Ah, well, now," began the helmeted head mysteriously, "that would be telling."

"You mean you don't know," accused the one.

"Of course I know," insisted the other. "Sort of."

Cathbad touched his wand once to the large cauldron. The iron began to glow, at first in a circle around the tip of the stick but soon spreading to ring the lower half of the container. The color rose by degrees until the whole cauldron glowed red.

Watching, he looked as he had at dawn—a figure cast in flame, his deep-set eyes molten in carmine shadow.

Steam rose out of the cauldron, then a burping, bubbling sound. The glow began to fade. As quickly as it had heated, the cauldron cooled to black. Moving nearer, Cathbad accidentally touched his wand against the metal again. The wand turned to ash and sprinkled out of his hand. It had run out of power. He sighed. A new one would have to be made. These days he seemed to be fashioning wands every other week. Pretty soon he was going to run out of hazel trees nearby. Maybe he could make do with willow for awhile.

Leaning over the edge of the cauldron, he lifted out the smaller pot. The liquid in it had thawed and now had the consistency of porridge. He set it down, then sat beside it. The heads watched, enraptured.

The thick reddish liquid continued to smoke as Cathbad took a thimble-cup and filled it from the pot. He then chanted over the cup, so softly that the heads could not make out a word of it. No one knows what words put prophecy into the bull's blood.

Cathbad drank the thimble dry. A thin trail of warmth ran down inside him, soon branched out through his limbs, into his head. The blood in the pot started to swirl. A whirlpool appeared in its center. Cathbad stared down into the spinning pit.

The contents of the pot became translucent. Tiny figures appeared through it. The whirlpool rose up and expanded, sucking Cathbad down into the center of the vortex. He said a single word: "*fuil*." Blood. One segment of the whirlpool slowed and began to spin counter to the rest. This was the point he sought, the stretch of time that concerned him. He released his hold on the present and allowed himself to fall into the riddle of the *vathi*.

They had not lied to him, his seers. She was there: the daughter of the Saffron Heel.

Nessa.

2. The Amazon Queen

Laeg and Senchan stood on a rocky cliff overlooking a crashing sea.

"Not long after she had turned the marriageable age of twelve," Laeg said, "Nessa's foster-family was slain by a marauding band of Picts who

had sailed into a nearby bay. They spared her, the strange girl of contrasts—of black hair and white skin. She looked an awful lot like their moon goddess, and the superstitious pillaging Picts decided she should be awarded to their chief. He waited with the rest of their party back on the beach. Nessa was led naked before him. When she finally stood before him and saw what a loathsome, spotty creature he was, she laughed at him so shamelessly that it was the Pictish chieftain who felt naked on that cold northern beach. His face purpled, which at least hid the splotchiness of his skin. He drew his sword to slay the insolent girl. Nessa turned to her captors and asked for a sword, that she might try to defend herself. That was her right, as in any combat. One of the men nearest her drew his weapon and handed it to her. The chieftain paused to watch Nessa struggle with the weapon, one hand then two, seeking for a balance that seemed lost to her, holding it in every possible way. It was obvious to the most obtuse among them that the girl had never picked up a sword before in her life. The chieftain laughed at her idiocy in defying him. He strutted forward to deal with her. His head still wore that malicious grin as it hit the sand beside his jerking, blood-fountain of a body. One swift blow had done the job: a triumph that made clever Nessa the new chieftain. However, she had some different ideas on the tribal arrangement. She chose three of the women from the group to accompany her, but only one man—the one who had given her his sword, whose name was Fachtna Fathach. This group of five destroyed the shored boats save one. In that one they sailed out of the bay, leaving behind the confused marauders of whom nothing further is known.

“After a day’s journey, Nessa and her crew arrived at an uninhabited boreal isle that she claimed as her own. It was so tiny, they could walk its perimeter in half an hour. Bitter winds assailed its rocky face and few creatures dwelt there—mostly black seals, which became the group’s staple for everything. They ate the meat, dressed in the slick black skins from head to foot. Against the cruel weather, they built sturdy stone huts. The remainder of their needs they acquired by plundering the neighboring coastline. New women returned with them as often as not. Soon the whole northern coast was alive with tales of the isle of women warriors who gave no quarter and expected none. Fachtna became Nessa’s husband. Other men joined occasionally, too—the women neither hated nor resented men; they just preferred the company they’d grown used to. Nessa bore two daughters, Deichtire and Findchoem, by Fachtna. But he grew restive over time, under her gracious yoke. He had a secret jealousy. To three of the newer arrivals he went, plotting to overthrow his wife, promising himself to each of the three conspirators in turn. In truth he intended to master them all. His plot was discovered at an incipient stage. Nessa cursed him: ‘A shame upon your beard!’ He covered his face in his hands at this cruelest of revilements. She had every right to level this upon him, too, for such scurrilous behavior deserves the harshest punishment. After that day no

one who met him could overlook the disgrace that made a sigil of his face; he took to wearing a cowl. Nessa claimed the rights of a full divorce from him. As he had provoked it, his *coibche*—in this case, his share of all plundering—remained with her, and Fachtna was sent off in his boat with the sword he had lent her, his clothes, and three bickering, tussling banshees.

“After that experience, Nessa took no other husbands. She got her pleasure from male concubines brought over for her or, more often, from one of the warriors she could trust. This, then, was the woman in the *tarbfeis*, Senchan. And this is where Cathbad came to find her.”

They turned from the crashing seascape and set off across the small, uninviting island.

3. What The Druid Knew

Rarely did the northern clime offer Nessa’s isle either warmth or dryness, but a few days each year the summer air did heat up enough to make sealskin slick with sweat. On one such day, Nessa and some of her women doffed their black garments to lie idly outside her hut on wide slabs of stone hot from the sun. The naked women felt lazy and pleasant, like big, well-fed cats. They told stories and jokes and recounted old adventures to the newer members of their group, but fell finally into a drowsy silence. They did not hear any approaching footsteps; did not notice they had a visitor until he was almost upon them.

Nessa heard someone gasp. She opened one eye a crack and saw a Druid striding silently toward her. She sat up. The warriors looked first at their leader, then at the robed figure whose face was hidden deep in the shadows of his blindingly white robe. If he noticed these lazing observers, he did not act as if he had.

Nessa wondered if he were real. Her isle was virtually sacrosanct. No one had shouted out the sighting of a boat, which should have happened if a priest had journeyed to her isle; Druidry was not practiced here. They had their own priestess, their own god.

As the apparition passed her, she proclaimed loudly, “There are *no* Druids on this island,” expecting the figure to pass right on by, deaf to her as a ghost would be. But the robed figure halted and turned his hidden face to her.

“There are now,” he said.

Nessa sat up straighter. “Why have you come here?”

“Because you require my service.”

“I need nothing of a man whose life is a secret.”

The bright cowl bobbed. "I was once a war-chief, too. I know as well as you when to lunge and when to withdraw my sword."

Nessa tried to ignore the ticklish sensation brought on by his ambiguous riddling. She inhaled deeply and said, "This is a good day, isn't it?"

"It is a good day," answered the Druid, "for begetting a king upon a queen." With that he pushed back his hood and stared openly down upon her. His gold earrings sparkled, two suns. His shaved forehead glistened.

Nessa studied his face, the cryptic message held for her in his deep-set eyes. She had had little experience in dealing with Druids, but not one of the few she had met had affected her this strangely, this ... lickerishly.

"Is your riddle true?" she asked.

"It is. A child conceived this day will become a great king, forever remembered."

Nessa arose from her stone. The other women looked at one another in wonder and confusion. "I should be interested to see you wield that sword of yours," said Nessa. "Come with me." She took his scarred hand and led him away. He made a strange backward gesture at the other women. At first they thought he had shaken his fist at them; but when they looked at the slab of stone where their queen had lain, they found a sprig of mistletoe lying within the perspiration shade of her, where the stain of her thighs met.

Nessa could not believe the Druid's prowess in making love. She thought she had tasted every flavor of coupling there was, yet nothing in all her experience had prepared her for his fierce penetration. He made her wild, made her shed her human senses to take on those of some elemental being. She dreamed while he thrust into her of the touch of a god. The touch took her away from herself and that cold room, into warm wet places. The dream burst in a pain that was exquisite. She came back from where he had driven her to find him staring down into her eyes with an alarming glare. But he was smiling.

"Cathbad," she whispered.

"You know me?"

"I heard your name spoken just now in a dream of spinning blood."

His smile grew. "A Druid has little to offer in the way of *coibche*. Our riches are knowledge."

"I've no family for you to pay, so your *coibche* would be mine in any case—and I feel you have an overwhelming treasure for me. I should like to experience it regularly. You can pay a little at a time, as you come and go."

"I accept, provided the resting place for my wand is your dowry."

"We're of the same mind, I see," she said with an irony as heavy as his.

"Then we must be of the same body, too." He caressed her hips. His fingers glided, strayed like birds.

“Druids’ studies include areas I never would have suspected,” said Nessa. She reached down to stroke him up.

As Cathbad had seen, she became pregnant that day, though whether from the first or the fifteenth round it cannot be said. Nessa grew quiet and sedentary in her pregnancy. Her warriors attended to her and her new husband kept her pleased. Across the water the northern coast experienced a time of tranquillity and plenty and did not ask questions.

The warriors had no idea what to make of the Druid. He came and went seemingly at will, disappearing from the small island whenever he had a mind to, while not so much as a dugout *currach* was ever seen sculling across the channel. Having no understanding of Druidry’s deeper mysteries, they could not have conceived that Cathbad, through the *tarbfeis*, was existing in two segments of time at once and little by little was catching up to himself. The spin of the minor whirlpool slowed each day, coming nearer the clockwise whirl of time major. Few Druids could exist doubly. It was more a matter of abstraction than knowledge, and many who attempted the *tarbfeis* went mad. Countless novices had been lost in this way.

Sometimes knowledge is hidden for a good reason. The pregnancy of Nessa continued past nine months. When a year had gone by, the women became concerned. None of this affected Nessa in the slightest. She remained phlegmatic no matter how worried they were. They finally brought in their own priestess; but, when presented with the facts, she merely gaped. So, at last, the women, led by the priestess of the isle, went before Cathbad and were finally let in on the secret: The queen carried a special child who required special circumstances for his birth. “He is being molded by magic; his creation takes time.”

“But how long?” they asked.

Cathbad knew the answer exactly. “He will be born three years, three months, and three nights from the time of my arrival here.” Some of the warriors who had borne children grimaced at the idea.

The priestess scratched her head thoughtfully, making her calculations. She said, “This is most propitious. The birth date you predict is the Feast of Othar.”

“And who might this Othar be?”

“Why, god of our island. The child *must* be very special.”

“Yes. I said so,” he replied, but seemed to have drifted off on some tangent.

“Then I’ll go and ask Othar to give the child his blessing,” she announced, but Cathbad didn’t hear her.

Some time later, he asked one of the women what Othar’s attributes were.

“Salt and stone,” he was informed. Didn’t everyone know that?

“It makes sense in a desolate place like this. But couldn’t that also mean that your Othar is formed from tears and pitilessness?”

The woman could not say; she did not inquire into such matters. Perhaps he should address such questions to the priestess.

Intending to do just that, Cathbad went off in search of her. Yet, as he headed across the rocky ground, time's small spinoff was losing its last wisp of impetus, slowing, slowing, to a dead stop—a moment of no time at all. Then the larger whirlpool caught it up and flung it forward again. The Cathbad of Nessa's Isle snapped into the present out of which he had come. Flecks of memory shot away in the swift transition.

He awoke in the *tumulus*, face down beside the small pot.

Above him a head murmured, "Takes a lot out of him, that bull-dreaming does." Cathbad got up on trembling legs, too weak to contend with the *vathi*. He pinched out the tallow wick and lumbered to his bed of straw in another, smaller chamber.

Two days later he awoke and headed off on his journey northward. He recalled vaguely that he needed a new wand and sought for the perfect hazel branch as he went. The matter of Othar was lost to him; the question he would never ask.

Nessa gave birth the night of Othar's Feast to a handsome boy. She named the babe after a brook in Crich Rois, where she was born: Conchovor. Cathbad and the warrior women held him up in the firelight and proclaimed him to be an auspicious child, born on Othar's Night. Far below them, an enormous surging wave shattered against the rocks. Thick salt spray stung the air and sprinkled like a sudden shower over the child. A frown crossed the baby's face, appeared and disappeared in an instant, buried inside his soul like a worm within an apple remains hidden until the fruit is cut apart. Many years later, Cathbad would see that unnatural frown again and go cold remembering the isle, the spray, and the attributes of Othar. That night, though, he believed as did the warrior women that the child, Conchovor, was flawless.

4. Parting

Nessa recovered slowly from the long trial of carrying and birthing her son. She called for Cathbad and he came, held her hand while she lay nursing the boy.

"You know," she said, "in the time I carried Conchovor, my contract with you ran out. You said nothing."

"Surely you don't fear usucaption from me?"

Nessa smiled wearily. "No, I know I don't have to buy my freedom from you, even if the contract has run these three years. Who could divide our traded fortunes after all? How can they be given back?"

He laughed.

“Cathbad, what happens now? What’s our future?”

He knelt beside her on the furs. “Why is it that people always beg to hear the future told when such knowledge inevitably brings ruin? Everything you learn changes what you’ll do, when you’ll do it. People who learn that they’re doomed to die try desperate means to escape their death and succeed thereby in running straight onto death’s spear.”

Nessa grew alarmed. “I’m to die?”

“You? No! By the Dagda, no.”

“But you said—”

“An example, that’s all. An inappropriate one, I see. Death is not in the future as far ahead as I’ve seen you. What I know is that this child will be king after seven years. You are still beside him then.”

“Seven?”

“Yes. His fosterage will be different from any child’s since he has to learn twice as much in half the time, and then more because we know already what he’s destined to be.”

“Who’s chosen to foster him?”

“I am. When he’s nursed, I’ll take him away and teach him what he must know to be the king prophesied. Then, when it’s time, we’ll return to you.”

“Then I’m involved in his kingship?”

“Oh, very much so,” he assured her.

She gazed at him with life-weary eyes. “So much mystery. Knowing only scraps—it’s like seeing a mountain through a mist. All you get are peeks at the face, or a bit of contour, so that you have to create your impression of a whole without ever seeing it. It’s so frustrating.”

“As I said, you can trap yourself with too much knowledge.”

“How do you avoid it?”

“Me?” He let go of her hand. “I don’t,” he answered. His gaze wandered, eyes unfocused. “It’s a Druid’s curse to know too much. Time is a tree. You cut it off at the stump and look at the rings within rings within rings. A tree’s rings lead back to an infinitesimal beginning. Time’s rings go on to an unseen end. My end—my own death—is unknowable to me. The curse is also that I find myself solely by the part I play in the futures of others. I could die in the midst of a bull-dream.” He looked at Nessa. “That’s how you and I came to meet, why we’re here with this child. And I never hesitated, never considered the risk, once I knew what I had to do. Only sometimes, when I have time—” He smiled at the word and did not go on.

Nessa comprehended barely half what he said, but inferred from it that he could give no answers to satisfy her. On a less conscious level she realized, too, that their days of copulative bliss had ended forever. The child had stopped that just by existing. Without Cathbad’s pre-knowledge of Conchovor, they could have made love forever; paradoxically, without

that pre-knowledge, neither would have approached the other in the first place. She looked down at the suckling baby. Here was the part fate had planned for her. Hereafter, she must live in devotion to this child. She had gone from girl to warrior to lover to mother. And from there? To what? Watcher? When would the time come? How am I to recognize the opportunity for Conchovor's greatness? she wanted to ask him. How can I be sure I do the right things to reach that point? She grasped then an inkling of the curse he carried: He could not tell her without destroying what he described.

A year later, after the man and child had vanished from her isle, Nessa knew no more about her future than he had told her that morning.

At first reluctantly, then with a renewed vigor, she returned to her old ways and led her glad warriors across the water once more. If, during this time, she ever doubted fate, she needn't have. Her victories had become legend, and it was the tales told of her that brought Nessa the warrior queen to the attention of Fergus mac Roich.

5. Invitations

The next several years passed slowly for Nessa, filled as they were with battles and adventures. She lived on her cunning alone. She spurned all former lovers and took no new ones, closing off that part of herself.

As time passed, she began to wonder if Cathbad had told her the truth—if she would ever see her son again. With no option to enduring, the warrior-queen maintained her unceasing watch for the Druid's promised return. In this she was not rewarded until the seven years were up.

At dawn one morning, a large sail-propelled *currach* approached the isle across the narrow channel off the mainland.

The boat, containing three men, had not reached the shallows when the alarm went up and a force of warriors arrived on the strand. Dressed all in black, standing poised and ready for a skirmish, they looked to the three men in the boat like spirits of the dead.

One man jumped into the surf and dragged the *currach* forward with a rope, all the while squinting suspiciously at the sinister welcoming committee. He climbed back in the moment the craft was securely beached. The other two men got out then. The first of them wore a tunic of blue wool to his knees. The other, shorter man was dressed, like the women, all in black. Unlike them his darkness belonged to a robe: he wore as well the tonsured skull of a Druid. The robe named his place in Druidry: *brithem*, the class of judges.

The tall man in blue wool stepped reluctantly out of the water. "I am Fergus the Messenger, servant of the king of Ulster, the *fine* Fergus mac Roich. I've come here at the king's, ah, request. Right. To offer marriage to Nessa, the infam—sorry, renowned!—leader of this isle." He smiled broadly.

The women looked at one another, then moved aside so that their queen could come forward. "That would be you?" the Messenger asked her. She nodded once. "Yes, right, well, as you have no family to placate—hmm?—the king offers his *coibche* to you directly and sends that you should name what you're worth."

Nessa's heart seemed to catch in her throat. She did not know what to tell the Messenger, and in a moment of wordless panic she fled from the beach. Some of the women chased after her, disturbed that she had not given a characteristic and pointed reply. "Others have made similar offers," they called after her. "And you laughed at them and took their heads. What's wrong here?" She made no reply, but gestured them to stop, then continued on alone, reaching the opposite shore in minutes.

A mist was rolling in there. Already it covered the shore and drifted to the point on which she stood. This was what the warriors called "the Dragon Mist" after the monsters of the sea that sometimes arrived with it. Standing there, she could hear their distant, high-pitched keens, and she shivered. As she peered into the mist, two figures materialized in it—two people walking on the surface of the water. One was a hawk-nosed man dressed in a white robe. The other was a boy who clumsily carried a spear, a shield, and a sword. The boy had fine features, totally unlike his father.

Cathbad led the boy to land. Seeing Nessa, he drew back his cowl. The years had left no mark upon him, she thought. He might have been gone just a day. He raised his hand to her and she reached forward and fit her fingers through his. He said nothing, but turned toward Conchovor.

The child was a complete stranger to Nessa though he had her mein, her cheeks and lips. His hair was brown, worn so shaggy that he looked elfin. His eyes darted when they moved, quick and knowing like Cathbad's. Mother and son observed each other from a great distance. At last, Conchovor smiled diffidently. Then Nessa knew him as part of herself. "Are you great?" she asked him.

"I will be," he replied, without any trace of haughtiness.

"Yes, I know," she answered proudly. To Cathbad, she asked, "What's to be my reply to the two Ferguses whose question I know you already know?"

Their eyes met again, but the warmth of his silent greeting had faded. "Tell them your price is the furtherance of your lineage. Your one desire is to have your son made king of Ulster for a year that his descendants may be recognized as children of noble status."

"But Cathbad, in a world stuffed with such self-styled 'royalty,' what good is that? He'll be nothing but a credential for some future fool to

name!”

The Druid remained passive, expressionless. “Just tell them that. I testified once that you would play a part in his kingship. Now you will. He relies hereafter on *your* cleverness and invention to see him through.”

She started to reply hotly: “Then why wasn’t *I* educated for this task along with him?” Then she stopped herself, recalling what he had said the day that Conchovor was born. She stared pensively at the Druid and her son for a moment. For so long she had counted the hours and nights till this time, till both had come back to her. Now that they were here, why did she want to fight? She had her son again.

Nessa turned and set off across the island, back to the beach where the Messenger and the Druid waited warily for her return. What they saw as she charged into view was something swift, black and grim: one of the fiendish *Morrighu* come to devour their souls. “Right!” cried the Messenger. “That’s it!” He dug in his heels and heaved the boat off the sand, then scrambled over the side. The Druid, seeing himself abandoned, fled into the boat as well.

From the safety of the shallows, they listened to the queen’s most unusual terms.

Fergus the Messenger frowned at the price. The dark Druid, whose name was Morann and who was the great Judge of Ulster, saw the face of displeasure beside him and felt some judgment would be helpful. “Two cultures come together here,” Morann explained. “What is fair to each is not necessarily fair to both.” He sat down.

“Oh, thank you *so* much for your help,” answered the Messenger. “You be sure and tell the king that. Fine. Fine.”

The boatman leaned forward between them. “Does this mean we can go back now?”

The Messenger stood with an eye toward balancing, and he called to Nessa: “Word will be sent from Ard Macha on the king’s decision. He will consider your offer carefully, I promise you that!” He sat down hard as the boat rocked suddenly. “Right. *Now* we can go back ... though I don’t know to what.”

6. The Somber Warrior

“To describe so uncommon a warrior-king as Fergus mac Roich,” said Laeg, “takes more than just a lengthy attributive citation. He was handsome. He was strong. But others were handsomer, others had more sinew.” As he spoke, Laeg and Senchan passed unseen through the openings in the earthen walls surrounding the high hillfort of Ard Macha. “The es-

sence of his remarkable character lay deep within him like a fish in a dark pool. As a youth it's possible his mettle was more shallow—that part of his history is unknown to me. I know that two years before he put the bit into Ulster's mouth, he had married; and that, simultaneous with his acquiring the kingship at nineteen, that wife of his succumbed to the disease that transforms the air in your lungs to water. She must have been an extraordinary person, certainly to him, and I think that forever after he believed that the goddess Macha had required her as a sacrifice in return for his triumphs. Later, he lost much more and won nothing for it, so his belief seems to me ungrounded ... but, then, who knows what motivates those dark goddesses of nature? The wife left him a son, Fiacha, already fostered out by then. Fergus pared down his joy to circumscribe that single treasure. He awaited the distant day his son would come of age and be returned to him. Meantime, he proved himself a thoughtful if emotionless ruler. Nothing broke his calm; anger lived in him no more than laughter. So you doubtless wonder, my lad, why did such a man send out for another wife?

“All kingships had a patron god or, as in this instance, goddess, much as you have saints now. In Ulster a celebration took place each year to the Triple Macha that her fertile aspects might smile upon the land. The king ceremoniously ‘wed’ a mare and consummated his marriage to her. She was then butchered in sacrifice, her blood drained into a cauldron. The king bathed in and drank of the mare's blood. Through these acts he renewed his contract with the Horse Goddess.

“The night after his second such celebration, Fergus lay asleep. His body was dark still, with the dried mare's blood coating him like a sheath. In his dream that night, Macha appeared to him. She had a long, flaming snout and a white diamond embedded in her forehead. The Night Mare she is called in this guise. She told Fergus to find a wife and, as she spoke, he saw behind her a red mist and in it a dozen shadowy figures that took the shape of seals. Ocean waves crashed somewhere in the swirl of mist behind them. An odor like that of decaying fish assailed him. Macha lay down upon a thick slab of stone and spread wide her legs. ‘Come into me,’ she ordered him. She opened like a great whirlpool. Fergus fell into her. The red mist appeared within her; so, too, the black seals. A great warmth covered Fergus and he drifted into unconsciousness. When he awoke, the mare's blood had been washed away by a brine that now coated him. He could taste the salt of the sea in his mouth. Immediately he sent for his Druids and told them the dream. They conferred briefly and announced that these portents pointed in only one direction—to the warrior women who lived north of the Pictish coast. The leader of this band had lately become a popular subject of the *filid*. Yes, he had heard of her. ‘They sing that she is beautiful,’ he said, which was true.

“Fergus followed the Druids' advice in order to preserve the plenitude of Ulster, but his heart was never part of the bargain. He had long since

forgotten such feelings. This was duty to his goddess and his people.

“When they returned to Ard Macha, the two men he had sent out went straight to him and told him of Nessa’s extraordinary price. The king sensed something sinister in her demands, but couldn’t fathom it. Morann was in agreement with him, having had much time on the way back to consider the *coibche*. Nevertheless, the Druid advised Fergus that ‘You must get a judgment on it from the *tuatha*, the tribes of the province.’ It seemed not to be a matter for Druids to decide.

“Fergus invited his advisors—who each represented one *tuath*—to a feast and had Morann outline the situation for them while they ate. Then the advisors pondered. I can tell you that no quieter feast ever took place in Ulster. In the end it was the fact that their king had no wife that swayed them. Advisors, Senchan, are always looking to marry off their kings in the name of fecundity. A fertile leader makes for good crops. ‘You *should* have a queen,’ they all agreed. ‘It’s important. So, accept her demands and fit a king’s torc around the child’s throat. We’ll witness his ascension but we’ll still call *you* king. What’s a year after all?’ Fergus nodded silently. He could see no harm in it when proposed like that. A year was nothing. Perhaps, if he had asked his Druids to inspect the future anyway, matters would have gone otherwise. But I doubt it. After all, a bull-dreaming Druid had set off the whole chain of events.

“The next morning, Fergus the Messenger was sent off again at dawn, grumbling loudly about ‘the spotty, disputative, smelly northern Picts’ with whom he would have to contend again, and cursing the damned boatman who was surely going to cower in his *currach* to see the Messenger coming again, and bitching about his lot in life in general.”

“He’s a very irritable man, isn’t he?” said Senchan.

“Perhaps. But the story goes that he had been performing great feats in bed with his wife when the king’s servants had come to get him, to send him off. And they had refused to let him complete the affair before bringing him before the king. It is, you see, a fundamental aspect of fate that while directed at one or two individuals, it inevitably disrupts the lives of many in the bargain.” They entered a round wooden fortress perched in the middle of the broad hilltop of Ard Macha. Inside, the building was divided into four concentric parts.

Near the doorway, an old man sat, surrounded by piles of clay and small wedge-shaped tools. As they stood over him, watching, he fashioned one lump of the wet gray stuff into a long, flat strip with a wide groove down the center.

“He’s making a sword mold,” explained Laeg. “He must have been the caster in Fergus’ reign. There was a different one by the time I arrived. Neither one probably made a decent sword, either. For us now, the trick is to unravel the path to the center of this place. The king will be there.” He and Senchan left the old man at his work.

7 The Winning of Fergus mac Roich

Nessa came to Ard Macha. She brought with her the warriors who were willing to give themselves over to Ulster's rule, her slaves, her son, and Cathbad. Conchovor received foster-parents, but as he was also the "king" the foster-parents lived in Ard Macha with him rather than the customary opposite.

At first, Nessa found herself quite taken with Fergus mac Roich. There was about him some hidden force that set him apart from all other men. And he was attractive to look on. His linen tunics were all bright checkered patterns. He wore his lime-dyed light-brown hair drawn straight back, gathered like a horse's tail at his neck. His nostrils turned up at the edges so that he always appeared aroused or angered, and she thought for the first few days that her presence excited him. However, he hardly spoke three words to her in the first week and their initial session of love-making after the wedding feast was mechanical and all too brief. Fergus made no pretense that the marriage arrangement had been his idea.

Through gossip Nessa soon discovered what separated Fergus mac Roich from everyone else. It did not take her long to realize that any attempts to entice this man would only widen that gap. She dismissed him from her mind then. She had lived without men before; she could easily do so again. And there was far more pressing business to attend to.

Conchovor remained oblivious to her machinations. The Fergus mac Roich he encountered was an entirely different man from the one his mother knew. His mac Roich took him out hunting, spent endless hours training him with the spear and sword that Cathbad had awarded him on his seventh birthday. They rode out in Fergus's war chariot across the great plain below Ard Macha, taking turns as chariot driver or armed warrior, steering the course or flinging death's point. Fergus told Conchovor of ancient deeds and of battles he had known. Nights, the two of them dwelled in the feast hall, listening to *filid* sing intricate rhymes of the great heroes of the Tuatha de Danann, those hero-gods who had fought impossible battles across the land long before the *filid* or Fergus had been born. Of Nuada, the great king who had lost his kingship when his arm was cut off in battle, and who gained back his kingdom when a remarkable silver arm had been fashioned to replace it. Of Balor, whose Evil Eye was so huge that it took great machines to pull back the lid that covered its deadly glare. Of the battle frenzies of a thousand divine heroes.

One evening, Morann the Judge went to see Fergus on the matter of certain omens he and the other Druids had recently encountered. He had been keeping watch for signs of some treachery from Nessa, and what he

had seen that night in the steaming entrails of a rabbit had been the first hint of disaster for the king. Upon entering the central room of Ard Macha, the Druid judge found Fergus and Conchovor seated opposite one another around the huge stump that stood in the center of the fortress. On the stump was a *fidchell* board; but what astonished Morann was that his king was doubled over in laughter.

Seeing the Druid in the doorway, Fergus pointed at Conchovor and tried to speak, but could not stop laughing enough to do so. The boy gave Morann a puckish little grin, then lowered his head. “What is this? What is going on?” asked Morann. He was not sure if he should share in the humor.

“He beat me!” gasped Fergus. “The impious little imp—who taught him this game?”

“I—I really haven’t a clue,” said Morann. Then he fell silent. He had never seen Fergus mac Roich smile, much less laugh. And now here, over a game of *fidchell*? Thoroughly befuddled, he turned away and left the matter of omens behind.

While the virtuous child had done what his mother could not, she in turn was hatching a plot to win him what he could not himself achieve.

8. Divide and Conquer

During the latter part of that year, a bizarre conspiracy unfolded gradually under Nessa’s direction. She began to meet from time to time most casually with members of a select group. This group consisted of her women warriors, servants, and Conchovor’s foster-parents. They sometimes came to her private chambers—never more than one or two at a time—but more often met on a designated hill, where Nessa would give them a task to undertake.

Conchovor’s foster-parents she sent out weekly among the people of Ulster, always to the west of Ard Macha. Each day they visited a different household. They demanded from each a tithe in the name of Fergus mac Roich. Their connection to him was widely known, and it was his right to demand anything from the people as all property was communally owned and he the head of the collected Ulidian *tuatha*—all the *derbfines*, or extended families, that together comprised Ulster. By the time the year of Conchovor’s “reign” had ended, the foster parents had acquired a tithe from exactly one half of the citizens of the province. They still had no idea as to why or where these things went.

They would have been surprised to find that every treasure they brought in Nessa gave to her warrior women and servants, who also made a journey into the countryside every week, but always east of the great hillfort. Loaded up with bags of treasure from gold coins to brass buckets, this group spent the year visiting the remaining half of Ulster. At each house they bestowed one of the items upon the family, saying, "This gift to you is the will of Conchovor mac Nessa, your wise new king."

When they had run out of gifts, they returned home to meet again with Nessa. Miraculously, she always had more treasures for them to distribute. Like the collectors, the distributors had no understanding of what was happening here. Not even Morann, who watched her suspiciously in every spare moment, had an inkling of Nessa's diabolically simple scheme.

When the year was up, Fergus mac Roich threw a great feast in Ard Macha to celebrate Conchovor's time as king. The boy celebrated joyously with Fergus, tasting his first wine, and being honored to sit among the great warriors of the province:

Such names as Sencha the Sage who judged all combats and had seen young Conchovor triumph over boys twice his age; Menn, the famous spearman, whose weapon, Bratach, arced through the sky like a rainbow because bright pennoncelts tied along the shaft magically imbued the air with color; and Nuadu, whose shield, Cannel, glowed at night like a full moon.

Soon, however, the time came for Fergus to take back his king's *torc* from the boy. Conchovor stood up and started to take it off. "Hold!" cried a dozen voices from around the large room. Fergus and Conchovor gaped at the crowd.

A handful of men came forward in a single file past the cooking fire in the center of the hall. Conchovor recognized the men as the representatives of the Ulster *tuatha* who advised the king. He turned to watch Fergus, but mac Roich's face now revealed nothing more than idle curiosity; however, his hand rested on the carved hilt of his sword, Leochain. Conchovor moved inconspicuously away a few paces. He also considered his weapon.

The advisors grouped together in front of Fergus. "We want you to know at this time that the people resent being treated like your dowry." A pudgy man in front turned to face the crowd. "It is our ruling that what was given up by Fergus mac Roich should stay given, and what was won by Conchovor should remain his." In the instant he finished speaking, his head split in two down to his chin. His body stumbled forward, came up against the huge vat of boiled beef that hung above the fire, and folded over the edge of it. His sandals caught fire but nobody moved to put them out.

Fergus mac Roich stood grimly holding his delicate, leaf-thin sword. Blood dripped like a dark sap from its needle-tip. His eyes shifted to the other advisors. It was at this point that Cathbad and Morann entered the room.

“Slay no more, Fergus mac Roich,” ordered Morann, “or I’ll circle your sword with a satire such that you’ll never wield sweet Leochain again.”

“Did you hear what he said?”

“I did. And I’ve seen abundant signs before he uttered a word. The ruling stands as pronounced. You have given up kingship by choice and it has come to Conchovor freely. It’s the will of Macha and her people that he remain our leader.”

“Morann—”

“Would you challenge the goddess?”

Fergus glowered at the boy beside him but saw at once that Conchovor was innocent of complicity. Behind the boy stood Nessa in a gown of red that hung from a large gold brooch below her shoulder. She met his gaze with defiance. He knew then the agent of his demission. Without taking his eyes off her, he asked the two Druids, “What say those signs you’ve seen regarding how the exchange has come about?”

“Precisely what are you asking?” queried Morann.

“Has this boy’s mother employed treachery of some sort to steal away my torc?” He moved past Conchovor; Nessa held her ground. “Has she discredited our contract?”

Morann and Cathbad eyed one another. The Judge was deferring to Cathbad, thinking Cathbad the better man to reply, unaware of the entanglements this created. Cathbad faced Nessa. “She has,” he said, “to both questions.”

Nessa shot him a wide-eyed look of betrayal.

“This feast,” he continued abjectly, “marks the end of your first year in marriage. It can be taken as a legal terminal from which to nullify your arrangement if you so choose.” He turned and quickly pushed his way out of the hall.

Leochain flashed between Fergus and Nessa. Two halves of a ruined gold brooch flipped up and dropped in the fire behind Fergus. The red gown pooled like blood around Nessa’s feet. The only sound in the room was that of the dead advisor boiling in the pot. Fergus’s eyes of torment looked the naked woman over one final time. Then he proclaimed, “Great shame upon your beard!”

Sword held ahead of him, parting the crowd, Fergus strode away. Nessa covered her mouth with one hand; the other had gone to shield the calyx of her thighs. The crowd stared at her in some confusion—no man had ever used that well-known curse before on a woman. The double edge of its meaning was barely dawning upon them.

The silence became too intense. One of the advisors turned to Morann and, pointing at the cooking cauldron, asked, “What’s to be done about him?”

Morann scowled at the body. “Take him out. He’s surely done by now.”

9. The Geís of Mac Roích

Anyone who thought they had seen Fergus mac Roich at his most withdrawn and silent before that night found that they had seen nothing yet. He continued to live among them in the fortress of Ard Macha, but he might have been a ghost. He retreated so deeply inside himself that he was alone even in a crowded feast hall—or would have been, since he no longer frequented them. Warriors who had taught him or been his friends avoided him entirely. To speak with Fergus was to have to look upon his empty face. Some people speculated that the curse he had laid upon Nessa had in fact infected him. Such speculation was quickly scuttled.

While Nessa remained facially unblemished, the insides of her thighs turned red from a rash so excruciating that she had to be carried from chamber to chamber. In spite of her infirmity she insisted on participating in all discussions on policy and matters of state from the couch on which she lay. She had a mind for tactics and, with close-mouthed Fergus no longer assisting them, the *tuatha* of Ulster needed her kind of help. Nevertheless, as time went by and her pain increased, Nessa came to the discussions less and less. By the time of the spring thaw, she had all but ceased to exist.

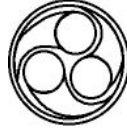
Cathbad ministered to her pain and soon became the only person she saw regularly. She called him her betrayer and spent her sleepless nights in bitter contemplation of other things to call him. He returned to her every morning without fail, deaf to her curses. His sense of guilt stemmed from not having known the outcome of her plot. Not even a sign of it had been revealed in the *tarbfeis*, as if the bull's blood had masked what mattered most to him. He had not heard even an echo of Fergus's damning curse. For these reasons, Cathbad believed he had lied to Nessa all those years ago.

He became Conchovor's personal Druid, but Morann remained the chief Judge in Ard Macha. The two of them seemed to get on well and quickly established their personal territories to each other's satisfaction.

The new king himself became a figure of awe to the people he governed. With the combined wisdom of Nessa and the two Druids to guide him, he ruled wisely and judged as fairly as any elder statesman. Because of the training received from Fergus, he handled weapons with the skill of any bearded warrior, winning every game, every combat. Yet, for all these overwhelming attributes, he had not an arrogant or vainglorious bone in his body. His soft-spoken modesty became the subject of a hundred tales and songs.

The first year he took true kingship, the crops produced the greatest bounty Ulster had ever seen. The Druids proclaimed that "this boy has

powers over growth and fertility unmatched by any of his predecessors.” In his role as leader, he presided over all marriages, but his advisors decided this was not sufficiently in keeping with his newly discovered talents. They passed a rule that hereafter Conchovor was to sleep with every bride on the night of the wedding feast, thereby assuring her fertility. “The king,” they said, “should be ‘first’ in every family.”



“And this is what drove Fergus mac Roich away to that horrible witch, Maeve?” asked Senchan.

Laeg turned from watching young Conchovor lying in his bed beside some girl twice his age, who regarded her king with great reverent cow eyes. Darkness swelled in behind Laeg and the scene receded as though along a tunnel. Even as it winked out, the tunnel grew with smells and sounds and, finally, light of its own. Laeg stood with his back to the cooking pot at another feast.

Senchan blinked and swallowed, glancing around himself warily. Conchovor presided here, seated at the head of two rows of men who were shouting, laughing, cursing and—it seemed to Senchan in one case—actually trying to throttle one another.

“No.” Laeg’s voice cut through the cacophony of the feasting. “That isn’t what sent Fergus off at all. As you can see here—” he gestured to where a brooding, haggard figure sat cross-legged, away from the two rows. Fergus was pulling strings of meat from a large slice of beef in his wooden bowl. He seemed oblivious of all that was going on around him. “Fergus, or the shell of him, remained. It takes more than that to make *him* pack up and go.” As Laeg said this, the Druid Cathbad got to his feet beside Conchovor.

The smoky, crowded feast hall became breathlessly quiet.

“Here, now,” whispered Laeg. “Watch how the clever Cathbad reroutes Fergus’s path to self-destruction.”

The Druid called out, “Fergus mac Roich!”

Fergus hardly glanced at him and went on eating in self-imposed insularity.

“Your king, Fergus, wants you for his right-hand man. For his champion.” Cathbad paused to let that sink in. “But no champion can act the way you do. No champion can be allowed to take his own life by slow degrees away from the battlefield, wedging mortar in all his mortal cracks. I’m aware of your misfortune. So is every warrior in this room. Morann and I have determined that you deserve no other fate than the one I hold for you. And it is this.

“I place upon you this night, Fergus mac Roich, my *geis*!”

The peril of his situation became clear to Fergus then. He stopped pretending not to hear. He leaped to his feet and tried to escape, but a solid wall of warriors rose up and held him back. He turned; they were behind him. On every side. He hammered them with his huge fists; a nose broke, a rib cracked, blood spouted and flowed. No one gave way and no one returned his blows. No one budged an inch to let him through.

Cathbad continued to shout at him. "You have no other *geis* upon you before this, do you?"

"No!" cried Fergus. "Let me through, you hairless chins!"

"This, then, shall be your *geis* of primacy. It takes precedence over any other put upon you ever after."

"No!" the warrior cried again. The Druid left him no choice now. He reached unwillingly for his sword. His hand closed on empty air. In his blanket of self-pity he had come to the feast unarmed.

"My *geis* on you, Fergus mac Roich, is a *glam dicin* in form, because you're as guilty of a crime as any thief, having stolen yourself from us. A satire then for him who has killed and buried his own soul." He began to turn as he spoke, directing his wand at the crowd, but deliberately starting with his back to Fergus. "What man eschews his people when they're faultless? Who fasts while others feast? And refuses the repast though he sits insubordinately amidst the sea of sustenance? The one who drowns the sound of merriment with the drone of his solipsistic musing. Let him who is such a one suffer all the cooking fires of Eriu, a sop at a time, never to turn from a proffered feast till every table sees him sated." The wand came to rest. The ring of men drew back, revealing wretched Fergus. Cathbad continued, "Whether foul pork or fair fowl, you'll not open your mouth but to fill it full from now till the night that no day follows."

He tucked the wand into his belt, drew up his cowl and, with a bow to Conchovor, strode away. Passing near Laeg, he slowed and turned in the unseen warrior's direction; sniffed the air.

"Hello, Druid," said Laeg. "You who attempted to hold Cu Chulainn from his great battle. Your clever *geisa* couldn't save him, could they? Still, as Druids go ... you're a matchless man."

Cathbad's high brow creased with exasperation. Was there something there, shaped by the smoke, or not? Finally, he shook his head frustratedly and continued out.

Fergus mac Roich had fallen to his knees. The blood drawn on the men surrounding him dripped now into his own hair, down his own face.

The *geis* could have gone either way for him: the Druid could as easily have constrained him from ever taking part in battle again—which is what he had feared he would hear, as punishment for killing that scurrilous advisor. This was not much better; death was what he had almost hoped for. The murder must have been admissible. That counselor must have offended someone's local god. Inadvertently, justice was served and it mattered nothing to him. To the Morrighu with justice!

A moment later the reverberating din of the feast began again. The men around him shuffled away, but he sensed someone still near. He raised his head and found that the warriors he had pummeled were lining up. As he stared up at the first in line, that man knelt down beside him and invited him to attend a feast in three weeks. Fergus closed his eyes and nodded. The warrior got up. Another took his place. Behind him, the line continued to grow.

“Before the night is through,” said Laeg, “every warrior present will require Fergus’s appearance at a feast. His calendar will clog up for the coming six months. A feast every single night. By the time that ordeal is over, he’ll have buried his bitterness and accepted, as does the rest of Ulster, that Conchovor was installed by Macha. Probably, he fancies that his dream set the whole thing in motion, so he’s played a crucial role. What else should he think, after all? The gods were in on this one.

“He will come through the gauntlet of gluttony with revived joy in living. When he returns once more to Ard Macha—after that last feast—Conchovor comes out, embraces him, and the two of them go inside to where the *fidchell* board is already set up on the stump.”

The images described flicked past Senchan; every time he blinked there seemed to be a new picture before him, around him.

“In winning that game, Fergus accepts the role of Conchovor’s champion, for a time at least. The embodiment of the king. You see, as with that tale of Nuada, the king is no longer judged fit to rule if he is seriously wounded. The champion becomes the king so that the king will always survive intact.”

Laeg took Senchan by the elbow and turned him away from the two men crouched over the silver board. “*Fidchell*, by the way, means ‘wooden wisdom.’”

They walked back through the corridors of Ard Macha, past the feast hall where, seemingly a few moments ago, a crowd had been shouting. The hall was dark and silent, the fire a heap of ash.

The weapon maker was gone from the outer doorway and that exit was covered by a large fur. Laeg lifted it up and stepped out ... into bright daylight, on the stone-ringed plateau of Muirthemne Plain.

Blinded at first, Senchan shielded his eyes and peered around. Fergus’s stone had canted to one side, its base now partially visible, resting on the flat surface of a new stone, one sharp as a needle, that had erupted from the ground below and now jutted obliquely. The two stones formed a great “V”.

“What—?”

“Conchovor’s stone,” Laeg interjected. “‘The Stone of Kingship.’ Whereas, Fergus’s is ‘The Stone of Honor.’”

“And Honor rests on Kingship,” guessed Senchan.

“Clever boy. You’re a born poet.”

“But what are the others? Maeve’s stone?”

“Sovereignty.”

“The Pigstone?”

“Dominance. But now we’ve another to deal with. This one,” and he pointed to the fifth in the circle. A small stone, its tip was jagged as if the top had been shattered.

“You see, Senchan, things might have gone on nicely forever in Ard Macha, except for the birth of a girl and a curse.”

IV. THE SORROW OF DERDRIU

1. The “Troubler”

In the house of Fedlimid mac Daill the Harpist, everything was quiet. A low and unattended fire threw shadows of dancing giants up the walls, across the thatched ceiling. Flames caught the shapes of the sleeping, snoring feasters; turned them into a rising and falling vulcanian landscape, bodies encased in hot lava.

One group of these figures slumbered in a protective circle around Conchovor. Firelight softened his round cheeks, caressed his beauty. He was ten years old this day: the feast had been a birthday party.

Behind him and all around the edges of the room stood harps of every size, some just empty frames, others polished and strung, in the light of the fire, with strands of scintillation. Deeper in the house, the fire picked up the varnished curve of a four-foot harp that stood beside Fedlimid, who lay awake, listening. Not far from him, his wife moaned softly in discomfort. He could just make out the profile of her large distended belly. In the dimness of this recess, her belly looked like an overturned cauldron.

Fedlimid thought to get up and lie beside her but stopped himself and stayed where he was. If she wanted him, she would call to him. She was like that, and Fedlimid could not help fearing that one day she would die and not so much as utter a word. He sat up then and did the only thing he could to soothe her and to solace his troubled mind. He tilted back the tall harp and began to strum a soft *suantraige*, the most delicate of lullabies. His playing was like that of the Dagda, whose pure-toned harp was fashioned of gold. Listening to Fedlimid, one could hear echoes of the god gently plucking the soft notes that changed summer into fall and passed the world to sleep.

When his own eyes grew heavy, Fedlimid abruptly ended his plucking. He listened to his wife's breathing until assured that she had fallen asleep.

Then he lay back and folded his arms across his chest, let out a great weary sigh and drifted off at last. Silence reigned in the house of the Harpist once more. The peat burned down to glowing ash.

One hour before dawn, the silence cracked apart with a wild shriek that shook the walls. The warriors leaped up, clutching their rattling weapons, wiping hard at the sleep still upon their eyes and searching the darkness for the fiend that had howled. As they peered around them, the scream pierced the night again, high and shrill, as if a malicious sprite had tumbled into their fire. This second wail issued from the darkness where Fedlimid slept with his wife.

“It’s got our harpist!” cried Menn the Spearman. He bounded forward and slammed into the shadowy warriors ahead of him, who in turn sprawled onto others—a great mass of flailing arms and legs that growled and cursed with a dozen voices. Menn jumped across them, and others pushed around them or tried to drag some of the topmost bodies to their feet.

At first Menn and the others could see nothing in the recess because their bulk blocked what little light the fire gave off. Then a torch was passed over those who still struggled to get up. It reached the front line and illuminated the recess.

Fedlimid knelt beside his wife. She lay unconscious in his arms. Even as they took in this scene, the scream came once more and those nearest the front realized it had issued from the woman’s belly, which had seemed to flex at them.

Conchovor climbed through and went up beside his harpist. “Go and fetch me a Druid,” he yelled at his warriors over the din they were making. He should have selected one of them but could not turn around, could not look away from the wife of Fedlimid. She had dark circles under her eyes and sweat-stuck hair on her brow and cheeks, but Conchovor felt as if he were looking through her. His eyes would not focus properly. For a moment he thought he smelled the sea. Behind him, the bickering died suddenly. From the rear forward, the warriors began to move apart, opening a corridor through to him. A white spectre drifted down the channel and drew up at his back. A scarred hand came to rest upon his shoulder. “There’s death in that wail,” the whisper of the Druid warned. “Get away from here before it hooks into you like a tapeworm.” Conchovor glanced back, saw Cathbad’s eyes so wide that the whites showed all around. But Conchovor could not leave.

Cathbad came past the king. He pressed one splayed hand over the face of Fedlimid’s unconscious wife, then chanted, “Woman, what terror erupts from your womb that awoke these warriors as if the Nemain herself had settled upon their backs?” He felt movement—a twitch of her lips—and released her.

The woman sat straight up out of Fedlimid’s embrace. Her eyes opened but saw nothing. She spoke in a monotone, the voice of a corpse re-animated. “Cathbad, conjurer, take these words from me. My man’s gentle

and pure, no mere ‘fly’ whose music buzzes. Ours should be a child of soft passions, so what, then, howls in here? No living woman knows what form life takes in the hollow of her womb. You must tell *me*.” Her glassy eyes closed. She slumped back in her husband’s arms.

Frustrated, the Druid drew his hazel wand and touched it to the woman’s belly. The warriors could see his mouth moving but could not hear the words. They crowded forward, straining to burst upon him. From the belly of Fedlimid’s wife the scream cracked again, and the warriors jumped back. Those at the rear, who had finally climbed from the tangle, were sent sprawling once more. The air filled with dust from their angry scrabbling. Cathbad turned and glared back at them. As if his stare were a mallet, the warriors reacted as if struck and unknotted carefully, quietly, like civilized men.

“Hear me, you lumbering protectors of peace,” he ordered. His wand swung back and forth across their path, driving them back another step. “A woman lies within this womb, a woman such as you’ve never seen. Her hair a mist of gold and her eyes so green that grass is envious. No cloth woven matches the softness of her cheek, and her lips never need paint they’re so very red and full. Red also will be the color of Ulster should she see the day her childhood’s torn away. It’s death her beauty offers. She knows your nearness, your fierceness. If she ever lays eyes on one warrior among you, all of you will be lost. The face of Ard Macha will shrivel like a hag’s. Her name is Derdriu, and trouble is all she brings with her into this world.”

“Kill the child!” the warrior Furbaide shouted. “To save us, we have to,” argued someone in the back. The room churned again, this time with a call for death to the unborn child. Weapons clattered impatiently.

In a daze, Fedlimid clutched his wife to him. Although he could not accept the Druid’s forecast, he had heard his own wife speak: Who knew what demon she would bear?

“Silence! You’ll do nothing of the sort!” cried Conchovor.

The warriors stopped their clamoring. Their faces turned hot with embarrassment and confusion.

“Conchovor, child—”

“No, father Druid, don’t interrupt me.” The boy fixed a hard stare on him. “Your right is to speak *before* the king, that’s the law. But the law says nothing about interruption.” He turned away. “He calls *me* child, but I feel older and wiser than the whole lot of you here who quake fearfully at a baby not even born. Well, so long as this child stands between you and her, you won’t kill that baby—not any of you. As I’m first in every family, this Derdriu is *my* daughter as much as Fedlimid’s. Harm her and you attack me.”

Cathbad peered at Conchovor’s face, at the hateful, obsessed look of the eyes. When had he seen that look before? The boy said to Fedlimid,

“You’ll foster your daughter to me, to protect her.” The harpist agreed with reluctance but also with gratitude.

“I’ll have her raised away from Ard Macha,” Conchovor said, “to protect us from the cruel fate my Druid foretells. Then she’ll meet no warriors. None of them will look upon her beauty. From the moment she’s born, she is mine.” His warriors fidgeted and lowered their heads as he swung around and took them all in, slowly. No one could find words to speak against him, not even Fergus mac Roich, who knew him better than any there. This person, though, was a stranger to Fergus, and the warrior sheathed Leochain and backed silently out of the house, retreating into shadows, full of foreboding.

“Good,” said the young king when no one objected. “Then in Othar’s name, let’s leave this woman in peace so she can produce my Dardriu.”

Othar! Cathbad stumbled back and banged up against Fedlimid’s large harp. It sounded a loud discord at him. “Salt and stone,” he mumbled at the bewildered harpist. “That’s what he is, what he’s become.”

Now the wife of Fedlimid began to moan anew.

2. The Satirist’s Pleasure

Dardriu was fostered on a secluded farm away from Ard Macha. She grew up seeing no one except her new parents, hearing no other voices than theirs. However, Conchovor did arrange to see her. The need to do so came in urgent fits, allied with phases of the moon, the pull of the tides. He would come there at night and peer in through a space between stones in the wall of the house. “Just to look at my prize,” was what he told everyone, and they could see the obsession in his eyes. Cathbad charted the sequence of his fits, which helped in arranging events so as not to coincide with the king’s evenings spent peeping in at Dardriu.

His warriors reconciled themselves to his behavior with the argument that when the girl reached her fourteenth year she would be eligible for marriage and the king would have her. Once Dardriu became his wife, the warriors assured one another, then his fits of madness would taper off. Meanwhile they arranged year-contract marriages for him, but none of these produced an heir.

Nessa and the *brithem* Druids saw to it that Ulster did not suffer for the king’s inattention, although Nessa, too, fell into periods of madness.

On one such occasion, as she drifted through the corridors of the fortress, she came upon her son. Sweat covered his face and his whole body shook. It was a full moon and the ocean waves tore at him until he barely knew who or what he was.

In their frenzy, he and Nessa returned to his room and made love. This mad mutual seduction would have gone unheard of had Conchovor's seed not ripened in her. When Nessa discovered this, she went to Cathbad and babbled a confession, blaming herself. Cathbad calmed her and, once she had fallen asleep, went to Morann and the other *brithem* and told them that they could no longer depend upon Nessa's aid in guiding the province. The efficient Druids carried on without her from then on during Conchovor's periodic withdrawals.

Nessa gave birth to a male child she named Cormac, and Cathbad looked after him, fostering him to a family within Ard Macha.

As more years passed, Nessa withdrew further into herself, but Ulster remained strong and fertile. The hopes of everyone involved might yet have been fulfilled had it not been for the arrival of the satirist, Levarcham.

She was a spindly and bent-backed creature, and she came to Ulster out of boredom with the southern lands. Her reputation preceded her, and the less distinguished people stayed out of her way for fear of becoming the object of her wicked lampoons. It was claimed that she could cause blindness or palsy, or even make one's hair fall out.

A sane, calm Conchovor gave her a good feast upon arrival, which Levarcham repaid with verses that extolled him and his warriors while making fools of every other province, especially neighboring Connacht: "A Connacht champion can be easily spotted, which is not to suggest he isn't spotted already; you can recognize him by this everyman's trait—the bush on his lip is so meager that he wears pebbles tied to his nose hairs to entice them, you see, over his mouth."

Eventually, it had to happen that Levarcham got wind of Conchovor's secret preoccupation; if satirists were good at anything it was ferreting out embarrassing secrets. She could easily have devised a vicious account of the young king's nocturnal forays, but she wanted to know more. She wanted to know the cause.

One night she followed Conchovor to the house where Derdriu was kept. She hid in a clump of high grass, watching the king watching the house. The air became colder as the night wore on. Owls called to one another and bats flitted on the air. The king huddled against the house as if frozen there in place. More like a dolmen than a man, thought Levarcham as she exhaled silent curses at the standing-stone king for keeping her here.

Hours passed before he finally left. Levarcham sat with her face pressed to her knees, using the trapped warmth of her breath to keep warm. She did not see him go, but looked up, sniffing, and found his place vacant and no sign of him anywhere. She flexed her stiff fingers and rubbed her cheeks. Her mouth had petrified into a hard scowl. Rising, she slunk past the high wall that isolated the front of the house from view, creeping on creaky legs to the place where Conchovor had been. Light from within

revealed a hole in the wall there. The hole fit around her eye like an extension of the orbit.

Through the smoke from the fire, sleeping Derdriu's beauty blazed forth like moonlight. The sight of her banished all thoughts of the cold night from Levarcham. Seeing Derdriu, the satirist became aware of her own shortcomings: of her crooked back and skeletal body; of her acerbic temperament, which had arisen out of her deformities as a weapon against their exhibition by others; and of the gulf separating her from Derdriu more inflexibly than the stone wall at her cheek. She reeled back from the vision and fled into the night.

Upon reaching Ard Macha, Levarcham hid in her rooms, trembling, lost. She had seen herself revealed as if Derdriu were a tall and perfect mirror reflecting her abominable soul. But the mirror was of such overpowering beauty that the most hideous creature would have endured its own naked wretchedness to look into the glass. Tomorrow she must return to Derdriu. And, as she was Levarcham the Satirist and a woman, no one could stop her.

She was waiting in the yard outside the stone house when Derdriu's foster-parents came out the next morning. Recognizing her, they tried to drive her away until she began: "I know two farmers who till no soil, hidden by high walls, eating fat and lean alike without one 'Welcome' in their soup..." They left off assaulting her then. The mother fled back inside to keep Derdriu in; the father rode off in a panic to Ard Macha.

No one knew just how Levarcham had learned of Derdriu; likewise, no one knew how to make her leave now that she was there. Conchovor assumed, as did all his advisors, that if the Satirist knew where Derdriu was kept, she must know the whole tale. They decided that leaving her alone might be the safest course, and such was their final ruling to Derdriu's father.

The reluctant parents made a place for their uninvited guest to stay, as was proper hospitality to anyone. Once inside, she could not be kept from meeting their daughter.

When Derdriu entered the room, Levarcham saw the dark cramped house swell with light, the walls stretch back to contain all the beauty. *This girl is soon to be Conchovor's*. Levarcham could not tolerate the thought of such innocent bloom being locked away from the world. She knew of the rumored curse but rejected it. Such loveliness—to be imprisoned, *that* was the curse upon Derdriu. Levarcham decided then and there to meddle in the king's affair.

Through the fall she remained at the farm. Conchovor took to meeting her in a field of cornstalks nearby. His questions were all about Derdriu: about her voice, her desires, every aspect of her body from the arch of her eyebrow to the lacquer on the nails of her toes. Levarcham derived cruel

pleasure from answering accurately in every detail. Through the satirist, the king sent gifts to Derdriu but forbade Levarcham to tell her where they originated. That was to be his surprise when at last they met, and he wanted his prize bursting with curiosity about him. One of his gifts—a hammered gold lunula—Derdriu liked so much, she wore it at her throat every waking moment. As to her interest in her secret admirer, she had practically none. Having seen no admirers, she could not conceive of any. The gifts, to Derdriu's mind, came from the world in general, and that separate world became her obsession as she was the king's.

She spent hours with Levarcham every day. She wanted to know how other girls dressed, what forts looked like and how the people in them lived. Were they all like Levarcham, thin and crooked? And did they all grow up alone as she had?

Sometimes Levarcham was unable to answer and had to go off for a while before she could speak again.

One winter morning after a heavy snow, she sat beside Derdriu, watching the girl's father methodically skinning a calf. A flock of ravens were skimming the sky over the nearby woods, and one particularly venturesome bird, drawn by the smell, settled in the yard and began drinking from the pool of blood that lay beneath the hanging carcass.

Derdriu said dreamily, "If I could choose my man, I'd choose him from that scene." Levarcham followed her gaze but saw only a man at work. Derdriu explained, "I'd mold him from the things there: white snow for his skin, dark blood for his cheeks and lips, and the blackness of the raven for his hair. I'd be forever content with him." She laid her hand on Levarcham's wrist. "Tell me, is your king such a one as that?"

Levarcham trembled at her touch and with the excitement of knowing this to be the opportunity she had waited for. "The king ... well, no—but I know one who fits your desires so well you might have shaped him just now. He is called Naise mac Uislenn. He's not too much older than you, but older enough to wed you, and bed you properly." She gnawed nervously at one knuckle.

Derdriu put her head down on her folded arms. "I'll be sick till I see him. Naise." Then, drawing the fur tightly around her shoulders, she stood up and walked away. Levarcham, after a quick glance at Derdriu's foster-father, followed after her. The guts of the opened calf spilled steaming into the snow, splattering the raven, which screeched and flew off.

When Levarcham caught up with Derdriu, she said, "This fellow Naise is quite a renowned individual, dear. He is one of three brave brothers. In battle, they fight back to back like the hub of a wheel spoked with scythes. He chants and sings, too, having learned the art from the great Fedlimid, the king's own harpist."

"Fedlimid is my true father," Derdriu informed her.

"Well, then. They claim at Ard Macha that this Naise sits alone every night on the walls of earth around the hill and sings to the cattle grazing

on the plain. His song floats out like a flock of doves, and each cow that hears him gives more milk than any two that don't."

"Alone," said Derdriu to herself, "on the earthen wall."

"Every night," Levarcham added. "At dusk. So they say."

Derdriu looked at her uncertainly. "And if he hates the sight of me?"

Levarcham replied, "That is exceedingly unlikely, child. But there's always the act of *flaying*, if you have doubts. You know of it?"

"My mother's spoken ..." Her eyes had gone wide as if the idea were too huge to envision. A blush flooded her cheeks.

"I happen to know that the road west between here and Ard Macha passes many stones appropriate to that act."

Derdriu nodded. "I'll spit in his mouth to capture him," she said bravely.

Levarcham saw then how futile her attempt at liberation was. Where could a Derdriu hide from the world? Where was the place that contained no men who would be shaken, no women who would envy her? She would have to live among the dead in a burial chamber, and Levarcham wasn't certain but that would revive the corpses. The satirist's plan could not succeed. Nevertheless, the girl now knew who she wanted and no one could stop her from seeking him out. Levarcham glanced back at the father roping the raw calf's carcass to a long spit. How had he endured his foster-daughter's presence all these years? Was he perhaps castrated, wounded in battle so as to have no lust to fire? Or had he gone mad years ago without anyone having noticed?

Turning back, she found that Derdriu had gone. A line of footsteps in the snow led to where the high wall met the house. Levarcham dragged herself up there in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of the girl scurrying into the woods. How long would Derdriu's parents wait before reporting her disappearance to Conchovor? Levarcham suspected it would be some time, while they first sought her in every direction on their own. To admit they had lost Derdriu might well prove fatal. Perhaps there was a chance for the girl after all. If the flaying magic took. If the tales of Naise's evening ritual proved true. Levarcham decided it was time to leave, before Derdriu's absence became obvious. Besides which, Levarcham wished to be on hand at Ard Macha when news of the girl's disappearance finally arrived.

She returned to the small house to fetch her belongings. Her hosts would not be sorry to see her go. No one ever missed a satirist.

3. Derdriu Flaying

"Flaying," explained Laeg, "involves stones like this one." He leaned back against a tall gray obelisk, triple his height and about the width of his shoulders. You see the rounded cap at the top? You know what it repre-

sents, don't you? One needn't be obsessed with sex to recognize it. The world is absolutely chock-a-block with them, too. They stick up all over like the hairs of a two-day growth of beard. Of course, they serve purposes other than Derdriu's. As a matter of fact I'm not certain how the extraordinary notion of flaying did start—but never mind, Senchan, here she comes over that rise." A shift of his cerulean eyes indicated the direction. Senchan got up from where he had been sitting in the snow at Laeg's feet.

Derdriu was a tiny black figure against the brightness of the snow. She walked down the gentle slope toward them with some difficulty, picking her way around all the rocks the snow had buried.

Senchan's throat constricted and his face tightened; though he was a mere observer, he was as smitten with Derdriu as was Levarcham or even Conchovor. Beside her pure beauty, Selden's dirty daughters really were bristled pigs. Laeg seemed totally immune to her charms and Senchan, with a young man's capacity for jealousy, was frankly glad of it. Besides which, he couldn't imagine devilish Laeg mooning for her attention anyway. He backed away from the immense stone phallus as she drew closer, forgetting in his awe that she could not detect him. Laeg also moved off from the stone, perhaps out of reverence for the performance to come.

Derdriu approached the obelisk side-on, like a cat warily stalking a snake. It intimidated her, that much was obvious to both observers. Then determination set her features as rigid as the object of her intentions. The fur slipped from her shoulders. She withdrew from her tunic a gold fastener: a device like two small clam shells welded onto a curved gold stem, each shell fit through slits in the woven wool. She wrapped the bright tunic into a ball with the fastener safe in the center, laid the ball atop her fur to keep it dry. From the waist up now she was naked. The large nipples of her slight breasts were two ruby pegs supporting the shining lunula around her neck; rubies chiseled by the cold. Her tartan trousers, tucked into her fur boots, must be pulled out before she could stumble free of them. The boots she left on because, rite or not, that snow was freezing. She knelt, folded the last of the clothing, then spiraled as she rose, to face the stone. And Senchan. This time she approached defiantly, an untamed nymphet making a maiden stab at seductress. Her cold red fingertips caressed the pillar and she craned her head to see the tip with vague white clouds drifting by. Still watching the sky, she pressed her whole body against the stone. A shiver rippled up her back, tossed from her shoulders, but she held to the icy stone. She shifted to a splayed stance and began, awkwardly at first, to rub against it, rising up and down on the balls of her feet.

Senchan began to whine without knowing it.

Derdriu chanted: "Naise you must give me. Red, black, and white all over. Hard as stone, soft as snow. Naise in my ears, in my eyes and mouth. Poured in my breath, in the pores of my skin. You wet stone, whetstone, hone me till my sharp edge pierces him." She was breathing rapidly now;

as rapidly as Senchan. “Naise,” she said and repeated. Even after she had lost the ability to speak, her mouth formed and held his name.

Finally, spent, she lay against the stone on quivering legs. Senchan had sunk down upon his knees. Laeg drew him gently to his feet.

“And that is flaying. Not exactly in the same class of magic as setting fire to wicker baskets full of goats.”

Unable to speak, Senchan shook his head. He finally got up the nerve to look Laeg in the face, to discover that no one was immune to the spell Derdriu cast. This failed to stir him; he no longer had the energy to be jealous. “It—it was barbaric,” he said.

“Barbaric? To want her freedom? To select her lover by whatever means? What is so barbaric about freedom of choice?” Laeg looked him over as if reconsidering the wisdom of bringing him along. “I suppose that’s the sort of attitude your new order has taught you: ‘If we do it, it’s fine and good, if someone else does it, it’s barbaric.’ Hmm?”

Senchan had no ready answer for that. He hadn’t meant to criticize. He turned away to watch an enervated Derdriu rewrap and pin her tunic. “And she’ll repeat that on every one of those stones?” he asked.

“From here to Ard Macha.”

He swallowed. “I ... don’t think I can watch it again.”

Derdriu shook the snow from her fur, then headed off purposefully toward the north.

“Ah, then, we won’t follow her,” Laeg said and shoved Senchan at the obelisk. The boy merged into it. Laeg took one step but stopped to give Derdriu a last forlorn glance before he passed through the stone, too.

4. The Brothers Uíslíu

The strumming of a harp showed Derdriu the way on the final stretch of her journey to Ard Macha. She had walked for two days to get there. The front of her body from knees to breastbone was chafed and raw from all the erect stones she had flayed. And now at last she heard the sweet music Levarcham had promised and knew she was very near the one whose name had dominated her ordeal.

On the dark wall somewhere ahead, Naise unwittingly lured her in. She walked like a spirit on its journey to *Tír na Nog*, passing briefly through this nocturnal landscape, practically oblivious to the clusters of warm round houses scattered on the plain around her, fires glittering through the doorways, catching her in their light and causing those people out in the cold to pause in their work and look up briefly. She did not see them. The only

thing that held her attention was the huge bonfire on the top of Ard Macha and the music that seemed to issue from it.

Soon she could see figures reflected in the fire's light, and below them the dark lines that were the tops of the three ramparts protecting the hill. Distant voices sounded crisply on the air. Weaving through them, the harp continued its siren song. A huge boulder scuttled off to her left, drawing her attention for a moment, becoming a cow. She recalled what Levarcham had said about the milk and cattle on the plain. Now she became aware of the populace around her—the many houses and fires, the low stone walls running in every direction to enclose countless herds of cattle and sheep. And in the huts, so many people, so close. The darkness hid their identities as it hid the shapes of the severed heads that hung as trophies beneath the thatched roofs. Then the music filled her mind again and all the people faded in the night.

Before long the fire atop Ard Macha passed from her view, became a smoky glow against the dark sky. The shape of the harpist became visible: a figure like a bear, he sat on the first snowy rampart. Nearer, she could see that he wore a thick fur with a hood. The harp he strummed hid in the shadow of him. How was she going to scale that wall?

He must have seen her approach but said nothing while he played. She stood directly beneath him, looking at his feet dangling overhead. When at last the sweet song ended, he leaned over and stared down at her, his face a cave circled in fur. For a second Dardriu feared that Levarcham had lied and that the harpist looked nothing like she imagined. But the voice that issued from the cave proved to be as pleasant as the music of his harp, if tinged with mockery. "You're the finest heifer of all the cows that have ever drifted here to listen," he told her. "And how uniquely high your shoulders sit for a heifer."

Her fear forgotten, Dardriu accepted the challenge in his words and replied, "The cows are always bigger where there's no bull in the yard."

The harpist wasted no time in setting aside his instrument and leaping from the wall. Dropping beside her, he somersaulted and came up on his feet. The hood had fallen back from his face and at last Dardriu saw him. Levarcham had not lied—Naise was the embodiment of the elements she had wished upon.

"I've never seen the like of you," he said as if picking up her thoughts. "Where have you come from that I've never seen you?"

"I've walked a million miles for you, my Naise. I want you. Now. Right here." She took off her fur and laid it over the snow. She settled herself down on it and removed the overused fastener from her tunic.

Naise had never seen anyone more beautiful. What or who she was did not matter to him. No one had ever offered herself to him like this; he could not even contemplate refusal. He got down beside her and spread open his fur above them to enfold their warmth.

They made love in the dark, on the ground beneath the wall, and it was not until they were lying united that Naise cared to know her name. When he heard it, he lurched up and stared at her with horror. "Derdriu! What have you done to me? You belong to the king!"

"So says he," she answered coolly. "I have chosen otherwise. I've chosen you."

More than that, she had found a path to his heart. Just being beside her made him burn with love. For himself, he saw that it was too late. But what of his family? Of Cathbad's prophecy? His desires could not be weighed against such things. He got up and started to put on his woolen trousers.

"Are you rejecting me?"

"I—" He stared down at her, his face twisted with conflict. "I am. I—I must."

She could not comprehend how the flaying magic might have failed her. And she had lain with him, crouched over him and spit into his mouth to bind him. How could he refuse her? She would not let anything force them apart now. She reached up and grabbed hold of what was available—his testicles—and pulled him sharply down beside her. His scream split the night. The cold air carried it far.

In a hut on the plain two young men suddenly stopped in the midst of their supper. The older of the two, whose name was Ardan, looked at his younger brother, Ainle, and said, "Didn't that sound like Naise?"

Ainle nodded. "And I don't hear his harp."

Ardan set his bowl on the straw matting and reached for his fur cloak and spear. Seeing his intent, Ainle scurried up after him.

Naise tried to wrestle free of Derdriu's excruciating grip. He thought he was going to be sick. Her hand was like stone. Derdriu was barely conscious of what she was doing. She began to chant to him, "Shame upon your manly parts like a withering fungus if you let anyone come between the woman who loves you and you if you love her, too."

Too late, Naise pressed his hands over his ears. He had heard it all, and he screamed out in worse agony than before. Derdriu had been cursed by a Druid and a *geis* of such consequences delivered by her had the power of a Druid's proclamation behind it. His second cry pierced the hearts of warriors in a hundred nearby houses. Derdriu released him in uncomprehending terror.

Doors were thrown back. Light spilled out in zig-zag patterns, and a horde of fur-covered figures charged into the night. Naise's brothers reached him first.

Ardan arrived beneath the wall and drew up short at what he found. Who was this half-naked girl crouched tenderly beside his half-naked younger brother? Had someone wounded him, knocked him from the wall? The girl looked up at Ardan with eyes that at first were distant but that quickly focused on him with fear.

“Naise,” Ardan said. He knelt beside his brother. “Naise, what’s happened to you?” Naise said nothing, but shook his head violently, refusing to look up from the snow. Ardan heard the thunder of many feet running toward them. He looked up to see Ainle and, behind him, warriors from many nearby houses.

Derdriu gathered her tunic around her and hid inside her fur.

Soon a ring of concerned faces surrounded the group of four. Ardan helped Naise to his feet. Naise seemed oblivious to his nakedness or the cold. He looked out over the crowd and hung his head, saying, “I love her, forgive me all but I do.”

No one understood what he meant. Ardan grabbed his brother by the shoulders and shook him angrily, demanding to know what had happened. Obviously, he hadn’t been wounded. If he had brought all these warriors from the warmth of their fires to learn that he was lovesick ...

Naise shouted, “No, you don’t see!” then grabbed the fur hood around her head and pulled it back. “She’s *Derdriu!*” he cried.

An urgent silence, like that before an eruption, followed. Each person there experienced his own admixture of reverence and revulsion.

Derdriu shrank from them, the press of eyes so charged with emotions, tongues licking lips or teeth bared in vulpine snarls, flared nostrils jetting steam like the snouts of a hundred horses. The rush of claustrophobia drove her back against the snow-covered wall. She read her doom in their final expressions.

Naise made an attempt to explain what had happened: she had come seeking him, by what mystical method he could not guess. Finding out who she was, he had tried to deny any ardor for her, and she had gone into a trance, putting upon him an incantation that required him to keep her with him and defend her, and there was just one way to do that. He had to leave Ard Macha.

“We’re honor-bound to turn you in,” said Fiachu mac Firaba, one of the warriors in the group, “if Conchovor comes to any among us. This is Cathbad’s curse—it’s begun. Still, it hardly seems fair that you’re trapped in it when you weren’t even there to hear the curse laid out. That’s not right.”

“Naise is a good warrior,” added someone further back. “How can we sentence him to death? Conchovor’s lost his wits over this girl ... not that I can’t see why, but still ...” There were murmurs of agreement with the implied injustice.

“I can’t let my brother go on alone,” Ardan said, “or be a part of his undoing. If he’s to be cast out, then so must I be.” He turned to Naise. “We’ll go together, little brother. You and Ainle and I. We’ll all protect Derdriu and your honor. There’ll be no shame upon you while I live.”

“And me,” Ainle said with a child’s determination.

To the crowd Ardan said, “Do what you must. Tell the king. We’ll understand and forgive you.”

“No,” said a woman warrior named Errge. “The sons of Uisliu are friends to everyone here. If it’s not on their heads punishment falls—and we seem to be in agreement this is so—then no one here can put it there. The only way to save honor all around is to go with them. There’s no province in all Eriu would deny us a place in their hall. If you agree, then make haste so we can leave tonight, before the king gets word.”

All attention fell again upon Derdriu. She still hung back from them, looking up with her chin pressed against the edge of the lunula. Naise went to her, touched her bare shoulder softly. “Come. We’ll all of us go to protect you and save Ulster from the curse on you. Maybe if we go far enough, all our people will be spared. No one here thinks you’re evil, you know.” She searched his face for the love he had for her and, finding it, she hugged herself to him and burst into tears. She had never known of the curse upon her, had never thought herself different from anyone else. She was only an unworldly girl, who could not fathom how her love for one boy had snowballed into a monstrosity of one hundred and fifty warriors, their husbands, wives, children and concubines— which was the size of the caravan that departed from Ulster that night.

Only one person saw them go. He stood on the earthen wall beneath Ard Macha in his white robe and watched them pass by with their hope, though he knew their flight would be in vain. He had warned them once and, had they listened to him then, there would have been far less trouble than what was to follow now. He looked up into the night sky and counted a star for every campfire those warriors would circle before they returned to Ulster.

5. Years of Exile

“They travelled all across Eriu that winter,” said Laeg, “warriors without a province, *fianna*. Kings could always use skilled fighters and the *fianna* from Ulster always found a home. However, Senchan, most kings also owed debts or favors to someone—if not to Conchovor, then to someone who in turn owed him. Others could simply be bought outright. Soon enough, the exiles found their hosts plotting against them.

“In desperation, they left the isle and sailed to the land of Alba, where Conchovor’s machinations could not touch them. What they forgot in this instance, though, was the effect that Derdriu’s beauty could have: they were all honorable people, so their love for her, as it grew, was the love of

a foster-parent for the child under their aegis. The king of Alba had a petty, greedy soul. When he saw Derdriu, he grew envious and tried to take her from them—first with offers of gold and cattle, and then with a promise of slaughter. The sullen, luckless exiles had no choice but to lade their *crannogs* and set sail again, back to Eriu.

“They landed on a bleak southern isle inhabited by a few goats, some rabbits, and hundreds of gulls. Dung spattered everything. Salt spray coated them with its grimy oil. They longed for nothing more than to go home, to find some means of reconciliation with Conchovor. They could think of none. Homeless, lost, barred it seemed even from the honor of death in battle, they lived that month in the deepest melancholy there is. For all they knew, they would live out their days on that chunk of rock until the ocean wore them away.

“But they were rescued,” said Senchan, hopefully.

“In one sense, yes,” Laeg replied cryptically. “However, nothing, Senchan, is ever half so simple as it seems.”

6. The Advent of the Curse

Tales of the tribulations of the fugitives in Alba had reached Ulster, exciting the populace and keeping the subject of amnesty alive. Groups of Conchovor’s advisors took it upon themselves to approach him regarding the exiles’ safe return. “Think how terrible it would be,” they suggested, “if our friends should die in some foreign land, defending what isn’t even theirs. They’re not *fianna*. And it’s all on account of that girl.”

That girl, thought Conchovor, only the most beautiful woman in all the world. She belongs to me but Naise mac Uislenn has her. None of you has ever seen her—how could you idiots hope to understand. I’ve waited thirteen years!

The advisors disregarded the dark look recasting his face and put forth the rest of their argument. “Isn’t it better to be magnanimous? Bring them home. Forgive—”

“Get out of my sight!”

The daunted advisors filed out. King Conchovor pulled at his short beard. His eyes were darkly ringed from sleepless nights, his temper grown short. Cathbad had ordered the Druids to avoid him, too; he could not even acquire a potion to help. Why had the Druid done this? he wondered. Why? He realized he was drifting, his thoughts tumbling in all directions—another unfortunate result of poor sleeping habits. All because of *that girl*. The solution, her return, should be a simple matter. It *was* simple: either she and Naise would agree to his wishes or she would become a widow. But forgive them? Pah!



Outside Ard Macha, a small crowd waited to hear the outcome of the advisors' adjuration. The men filed out shaking their heads. No, they had not found a way to move his petrified heart. He would do nothing ... At least, so everyone believed until two nights later when the king announced that he had sent off Fergus the Messenger to invite the fugitives home. Great rejoicing followed.

Cathbad did not celebrate, however. He continued to note every person who was called before Conchovor and, with other information gathered or inferred, to create a complete, interlocking framework around Conchovor's designs. Cathbad alone saw Levarcham the Satirist slip out of Ard Macha one night and set off to the south. He alone knew that one Eogan mac Durthact had been ordered to the fortress. Something evil was brewing. Cathbad smelled it.

Fergus the Messenger returned with the happy news that the fugitives wanted nothing in the world more than to come home. Their single stipulation was that they would return *only* if accompanied by Fergus mac Roich, as proof of Conchovor's good intentions. Fergus accepted readily to put an end to the strife.

The following day he set out for the shores of Leinster.

He took with him his son, Fiacha, who had returned to him after graduating out of fosterage; two foster-sons of his own whose names were Iollan and Buinne; the warrior Duffach the Dark, known widely as "the Beetle of Ulster," supposedly in reference to the jutting brow that shaded his glowering blue eyes with menace; and Cormac Connlongas, who was the yield of Nessa's incest with Conchovor, and who was only too glad to escape from the antinomy of those two authorities for any amount of time. It was felt that this larger band—especially with the king's son in their midst—would reassure the exiles all the more. Fergus also brought with him Conchovor's personal *geis* in the matter: that the Sons of Uisliu eat no food on their journey till they sat in Ard Macha with their king. This was not an unusual prohibition and added an extra note of honor to the proceedings.

That same evening, Cathbad watched from the shadows as the king ushered a secret visitor out of the hillfort. Cathbad could not see the face of the extremely tall visitor and caught only the king's final words to the man: "Remember, ask it of all. If you don't, everything will be lost—including you."

The following night, Levarcham the Satirist returned to Ard Macha. Cathbad intercepted her before she reached the center of the fortress. He dragged her back out into the night where no one could listen. "And where have *you* been, old acid-mouth?"

"Has ever a satire been written about a Druid?"

Cathbad replied dryly, “What good would a satirist be with a *glam dicin* upon her never to speak except to ... goats?”

“I’ve never met a Druid with a sense of humor yet. All right, I’ll tell you what you want, cruel Cathbad. I’ve been to the Siuir’s mouth, and I’ve spied there the face of Dardriu amongst the hundred and fifty, who, I might add, have grown somewhat from births and fosterage.”

“But why did you go? Conchovor required it of you?”

“Oh, indeed. He pines for word of her—is she lovely? has her beauty sloughed away through the rough two years with those ‘conniving brothers?’”

“And?”

“She’s as beautiful as always. You’ve seen her, too?”

“Not in the way you mean, no. Only in visions, in chants and dreams—all linked to carnage and destruction. Now the dream blood is murky, the answers hidden from me for I’m in it; yet in the center of the swirl I can see her face like a moon in a bloody sky.”

Levarcham glanced away. “Well,” she said, “it’s time I went before the king.” Cathbad moved to stop her but she silenced him with a crooked finger to his lips. “I won’t be telling him what I’ve told you. She’s grown bony and dry like a starved plowhorse. Eyes that once dominated the stars have turned to charred wicks in guttered lamps. I shall count the times he flinches. And I’ll be gone from this place before she returns. Too many traps here for a satirist. Not enough good material.”

Cathbad brought his hand out of his robe and suddenly flung something across Levarcham’s shoulder—crystals of salt. “You’ll need the luck against him,” the Druid explained. “He’s become more than Conchovor.”

Warily then, Levarcham went to see the king. She told him how pitiable Dardriu had become. Conchovor did not call her a liar. He heard her out, then dismissed her curtly and sent for another messenger.

That night the second observer left for Leinster.

Eogan mac Durthact arrived the next morning, accompanied by his retinue of *fianna*. He had the face of a weasel and the habit of wringing his hands together as if in a constant state of agitation. His power extended over a region due south of Ard Macha called Fernmag. Experienced travelers were known to go far out of their way to avoid crossing through that region:

Fernmag had a reputation for swallowing people whole.

Mac Durthact and Conchovor had been adversaries for years on various matters of policy—most notably those concerning demarcation. From the Fernmag lord’s arrival, it seemed that their disputes were about to be parleyed.

Cathbad doubted this. The timing was too critical. He distrusted Eogan mac Durthact even more than the monster lurking in Conchovor, and he considered the man capable of any atrocity. Helpless to interfere, he turned at last for advice to Nessa.

She never left her chambers now. Cast off, she sang or hummed alone, sometimes erupting into fits of laughter or tears without apparent cause. She could no longer walk: after Cormac had arrived, the boils of Fergus's curse had erupted with renewed vigor. The skin of her excoriated thighs had grown leathery with scars.

Cathbad hoped she might climb out of her melancholia one more time, long enough to help him. He sat beside her bed, where she lay awake, silent, staring into shadows. Quietly, he explained that the curse upon Derdriu might be coming true, but that all attempts at foretelling had proved fruitless. "What should I do?" he asked her, "how should I block him from destroying the province?" When she did not so much as acknowledge him, he added, "That harsh god of your isle is in this, too." Nessa suddenly grinned at him. He saw to his grief that she would never again conquer her miserable madness. He patted her shoulder, then got up to leave.

Nessa sang out suddenly, "It's a Druid's curse to know too much."

He stared back into her wild eyes and noticed for the first time a grayness about her, in her skin and hair. Had he grown old as well? He did not feel as if time had passed for him—but time was a jumble to Cathbad. Again he turned away.

Again she cried out. "History can be changed in a night!"

"Yes," he agreed, sick at heart, "yes, it can."

She tittered at him, or at some secret thought. He went out and wandered alone through a seemingly deserted fortress.

Fergus mac Roich now remained his sole hope of fending off disaster. In a dark corridor the priest paused, closed his eyes and sought with his mind for the thread of Fergus's future among all the others. He heard a noise like a blade whipping past his head. He dropped into a crouch, his arm raised to fend off a blow. Out of his trance, he stared into the darkness, ready to face his foe.

The hallway was empty.

Fergus mac Roich led the fugitive army up into the heart of Leinster. He peered at the rolling landscape ahead, anticipating an ambush over every hillock, glanced back at the wide stretches of gentle valleys, expecting a force of warriors in pursuit.

At first he had trusted Conchovor, but things had happened to make him suspect the king's good intentions. First, as he and his group had crossed near the place called Dind Rig, he had seen a figure he believed to be Levarcham the Satirist hurrying away up a high, rock-strewn hill ahead. If it had been the crooked satirist, she could only be spying on them at Conchovor's command. Then, last night, as they rested from their day's journey in a hut near Rathangan, Derdriu had suddenly grabbed Naise's sleeve and whispered urgently to him. Surreptitiously, Naise had fit a stone to his sling, then had flung it at the window of the hut. Outside, someone

had screamed. The members of the feast, in rushing out, had found no one there. Moonless, the black night shielded the spy, and the people had returned to their meals in tense silence. Naise, not allowed to eat, had tried to cheer them. "Whoever it was," he said, "they now share a common trait with Leinster's Eochaid Goll, the one-eyed sun god." Slight laughter answered the remark, and that died quickly. A heavy question hung over the matter: why should anyone be spying on them?

At midday Fergus and the forefront of the exiles climbed a high hill and were greeted with a beautiful view of the River Dub. More than that, between them and the river a huge house stood. Around the house a dozen spitted boars were roasting, servants worked, and a pot of wheaten beer stood steaming. The commingled odors of meat and beer reached the top of the hill, and a hundred stomachs growled as if in paean.

Fergus led the way down toward the house, all the while considering how he would explain to their expectant host that they could not delay with him.

The owner of the house appeared—a long, lanky man, so tall that he looked to be walking on stilts. He waved joyously at them. Fergus ducked out of sight behind Duffach the Dark. Duffach stared over his shoulder at Fergus cowering. "I don't believe it. The great mac Roich crouching behind me like some little boy behind his older brother."

"You're damned right I am. That tree of a man is a warrior named Borrach. He was present at the feast the night Cathbad bound me to my prime *geis*."

"So what? I was there, too, and you don't hide from me."

"Yes, but I don't still owe you a *feast*."

Duffach was not the swiftest of thinkers; but even he comprehended what Fergus implied. More than that, in a rare burst of perception, he carried the thought further. "Beer has to be brewed for days."

"How can I escape this trap?"

"I can't guess," replied Duffach, "but you'd best find another rock to crawl under because that giant is heading straight for me." Fergus looked around frantically, but the majority of the crowd had passed him by and the hillside wore no cover wider than a blade of grass. He wondered how severely Morann would rule if he slew Borrach before the feast debt was discharged.

"Ah, it's 'the Beetle' himself," called Borrach. He reached out his long, lean arms and embraced Duffach. Though standing lower on the hillside, Borrach towered above Duffach. By hugging the thickset warrior, he was able to look over Duffach's shoulder and see Fergus mac Roich crouching down, pretending to pick burrs off Duffach's dragging cape. "Fergus mac Roich!" he shouted. He released Duffach and came charging around before

Fergus could move. "I've waited years to have you wander across my land. What a golden opportunity—"

“Don’t say it!”

“—for me to collect upon your *geis*.”

Fergus stood up glumly. He stiffened at Borrach’s resolute grip on his arm but could do nothing.

Borrach turned away from Fergus’s accusing look, grinned at Duffach, clapped him on the back, and said, “Well, since Fergus is here to stay, why don’t you *all* stay the night and enjoy the food I’ve got for you.”

Duffach glanced uneasily at Fergus, then replied, “Had we only thought of that, we’d have sent a runner ahead to you so you could have had time to prepare for us. I know Fergus doesn’t care to eat alone, but I can see you’ve hardly enough food laid out for two.”

Borrach’s brow creased as he tried to determine how much sarcasm had just been heaped on him. Duffach’s face revealed nothing.

“Unfortunately,” said Fergus, “there are four among us who can’t stay, as they’ve taken an oath of their own to share their first meal with Conchovor. You didn’t know about that, did you? He wouldn’t *be* here, by chance, would he?”

“S-sorry, but he’s not.” Borrach turned red and went off quickly. “Must see to everyone else,” he called back. “Come down when you’re ready.”

Fergus’s sons came down the hill, accompanied by Cormac. “What is all this?” they asked. Fergus explained, adding that he was certain the situation was Conchovor’s handiwork to get him out of the way.

“We can’t let the brothers go alone from here,” said Fiacha. “That has to be what he intends.”

Iollan and Buinne said, “Listen, we’ll go with them and protect them.”

Then young Cormac cleared his throat. “Honorable notions, but they probably aren’t enough. If Fergus has been waylaid, then the way to protect the brothers is to send them along with someone whom none would *dare* harm. Me.”

From the house below, Borrach called up, “Mac Roich, people are waiting for you to take the first slice.”

“All right,” Fergus replied to Cormac. “You and my sons I can trust. Duffach?”

“I’ll stay I think. I don’t want all of us deserting you, and I don’t know the shape of this plot.”

Fergus said, “I’m here among over three hundred people, Duffach.”

The Beetle of Ulster only answered cryptically, “There are all different kinds of alone.”

Rather than argue the matter, Fergus went down to the feast by himself, ahead of the others.

7. Borrach Recants

Borrach's feast seemed to drag on interminably. For every course devoured, his cooks appeared with two more. Fergus grew more exasperated with each idle hour. He imagined dozens of traps and ambushes set for his sons and not being among them made him frantic. Finally, he sought out his host and took him aside. "Your fine feast has found a place in my heart," he said.

"Really?" Borrach answered uncertainly.

"It's the leeks I think." They both laughed over that. "But now," Fergus continued, "I think the conditions of my submittance have been fulfilled. It's time I went after Fiacha and my foster-sons as I pledged to do."

"No, really, you can't," implored Borrach. "There's so much food left, and it will all *spoil* if "

"Feed it to your dogs then!" Fergus snarled. He grabbed Borrach by the *torc* at his throat, bent him down like a green willow so that their eyes met. "I have some idea what the purpose of delaying me here might be. As the weight of a *geis* compounded your request, I was obliged to stay against my will. But you—you keep on like you've got the Dagda's cauldron that never empties in your cookhouse, and I've begun to wonder how so much food came your way. Here, then, is my offer to you. That you and I go back and inform the exiles you're satisfied I've complied with the *geis*, in return for which I won't take any action against you regardless of how you're mixed up in this plot. If you choose not to agree to this and anything happens to the people I'm sworn to protect, then I swear to you, your servants will *need* the Dagda's cauldron to put all your severed parts in to bring you back to life."

Fergus released his grip on the *torc*. Borrach sprang upright like a birch tree and just as pale. He hurried off to where the majority of the feasters sat, and he announced abruptly that the *geis* on Fergus had been lifted. He added, "Perhaps all of you should think of going along with him. He's in a hurry."

The feast ended with Fergus mac Roich certain that he had been deceived and out-manuevered. He and Duffach ferried across the Dub ahead of the exiles, who would be many hours in their crossing. He prayed that he might somehow overtake his sons and their charges in time.

8. Ill-Met on the Plain

The band of young expatriates led by Fiacha arrived below Ard Macha much sooner than Fergus could have anticipated. The reason for this was Derdriu: each time the group encountered settlements or travelers along

the way, the people swarmed around them to see her. Somehow, everyone knew about her return. Her name had become ubiquitous.

To protect her and themselves, Naise, Ardan, and Ainle formed a tight triangle around her, keeping her from sight. All the curious onlookers got to see was the top of her head to her brow.

Fiacha kept up a swift, steady pace, with Cormac at the rear, flanked by Iollan and Buinne, who staved off all attempts to breach the barrier. The group raced to their destination.

They found the wide, green plain empty of cattle. A thin breeze blew steely clouds over the ridges. Outside the scatter of huts, whole families stood in doorways, silent, unmoving. Only unattended sheep moved on the plain. At the base of the hillfort, where Derdriu had first found Naise, a group of figures stood tightly clustered. Drawing nearer, Fiacha soon recognized the leader of this reception committee to be the red-haired king of Fernmag, Eogan mac Durthact. And from the neutral color of their tunics and cloaks, the group around him appeared to be members of his serving staff. Puzzled, Fiacha searched the hillside for Conchovor, found the king alone, near the top of the hill, with his hands around his face, probably trying to shield his eyes against the sun's glare.

Mac Durthact strode forward. His servants formed a ring around him, as if suspecting that the Sons of Uisliu meant to do Eogan some harm. Fiacha surmised that the king of Fernmag must have been brought here to act as an impartial go-between. Obviously, Conchovor was incapable of being impartial or forgiving. This seemed a wise course of action, and Fiacha assumed it must have been done on the advice of a Druid, maybe Cathbad. He looked forward to seeing that austere man of wisdom again.

Behind him, Ainle cried, "Look up there!" Fiacha looked and found the tops of the ramparts covered by the women of Ard Macha, all seated, watching. He thought of them awaiting the first glimpse of a long-lost son or an expatriated lover.

He glanced again at the king of Fernmag coming toward him across the field. The servants in front of mac Durthact finally parted and Fiacha saw the wide smile on Eogan's vulpine face.

Eogan called to him cheerily, "Fiacha, let me greet first the young warrior called Naise. It's through him that both sides in this dispute are to be reunited." Brushing aside one edge of his enfolding purple cloak, he reached out his hand, palm up. The bracelets at his wrist clanked together like two spear tips meeting.

Hearing this, Naise broke from formation and moved ahead of Fiacha. He reached out to clasp Eogan's reconciling hand.

Eogan gripped Naise's hand, then yanked him forward. Fiacha saw only an elbow slide out of the cape as Naise seemed to fly into Eogan. Then Naise rose up on his toes and Fiacha heard a wet snap. Three shining metal points popped out of Naise's back. The tips withdrew and Naise recoiled, head up, arms flung out as if to embrace his murderer. He

stumbled and Fiacha saw the forked spear Eogan had concealed beneath his cloak.

Fiacha bellowed and charged forward. Swinging around Naise, he knuckled the nearest servant across the brow and, as the man fell back, jumped through the opening this created. He drew up defiantly between Eogan and Naise, who spoke out suddenly with chilling calmness: "Fiacha, my legs are all numb." Fiacha glanced back, saw the bewildered smile, the blood pumping out; saw as his vision swept the group that the "servants" were flinging off their cloaks, revealing on each back a forked spear strapped into place. Fiacha cuffed Eogan mac Durthact back. "Throw down that spear, assassin!" and drew his sword.

Naise stumbled up against his back. Fiacha shouted to the others to protect themselves. His warning turned to a scream of pain as the short three-pronged spear slammed into him with all of Eogan's weight behind it. The prongs tore between his ribs, out his back, and plunged into Naise, pinning the two youths together. They fell, Fiacha dying on top, Naise dead beneath him.

Fiacha heard the screech of a monstrous raven—Morrigan—somewhere very near. Night seemed to flood the sky and the sun to turn into a red bead—the cold, hard Morrigan's eye. He could not believe this treachery; he could not hear Conchovor screaming from on the hill.

Ardan and Ainle tried to catch Naise as he stumbled and then righted himself. They heard Fiacha's cry; but, ignorant of the danger to themselves, did not have time to draw their swords before Fiacha and Naise fell and Mac Durthact's warriors closed upon them. Three spears each cut free their souls.

Buinne, Iollan, and Cormac charged past Derdriu with their weapons drawn. They slashed out against the Fernmag warriors, driving them back. Buinne became trapped between two of them. He chopped one through the neck and took a spear in his back. Iollan leaped in and killed that one. He trembled in a berserk rage, began to spin his sword like a wheel around him, slitting two more throats, opening up the bellies as well. A low-flung spear caught him from the side, sent him flying across Buinne. Growling, furious, the warriors hacked his body to pieces.

Cormac last of all was left to defend Derdriu. "Get away, get away!" he cried back to her. The remaining warriors turned from Iollan and spread out, forcing him to increase his distance from Derdriu if he wished to engage in combat. He was angry enough to comply. Passing his comrades' bodies, he wrenched the spear from Iollan and flung it at Eogan mac Durthact, a sure shot; but one of the warriors leaped into its path to save the villain. "No, you! You!" Cormac cried out in frustration. He charged them, tears streaming down his face. They would not engage him fairly, with honor: he was Conchovor's son and they dared not kill him.

Cormac seemed to trip and sprawl. One of the warriors laughed at him and bounded forward. Cormac, on his knees, swept his blade around and cut the man's feet from under him. Then Cormac leapt up at the two remaining warriors, but a stone slung from behind him struck the back of his head, and he pitched forward into the grass.

Eogan mac Durthact casually tucked away his sling as he walked toward Derdriu. She had not moved during the swift slaughter. Eogan stared at her with the eagerness of a rat encountering more cheese than it could contemplate. Derdriu reviled him with her eyes: "Kill me," they said, "finish what you've begun." She thought suddenly, *Naise is dead*. The phrase was meaningless, his body hidden from her, the vision of his dying already sealed off, memory's hermetic magic. At that point Conchovor arrived. Anger poured from him like heat from a fire. He knelt and touched Fiacha, but the young man was obviously dead. Mac Durthact shoved Derdriu up to him.

Conchovor rose and stood over her. He could see that she wanted to spit in his face, and that made him want to strike her down, but he could not make himself do it. Unable to harm her, he willed her to wither, but even that impulse died, so much was he enthralled by the wonder of her nearness. Then, over her shoulder, he saw Eogan's lewd stare upon him. Conchovor took Derdriu by the hair and forced her back between himself and the Fernmag king.

The two surviving warriors appeared beside Eogan. One of them suddenly lifted Naise's severed head up inches from Derdriu's face and jiggled it at her. He wheezed laughter at her, but she did not seem to see or hear. Naise's blood spattered her.

Conchovor slapped the warrior's arm viciously, knocking the head away. "Enough!" he snarled. The warrior backed away. "Get from my sight," Conchovor told all three of them. "I'll keep my promise of good will, though not even Macha knows why after this—but you leave those trophies here and get away while I'm set in my purpose." Then he turned and dragged Derdriu with him across the field. She came sluggishly. Above them, the ramparts now lay empty.

Halfway back, the king slowed and called out, "Someone go and fetch Cormac!" He had forgotten his son. If Eogan had killed Cormac ...

Two warriors came out of the first rampart and ran past him. When they returned, it was with the collection of heads that the Fernmag warriors had cut free. Cormac's body was nowhere to be found. An hour later, Conchovor learned that a horse was missing from a field nearby. He had no doubts of what these two events meant. What he did not know was how soon word might reach the others, how soon they would return. Disaster rode the wind.

9. Retribution

In Conchovor's mind, hundreds of naked warriors surged across the plain, slapping spears against their shields and shouting to chill the bones of the defenders on the ramparts. The din he heard equaled the howl of the Nemain that could burst a man's heart with fear. He saw spittle flecking lips, madness glistening in eyes. He saw bodies swarm like ants over his walls. Certain this was a premonition, he lined the ramparts with guards to watch for the surging horde. Thus, no one even detected the stealthy invasion by three: Fergus, Duffach, and Cormac.

The three crossed the plain from three different directions, weaving in and out of the hushed settlement. They met within and climbed the hill together. People passed them in the dark without notice. At the top, they met, then split up again to create three paths of havoc and death.

Fergus attacked two guards outside the circular fortress—two brothers who had been known to him but whom he slew now as if they were bitterest enemies. Duffach ducked around them as they fought and entered the fort. He came face to face with one of Conchovor's innumerable bastards, a child named Maine, and lopped off the child's head before Maine even saw that he was in peril. Duffach killed a second child as well, one that belonged to Conchovor's eldest daughter. He was thinking that Fergus would approve of this precise exactment of revenge. As he stood over his two victims, Duffach looked up to find a skinny messenger with a bloody bandage tied over one eye standing and gaping at his handiwork. Duffach raised his sword and the messenger shrieked.

From deeper in the fortress, the alarm sounded. The corridors echoed with running feet. Duffach slashed at two warriors but was forced to retreat. He backed outside, slammed up against Fergus, who ducked around him, spearing one of the two who pursued Duffach. The Beetle announced proudly, "Conchovor's *derbfine* is smaller by two thanks to me."

Fergus said nothing, glanced around to see Cormac being driven back towards them. "It's time we made our escape. They'd like to hem us in." He yelled to Cormac. The three set off down the hill, swiping at the few who tried to oppose them. Most of the warriors were racing to the fortress to protect the king.

As he ran, Duffach called out, "I thought you wanted to murder Conchovor."

"No," answered Fergus, ahead of him. "No, it's Eogan mac Durthact I want. Didn't you listen to Cormac's story?"

"Yes, but ... I wish you'd said something on the way here, damn you. Mac Durthact's a rodent—I could have told you he wouldn't be here."

"All the same, we'll return with the others."

"What? Attack again? What at?"

Fergus glanced back at him and bellowed, "I hope one day I get to see *you* lose a vital part. Then you can show me how calmly you take it and how little you do about it."

They spoke no more to one another. On the plain, Cormac killed a charioteer and the three men rode off on the stolen vehicle.

Conchovor counted the dead—his child and grandchild among them—and sank down in the darkness outside. He had hoped to bargain with mac Roich before any slaughter began, promising to help avenge Fiacha's death. In truth, he had expected everyone but the Sons of Uisliu to fall into the feast trap he had laid. Mac Durthact was to have killed just the brothers. Why had he trusted that weasel after so many years of conflict? He knew better; he was not making the right choices anymore. His grip on his kingship seemed to be loosening. And now he had acquired an enemy that made mac Durthact look like a mere gadfly. The king stared into the heart of the conflict and saw one face there, one agent of his trouble, whom he could punish.

Derdriu.

He got up and returned to where he had her chained. He stripped her and shoved her through the corridors into his chamber. There he raped her. She let him crawl over her as though her spirit had abandoned her body, leaving nothing inside to protest. Her indifference fueled his anger. He whipped her, then placed a quivering knife against her cheek. "I might peel your face to the bone, here or here," he threatened, his voice trembling. The very act of saying it nearly made him sick. He became aware of what he had done to her—as though having performed it in a trance—and reviled himself for it. Taking the knife, he ran away to the room where the cedar-embalmed heads of enemies were kept, found the unpreserved heads of the three brothers and dug out the eyes. He slashed and gouged the dead, plastic skin, screamed until his voice failed and the spit was dripping from his lips. The knife dropped from his fingers and he followed it, still gasping and croaking impotent threats. He lay twitching, his legs drawn up to his chest and his eyes rolled back in his head.

When the army of exiles swept down across the plain, no one could find Conchovor. The fortress became a scene of pandemonium with no leader to take charge. Three hundred naked berserkers burst through defenses they knew by heart and killed everything that got in their way. Duffach, refusing to ascend the hill again, entered a house on the plain where girls in warrior-training lived. He stormed through alone, swinging his sword with one hand, stabbing his spear with the other, slaying everyone he encountered before setting fire to the house. Above him, the hill looked incongruously festive with the fires scattered across it.

Fergus and Cormac slew their way to the top. While those with them cut down any defenders within reach, Fergus set fires all around Ard Macha. The flames closed around the timbers like fingers curling into a fist. Upon

Fergus's signal, the army turned and surged over the hill, down the opposite side, collecting their strays, killing instinctively with animal precision. Behind them lay a harvest of death.

As the fire consumed the fort, the survivors on the hill braved the flames to drag out the wounded and unconscious. Conchovor had been found almost last of all, still curled up cataleptically. No one had gotten Nessa out: she had fought off her rescuers.

The roof groaned as it collapsed. Conchovor came to his senses with his mother's name on his lips. He tried to run into the fire but was held back. Helplessly, he watched one wall cave in and imagined Nessa burning like a sacrifice in a wicker cage. The image would not leave him. He was left beside Derdriu, who had been among the first saved. He would not look at her, but suddenly lurched up, snarling, and struck her to her knees.

He would have hit her again had not another hand clamped over his wrist and twisted so hard that he was turned around.

Cathbad stood imperiously before him, the white hood of his robe cutting his face into light and dark halves. The Druid's bright eye accused him with the image of the fire. His teeth gleamed as he spoke. "Still striking down what you've worked so hard to acquire? Here is madness: a king who would dominate a child to her death. I will tell you this—that though you may succeed in impregnating this hapless girl as you have so many others, no offspring will come of it. No offspring of yours will ever rule here, *Othar*."

Conchovor's mouth fell open. His face took on an evil cast and tilted back from the fire.

"Yes," said Cathbad. "I know—how you've warped the soul I fashioned. I know. Reside in him as long as you like, but what I've said will be. Just as you'll find yourself required to let Fergus's Black Army of Exiles go free now. We have judged, Morann and I, and we find that they've merely offset your heinous acts of treachery. Sons on both sides lost forever, three sons of one mother, and the mother of a king. Whom I loved. Here is the end to it all, then. Count yourself lucky that the *brithem* didn't rule to take your head as a way of balancing the debt to Ulster." Abruptly, the Druid threw him aside and strode off into the wailing crowd.



"The army, as you've rightly surmised by now, went to the Rath Cruachan, where Ailell and Maeve welcomed them." Laeg tugged at his beard. "Cruachan could never become home for the expatriates, but Fergus and the others did have the assurance there that Maeve and Ailell would never side with Ulster against them.

"Yes, fine," Senchan said impatiently, "but what happened to Derdriu?"

“Well.” Laeg bowed his head. “Conchovor kept her for a year. He never tried to assault her again, but he did chain her—first in a hut and then in his chamber, once the new fortress at Ard Macha was completed. She hardly ate or slept. Levarcham’s false description of her became prophecy, then was surpassed. Day by day, as Conchovor looked on, the beautiful girl withered away. Her face thinned against her skull, the skin of her lips dried and cracked, her teeth turned brown and rotted. Those once-dazzling eyes, now ringed with darkness, never regained their lustre. In desperation, Conchovor had people force-feed her and tried to cheer her with music. Each time the harpist—her own wretched father, no less—came to the chamber, she would request he play a *goltraige*, which is the saddest of all laments. Her father wept but could not refuse her. After he had strummed a verse, then Dardriu would begin her dirge, always the same words: ‘You’ve taken from under the sun the one made from my desire, of snow and blood and raven’s wing. I would gladly trade you all to have him back. My body knew him like it knows itself. I no longer sleep because the place beside me is empty and my body can’t rest without him there. When I do slumber, he calls to me in my unhappy dreams, and I waken to find him dead and joy gone to worms—and I’ll have none now till I go to them, too. The husk of me will soon fall away, oh mighty king. As that’s the part you coveted so, let it be bestowed to you. It will be your prize to remind you of this, motherless man—that there is something in the world overrules the sea and stone. Grief is stronger than both. Naise!’ She collapsed in tears.

“Conchovor endured this a few times, though her dirges choked him with self-disgust. She was a scourge applied to his flesh.

“Fedlimid finally went before him and implored him not to make the harpist play for his daughter again. The dirges came to an end. For a year Conchovor tried to penetrate the cincture of her abjection. Then, in a fit of anger, he screamed at her, ‘How *much* do you hate me?’ She answered without looking up that she hated him no more than she hated Eogan mac Durthact. Well, he said, then perhaps if she spent a year with Eogan, she would learn to hate Conchovor less. She met his eyes then and replied calmly, ‘The two of you will never own me.’ This infuriated him further, so he had her dressed and packed off to Fernmag.” Laeg saw from the look on Senchan’s face that the boy had already imagined what such a fiend as Eogan mac Durthact could do to her.

“Mac Durthact was sent for and promptly came to Ard Macha. He found three new structures barely begun there—just posts and thatch. Conchovor played on Eogan’s vanity in offering Dardriu to him. You must remember that Eogan hadn’t seen Dardriu since the day he dragged her over to watch her lover’s body cut up. What he thought he was getting was a woman as enticing as a *Leanbaun Sídbhe*, whose far-famed beauty drives all men mad. The offer had him salivating; that she hated him only made him more eager to bend her to his will.

“Conchovor had Derdriu dressed in layers of bright clothing to hide her scraggy body and had a hooded cloak trimmed in gold put on to conceal her cadaverous face. He also rode in the four-wheeled chariot with mac Durthact to keep Eogan from discovering the truth too soon. Derdriu stood in the cart between and behind the two kings. Conchovor made a rude joke to Eogan about applying the girl between them as a way of linking their territories. Lubricious mac Durthact actually considered the idea.

“The road at that point ran through some very narrow passes cut from sheer rock. One of these was so cramped that the wheels of a royal chariot barely fit through the gap. They approached a place where a great block of granite jutted from the face of the sheer wall. The two kings and their driver moved to the right. Behind them, Derdriu cried out suddenly, ‘Naise!’ Then she leaned out over the side screen of the chariot. Before the three men could move, the outcropping stone smashed into her. The force of the blow snatched her body from the open cart. When they ran back to her, they found that her head had shattered inside the hood of her robe.”

Senchan sat weeping over the girl’s doom.

Laeg told him, “You’re not alone in your grief. All Ulster and the Black Army would mourn her passing. She had been the most beautiful in spirit of any woman among them. No one blamed her for the forces that shaped her life. The *geis* upon her had ended as Cathbad had forewarned, in blood and slaughter, though even he had tried to defeat it. Mac Durthact fled the scene, unaware that he had been offered anything but a great beauty. Conchovor chose to walk back to Ard Macha alone. He returned home like a penitent prodigal and buried his Derdriu in all the work he had abandoned while she was alive. He had lost so much, he could not think of it. If Othar had indeed possessed the king before that, there was afterwards no sign of him. Conchovor became the quiet, forthright leader that Cathbad had promised Nessa. She and Derdriu were given great honor, by the way, and their remains placed in the same tumulus, side by side.

“Conchovor had his three new houses built to replace the fort of Ard Macha. Resplendent houses. One was called Craebruad, which is ‘the Red Branch’—named for all the copper screens and red cedar panels that composed it. He lived in that house and held all his feasts and meetings there. The second house was called Tete Brec or ‘the Twinkling Hoard.’ The great and magical weaponry of Ulster was kept there. The third house, Craebderg, contained all the severed heads taken by the warriors of Ulster, which accounts for the meaning of its name—‘Branch of Blood.’ The heads of the sons of Uisliu lay in there, charred skulls without identity.” Laeg turned away from the view across the plain of the great hill and the three tall houses like glittering red carbuncles upon it.

The image vanished abruptly.

Senchan looked up in surprise to find himself back beside the ring of stones on Muirthemne Plain. Until now, he had taken for granted that everything he had seen was real. He looked to Laeg for an answer. Was it possible that he had never left here?

Laeg seemed utterly disinterested in clearing up the mystery. He said, “Now you know the history of Fergus mac Roich—how he lost his kingship and his sons and his home. And now you know the Sorrow of Derdriu.

“It’s time to return to the parlor of Queen Maeve to see how Fergus answers her demands. Notwithstanding that his Black Army has dwelled in Cruachan for some years, this is the first time they’ve been required to prepare for any incursion into Ulster. Fergus ... well, better you see for yourself.”

Senchan got up somewhat reluctantly and left the Stone of Sorrow. He followed Laeg back around the perimeter to Maeve’s stone. He drew up short at the sight of it. The great twin-ringed rock of Cruachan had somehow encased the lower half of Fergus’s stone. He looked to where the latter stone had stood before. Conchovor’s stone stood there, erect, alone. There was no evidence that Fergus’s stone had ever been anywhere but right in the midst of Cruachan. He looked at them all, the entire ring, and wondered what the final shape of the circle would be.

The world returned to mist.

V. THE PANGS OF ULSTER



1. *Fergus the Fer Fognama*

MacRoth accompanied Fergus mac Roich from the outer wall of Rath Cruachan to the doorway of Maeve's private chamber. Fergus had said nothing, asked no questions regarding why he had been summoned. MacRoth could not help but wonder if the warrior knew already. The queen had suggested that her plans were common knowledge in the Rath. For once, MacRoth felt uninformed, and the somber reticence of the Ulidian warrior served to chafe his wounded pride.

As they arrived outside the door, Maeve's voice echoed from the inner sanctum of her chamber, ordering MacRoth to leave Fergus there. He was only too happy to oblige.

Fergus entered the arboreal *grianan*. Sunlight dappled the dirt, sparkled on the gauze curtains ahead. Fergus speculated that light would spill into this room even while the rest of the world was bathed in rain. He drew back a curtain and stepped through, into Maeve's round, tiled refuge of pillows.

She lay naked at his feet. Her shining hair surrounded her like braided sunbeams. Both her hands cradled her head, revealing the tufts of hair beneath her arms. One leg was drawn up halfway. He knew this was a pose

for his benefit. "I am so glad you arrived at last," she said. "All this business of counting possessions has simply drained me to a state of languor."

"Sweet languor by the looks of it," he answered.

"It will be sweet—once you discard your tunic and come lie with me."

He obeyed her with a mechanical dispassion. She watched, becoming more hungry and eager because of his indifference. He fascinated her so. His skills at lovemaking delighted her, true; yet, he never allowed himself to lose control, sharing the joy, perhaps, but never yielding to it. It intrigued her that any man could accept her charms without giving her dominion. Fergus mac Roich was a hermetic enigma—the only one she had ever encountered.

"There's so little for me to do these days," she complained as he lay down beside her. "I need something to rekindle my interest in life."

"Try drowning cats."

Maeve laughed at the suggestion and hooked her knees over Fergus's shoulders.

"I knew about her voracious ... habitude long before we married," Ailell was explaining to his fool. The fool's name was Tamun the Stump. "Do you know, the first stories I ever heard about her told of how an endless line of swinish, greedy suitors went before her, one by one. They—all of them—came away broken, destitute. They had given her all that they had."

Tamun nodded, dripping grease from his chin back into the bowl of meat in his lap. He sucked at his fingers and encouraged Ailell with his wide, witless eyes.

"In the flesh she's disarming, that the tales convey—more even than they can hope to convey. She has about her the superlunary aura of a triple goddess. Seven sons and Finnabair—Maeve's brought them all into the world and it's not changed her one bit. Oh, perhaps—well, her breasts are heavier, the aureoles darker—but the body, the face, the appetite ... all of a—"

"A woman?" guessed the Stump.

"She means more to me, Tamun, than any other woman ever could, and I've been very satisfied in our arrangement here. How many men can say they've wed a goddess?"

The Stump scratched his slick chin, pursed his lips, finally shrugged.

Ailell shook his head at Tamun's obvious idiocy, then went on, as before, thinking out loud. "Did you know that those advisors in Ulster tried to wed her to Conchovor once? While I was arranging to pay her bride price. They heard about it and moved in quickly, secretly, with their promises to her family. She was packed off to Ard Macha to see if that was what she preferred. Left me bidding for empty air like some ... simpleton. As if I was paying the bride price in radishes or rocks. Conchovor—a child. I might actually have lost her to him, to that little boy, but he was obsessed with his foster-girl—that Derdriu—and hadn't any interest in Maeve or

any other female for that matter. Must have been possessed. And then some perverse advisor in Ulster actually suggested to her father that he give her to some enchanted Hound of Conchovor's that guarded the frontier of the whole province. And he was serious! Imagine, marry her off to some cur. Enchanted or not, it's still a dog.

"I've sworn ever since then to pay them back for their rude treatment of her. Bidding her around that way. And now I shall, even if it costs me the supremacy I've enjoyed over her till now. Even that isn't too high a price for a chance to reward their barbarity.

"That's the reason I keep the exiles off by themselves, because of their outrageous nature. I wouldn't want bestiality sweeping through Cruachan."

Tamun's brow knitted as he tried to follow the threads of this monologue.

"I know she's fucking with Fergus mac Roich right now. I know that. He's better than some of them I suppose, but the reason I say nothing is that I know she's doing it just to keep him bound to us. It's not only justifiable, it's ... necessary."

Tamun the Stump agreed. "Without doubt," he said. "I myself have made the same observation about shepherds and their sheep."

Ailell's jaw tightened. A tic developed in his cheek. He reached for the solid silver wand hanging overhead and started to get up. Sometimes he understood too well why his fool was called "the Stump." On the other hand, perhaps a good thrashing was just what he needed to undertake to release the anger in his thoughts.

"I am preparing an incursion into Ulster," Maeve said to Fergus. She looked with practiced unconcern to see his reaction. He showed no sign of surprise, not even of interest. "I have called upon forces throughout the rest of Eriu. My family has ties everywhere."

"So I've heard. But that ought to be expected of the daughter of a High King. Who didn't your father meet and manipulate?"

"He ought to have met you. I should have enjoyed that. You might actually have intimidated him. You knew of my plans, then?"

"Naturally."

She considered that he was probably lying, but she did not care. "I want you to lead the armies. I want Fergus mac Roich to take us into the tempestuous heart of Ulster."

"Is that all? Just take you in?"

"Of course not," she answered. "You—your men belong to me. I expect you to fight."

He folded his arms, drummed his fingers against his chest. "You'll need the armies of the other provinces as well to contend with Ulster."

"Possibly. But I think you may be surprised at how easily we slip across the border and how little resistance we encounter."

"It sounds as if you know something I don't."

Maeve sat up and leaned over his face. “Quite the contrary, my warrior of service. I am fairly certain you know exactly what I know.” His dark eyes continued to withhold evidence; she would have been disappointed had it been otherwise. “I am going to tell you a story, Fergus. And when I finish it, I will ask you to corroborate or deny its veracity. Do you swear to do this, or must I bind you to me by making you *feast* on me again?”

“I’ll answer you.”

“Good.” She eyed him over her shoulder as she drained her goblet of wine. “I may let you feast anyway.” Then she rolled over, pressing up against his warm body. “I’m going to tell you the story of the rich landlord and his six sons. Do you know it?”

“You said, afterwards.”

2. The Chariot Race

“In the great hills above the eastern coast of Ulster, lived a man named Crunniuc mac Agnomain. Crunniuc was wealthy in terms of both money and offspring. He had six boys, all strong and favorable. His wife, poor thing, had died from giving birth to the last of these. I have born septuplets, my little Maines, and I can tell you what excruciation that is. But then, you already have a widower’s perspective on the subject. Forgive me.

“This Crunniuc had learned to live very comfortably without a wife. Surely he had concubines and slaves galore; he could afford them. But our tale concerns the day a different woman entered his life. She appeared among the mounds and hills outside his house. He caught sight of her but, as he was alone, had no one to share this remarkable vision with. She came sauntering up the hill towards him, smiling a sweet smile. To his amazement, she passed right by him and walked into his house. By the time he ran up and entered it, the woman had begun preparing a feast for him and his boys, as if she had lived there her whole life. She knew where the two stones of his quern were, and which flagstones Crunniuc used for baking bread. Isn’t that peculiar?”

“Eventually all his sons returned from wherever they had gone off—hunting, or thieving—and each of them, as he set eyes on this gorgeous apparition, was smitten by her charms just as his father had been. They devoured the feast, those hungry boys, and proclaimed her a cook of great skill. Afterwards, she retired to Crunniuc’s bed. She stayed with them for a long time after that and ... now, how shall I put this? They were all made content by her.

“While this nameless woman entertained Crunniuc’s family—you Ulstermen, you are so quick off the mark that you ignore the simplest matters of protocol: like inquiring after who you’re coiting. Where was I? Ah. While the time flowed by like honey for the family, down in Ard Macha a certain Fergus mac Roich and his Black Army of Exiles burned down the fortress and half the houses and slaughtered hundreds in the process. Not a happy time for Ard Macha. Crunniuc was fortunate to be so isolated.

“Conchovor and his warriors set about rebuilding their home: instead of one house, overbearing little Conchovor built three. And they looked so nice, he decided to hold a fair on the plain below to celebrate his new and improved fortress. Everyone in Ulster was invited—even Crunniuc mac Agnomain and his boys.” She cleared her throat. “Here, take that jug there and pour out a cup of wine.

“Apparently, Crunniuc wished not to go at first. The woman—whose name he still had not bothered to ask, if one is to believe the story—was very pregnant at this time. Crunniuc was paranoid about births, understandably so. However, his sons pestered him, and the woman sided with him. She wanted them all to enjoy themselves and not worry about her. She told them not to think of her at all. In fact, she went so far as to insist that Crunniuc not boast of her to anyone. I suppose she knew how you Ulstermen love to brag. And being that you are an Ulsterman, my darling, albeit an expatriated one, can you guess what happened?”

“Her husband went to the fair and boasted about her,” Fergus answered.

Maeve ran her hand along his spine. “You see?” she whispered, “you have heard this story.” She sipped wine dark as blood from her hammered cup. “Yes, the landlord and his sons got themselves thrasonically drunk. Worse for them, they stumbled over to the area where a chariot race was to take place—and just as the king came riding out in his two-wheeled racing chariot. He was showing it off to the crowd, having his driver circle the field. But when he rolled past Crunniuc, the drunken and overweening fool proclaimed that his *wife* could outrun ‘that jewel-encrusted ox-cart.’ His wife. no less. Conchovor heard him say it and we both know how much Conchovor likes being minimized. Look at that poor sweet girl, Derdriu. Such a waste.

“In a state of utmost dudgeon, Conchovor snatched the reins from his driver and rode back to the fort. There, he dispatched some guards onto the field.

“The next thing Crunniuc knew, he was kneeling in a pool of vomit in front of the king. One or two of his teeth had been bashed out. His sons hardly looked better after their beatings. His king ordered him to substantiate his grandiose claim or else retract it and forfeit his life for lying. Naturally, as any man would do given such a choice, he swore to the truth of it. However, he experienced a little more difficulty convincing Conchovor of his sincerity than most others might; because, of course, he could not give them her name, this woman who was supposed to be his

wife. Crunniuc whined and wheedled. Conchovor contemplated vivisection.

“He finally sent Fergus the Messenger to bring the fantastical woman to Ard Macha and extended the fair till her arrival. The prisoners were put in slave chains and kept in one of the less fashionable rooms of Craebderg. Wild rumors of all this spread through the crowd, and no one left.”

“So she came to the fair,” Fergus interjected.

“She did, but not without much coaxing on the part of crusty Fergus. She refused at first. Honestly, she was well into the third term of her pregnancy; who could blame her? The Messenger explained that, if she did not return with him, her husband and children became available immediately for all Druidic sacrifices. In fact, they went to the head of the list. Had he told me that, I would have let them perish. Serve them right. But, then, you and I know there is more to this than has been revealed, don’t we?”

“The woman went back with the Messenger. The ride from the coast to the fair in a chariot covers, they tell me, some of the roughest terrain in Ulster. Promontories and rocks and one hill after another. For a pregnant woman, near delivering ... By the time they arrived at Ard Macha, she was in labor.

“The Messenger took her right out to the field where Conchovor awaited them. By now, the crowd had swelled like her belly. Even Crunniuc and the boys were hauled out on their leashes; all seven, filthy, stupid beasts.”

“Yes,” murmured Fergus to the pillows beneath him.

“In stabbing anguish, the woman cried out to the crowd, begging someone to intercede on her behalf and delay the race until she could deliver. No one lifted a finger. No one so much as tried. They wanted to see this woman—about whom so many tales were woven—perform. She warned them they would regret it.

“Conchovor insisted she race him right then. I suspect he sensed that things were out of hand; he may have feared he would lose the race otherwise. You know him better than I.

“With her man in chains and the king adamant, the woman had no choice but to submit, and she trudged to the starting point. Conchovor, showing more tact than her pathetic man—which is why, finally, he is a king—asked her what her name was. She looked him in the eye and told him that he should have known her name already. Conchovor made his driver stop lining up the chariot. ‘It is upon your houses,’ the woman said. ‘We are married, you and I.’ When he still failed to grasp the obvious answer to this riddle, she painted it in broad strokes for him: ‘I am Macha.’ Upon hearing that, Conchovor’s blood probably turned to ice. I know he started to call off the race. The goddess hushed him. Now it was *she* challenging.

“He insisted then that she begin the race. Letting her win would hopefully ameliorate the situation.

“She took off, much faster than any mortal runs. The chariot had no chance of overtaking her. Seeing that, Conchovor had his driver push the horses hard.

“Then to his amazement, as he followed the woman’s path, she began to change form. Her body compacted. Her long skirts became too large for her and blew up and off, sailing over the chariot rail, barely clearing now-fearful Conchovor. Halfway across the field, the monstrous woman doubled over. She squatted and reached down to stretch herself wide. She gave birth in front of all Ulster to twins. In the midst of her pain, she screamed out in a voice like a raw wind a curse on everyone there. They’d refused to help her in her pregnancy, so that would be the form her curse would take. In times of greatest peril, she proclaimed, all of them were to be stricken with labor pains so severe that they would not be able to walk. The pains would last—”

“Nine days,” Fergus interrupted grimly.

“One *noinden*, that is right. And the curse would linger through one *gens*. So Ulster—if we are to believe all this—is cursed for the next nine generations.”

“Yes.”

“The race never ended. By the time Conchovor reached the spot where Macha bestraddled her discharged babies, she had changed into her evil aspect, the grinning Night Mare, her face stretched into a narrow horse’s snout, her round eyes red like twin coals, and her hair a brown mane sprouting down her back. Conchovor sprang from his chariot and fled into Craebruad. Hideous Macha gathered up her babes and vanished in front of everyone, back to Int Ildathach, from whence she had come to the landlord. The fair ended on that less than cheery note. Crunniuc and his sons, all but forgotten, returned home in chains. I understand that the new hillfortress and the plain have won a new name as a result of the occurrence: Emain Macha—The Twins of the Horse-Goddess. This is true?”

“Everyone calls it that now.”

“It was because I inquired after that name that I learned this story.” She climbed upon him and began nibbling at his neck. “You corroborate it all, then?”

“Macha’s curse is real enough, as you knew. Only beardless children remain exempt.”

“Then there will be no one to impede us.”

Fergus said nothing.

“Even if it fails to affect the women warriors—and there is speculation that the women, knowing already the trial of labor, are exempt—we can handle the few who might meddle. What are one or two against all the armies of all the other provinces? Should we sack Emain Macha while we’re about it?”

“You’ll have just nine days in and out.”

“Yes, true. Wise counseling, my dear. I must not allow greed to ruin my plans. Equality with Ailell will yield dominant results. That will have to be enough.”

“And how’ll you motivate him to cut his own throat?”

“He yearns to go already. If you gave yourself over to pleasure, Fergus, you would know why. I am all there can be in a woman for you.”

“And I’d wager you tell that to all your serviceable warriors.”

Her pale eyes turned to ice. Slowly, she began to smile, then to laugh exquisitely. “Yes,” she admitted. “Yes, I do. But, usually, it works.”

Fergus rolled over then and let her take him inside her again.

VI. THE TAIN BEGINS



1. *The First Warning*

Throughout the next two weeks Fergus mac Roich watched Maeve's army grow. Warriors gathered on Magh Ai from every province. Many of them were relatives to the queen or king; others, such as the entire tribe of the Galeoin, owed favors to someone or other, but came along in pursuit of a good battle. Cormac Connlongas arrived with those of the Black Army who had settled in the south of Connacht with him. Fergus's men went out to meet them, and the reunion celebration lasted two days.

When Maeve's call had at last been answered from all directions Fergus counted thousands of people scattered like breeze-blown flowers across the plain. Clusters of purple, of yellow and red, frilled with gold, swayed and shifted and mingled. In one respect their number pleased him: the more massive the army, the more slowly it trundles. He hoped that things would not go well with these forces, that they would take too long and be caught in Ulster. If there was to be a battle, he wanted it fair. Most of all, he relied on a thing that no one there apparently knew about—one last secret in Ulster that he intended to keep a secret as long as possible. Many of the expatriates knew about the Hound, but they, like Fergus, preferred to keep such matters to themselves, to wait and see what would happen.

Maeve wanted to leave but her Druids advised her to wait for some sign that the time was right. "Ridiculous," she told them. "How could the time be more right, when I have an army so great against a foe who will not even be able to stand up when the critical moment comes?" Nevertheless, she delayed two days while the robed men wandered in amongst the myriad camps in search of their sign. She, too, sought sporadically for something concrete—a flock of geese flying north or a moonrise dipped

in blood—the kinds of things that would satisfy Druids. But the birds flew south and the crescent moon came up white in the chilly night sky.

Finally, frustratedly, Maeve told them, “We leave today.” The priests grumbled at her defiance, but they did not worry her half so much as did the gathering of hundreds upon hundreds of quarrelsome, unemployed warriors.

She ordered the army to gather itself up for a first day’s march. Cheers shot across the field. The multi-colored clusters swirled, then burst apart like dandelion heads. The army hurtled into action.

Maeve wove her chariot through the melee and up beside Ailell’s to take her place with him at the head of the army. Ailell veered off unexpectedly and went to speak with his brothers. They had brought troops of their own to his army. Maeve quickly grew impatient with waiting for him and she resolved to lead them all by herself.

That south side of Magh Ai lay nearest to the Caves of Cruachan—home to the Sídhe of Ochall Ochne. As Maeve raised her arm to order the armies forward, a bright red chariot led by two black stallions emerged suddenly from one of the caves. The Druids began shouting and gesturing with their wands.

Maeve reluctantly lowered her arm.

A young woman drove the red chariot. No one else occupied it. She drove straight across Maeve’s path, blocking the way. She wore a red cloak speckled with green dye. Her hair looked like gold cast upon her head. Two tresses of it bound the rest tightly and a third hung as far down her back as could be seen above the rails. Her brows were black, no thicker than a fingernail; her eyes gray—exceptionally gray. Each one contained three irises. The Druids surrounded Maeve’s chariot. They began to chant softly.

The woman from the Caves drew a sword from inside her chariot. It was a strange sword, made of hammered white bronze. The blade was round and circled by seven small, evenly spaced, red-gold rings. As the sword moved, the rings traced misty pastel trails, sprinkling the air with dewy rainbows that hovered in place awhile. The woman held the sword upright as she spoke.

“I am Fedelm,” she announced, “come to fathom your fears of tomorrow.”

“A prophetess?” said Maeve. “You have the gift of *imbas forasnai*, then?”

“The Light of Foresight dwells in these eyes, Queen Maeve. I learned and was transformed in the country of Albion, where I am known as Fedelm Bhanfil.”

“Well, Seer and Poetess, tell us how we shall soon carry the day. Cast your inhuman eyes over this battle force and describe how you find them.”

The woman looked past Maeve and scanned the whole teeming plain of Magh Ai before she answered.

“I see you all crimson; I see you all red.” There was sadness in her voice. The Druids ceased chanting, and stared.

“Absurd,” snarled Maeve. “The King of Ulster and all his people will be in the grips of a goddess’s curse by the time we arrive. I fear you have mistaken the sight of their blood upon these noble warriors. Reconsider with that in your mind, and look over my army again.”

Fedelm Bhanfil looked gravely upon the expectant multitude and replied, “I see you all crimson; I see you all red.”

“How can that be?” Maeve raged. “You should perhaps go back to Albion and review your craft before stumbling through more false visions. Your eyes are not right, young woman. With so many pupils, you see too much and are overwhelmed by it. I have half of Ulster with me—on my side. The bull I want resides in Cuailnge, where I can go and return easily in less than nine days. Who can obstruct me? I begin to think these robed retainers have brought you forth to mock me. Look once more, and carefully, prophetess.”

Fedelm shook her tresses. “I see you all crimson; I see you all red,” she firmly replied.

“Damn you! Better you should stick to poetry—that is why they named you Bhanfil. If you *are* certain of your vision, then clarify it for me. How is it possible?”

Fedelm lowered the sword, pointed it levelly at Maeve, then began to gesture with it. The rings wove a strange web in the air. A bright red interlocking pattern soon emerged out of the colors, the rest of which faded as the red intensified. Maeve saw Fedelm’s beautiful face through the pattern, her features become somehow part of it, Fedelm and the pattern merging.

Her gentle voice floated out, rhythmically, like ocean waves.

“Here is the battle,
One against you all.
A light on spikes encircles his head,
He is not very tall.

More beauty rests
Upon this favored child
Than looks on any other son
But his heart is wild.

Some brightness lives in him,
A sinister, powerful thing.
It Warps him this way, pops his eye,
And makes his weapons sing.

The host here yields collectively
Its head to the skill of this scourge.

Bodies' parts fill riverbeds,
Victims of the Hound of the Forge."

Abruptly, she fell silent. The floating tapestry blocked anyone's view of her. Maeve said nothing, biting back her anger. The pattern suddenly fell like rain, reddening the grass, revealing that Fedelm and her chariot had vanished.

Maeve snatched the reins from her driver and swung her chariot around. The Druids cried out and scattered from her path in every direction. She drove back to where Ailell awaited her.

"Who was that woman I saw you with?" he asked.

"It was a long-winded propheticess of the Sídhé."

"And did she have anything to foretell?"

"Yes, indeed," Maeve replied. "She said the only person to stand in our way will be a boy and his dog."

The king smiled. "Excellent. A propitious sign. Surely that satisfies our Druids. Well, then. I think we should go."

He raised his arm and signaled the armies forward. The field echoed with cheering again. At last, everyone thought, they were heading off to victory. Only the Druids, like a ring of ravens, followed along morosely.

2. The Galeoín Problem

The army marched only as far as Carrcin Lake that first day. By the time Fedelm Bhanfil had written her riddle on the air, the sun had climbed to the top of the sky. The day was unseasonably warm and many of the warriors paused along the way to strip off their

tunics and leggings. Those who had come prepared for immediate battle—arriving naked and already coated in splashes of war color—soon made the front ranks. This created dissension among the various tribes, all of whom, eager for conflict, vied for supremacy. It is the nature of all men to want to be first in long lines.

Ailell rode his chariot hard back to the clamor, and was shouting before he had drawn up, at the thick of the skirmish. "This is a *raid!* Not a *race*. If you heard otherwise and came to show off your footwork and endurance, go home and return another time, when you'll see the rest of us celebrate our successes gained without you!" At that, the troublemakers separated in some embarrassment and Ailell returned to the front. Any further disputes—if any occurred—were put down before the king and queen of Connacht heard.

Shortly before reaching Carrcin Lake, Maeve ordered her driver to circle the army so that she might see who was quickest and who lagged

behind. Watching the spin of her wheels, Ailell experienced a sense of foreboding that before the day was out she would have interposed once more where her authority was out of bounds. He said nothing of this to anyone, not even to his driver, Cuillius, with whom he discussed nearly everything in battle. He thought it might be more instructive to let Maeve intrude on the natural formation of the armies, if only to show her that she shared fallibilities with the rest of the race of men.

They camped at Cuil Silinne—a small nook of dry land pocketed between the rolling hills and the peat bogs that surrounded Carrcin Lake.

Ailell sat inside his tent, sharing a drink with three of the tribal leaders from Ulster: Fergus mac Roich, Cormac Connlongas, and Fiachu mac Firaba. Next to Fergus sat Flidais Foltchain, a handsome woman whose husband had died early that year. Flidais had recently married with Fergus. She knew full well of his unique relationship with Maeve, but that was no secret to anyone. A beautiful young woman reclined next to her. This was Finnabair, Maeve and Ailell's daughter.

The smell of basted meat drifted in, making stomachs growl. A huge cloud of smoke from the cooking fire rolled into the tent when Maeve flung back the linen curtain and stormed upon the scene.

Ailell busied himself with refilling his wine mug. Maeve stared at him suspiciously, certain that he had somehow foreseen a dispute and brought these people here to circumvent the scene she wished to make. For a moment she lingered in the doorway, holding back the linen, filling the tent with flavorsome smoke; then, her mind made up, she crossed over and sat in the center of the tent, facing Ailell. He looked up as if startled. "Well. And how did you find the armies? All in good order, I hope."

"Yes. There is, however, a problem, and I think it may be fortunate that all of you are here to hear this." She looked at each, one at a time, with significant solemnity. "We cannot continue our journey with the Galeoin of Leinster."

"Why, whatever can you be saying?" asked Ailell. "What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing. The problem lies in their being *too* efficient. At this moment, they are lying back and listening to a harpist they brought along—which is to say, they have already erected tents, caught game enough for all, and cooked and eaten it."

Ailell bowed his head to hide a sardonic smile. "I know that," he said. "That deer roasting on the spit outside was a gift from them. Said they'd caught one too many and would we honor them by accepting it for our meal."

Maeve's face pinched and puckered like a scar. "There it is—you see it for yourself. If they go on with us, they will always outdistance the rest. Every triumph will go to them. It will be the Galeoin presenting us with the Donn, taking all the trophies. Do we really want that?"

“Of course not. It’s our invasion, our plan and our bull. If you think their attendance is a problem, then go and tell them to stay behind.”

“Stay behind! Really, Ailell. If they stay behind while we go on to Ulster, what will be left of our kingdom when we return?”

“I expect, what’s there now, but I won’t debate the point with you. If you came here with the problem, you came with a solution as well—I know you. So what’s to be done, hmm?”

“We have to kill them,” she replied simply.

“That’s what I love in you— calm, execrable thinking.”

“Respectfully,” Fergus mac Roich interjected, “these warriors are my friends. If you try to kill them, it’ll have to be through me.”

Maeve shot him a look that smoldered. “Like son like father? Anyone under the command of my seven Maines would take pride in the opportunity if those sons of mine are too bored by the idea.”

“And I,” said Fergus, rising to his feet but keeping his voice level, “have friendship of all Munster’s warriors, who enlisted out of a bond to Cormac and his *tuath*, not from any debt owed you. Instead of a cattle raid, we can have a slaughter in Connacht.”

“This achieves nothing, Fergus,” Fiachu said softly. “The Galeoin came at your call, Queen Maeve. By invitation. Such treatment would engender a curse that even you could not withstand. Leinster’s Druids would call down the sky on you.”

Haughtily, Maeve asked, “Can anyone propose a viable alternative?”

“Why don’t you just scatter them?” Fergus suggested.

“What, chase them off?” Maeve practically laughed at him.

“Divide them up,” he explained pointedly. “You’ve seventeen troops here not counting the Galeoin. Why not reassign them, place them in with all the others? You could even tell them that you’re in such a hurry that, by setting them at the head of every group, the others will see how they strain at the bit and will pick up their pace. Excitement is contagious.”

Cormac added, “They’ll believe that—they know their value.”

Ailell nodded. Fergus sat down on the straw. The king said, “Well? Do you find that acceptable?”

Maeve crossed her arms over her breasts and pouted at the rear wall of the tent. “If it solves the problem, then I suppose I must.”

“But she’d still prefer to kill them,” Cormac whispered so that everyone could hear.

A moment later, Maeve had gone. Her daughter got up, not sure of what had happened, and went out after her. Finnabair was that rarest of flowers, a total innocent.

The following morning, Ailell redistributed the Galeoin in among the other tribes. The Leinster warriors took it as a great honor.

The army set off once more. That morning they crossed the moors of Moin Coltna, and the dust in their wake darkened the sky like thunderheads. Most of the afternoon was spent in ferrying troops across the wide Shannon, one cluster of men, horses, and chariots after another, while numerous naked fighters strapped their shields and spears to their backs and swam the icy waters.

By day's end they had reached the plain of Magh Trego and camped along the reedy banks of a narrow river there.

That night, beneath a moonless sky, the Beetle of Ulster suddenly sat up in his tent. Duffach's eyes showed white all around. Perspiration glazed his body. He stared straight ahead out the doorway of the crude tent, his face a twisted mask, as if he saw some hideous creature prowling past. Without awakening the others near him, he stood and walked naked into the reeds, to where the cold water was ankle-deep. He sat down and, even though under a spell, sucked in his breath as the water froze his manly parts. His head snapped erect and he began to chant. It was not his voice that awoke the encampment. The voice issuing from him belonged to a speaker of inhuman proportions. It spoke high and sounded like wind skirling through a hole between two rocks.

"Now hear my vision!" it proclaimed. "The dark before the dawn. You think you're safe where you go, but numbers don't always ensure safety. In darkness, death will find you, slung from a single hand, while we hide the treasure you seek from you and your days dwindle to hours, flight-felling. The Warped One awaits at the cave mouth to the dark realm. We three daughters of Ernmas will keep you company hereafter!" Upon finishing, Duffach toppled over with a splash, unconscious, in full view of those who had pushed forward through the reeds. They splashed toward him. Maeve shouted: "Do not touch that one!" but no one heeded her wisdom, and a dozen hands clamped hold and righted him out of the black water. In that instant, the night came alive. "Idiots," the queen snarled.

Colors pulsed out of the black sky, bright auroras shooting up like fountains. The temperature plunged so quickly that ice crackled on mustaches and beards between one breath and the next.

A vicious wind whipped down the river channel from the north, driving the smooth surface ahead of it. It burst upon them like a gale. The sky began to scream. The armies ran about in pandemonium at the sound of that scream—those who had never heard it knew what it must be and those who had heard the cry before tried to bury their heads under bundled-up cloaks and blankets.

The Nemain, the war-spirit of terror, had found them.

Later, when they had time to sort things out the survivors would realize that it was she who had taken possession of Duffach the Dark; but while she remained, no one could think at all. Frenzy seized them. Some warriors ran around in circles, others took their swords and hacked at themselves as if they were their own enemies. A few green youths died of

fright, pitching over as they ran, their hearts bursting from the intense pressure of such dread. Across the island, many mothers awoke that night to hear their departed sons cry out a faint farewell before the Nemain swept away their spirits. Instinctively, the mothers understood what had distantly occurred. They wept in solitude, for who else would have understood their sorrow?

Maeve shouted over the cacophony of fear, "This spot is haunted, we have to move! Those who can still reason gather up whom you can and strike out for Granaird. We will regroup and learn our losses there!" She climbed aboard her chariot but had to take the reins from her cringing driver. Behind her, the Druids, in a line, moved through the camp, flinging salt across the ground to keep the evil of the otherworld from seeping out.

Fergus mac Roich was among the earliest to escape from the invisible spirit. He made his way on foot until his chariot, driven by Duffach's driver and containing the warrior's unconscious body, caught up with him. Many of the Ulster contingent were passing by at that point. Fergus called out to a boy in that group. The child ran to him, still quivering from the encounter. Fergus said, "Come with me," and led the boy away a few yards. Then Fergus laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I've a grave mission for you," he said. "If Maeve has her way, we'll be sneaking up on our own people and, though I hate what's been between us, I won't treat them that way. I want you to run north of Lough Sheelin, north of Lough Ramor, then due east to Muirthemne. This pandemonium will cover your tracks. Warn every Ulsterman along that border that all Eriu is come calling to kill them. You'll have honor for this if you love our people."

The boy swallowed, then nodded rapidly. "All right. Go then." The young messenger turned and ran off into the night. Fergus went back to his chariot, where Duffach sat, conscious but babbling like a drunkard. He took the reins and drove on. They passed hundreds of others, some burdened with weaponry, some naked, and some tormented with madness, not long to live.

The Nemain did not follow them. The Druids were satisfied that they had sealed off the forces controlled by the three dark sisters of fate for the time being. The Nemain might return, however. The Terror of War gave no warning when it struck. It was ubiquitous and unprejudiced—it would take anyone it could get.

Everyone who survived counted himself lucky. But the Moriggu were far from done with tampering in the cattle raid upon Cuailnge.

3. The Messenger's Encounter

Fergus's young forerunner followed the outlined course and headed east into Muirthemne. Every person in every settlement he came to heard his message. He stuck to the lowlands as much as possible, going on so swiftly across the shriveled winter landscape that he had no notion of how his warning affected people; of how, in his wake, he was leaving the defenders of Ulster prostrate with swelling pain. His words could not have been more pestilential had his breath blown plague.

Heading south to avoid the heights of Oriel, skirting marshes where will-o'-the-wisps danced in the darkness, the boy followed the Devlin River. Just prior to dawn, he came upon a figure bathing at a ford in that stream.

The bather stood in the middle of the water, where it was no deeper than his knees. He was short, but that and the sharp cut of musculature from shoulder to waist were all the messenger could determine of the bather in the vague, crepuscular light. The bather scooped up a great handful of water and poured it over his head. He yelled and cursed in good humor at the cold that made his whole body twitch.

As the messenger watched this, he considered that he had to cross that river. His loyalty to his cause required that he not delay any further. He crept down to the shoal and tried to make enough noise so as to announce himself.

The bather, hearing the scraping of his feet, came about suddenly. The messenger stopped dead. Although the glow of the rising sun was at the bather's back, his eyes flashed with an unnatural light as if they were prisms reflecting a sunbeam. For a split second, the smooth features of that face appeared. Then the lights in the eyes vanished and the silhouette returned, a silhouette with sharply spiked hair.

"How do you find me?" the bather called out. "Am I worth creeping up on?"

The messenger blushed and took a step back. He did not know how to answer the bather's arch tone. Then he remembered why he was there and repeated the warning that, after so many repetitions, he had refined into a single sentence.

Upon hearing Fergus mac Roich's message, the bather sprang out of the water, as graceful a salmon. He landed on the opposite bank, beside a pile of clothes. As he dressed, he told the awed messenger to hurry across so they could set off together at once to warn the rest of Ulster.

They headed north—straight for the heights that the boy had intended to avoid. He ran at the swift, steady pace that had carried him this far in so short a time. Even so, the bather quickly left him behind and was lost to view in the hilly landscape ahead. Then, just as suddenly, the dark figure reappeared, racing at the messenger. "You're fast but not enough for this day's work," he called as he neared. "I've no time to waste waiting." With-

out breaking stride, he swept the messenger up off his feet as if he weighed no more than a rabbit. The boy had covered his face at their apparent collision; now he opened one eye and nearly became ill. The landscape sped by in a blur. He closed his eye and gritted his teeth and listened to the thunder of the bather's heels slapping the ground in such close succession that the noise seemed like one endless rumble.

Soon they were ascending from the river valley, but the young man did not even slow down. The messenger bounced up and down on his shoulder and thought: This is what it's like to be a sack of grain.

They made impossible leaps over boulders and across waterfalls. Sometimes he was sure they were upside down, racing along the bellies of clouds instead of on the ground, but he did not dare look then.

At last they topped a ridge and dashed across a wide plateau, toward where a single stone hut stood near a twisted, stunted tree.

The bather called out, and an old man emerged from the hut. "Sualdam, my father," the young man cried, "this messenger I hold informs me that Queen Maeve is bringing a huge host into Ulster for the purpose of stealing the prize bull of Daire mac Fiachna."

"They'll smash the landscape flat, and that's for sure," answered Sualdam. "We must warn all of Ulster, and right away!"

"That's what ... I've been ... doing," the messenger said as they drew up before the hut. "Can you put me down now, please?"

Once settled unsteadily on his feet, he continued, "Fergus mac Roich gave me this information, saying that he didn't want to see Ulster treated unfairly—"

"Fergus is an honorable man," agreed old Sualdam. "But the fates don't much like him."

"Father, you must go warn Conchovor while this boy carries his message east as Fergus told him."

"What about you, Setanta?"

"Me, I'll go greet the invaders. Someone should be on hand to welcome them properly, and it's my duty." Saying that, he dashed inside the hut. The messenger turned to watch him pass but only glimpsed a pale blur with dark hair. Setanta returned a moment later with a cloak and a spear. The messenger squinted at him, but the light from the hut had turned him into a silhouette again. "Where's Laeg, father?"

"Gone to visit the bondmaid of Fedelm Noichride. He thought you were coming along, too, for Fedelm."

"And so I will perhaps," replied Setanta, "after I've shown the foreign armies that they'd do better to invade Leinster." He drew on his cloak, pulled up the hood. "Good luck, boy," he said to the messenger, and then to his father, "Farewell, Sualdam. You've raised me well. If this is the time that cuts me shorter, tell Emer that I thought of her at the last." He flung his spear up into the sky and raced off after it, a white ghost. In a moment he vanished over the ridge.

“He’s incredible,” said the boy.

“And a half at least,” answered Sualdam. “Now, come! Take some food for your journey, and I’ll take some for mine.”

“I’ve told many people already. Word must be spreading.”

“So we can hope, but it’s best not to assume what you don’t know.

They went inside, ate bread and beer. Then Sualdam doused the fire and the two went off on their separate journeys. The boy continued toward the coast. Old Sualdam hurried toward the River Dee. He made it as far as the sharp slopes of Slieve Cuilinn before the Pangs caught up with him and dragged him down. The warning reached no further either—the Pangs had outdistanced it at last. At Emain Macha the entire settlement was struck down without a clue as to why.

By midnight the entire province had been felled, and not a single sword-blow struck.

4. Setanta’s Greeting

After Maeve’s invaders regrouped at Granaird, they assigned the lead to Fergus mac Roich. He accepted the honor with the obvious disinclination of a man who would rather see anyone else lead.

Under a gloomy, overcast sky, he took the army first northeast, then gradually cut south between the two lakes of Sheelin and Kinale, but closer to Kinale so that the army, glimpsing its smooth surface far off on the right, thought they were seeing Lough Sheelin’s northern shore. This detour was all Fergus could legitimately do to give Ulster the time to prepare its defense. If the Pangs of Macha did strike ... well, that he could not forfend.

The weather aided him until mid-afternoon, when the heavy clouds blew away on a stiff wind and the position of the sun was revealed.

Maeve rode up beside Ailell and pointed to the west. “Do you see that?” she asked him. “Does that tell you anything?”

“Well, we’re going south,” he replied. “I’d like to know why.”

“I intend to find out.” She rode her chariot through the middle of the marchers, her driver blowing his horse-headed carynx horn to warn them all out of the way. Its eerie call warned Fergus long before Maeve reached him. He looked back to see the face of the carynx rising like a sea-serpent’s head above the sea of soldiers and knew who pursued him.

Maeve drew up beside him, but he did not even look at her, pretending to be deeply immersed in watching the landscape ahead. “Fergus,” she shouted, “it appears that you have led us nearly into Lough Lene, and

there is absolutely no excuse I can see save treachery! If your allegiance is to old enemies over me, then give up the lead to one I can trust.”

“It’s no deceit,” he answered flatly. “Didn’t you hear Duffach’s chant last night? That was the Badb warning us of doom on Muirthemne Plain. I know enough not to doubt her, so I took the liberty of detouring us south that we can come up at another point, bypassing the treacherous plain. I’ve warned and warned, there are darker forces here at work than you know.”

“If that’s so, you are one of them, Fergus mac Roich. My knowledge of the geography of Ulster is keener than you suppose. Your detour takes us right *into* Muirthemne. There remains hardly a way to get into Cuailnge now that misses it. I congratulate you. Now turn us back upon a proper course or I will cut your head off myself, no matter how many warriors side with you. Is that clear?”

He stared straight ahead, masking the smile that played on his lips. “Transparent,” he said.

“Which is what you are to me, my dear.” She leaned over the rails and scraped his cheek with her fingertips. “Had you been in search of me before Ailell, oh, what a stormy union that would have been, however brief. But what a meeting of thunderheads.” She retreated abruptly as her chariot veered off.

Fergus altered their course, putting the sun at their backs as they made their way through the wet lowlands between Loughs Lene and Bane. The new course took them on toward the heights of Iraid Cuillen. The warriors could see it rising out of the distant horizon, and all of them understood how their path had been changed. Fergus was the first to see the tall obelisk that had been raised on the height. He waved two chariots up to him and sent the warriors, Err and Innel, and their drivers up to see what the tall, unexplained object was.

Upon their return, the two men carried a hoop between their chariots. Seeing them approach, Fergus ordered the army to a halt. Err and Innel set the hoop on the ground.

It had been made from the branch of a tree, its ends twisted together. In all respects it resembled a spancel hoop, the sort used to hobble the back legs of cattle and pigs, but this was huge, looped for an impossible animal. There were notches cut all around it, some straight, others at an angle or slashing through others. “It had been formed around a pillar—that’s what we see from here,” Err explained to Fergus. “There are no trees up there.”

Maeve and Ailell arrived. Maeve called out, “What trick is it now, Fergus?” She looked weary of him.

“There’s no trick. Look for yourselves.” He moved aside to let them see the spancel hoop. “Your own scouts brought it back from Iraid Cuillen.”

Ailell climbed down. He handled the hoop. “Not very practical unless it’s meant for the likes of Finnbennach. Look here, there’s ogham on it.” He glanced up at the pillar on the height. “It’s a warning to us, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I expect so,” agreed Fergus. “You’d best get your Druids for this.”

The robed ones arrived on foot, their tonsured skulls bright with sweat. Fergus passed the hoop to them. Two held it while the third read the pattern, then switched positions until all three had deftly traced the notches with their fingers. Then they stood together and conferred. One Druid left the others and came forward. “It issues from an individual of enormous powers. It has been made especially for your passing. The message reads: ‘Enter my district at your peril unless you can find a man to make the like of this hoop and using just one hand as I have done. I exclude Fergus mac Roich from this challenge.’ We advise you to take another route. Who made this can elicit a great price for any defiance.”

“I warned you—”

“Silence, Fergus,” Maeve ordered. “Did you not listen? You are excluded.”

“Someone’s survived the Pangs,” Ailell pointed out. “And where there’s one, there are likely more. If we don’t change course, Maeve, you’ll have everyone killed before we even *see* your cow. I suggest we turn south again, into the forest of Fid Duin, then make for Cuil Sibrille on the Blackwater when we come out. If our opponent is watching us, that ought to convince him he’s succeeded.”

Maeve tried to argue against this—she wanted to force the unseen enemy’s hand—but no one would listen to her. The army changed course as Ailell recommended.

Fid Duin was a vast forest of straight, slender ash trees. The first line of Connacht’s armies to reach it began to cut a swath toward its heart wide enough for their chariots, and soon the air was thick with the spinning, winged berries from the felled trees. The Druids rushed about at the forefront, chanting blessings over the fallen, sacred trees, marking those from which they would later make wands. The lowest boughs brushed at Maeve’s head as she scanned the forest depths. Far back in the trees, in a pool of sunlight, something flashed. Maeve leaned over the chariot screen for a better look, but the forest had swallowed up the view. It had looked like a chariot, the thing she had glimpsed. She wondered if she had been witness to a relic of the Partraige—an ancient tribe who had purportedly vanished into the depths of Fid Duin hundreds of years earlier.

Then, moments later, the chariot appeared again. This time Maeve saw it plainly, and she saw the driver within: Fedelm, the Sídhé prophetess. Above Fedelm’s shining head a woven red mist hung like a leaf-filled branch. The girl’s voice rang in her ears as plainly as if Fedelm were beside her. “I see you all crimson; I see you all red.” Maeve whipped around. The rear of the chariot was empty. Had her driver heard that voice?

No, he replied, he had heard nothing at all. She searched for Fedelm again, but the hundreds of straight, narrow trees closed off her view.

She called the army behind her to a halt. As she climbed down, she called out for all the warriors to cut a path for her, and she pointed to where she wanted it.

The warriors set to work, confounded and reluctant by way of knowing that every moment they worked here the major part of the forces pulled farther away. They worked all the more fiercely in order to get out of Fid Duin's sepulchral depths.

When everything had been leveled from the "road" to the spot as the queen had directed, she pushed in past them. There was no chariot nor any sign that a chariot had ever been there.

No path save the fresh one led away from the place where Fedelm had been. Maeve shouted in frustration, then railed at the swordsmen, calling them deceivers and conspirators with the *Sídhe* or with Fergus mac Roich. They had no idea what she meant. Their silent denial sent her raging beyond words. Moon-white hair streaming out behind her like a cape, she marched back to her chariot and slapped her driver into action. She heard Fedelm's whispered words again and extracted them from her mind. "We shall see," she said, "who is painted in blood."

Her driver eyed her askance but kept his mouth shut. The forces camped at Cuil Sibrille, some arriving much later than others, and these latecomers entertained their brothers with a tale about a madness that had possessed their queen and the clearing that appeared in the depths of Fid Duin as a result of that seizure. Forever after that night, the clearing would be referred to as Maeve Sleachtadh: the Felling of Maeve.

5. The Four-Pronged Fork

It snowed that night hard enough to smother the cook-fires. Most of the army went hungry. They slept pressed together for warmth in tents or under chariots. In the morning they arose in the smoky light of pre-dawn and headed out once more. Their bellies grumbled but at least the dry snow allowed the chariots to roll without trouble.

For most of the morning the armies headed south again in order to reach the Dub, as the confluence of the Blackwater and the Boyne was called in Connacht. There they intended to cross and then follow the Boyne along into the south of Muirthemne. They might have crossed earlier but the first ford would have led them through the middle of Taitiu, which was the burial center for all of Ulster and bore the name of a goddess. No one wanted to go there for fear of unleashing an army of Ulidian

spirit warriors. As it was, they would still have to deal with the more ancient burial site of Brug na Boyne, where the Dagda had once dwelled. In mid-afternoon they passed that place. The Druids left the army then to go off among the cromlechs and the mounds of the dead. They raised chants to Eochaid Ollathair the All-Father, who was also the Dagda. This was his ground. The army passed by quickly without needing to honor or sacrifice to the ancient graves—the Druids would catch up later. Nevertheless, the proximity of the mounds and the mushrooms of stone scattered across the northern horizon painted the afternoon with grimness. The snow-covered craggy hills looked as if some unseen force preceding them had hacked the world to pieces. Tales of the giant monopedal Fomoiri mingled with the speculations raised by the spancel hoop found the day before. Had the Ulidians found a way to resurrect those one-legged monsters? Were the Fomoiri even now lurking beneath those gravesites? Imaginations churned with terror.

Err and Innel and their two drivers continued to ride ahead of the host. Fergus kept to their tracks in the snow. Still visible on his right, the wide Boyne flowed like black blood across the snow. The armies followed him around the hill of Slane and crossed over the Devlin River, ascending into drier, colder heights. Fergus would have liked to camp on the heights just south of Oriel, but Maeve insisted they push on.

In the settlements they passed, no one came out to challenge, or even to watch them ride by. Maeve glimpsed few faces in doorways, and those few were female. In the entire journey so far, she had not seen a single Ulster male over the age of twelve. She would have preferred to pillage the settlements they passed but such luxuries would have to wait for another time—the return journey, if they were left alone hereafter. *Damn the three sisters and Fedelm as well*, she thought, *we will leave here with the Donn*.

They came down from the heights through a gray ceiling of clouds. As those in the lead spread out across the lowland plain again, they were surprised to see the two chariots of Err and Innel racing back toward them. Fergus, sensing trouble, drove his team forward, ahead of the rest. Others followed his lead, but by then he had managed to bring to a stand both teams.

The chariots were empty of either drivers or warriors. The carts' interiors were smeared slick with blood. Blood coated the boards and the bronze sides. Blood dripped from the axles and speckled the snow below. Blood striped one white stallion as if its side had been ripped open.

The warriors snarled and shouted in a collective fury. Some tore off their clothing and rolled naked in the snow. They screamed and beat their wet red chests. Others took out their spears and called the charge, slapping spearheads against their shields in great cacophony. A mass of berserk fighters set off running to follow the tracks of the empty chariots back to the scene of carnage. Everyone expected to engage in a major battle with a vast defending force. More and more warriors charged past

the empty chariots. The air rang with chants, shouts, and the bellow of the curved horns.

At a ford on the Mattock River, the trail ended in a muddy, blood-soaked mess. There the enraged warriors found their comrades.

An enormous forked tree-branch had been planted in the center of the stream. The thick bole split into four smaller branches as big around as a man's thigh. On each of these four, the head of one of the missing men had been impaled. Seeing these, the warriors stamped and hammered their spears more loudly still against their shields, and they called for the cowardly Ulstermen to come out and fight fairly. Then one amongst them shouted them to silence with the discovery that only one set of wheels led away from the scene of death. The army fell into confusion.

Ailell stood in their midst, in his chariot, and stared with regret at the four heads. "Those were among our best," he commented to no one in particular.

"Of yours," Maeve corrected from her chariot beside him.

The tally had begun.

The Druids arrived last of all, from Brug na Boyne. They studied the tree and discovered more ogham letters carved into the black bole. They conferred, then presented themselves to the king and queen. Shouting down the din, many others gathered to hear.

"This is the work of the same one as before," said the Druids. "He alone did all this and again he warns of your passing this point unless one of you other than Fergus mac Roich can duplicate his feat. We could, perhaps, select four men for sacrifice if you desire it—that might placate him."

Ailell shook his head and gestured them away. "I can't believe one man did all this." He'd heard the muttering among his army, murmurs of doubt and fantasy. He could not accept that Ulster had a Fomoiri defender.

Fergus mac Roich approached him, dripping wet. "It may surprise you to learn that this branch before us was severed from among that stand way over there and with a single stroke. And if you care to repeat what I've just done and dive into the stream, you'll find as well that half again its length is buried in the silt, suggesting that it was thrown down there—I'd guess from the back of a chariot."

"Is that all you can say about it?"

"It's also smack in the middle of the ford and no one will be able to go further today, feat or no feat, until we pull it out. And that's all I have to say." He threw off a shiver.

"Get rid of it, then, Fergus," ordered Maeve.

"Give me my chariot, then."

He roped the tree to the rear of his chariot and hauled it by degrees out of the water, cutting a new stream as he went, all the way to the stand of trees from which it had come. The four heads were put

with the four recovered bodies and given to the Druids, who solemnly took them away.

A dozen large fires had been started by the time the burial rites had begun. The ford of Ath Gabla would be the campsite for the night. Ailell had his feast with the Ulstermen again, Maeve sitting between him and Fergus at the fire, with Finnabair in front of her, curled up with her head in her mother's lap.

As they ate their meal of boiled pork and leeks, Ailell talked to them. "It appears that we have to address ourselves to what sort of person we've encountered." He pointed his long meat fork at the group of exiles. "And I suspect the lot of you know what we, with all our messengers and spies, do not. So, tell me, Fergus mac Roich, did Conchovor do this deed?"

"How could he? And even if he could, think, Ailell—would Ulster allow him to come here by himself, unprotected?"

"True, Celtchar mac Uthidir, then."

"By now he's laid low in Lethglas with the Pangs."

"Eogan mac Durthact?"

"Are you spitting on me? His like could never accomplish such a deed. Nor would he ever dare come out against us alone, knowing how I yearn to pare the flesh off his white bones."

"Then, who, brave men all? You've kept your mystery long enough. I won't tolerate any further reticence on it. We know by now that our plans fall incomplete, and that something out there awaits us in the night like the Terror itself."

"Yes," replied Fergus, "I suspect he does."

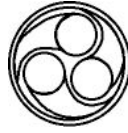
"Who?"

"The one responsible for this is named Setanta. But he's won a great title in Ulster, which has become his foremost name. You've heard it, both of you; they call him *Cú Chulainn*.

"Hound of Culann?" Ailell gaped.

Finnabair yelped and jumped up. Wine ran from her hair and chin—wine spilled when her mother had dropped the cup she was holding. Maeve hardly noticed her daughter's outrage; the words of Fedelm the Prophetess were drowning out the scene, ringing like a tocsin bell in her mind.

Ailell called his daughter to him, gestured a servant to come and clean her off. Then to give himself time to think, he leaned forward, stabbed his long fork into the bubbling water of the cooking trough in the center of the group, and flung a bit of boiled pork to a beagle that stood near the entrance to his tent. "We sit at feast," he said as he continued to stir the greasy water, "and there's meat enough for all of us still here and drink enough for half the army. So I think we'll all spend this night getting better acquainted with your controvertible Hound. No one objects, surely." He leaned back against his pillows, then lifted his cup to his lips but paused before drinking. "Regale me with his deeds," he said, then closed his eyes and drank long to calm himself.



In the corner of the tent, warm despite the chill surroundings of the night, Laeg and Senchan sat as well. In the pause that followed, Laeg whispered, “Now you’ll hear the story of the greatest hero, my boy, that ever was, how he came to be and what he did to earn his reputation. Listen to every detail the Ulstermen give tonight—these tales are the legacy you carry from here. When all else is gone, and this history you see before you has been swept back into eternity, and me with it, only conjuring words will remain.”

Senchan nodded absently. He could not have argued had he even wished to. The interior of the tent was altering for him, becoming so sharply defined that he could feel every edge, breathe every shade of color, smell every morsel of food. All this stirred some eagerness in him and he leaned forward in anticipation, hungry for their words.

“Listen now,” said Laeg, “to the story of Cú Chulainn.”

VII. THE BIRTH OF ULSTER'S ONE SON

I. The Interrupted Wedding

“There must have been hundreds of people from all over Ulster,” began Fergus mac Roich, “at the feast young Conchovor threw the night he gave his sister, Deichtire, to Sualdam mac Roig. It took place outdoors, the feast did, on the height of Ard Macha. This was just a formality, really. Deichtire loved Sualdam and they’d been intimate for over a year. Whether or not our eight-year-old king was aware of that, I couldn’t say.

“Everyone was dancing around a great bonfire, and now and again couples wandered off into the darkness. A pleasant, unseasonably warm evening. A *crossan* appeared at some point and began hopping around Deichtire. It was Bricriu Nemthenga dressed in the obscene straw costume that night. Conchovor had submitted him especially to Cathbad for the performance because Bricriu has such a nasty, fractious way with words and, of course, *crossans* can’t speak during their part in celebrating. I suppose Conchovor didn’t yet comprehend fully Bricriu’s skill at goading people. Just because Bricriu’s sobriquet is ‘the Bitter Tongue’ doesn’t mean he required words to annoy. And, dressed in that straw and wicker wrapper with its great pregnant belly, and wearing a leather phallus the size of my forearm, well, he had little trouble expressing himself.

“He started on Conchovor but soon made Deichtire his prime target. He chased her around the rings of dancers, over those seated at feast, in and out of the fortress, till the obscene pantomime had become obviously supererogatory, even to the drunkest among us. Every time the *crossan* caught Deichtire, he pulled up her skirts and jabbed her from behind with that huge prosthetic pizzle, then she’d struggle free and the whole chase would begin again. Most everyone laughed, but after awhile the sound was of embarrassment. Sualdam finally got up and stormed off from the celebration, livid, but Bricriu didn’t stop. Then Sualdam reappeared out of the darkness from the side opposite where he had left. Bricriu had,

meantime, caught Deichtire again from behind and was showing off her anatomy to the crowd. His bull's pizzle jutted out from between her thighs. Sualdam crept up from behind the *crossan*. He had a lighted taper in one hand. He reached around Bricriu and pried up the distended belly just long enough to toss in that taper. Immediately, the straw torso began to smoke.

"Bricriu let go of Deichtire all of a sudden. He tore away from her so fast that his pizzle wrenched free and remained between her legs. He dashed like a greyhound, knocking over dancers and scrambling over the seated crowd, and dove headfirst into the nearest cauldron, which, as it happened, contained the next morning's cold stirabout. I nearly choked to death from laughing. Deichtire joined the nearest ring of dancers, waving her stolen prize in the air. Finally, she broke away, went over to the cauldron and solemnly pushed the leather monster into the gray paste with Bricriu.

"She returned to Sualdam then, everybody cheering and toasting her as having 'unsexed' the *crossan*. She laughed with them till she was out of breath. Gaily, Sualdam called out for a cup of wine for his victorious bride. 'I wouldn't want her to get mad and repeat that act on *me!*' he shouted, and the laughing started all over again. The wine was duly brought. But, as Sualdam passed the cup to her, a small white mayfly flew into the drink. Deichtire was so thirsty she drank it all down. She felt the mayfly in her throat, coughed and gasped, but by then it was too late to do anything but swallow it. They gave her more wine immediately.

"After awhile, whether from the wine or the chase or some property of the mayfly, she grew sleepy and left the festivities to take a nap. Conchovor ordered Deichtire's fifty female attendants to go with her to be sure she was all right. A moment later, everyone had forgotten about her, because they were off in a new course of laughter, watching an ungainly *crossan* smothered in stirabout trying to pull himself free from the suction of that pudding's stringy grasp.

"Left alone inside the fortress, Deichtire fell asleep and began immediately to dream that a strange man approached her. He had radiant eyes and skin so bright she could not long look upon him. This man told her that he was Lugh long-Am. He had come to her disguised as the mayfly so no one would know him. Lugh wanted Deichtire to come away with him because she had such a gentleness about her that she brightened any place she went. He held out his hands to her and she reached out and touched him. She saw herself transform then into a bird. Her attending maidens, who had been nearby as she dreamt, also turned to birds. Lugh became a bird, too, but a huge orange one. His arm that she had held became a silver chain linking them together. The birds rose up, right through the ceiling of Ard Macha. Then, led by the bird-Lugh, they all flew off across the landscape of Ulster and into a *sid* near the coast.

"All a dream, as I said. Yet, when someone later thought to check on her and the maidens, they found that she and the maidens had vanished

without a trace. The wedding feast ended in disruption. Searchers scoured the fortress and every hut on Emain Macha for her. We found no one. Poor Sualdam was nearly out of his head. He attacked dripping Bricriu, accusing the Bitter Tongue of stealing her away. Of course, that was preposterous. We kept the two of them apart till Sualdam regained his wits. But by then the search was over, and even the Druids could not discern her location. All they could say was that, from reading the entrails of a rabbit, they had learned that a god had passed nearby that night. That hardly consoled Sualdam, since even the unspecified god had failed to protect his bride.

“A year passed without any further sign of her. Then one day, a flock of enormous red birds appeared over Emain Macha. They swooped down to ravage the crops. Rampart guards sounded the alarm, and little Conchovor and the rest of us who were near set off down the hill after the flock. Before we got close enough to kill them, though, the birds took wing again. We gave pursuit but they managed to keep just far enough ahead that no weapon flung could touch them. We never lost sight of them, either, and our chase lasted all day.

“By the time evening set in, we still had not closed on the birds. The clouds of the night sky drank them up. Snow started to fall, much as it did on this army at Cuil Sibrille. We were caught too far from Ard Macha to turn back. Conchovor sent some men out to search for shelter while the rest of us huddled together to stay warm. Among those who went out were Fergus the Messenger and Bricriu Bitter-Tongue.

“The Messenger returned first. He had found nothing but a rundown farmhouse that lacked even a roof. Part of one wall had caved in as well. He didn’t think we should bother with it. He joined us and we waited for the others to return. Last of them was Bricriu.

“He also had chanced upon a house, but not like the one the Messenger had found. This house had a thickly thatched roof and wide high walls and a chimney spout blowing smoke. Bricriu had smelled food cooking—his stomach led him to the door. Without the slightest hesitation, he went straight inside. As if he owned the place.”

2. The Farmhouse

“We must have waited hours for Bricriu to return. When he finally did, he found few friends to greet him. We were all freezing in the open when we could at least have gone to the Messenger’s inadequate shelter and made a fire. Three walls were better than none, that was the general consensus.

“Bricriu informed us that he had found a great house where the men could rest. Inside it, there was plenty of food and, more than that, any number of willing women. Momentarily, he was absolved of every treachery he had ever performed and we pursued him fervently across the hills to the huge farmhouse. The door opened and a tall man came out. He bid us welcome and invited us to share his humble feast. ‘Humble’ it was not. He could not have done better if he had been given as much time as Borrach had for the Sons of Uisliu. Dozens of women waited on us in that warm place. We sat on sheepskins on his wood floor. Drink was passed around by the bucketful. After that fruitless chase, we needed little excuse to indulge our tastes to excess. Soon, we were regaling our host with our brave deeds and grabbing for the women when they went past. Conchovor alone had the sense to ask if one of the women was the fellow’s wife. The man replied that his wife could not attend as she was pregnant and near to giving birth. That announcement stripped away our last sense of restraint. We made plain our intentions to the women, but they failed to respond one way or the other and continued serving food and drink as if deaf and blind. The warriors—even I—grew angered at this kind of rejection. Fighting broke out.

“Our host came to Bricriu of all people and demanded to know what kind of men we were that we lacked respect or awe of things greater than ourselves. He called Bricriu ‘Foul-Mouth.’ The whole building shook with his voice, his anger. I remember looking up at him between blows and thinking he’d doubled in size. The room had gone all smoke-filled, as though the chimney were blocked. The Host’s eyes suddenly cut through the smoke like two suns. I was coughing and tried to stand, but fell over on my side. Bricriu was howling like a dog. I passed out then, the world whirling around over me as if I’d drunk three times what I *had* drunk. And then it was the next morning.

“We all awoke at the same moment, buried in snow, some of us numb from the cold. The snow had fallen through the space that had long ago been a roof, piled in drifts where the one wall had collapsed.”

“But how was it you awoke at *that* farmhouse?” asked Ailell.

“Because we’d been there all along. Bricriu’s farmhouse was the Messenger’s. The only difference lay in what we saw. The story came out then, because we had Bricriu penned in and none of us feeling sympathetic. He told us that the ‘man’ had really been Lugh Lamfada the god. The women, as we now saw, were the fifty servants to Deichtire. Had Bricriu shared this information with us, then the spells over them would not have blinded us; as it was, we saw what was in our minds: a brace of royal whores and a simple farmer. We had shamed ourselves before the god. That was Bricriu’s revenge upon Deichtire and Sualdam, that he had waited a year to take.

“We found Deichtire not far away, in a second hut that had served as a stable once. She was the ‘wife’ that Lugh had spoken of. During the night

she had given birth to a child, a boy. In the remains of a stall beside her, a mare had given birth, too. A pair of foals stood on weak legs beside their mother. We got the rest of the story from Deichtire.

“The boy at her breast was the son of Lugh with her. He was to be named Setanta. She had gone willingly to ... to Int Ildathach with Lugh but had at once begun to miss Sualdam. Lugh, seeing her sadness, agreed to return her to the world, where his son should live with a hero’s power. Conchovor rejoiced at this fortune—to have the son of a god for a nephew! He gave the two foals to little Setanta as a gift. Who could doubt that their presence was more than mere coincidence? It was Macha giving her blessing to the event. The warriors and the maidens made ready to return home. All, that is, save Bricriu.

“Conchovor decided that Bricriu, for his omissions, should stay behind and rebuild the dilapidated farmhouse into what Lugh had made of it. He could take as long as he liked, but he would not be invited again to Emain Macha until he had completed the task. His wife and effects would be delivered there. When the house was completed, he was to send word to Conchovor and a great feast would take place there, after which time Bricriu’s house would be open for feasts and celebrations of every kind. Bitter-Tongue demanded a ruling on such a heavy proclamation, and in due course he got one. The Druids sided with Conchovor: Bricriu had offended the god with his deceitfulness and some extraordinary punishment must be served. Reluctantly, he set to work then. But Bricriu’s a lazy man, and he’s still at it from what I’ve heard.

“A feast night was set for Sualdam and Deichtire to complete what they had begun a year before. In the meantime, all sorts of stories scattered around Ulster about the baby Setanta. Most of these suggested that Conchovor had hidden his sister away after he learned that she was pregnant. The baby, so the story went, really belonged to him. Utterly preposterous, but how strangely premonitory, since a little more than a year later he was seduced by ... by Nessa, who subsequently gave birth to our luckless friend, Cormac. But loud calumny always finds a large and willing audience.

“When the *crossan* danced again—it wasn’t Bricriu this time, of course—the hill and plain looked like a serried multitude had come to answer a call to war. In the midst of it all, Deichtire brought forth Setanta and told them all the story of how Lugh had taken her away in order to give Ulster a hero. Nearly true. The crowd cheered her, whatever lay truly in their hearts. Conchovor named Findchoem, his other sister, to be Setanta’s foster-mother. Her husband, Amergin, swelled with pride. Then the arguing started. Other warriors strode forward, bellowing. Sencha, who’d been with us on the bird chase, shouted to drown all the noise: ‘I should be his foster-father. I’m as worthy as any!’ He then listed his many deeds and strengths, and, truly, Sencha is a clever man to be the judge at all combats held in Ulster.

“Then Blai Bruga came up and more or less repeated what Sencha had said. *He* should have the boy: he had greater land and possessions than anyone else there save the king. The boy, given to him, would have the best of everything. More came out of the crowd after that. Pretty soon you couldn’t hear yourself. The noise brought old Morann on his spindly legs from rites that the bickering had interrupted.

“Silence!” he shouted in a voice louder than Sencha’s. He pushed his way into the middle of the conflict. The crowd fell silent while he stood staring keenly at Setanta. Finally, he addressed the crowd. Since the child was unique, he said, it deserved special care: Setanta should be given over to *all* of Ulster. As Conchovor rules, he is naturally first in every family, but the family in this instance was the entire province. So, to simplify matters, the boy would live with Findchoem and Amergin, but all those present would be responsible for his upbringing. ‘You,’ Morann said to Sencha, ‘you will teach him judgment and wisdom in combat. Blai Bruga, frugality. His parents, the duties that parents should teach. Their natural son, Conall Cernach, will be his brother.’ The others, all of us, would go at some point to Imrith Fort on Muirthemne Plain and teach what we best knew to this boy. He would be the son of the wisest *tuath* in the world, and all of us were his relatives because—to Morann—we all bickered like a family.

“He shoved his way out of the crowd to go back to his rites, muttering on the way that we were nothing but a herd of ‘raging bulls lacking enough brains to co-exist peacefully with dirt clods.’”

“So,” said Ailell, stretching the syllable out, “this enemy of ours is the son of Lugh the All-Talented. Thus, the Pangs have no effect upon him.

“Also, he wasn’t present in Ulster when Macha laid down the curse.”

“But the name? The other name. How did he come by that?”

“That was another time,” explained Fiachu mac Firaba.

“Well? Tell us of it,” ordered Maeve.

Fiachu pursed his lips. The others in the group—Ferbaeth, Duffach, Cormac, and Fergus—nodded their accordance that he tell the next tale. He sighed, tugged at his beard, and started his story.

VIII. CHILDHOOD TALES OF CU CHULAINN

1. *The Blacksmith's Feast*

“In Ulster, there’s a smith called Culann. Not a very great smith—by which I mean not wealthy from his work.”

“*You* mean that of everyone who hasn’t founded a kingdom,” joked Ferbaeth.

Fiachu took a drink; then, unruffled, he continued his tale. “This poor smith owed Conchovor a feast debt. That’s what this is all about—the collection of that debt. One day when Setanta was still a fostering child—only six, he was—the king decided to call in Culann’s debt. He picked fifty warriors to accompany him, including me and Celtchair and Duffach and, oh, yes, Cathbad. Very important, his coming, as you’ll see. Conchovor brought only fifty because he didn’t want to overburden Culann. Some of the warriors were out on the playing fields of Emain Macha—of course this happened before that plain had that name hung on it. On the fields the warriors practiced javelin and sling, and played games like hurling. The children were there, too, performing their own versions of the same. Now, his abilities being what they are, Setanta had taken on the rest of the children that morning in a kick-ball game called Shoot-the-Goal—you must have played it. Every time the other nestlings shot their goal, he blocked it or knocked them all flat, stole the ball away and dunked it into their hole for points. The lot of them couldn’t thwart him. A lot of the warriors had suspended their practice to watch, and you could see from the looks of some that they were damn glad not to be taking him on themselves.”

“Oh, really,” disparaged Maeve.

“Yes,” said Fiachu. “Really. I was there. So were some of these other good men. Conchovor was so impressed at his nephew’s doings that he invited the boy to come with us. Setanta didn’t know the proprieties of addressing the king—or, if he did, they’d gotten confused in the implicit understanding that he was talking to his uncle. He called back that he

hadn't had his fill of playing yet and that he'd come along when he had finished off his playmates. Conchovor found this hilarious and waved the boy off. Setanta went back to his game. We gathered up the rest of our party and set off, at about which time, here came the whole horde of screaming children, running stark naked around our chariots. Behind them, little Setanta, carrying their clothes in a huge ball over his head. They'd played the Stripping Game and he'd stolen the apparel off every one of them, while not a single grimy little handprint smudged his tunic.

"We drove our chariots and shouted to one another and made races all the way to Culann's feast. You can smell his house before you get there if the wind is right. All that fire and coal and metal. The stink of slag in the air. The black smoke of his fire like the dark arm of Goibniu pointing out his hill. He lives inside a small *catbair*, although the stone wall round his huts is only about waist high. He could have built it up, I reckon, but he had got himself a guard dog instead—a great wolfhound. The back of the dog stood level with the wall most places. It took three good chains latched to its collar to hold that animal back, and I'm telling you, if Culann had let it loose, that hound could've bowled over a chariot."

"He means it was a large dog," Duffach interjected.

"See if I don't interrupt your tale, Beetle," Fiachu replied. "Well, Culann offered us drink. Offered Conchovor a bath—they had a tub of water ready for him. He accepted, being a clean sort. We drew our chariots inside the stone wall and Culann closed up the gate and loosed the hound. It circled the *catbair* wall, ensuring that no cattle or pigs scuttled over the stones, and guarding against trespassers. No one remembered about Setanta by then—too busy drinking and bragging. It'd been a long ride.

"The boy came along as he had said he would, late—early in the twilight. He had followed our trail on foot no less. All the way there, he performed exercises and skillful feats to amuse himself. He had one of the balls from the Shoot-the-Goal game, a hurling stick, and a practice javelin—all made of wood. He drove the ball with the stick and while it rolled he tossed the javelin up. Then he'd smack the ball again and skillfully catch the javelin before it hit. The hound saw him way before we did. It barked harshly, then tore across the hillside at its sighted prey. Somebody clambered up on the wall to see what had provoked the hound. Next thing I remember was hearing the cry: 'Setanta!' Then we were all climbing over the wall. Culann dragged back the gate. A few chariots went wheeling out, but the hound had halved the distance by then—no one was going to catch it. Culann tried to call it back, but he'd trained it too well. We watched helplessly, knowing that in a few moments Ulster's favorite child would become the dog's dinner.

"The wolfhound was all grace as it sprang. Setanta, he seemed oblivious to this monster. He caught his javelin, stuck it in the ground, then flicked up the ball on the end of the hurling stick. At the top of its leap, the hound's jaws opened to rip Setanta's throat. In that instant, he faced the

hound and, with the hurling stick, slapped that hard ball. The crack echoed all over the hill. The ball shot right down the hound's gullet and burst out from under its tail, trailing the poor beast's insides.

"We raced out to him. The others ahead had already surrounded him and were tossing him up like a pig in a sheepskin. I think our reaction surprised him—he had never doubted that he would best the dog. Culann, though—he went to his house and sat off alone. We carried Setanta in to greet him, our host. The smith welcomed him perfunctorily, listlessly offered him a bath. 'But,' he said, 'I confess no joy in seeing you. You've robbed me of my greatest treasure. My heart is hollow, my hound is dead. Who will guard my cattle now? Who will be companion to me and my family?'" He got up to leave us.

"The boy blocked his way, placing his sticks at Culann's feet. 'Sir, I will take his place,' he said, 'while I find and raise you another such hound as strong and as loyal.'

"'My hound could guard the whole of Muirthemne Plain,' complained Culann. Setanta answered, 'Then, so will I. My home, after all, is at Imrith. I'll be your hound.'

"Culann agreed to this arrangement. The warriors honored the boy for his willingness to accept responsibility when it was his. A lesser one might have blamed them for forgetting him and allowing the hound to be set free in the first place.

"Cathbad came up to the boy and touched him with his wand. 'Henceforth,' said the Druid, 'you shall bear two names, and though Setanta be your name of primacy, your new name will carry the strength of your honor and fairness. Cú Chulainn you shall be called henceforth: the Hound of Culann.' He's a Druid—he talks like that, you know. A joke contest started after that. 'He's a *dogged* warrior!' somebody shouted. "No one can muzzle him,' yelled someone else. 'He *bounds* his enemies!' 'And if you trap him, you'll face his *doggerly*!' And so on, until the round came to Conchovor and all fell silent to see what he would say. The king just shook his head disobligingly. 'Not from me,' he told us, 'I wouldn't dare invest in your . . . doggerel.' That suitably closed the contest of puns. At least, we thought so.

"Cathbad had endured this lengthy punishment with a bleak smile. Now he addressed blushing Cú Chulainn again. 'There is a *geis* goes with your title—that you never eat dog meat. If you ever do it will portend your death.' The boy swore never to forget this. 'Good,' answered Cathbad. Then he covered his mouth as if to hide a yawn and said, 'So here's an end to the episode finally—now this child has a new name and with it his personal *dogma*.'

"We all of us gaped, which seemed to satisfy Cathbad. He wandered off, fairly skipping, and humming in that deep voice of his. I don't think anyone moved till he had gone over the hill. Then the boy repeated his name to himself and said, 'It suits me.'

“Culann’s wife came and said the feast was prepared and we followed her into the house. The Feast of Punmanship it ought to be called, from the word-play that began again once we sat down.

“Cú Chulainn stayed with Culann afterwards and performed as watchdog until he had trained another wolf hound. But he became the unremitting watchdog of all Ulster that day, at six years of age. And now he’s seventeen. *That’s* who you’ve to deal with.”

“A ridiculous story,” Maeve objected. “Anyone can kill a dog.”

Fergus lowered his head. She would not listen so long as the Donn ran free, of this he was certain. Only Ailell might come to understand something of Cú Chulainn’s force. Had he blotted out the sun with his greatness, Maeve would have belittled him.

“All right,” said Cormac Connlongas with some bitterness. “Let me tell you how he got his weapons before his time.”

“Before?” questioned Maeve. “So he is capable of dishonor, is he?”

Cormac refused to take the bait, but calmed himself before beginning his tale.

2. The Spear

“One afternoon when Cú Chulainn was seven, he went out playing on Emain Macha alone. Nearby, Cathbad held class for his novices. There were about a hundred of them in various stages of learning. Cú Chulainn liked to spy on them. All the children did. *I* did. Everyone wants to know secret things. None of the children ever understood what they saw, of course, because Cathbad would sense them watching and use his hand-sign alphabet; but that only made him more interesting to spy on.

“That day, Cú Chulainn did manage to sneak up on the Druid novices. He overheard one of them ask Cathbad what that day was lucky for. The tale of Cathbad and Nessa had become legend; everyone knew about how she had asked him that same question; his more advanced students used to do it just to tease him, and probably still do. I’m certain it annoys him no end, but he has to reply truthfully.

“He answered his student, saying, ‘This would be *the* day for a child to receive his weapons. Most auspicious. He would become the best-known warrior in all Ulster.’

“The moment he heard that, Cú Chulainn scrambled away and back to Ard Macha.

“My father was teaching me *fidchell* that morning. Cú Chulainn came bursting into the king’s chamber. He knelt on one knee and asked humbly if he could be granted his weapons that day. He hadn’t reached the proper

age as I've said. Naturally, my father asked who had told him to come and request this so extraordinarily.

"'Cathbad,' Setanta replied.

"'Well,' said my father, 'his word has always been good enough for me.' And with that he left me seated at the board, went out and returned with weapons—a sword, a spear, and a shield—for my cousin. They tried out a number of them. Cú Chulainn took practice swings against a section of the wall with his swords—I say *swords* because he kept breaking them and my father would grumble and go get him another one. Then they had me move the *fídhbell* board—which was nearly as big as I—and Cú Chulainn practiced with his spear by chucking it into the stump. The tip bent and the haft snapped from the force of the throw. My father grumbled again and went out to get an armload of spears. He did not hide his concern that his storehouse of weaponry was diminishing right before his eyes.

"Finally, out of desperation more than anything else, Conchovor gave little Cú Chulainn his own kingly weapons, which were much stronger, having been fashioned by the Druids in their secret way. It was at that point, Cathbad strode in.

"'What's this?' he cried out in real alarm. 'That boy's not ready for his shield. Woe to your mother, boy—put those down!'

"'What?' asked my father. 'Didn't you send him here?'

"'I most certainly did not,' the Druid swore. 'And surely not on *this* of all days.'

"'My father became furious. He raged at Cú Chulainn, called him a little liar, and came very close to striking him. But my cousin pleaded his case. He had not lied, he said. He had overheard Cathbad tell a novice that a child given arms this day would win incalculable fame.

"'Then you ought to have lingered longer,' Cathbad informed him severely. 'You would have heard the *rest* of the prophecy: that the greatness of your name will bear direct relationship to the shortness of your life.'

"'Conchovor studied my cousin. 'Well? And how do you feel about that?' he asked.

"'Cú Chulainn stood proudly. 'For glory,' he proclaimed, 'I would gladly trade late years.'

"'A child's empty statement,' Cathbad caviled. 'How can you, who knows nothing of the fullness of a life well-lived, speak of this sacrifice so casually and hope we could listen to you?'

"'Cú Chulainn replied directly, 'Good Druid, I was born to be a hero. The best of Ulster trains my body and my mind every day for this single purpose—to be the best of each teacher, the sum of all their better parts. I am all Ulster—the son of a warrior race, bred to battle, my duty to death.' He sank on both knees before the white robes of Cathbad. 'You know this to be true already,' he said with his head bowed. So grave.

“And Cathbad, too. I was too young then to understand that some secret ritual had been completed, some prophecy fulfilled. Cathbad’s voice contained immeasurable weariness, as if ... as if he’d had to climb a mountain to reach this place in time. I sensed through my father that he and I had become mere observers.

“Cathbad withdrew his hazel wand from a sleeve of his robe and laid it across Cú Chulainn’s brow. As we looked on, the wand curved of its own will and circled my cousin’s head like an oversized torc. The Druid began to chant: ‘This, head of a champion, son of the light, perception and strength within. Hereafter, the Hound must have its Houndstooth. What weapon serves best the son of Lugh?’

“‘The spear,’ Cú Chulainn chose.

“‘It is yours. Rise and carry the day.’ He withdrew the wand. It had become straight again. Cú Chulainn stood up stiffly. Then a stranger thing happened.

“Cathbad took my father’s spear away from Cú Chulainn and handed him the wand in its place. Immediately Cú Chulainn gripped it with both hands, the wand began to glow. It got so bright I couldn’t look at it. The air crackled. Bursts of tiny lightning began to spark around him. He was glowing like a Water Sheerie over a night marsh. The glow rose over him and assumed the shape of a man. as bright as the sun.. A clap of thunder rattled the whole fort; the *fidcbell* pieces leaped off the board. The giant of light vanished.

“In his hand, Cú Chulainn no longer held Cathbad’s wand. A spear had taken its place—a strange short spear, with a flat silver butt and a head like no other I’ve seen. It glowed as if heated white hot, and three of the four edges under the point curled out into hooked barbs. The other edge was solid, flat and razor-sharp. Looking at it, you knew that if ever that spear entered the front, the only way to remove it would be out the back.

“‘Behold,’ chanted Cathbad, ‘*an tsleg boi ac Lugh*: the Gai Bulga, the lightning spear.’

“And that is his weapon still. Forged no doubt by Goibniu and given him by Lugh himself while my father and I looked on no further from him than this.”

A long silence followed.

Then Maeve said rudely, “It appears Ulstermen tell tales taller than a Fomor giant.” She got up and left them.

Ailell was less skeptical. He considered it at least possible that they had come up against something unnatural. The four-headed tree had been real enough ... “Still, he’s no god. Merely a god’s son. Heroes bleed and fall. And this one’s early demise has been forecast. *We* might validate the Druid’s proclamation.”

“What of his renown?” asserted Ferbaeth. “His fame has yet to spread beyond Ulster, Ailell.”

“In answer to that, I advise you to recall what the Druid’s exact words were—that is providing we can trust Cormac to have remembered them precisely. He mentioned nothing of this one’s fame outside the province. And inside it, we’ll give him fame enough. He will be one against a multitude.”

“Perhaps if you heard of his training in arms,” Fergus said, “you would understand him better.”

“But Cormac has already—”

“I don’t mean his training in Ulster. I’m referring to his training on the Isle of Women.”

“Emain Ablach? He trained *there*?”

“He did.”

“Then we’d best know of it.” To a servant he gave orders for Maeve to return. When she did, she was carrying a small dog in her arms. She went and sat next to Ailell, stroking the dog, ignoring the Ulstermen. Finally, with boredom heavy in her voice, she asked, “What now?”

“This you’d best hear for yourself, I think.” Ailell nodded then to Fergus, who took up the tale again.

IX.

HOW CÚ CHULAINN SOJOURNED ON THE ISLE OF WOMEN

1. The Riddle Girl

“I’ve said before, and it was true, that Cú Chulainn was a beautiful boy. So much so, in fact, that practically all the women of Ulster adored him. And the older he grew, the more noticeable the women’s attention to him became to their husbands and lovers. These men anticipated that, sooner or later, Cú Chulainn’s beauty would bring trouble, and they had enough on their hands with Conchovor mooning almost constantly now over his budding Derdriu. So a group gathered together at a feast and elected to find the boy a wife. These men numbered among them the same ones who had urged me to seek out Nessa. Look what their meddling brought me; although they would argue that it had placed Conchovor on the throne, in harmony with the express desire of our goddess. Conall Cernach added another worry to the situation, fearing that, with Cathbad’s prediction hanging over him now, Cú Chulainn might well die without issue and that it would be criminal for him not to give Ulster a son. ‘Where else will the blood of Lugh come forth?’ Conall asked me. I had to agree with that point, so we sent messengers out to the nine provinces to seek a woman for Cú Chulainn, soon to be thirteen.

“But as he bested us in sports and war, so this time he bested us in our hunt. While we sought all over the isle, he found and wooed a girl in Ulster. Her father was Forgall Monach, better known to those here I think as Forgall the Wily.

“Her name was Emer.

“She’s small, thin and lithe like a cat. She has dark brown hair, kinked and braided to her breasts, and when the sun catches it, the hair flares red like a fox tail. She maintains about her a puckish nature, so her eyes always promise mischief and secrets that you know she wants you to know. For Cú Chulainn no more perfect woman could exist.

“Their first meeting was in the great Gardens of Lugh, and it happened by pure chance. She had gone there along with her foster-sisters, of which she had dozens. They spent their afternoons among the bushes of berries and the blooms of flowers. All these girls were daughters of the families living around Forgall’s dun-fort nearby. Since he had the fort and much power locally, naturally all the families wanted to be related to his line, to Emer.

“Passing near the gardens one day, Cú Chulainn heard Emer laugh, and her voice floated sweetly like the sound of Fedlimid’s happiest *gentraige*. He left his chariot and approached the group of girls, greeted them each. Emer saw him and loved him in that instant as he loved her. But, like him, she was a cautious suitor. Also, her father was extremely possessive of her and she knew that her ‘sisters,’ to curry favor with him, would tattle to Forgall about anything hinting of courtship. So, Emer revealed her love to Cú Chulainn as if creating a tapestry, one thread at a time.

“Emer answered his greeting: ‘Straight be your road.’

“‘It is, now I see this flowering garden.’ He plucked a blossom and tossed it at her feet. When she bent to retrieve it, Cú Chulainn saw her breasts over the neckline of her gown. ‘I see a country of gentle hills where I could rest my weapon,’ he said and hefted his spear idly.

“Emer looked up at him with an ironic smile. ‘I know that place pretty well,’ she replied. ‘But tell me, fair man, where is your home that you’ve come from?’

“‘I came down from *Epoma* hill.’ The girls eyed one another perplexedly; they had not heard the hint of double meaning and thought he had made a simple, if unhelpful, statement. Only Emer caught the reference to the Horse Goddess of old, the other and more ancient name for Macha. She alone grasped its meaning. ‘Where do you sleep on your long journey?’ He answered that he slept in the house of the man who tends the cattle of Tethra.

“‘What did you eat on your way here?’

“‘A chariot-child.’

“‘And where do you travel from?’

“‘From the land under cover of the sea,’ he answered.

“‘Who are you, then?’

“‘The nephew of he who passes into another, deep in the wood of the Nemain. But now you’ve asked me enough and I have as many questions for you. You know them, since you asked them of me. Tell me of yourself.’

“‘I, young sir, was raised in virtues both ancient and noble,’ Emer declared modestly, ‘to be a queen of some small land. But my sisters must go before I can marry, and no one can have me who has not slain a hundred on each ford that circles the dun of Forgall. Not only that, but a suitor of Emer must kill three times nine, save one from each relative multiple.’

“‘That’s a hard line,’ replied Cú Chulainn, ‘but not impossible for one whose bark is loud.’

“Emer blushed and smiled. ‘And what offer such a one would make to me is accepted. It is taken. It is granted.’ With that, she stood and stretched and asked her sisters if they would mind returning to the fort with her because she was tired, leaving Cú Chulainn to fathom her riddles as she had done his.”

“And what, if I might ask, *is* the meaning of these riddles?” queried Ailell.

“I’ll explain. The first one I told you already. He told her next that he slept in the house of Ronca, who was Conchovor’s fisherman—fish being the cattle of the sea, and Tethra, leader of the displaced Fomoiri, being a lord of the sea.”

“How clever,” Maeve said admiringly in spite of herself. She stroked her little dog as it slept.

“He and his driver had eaten a meal the night before of a foal cooked on a spit. That is the chariot-child. And Muirthemne is the land under the cover of the sea because it was under water once until the Dagda came there with his club and sang the water away.”

“And the other riddle?” asked Maeve. “He is the nephew of the king, but I fail to see—”

“Conchovor was named by Nessa for the river Conchovor. In Ross, that river flows through a dark forest called the Wood of the Morigu. Somewhere in that uninviting Wood, it also meets up with and pours into a second river, the Annalee—hence his uncle *passing into another*. Cú Chulainn was testing Emer, and he could see from the larksome light in her eyes that she had solved every puzzle. By the time he asked her to riddle him, he had lost his heart to her.”

“And her riddles to him?”

“She said she’d been raised to be a queen of some small land,” Fergus iterated. “That, I think, meant Cú Chulainn himself. He’s short of stature. She also told him, within her riddles, that he would have to carry off her sisters and slay her four guardians, who stood on four different fords around the home of For gall Monach. Each of the guardians reputedly had the strength of a hundred. Emer had three brothers, too, named Ibur, Seibur, and Catt. They each commanded a troop of eight men, so the three times nine save one meant he would have to slay the eight but save her brothers. I think the rest you can figure out yourselves.”

“The offer she accepted was of marriage?” asked Ailell.

“Naturally.”

“To the Hound—the one with the loud bark.”

Fergus nodded.

Maeve was scheming, seeking a weakness in their invisible foe, but she needed more information. “Did Cú Chulainn win Emer? Did he kill all those others?”

“That’s an involved story. It wasn’t as simple as all that.”

She inhaled deeply to calm herself. “Well, Fergus, you seem to have all the information. I, myself, am so wide awake—an involved tale would be just the thing to hear now. You do agree, of course.”

“Fergus is always ready to tell a story,” said Duffach somewhat drunkenly. Fergus contemplated him, but Duffach did not see the look.

“Come, mac Roich,” said Ailell, “you *did* promise to tell us of the boy’s training.”

“True, I did. And so I will. Be patient, all.”

2. Forgall’s Treachery

“When his foster-daughters returned to the fort on the afternoon of the riddling, Forgall heard of Emer’s encounter with the strange boy. He went ashen with the news, even though his girls got some of the specifics of the riddles wrong since they themselves didn’t understand a word of it. But Forgall had stopped listening to them in any case. Fear clouded his mind and proposed to him his doom. The foster-daughters were certain he comprehended the riddles and, when he ignored them altogether, they marched off in a huff, complaining loudly and bitterly that Forgall always favored Emer over them. But those ill-tempered bitches were the least of his worries.

“Some years earlier, Forgall’s Druid seers had predicted he would meet his end at the hands of one of his daughter’s suitors. At that time, he had only sons, but his wife was pregnant and, as he feared, added a daughter to the brood. You might say that he ought to have killed her and solved all his problems then and there. I’d guess he considered it, too, but he wasn’t cold enough of heart to commit such an act, and those same Druids would likely have condemned him as a criminal for trying to escape fate. What could he do? There was just one way out as he saw it: he used his wiles so that his three sons became overly protective of Emer and shielded her from outside contact. He hired four guards of great training and skill, whom he had train his sons as well as a select group of twenty-four others picked from among his fosters. This force became his great barrier; no one could get through that living wall. Forgall was confident of his safety.

“And now, with the girl barely turned twelve and marriageable, she had already threaded through his precautions to find herself a suitor and in such a way that no one had recognized what was happening to put a stop to it. Worse, if he guessed rightly, this hadn’t been just any suitor, either, but the bloody, terrifying Hound of Ulster. Forgall determined that greater precautions were necessary. The first of these he undertook himself in secrecy.

“One morning on Emain Macha, Conchovor was watching a dog race. One of his servants came down the hill to him and announced he had a foreign visitor. Conchovor ordered the visitor be looked after in his chambers until the race had finished. His dog won, so he was in a cheerful mood to greet his guest. The visitor wore Gaulish clothes and bracelets, and he had the sharp features and dark complexion of a Gaul, too. In reply to Conchovor’s welcome, he offered the king a small cask of Gaulish wine—a gift. ‘Sweet is it and to the head, staggering,’ he warned in that peculiar Gaulish way of turning simple speech around. Next he gave Conchovor a box of jewels. Then he explained, this was all a gift from his master across the sea who yearned for news of life here in Ulster. Young Conchovor swelled with pride but secretly considered that this unknown master might be contemplating an invasion. He studied his visitor carefully.

“They spent that morning in Conchovor’s chambers. The old Gaul listened while the king went on about Ulster’s great strength and energy, bragging of his house of warriors, listing us off: me, Conall Cernach the Victorious; Laegaire Buadach the Battle Winner; Cú Chulainn the Hound; the terrible trio of Naise, Ainle, and Ardan. The list went on and on.

“The Gallic messenger finally asked to see some of these warriors. Conchovor had been hoping for that. He obliged immediately, leading the Gaul out onto the sunny playing field. The Gaul insisted the king point out each warrior he had named. Conchovor complied until he came to Cú Chulainn. ‘Ooh,’ said the Gaul, ‘that one has skill innate.’ He watched the boy best a whole team of opponents. ‘Benefit would your Cú Chulainn by a visit to the Isle of Apples, where Domnall Mildemail trains her students.’

“‘Not many survive the rigorous training of the women warriors on that isle,’ replied the king. ‘There are, at present, three brothers named Id, Sedlang and Laeg who went there seeking to improve their chariot-skills. They’ve not been heard from since Lughnasad last. We would not care to lose Cú Chulainn’s like as well.’

“‘Ah, true,’ agreed the Gaul. ‘But survive, that one would. His talents would protect him. And I want—that is, I recommend only. Think you—a warrior greater than even now he is. Domnall. Perhaps Scathach even, or Aife. Is glory not worth risks this big?’ Then he added, ‘But show me now the others you hold forth so boldly.’ That being Conchovor’s first duty to Ulster, he led the Gallic visitor away. No more was said about the Isle of Women—Isle of Apples, as the visitor had named it.

“While they toured, a feast was prepared for the Gaul. His own magnificent wine was opened, strained and consumed. Conchovor and the warriors enjoyed his company all evening. He thanked them for their grand hospitality and, the next morning, set off on his journey again. Once over the hills east of Ard Macha, he paused at a stream, where he stripped and

washed himself. The water turned rusty brown around him as the dye on his skin ran away with the current. He worked at his eyebrows, seemingly tearing the hair from his face; in fact, what he removed was horsehair that he had carefully plastered over his own eyebrows and cheeks. A piece of stained clay covered the bridge of his slender nose to make it sharp and pocked. He laughed all the while that he altered his appearance. No one had recognized him—not even the clever Druids.

“Forgall left the stream and hurried home, where he had to endure a long wait for news that his bait had been taken. He knew that hardly one warrior in a dozen returned from the Women’s Isle. If all went as he planned, Cú Chulainn would soon be nothing more than a statistic. And, on the off-chance that the one became a two rather than the dozen a dozen and one, Forgall had a second plan, already brewing.

“Nevertheless, as he hoped, the matter of further training stuck in Conchovor’s head until at last he mentioned it to Cú Chulainn. And Cú Chulainn, certain of himself in all things, agreed to go. ‘I see how this fits in Cathbad’s prediction,’ he said. ‘Greater will be my fame for it.’ After making his goodbyes, to somewhat alarmed friends and family, he took his spear and set off for the coast. On the way, he detoured to the Garden of Lugh and waited there for Emer to come again. He did not have to wait long.

“Learning of her father’s plans, Emer had taken to sneaking off early every morning to the garden. She found Cú Chulainn sleeping there in a bed of cresses. She knelt beside him and stroked his smooth cheek. He opened his strange eyes and smiled up at her. They spoke, freely this time, of their love for one another. Then Emer surprised Cú Chulainn by revealing that she knew his intentions. When he asked how she knew so much, she replied, her father had played a trick upon him and the king. ‘He fears you,’ she said, ‘and hopes you’ll die in Emain Ablach.’

“‘I should kill him for this trick he’s played on my uncle,’ Cú Chulainn mused, ‘but I won’t. Know it or not, he’s done me a favor here. This training is just the thing I need to finish me.’ Emer took no joy in the double meaning she heard in this phrase. She left him and went to the pool in the middle of the vast garden. He followed her. She leaned over the pool, then stood and held out her cupped hands filled with water. ‘Here,’ she said. He knew that, had they been at feast, her gesture would have signified she had chosen him as her husband. He saw no reason why this symbolic act should not be valid here. He immersed his hands in her palms. Water dribbled out and splashed their feet. ‘There’s too much water in the bowl,’ he said lightly. Emer answered earnestly, ‘Too much isn’t possible, even when it’s over-full.’

“With this they were pledged to one another and swore that, upon Cú Chulainn’s return, they would join together properly.

“He would have taken on the Eye of Balor for her. He loved her utterly. As he got aboard his chariot again, she warned him to be careful, for her

father had not won his name through idleness. Cú Chulainn replied, he relished the confrontation that would eliminate all which stood between them. Then he set off.

“Word had been sent ahead by our messenger Fergus, and a sea-going *currach* awaited him at Ringfadh. He set out alone next morning across the eastern sea.

3. The Isle of Apples

“The camp of Domnall Mildemail lay in deep seclusion, in a grotto. A thick stand of hazels sealed the grotto off from the rest of the island. How Cú Chulainn found her camp, I can’t say. Much of that isle remains a mystery, and those who have climbed its cliffs often will not or cannot recall much of their experience. Let us say fate ordained it.

“The mouth of the grotto contained two rows of huts in which the students dwelled. Domnall lived elsewhere, deep in the caverns beyond the huts. Cú Chulainn arrived at the camp late one evening, announced who he was and why he’d come. Three young Ulstermen came up to him and introduced themselves, then asked for news of their home. He told them what he could and asked, in return, for information about the life here in the grotto. One of the three—who were, by the way, the brothers Conchovor had mentioned to Forgall the Gaul—explained: ‘You will learn more than you thought possible about whatever craft is chosen for you, or else you’ll die in the trying. When we came here, every hut was full from a new crop of students, male and female, with visions of great feats in mind. As you can see, only this handful remains. And none left the isle by mortal methods.’ Nor would he. Yet, none of them could tell Cú Chulainn how to find Domnall.”

In the corner of the room, Laeg leaned close to Senchan as if the others might hear him. “He hasn’t got it word for word, lad, but that does approximate what I told him that evening. In fact Fergus’s put it somewhat more succinctly.”

Startled, Senchan stared at him with wide eyes. “You?”

“What’s so remarkable about that? I had to meet him sooner or later, didn’t I?” Before Senchan could speak again, Laeg admonished him, “No more or we’ll miss his description of Domnall.”

“She appeared the following morning,” Fergus was saying. “And she treated Cú Chulainn at first as if he had been one of her students all along, ignoring the fact that he stood off to one side and just watched her. And no wonder, either. She had skin so white, it seemed to contain no pigment at all—not a freckle or a blemish. Her hair, too, was white, and it stuck out

in stiff spikes around her reptilian face. Bracelets and rings adorned her arms, chains her waist, and twin torcs her throat. Her eyes were milky, the pupils vertical slits. The lower half of her face projected forward, the nose and mouth blended into a single rounded feature.

“Her warrior students set about their tasks without a word from her. They took up whatever weapon she trained them in. Slings, spears, swords. Some battled their friends. Others sought to destroy stuffed targets. Those like Laeg and his brothers, who trained for the chariot, stood on a piece of sloping ground, holding each end of a long leather cord that had been looped around a great boulder. They moved the boulder by degrees, first to one side then the other, by tugging on the ends of the cords. They had already mastered the most obstinate horses Domnall had.

“She came to small Cú Chulainn last of all and ordered him to follow her back into the depths of the grotto. The students paused to watch him depart: some saw with eyes of envy; others, looking on in sympathy, had accompanied her into the caverns themselves and knew they might be looking on him for the last time.

“First off, Domnall took him to a strange formation of rock—a large round flagstone balanced on the tip of a tall stalagmite. Beneath this pointed pillar lay a hot, smoking, coal pit and a large bellows of uncommon design. Stone steps cut up the cavern wall led to the flagstone. Domnall ordered Cú Chulainn to climb the steps, requiring of him also that he remove his shoes. He obeyed her and awaited her next command from the top step. The surface of the flagstone, he saw, gave off steam or smoke. Domnall worked the bellows until the coals lit the entire cavern red. ‘What you must do, Cú Chulainn,’ she told him, ‘is leap onto the flagstone and then balance yourself from one foot to the other, back and forth, until I tell you to stop. Be careful not to lose balance, because the fall from there will drop you in the coals and you’ll cook before I can get you out. Be aware—everything else I have to teach you depends on your learning this.’

“He waited, taking the measure of the stone, where he wanted to land, and guessing at how much it might tip. Then he jumped from the step onto the hot stone. It tilted up and he nearly fell, but he stamped one foot to force the other side down, then the other foot to bring it up, and so on, back and forth, just to stay on it. Domnall said nothing, watched and pumped the bellows.

“All morning he pranced in place, sweat pouring from him like seawater off a *merrow*. As he mastered his position, he managed to strip down and continue his dance naked. Below him, Domnall pumped steadfastly, a constant rhythm, although she too was slick with sweat. Eventually she stripped down as well. The glow of the fire reflected off her as off a figure of bronze. The coals hissed and spat with Cú Chulainn’s sweat. His nostrils stung from the vinegary smell, but he hardly noticed this over the pain in his feet. They hurt as if a hundred knives stabbed into them each time he leapt; but he blocked the pain and jiggled on until he thought he

must faint. It seemed to him he had danced for days. Then Domnall called, 'Stop,' and Cú Chulainn bounded immediately to the top step but could not hold himself up and fell headlong. Anticipating such a reaction, Domnall was already there. She caught him and carried him like a child. He rested his head against her slick, pale breasts, his eyes barely open. She took him further into the caverns, to a pool filled from a waterfall. Strange colors lit the walls there and seemed to pulse, though Cú Chulainn admits this may have been a feverish impression.

"Domnall lowered him into the pool. The cool water revived him. She let him float out under the waterfall, then dove in to cleanse herself and swam with the grace of an eel around the pool. When his eyes opened and a look of peace settled upon his face, she lifted him out of the pool and carried him to her own hut, not far from there in the cave. The floor was of soft rushes and the wall of crushed crystal. She laid him down. He could not feel his feet then. When he looked at them, he found Domnall on her knees there, oiling them from a small brass beaker. She glanced at him with her strange green eyes and said, 'The soles are black and swollen, but not so much as to stop you from training more tomorrow. You do not yet have the inner peace to balance the flagstone without ill effect. This is the secret that will allow you to go on: No fire can burn you if you make it cold.'

"How is that done without watering the fire?' he asked.

"Domnall oiled his calves. 'You can make sun into moon or become hotter than the fire yourself.' It was all a riddle and his mind drifted, trying to unravel it.

"When she oiled his thighs, he became aroused. He hid his face in embarrassment. Domnall's eyes glittered and, in a sultry tone, she said, 'Ah, you're ready for more teaching. Let us see, little hound, if you can balance me.' This was the second phase of his training, and once again Domnall Mildemail pumped the bellows.

Maeve laughed loudly at this. "How long did it continue?"

"Late into the night, as you might expect."

"No, fool—his training. How long?"

"One year he stayed there," answered Fergus, "while back in Ulster a girl named Dardriu escaped her captor in a way that cleaved the province in two. No word of that reached him.

"When he had mastered the flagstone and could dance all around the tip of the stalagmite without scorching his soles, Domnall took him elsewhere and taught him to walk along the shaft of a spear and to stand on its tip without piercing his foot. Next he learned to jump out of the grotto pool, as high as the waterfall, or to flip up out of the water and land beside the pool. This feat is called 'The Salmon Leap' and it serves him well. Then Domnall combined all these things and taught him how to lay the Gai Bulga on the surface of the water, then to leap up, catch the butt of the

spear between his toes and skim it across the pool. He even learned to make it slide up the waterfall.”

“Preposterous!” cried Maeve. Her small dog yapped in reflex at the tone of her voice.

Fergus did not respond to her. “The point is, this spear was given to him *before* Forgall schemed to send him away—which meant that he had stumbled upon his destiny. Great Lugh’s gift served as proof.

“Domnall’s training had ended. ‘Every individual has his own talents,’ she told him on his last night with her as they lay in the afterglow of coupling. ‘It’s my craft to know what talents belong to what warrior and to develop them accordingly. Many are the warriors who don’t know themselves enough to see that, and who perish. You have a binding tie to water, to rivers and seas, and it’s the water you’ve learned to be like. Cú Chulainn flowing like a river; Cú Chulainn smooth as a lake. Cú Chulainn, whose shape ripples when anger overtakes him, the way water ripples when pushed by the wind.’

“The next morning, she led him into the grotto once more. She took one of the three Ulster brothers and paired him with Cú Chulainn. She told them they were destined to be together, to work as two parts of one being. The charioteer, whose name is Laeg mac Rianganabra, became like Cú Chulainn’s brother. He is a tall, thin man, his tremendous strength hidden, covered in freckles. Domnall gave him a chariot from her horde, crafted by another secret sect upon the island and gave him also directions to the camp of Scathach. There they were to learn much more. They set out and reached the heights of that camp before mid-afternoon.” Fergus glanced up at a gesture of impatience from Ailell.

“Again you mention this Scathach,” said the king, “teasing us with the name. The name of Domnall Mildemail the War-like is known to me. But the only Scathach I’ve ever heard mentioned is from the ancient tales of the Tuatha de Danann. That Scathach was a goddess of Scythian descent who is credited with training Nuada himself. However, that took place before the Sidhe went to ground. Long before.”

Fergus nodded but added nothing. When Maeve saw that he would elucidate no further, she invited him to continue with his story. “I will,” he said, “but first we must deviate back to Ulster to hear of the second part of Forgall’s wicked plan. I could relate that tale, too, but by luck you have in your camp one who knows it firsthand.”

“And who might that be?”

“Lugaid mac Nois, son of Cú Roi and king of Munster.”

“What?”

“Does everyone know of this Ulidian warrior save *us*?!” bellowed Ailell.

Fergus shook his head. “No, that isn’t the case. Send for Lugaid and you’ll see that he knows of him only indirectly. It’s a quite different matter he’ll speak of.”

So a messenger was dispatched to go wake the Munster king and bring him along. Meanwhile, the others replenished their drinks and went outside on stiff legs to relieve themselves. Laeg and Senchan stood and stretched, watching the warriors pass near. Laeg recognized in Senchan's covert glances a new respect, and he thought that there was nothing improved one's own reputation more than to have it from the mouth of someone else.

4. Lugaid's Story

The king of Munster entered the Connacht tent in the company of twelve attendants and his younger brother, Larene. He wore a long linen tunic dyed yellow and sprinkled with gold; two disc brooches gleamed on either shoulder. He looked almost as if he had been expecting their call. Only the red edges to his alert eyes indicated his recent awakening. He hailed each person amiably, then took his place between Ailell and Fergus, who moved to give him the superior position.

Once his servants brought him a full mug and he had taken a sip to clear his throat, Lugaid said, "Now, what matter of campaign is it drags me from bed to this—" he paused to look around "—this rare meeting?"

"Tales of brave Cú Chulainn," replied Ailell.

Lugaid arched one brow. "Then you woke the wrong man. The better tellers are all present. What can I add?"

"Fergus indicated you'd say that. It was about Forgall Monach and his daughter, Emer, you're to speak."

Lugaid's eyes half-closed and he nodded slowly. "Oh, yes. Our wedding."

Even Maeve registered surprise. "You? And Emer?"

"A handsome couple, wouldn't you agree?" When Maeve remained silent, he lifted his mug and toasted Emer: "that most delicate of pincers." His brother laughed into his wine and began to choke. Lugaid paused until Larene had composed himself; then, clearing his throat once more, he said, "Here, then, is my tale.

"A messenger of most oily Forgall Monach—his son, Ibur, I recall—came unannounced to Munster one afternoon. When shown before me, he proclaimed that it was his father's fervent hope that I, who had no wife and was, ostensibly, seeking one, would accept in marriage his daughter, Emer. Ibur explained that matters being what they were—I being a newly empowered king and Forgall's daughter the daughter of a lesser Ulster king, for that's how he saw himself—our stations in life suited one another perfectly, and I should have a grand, glorious girl of great beauty and sexual

awareness. You don't get descriptions like that every day, and even when you question them you're inclined to consider them. Thing of it was, I knew a bit about Forgall's well-deserved reputation, the which suggests he was descended from eels. To protect myself, I proposed that I ought to meet this perfect girl first and at least let one of us go through the motions of courtship. 'Regrettably impossible,' I was informed. It seemed there was an army of suitors already suing for her body, making any delay in the matter out of the question. She was for me, you might say, unsuitable.

"They had put the onus on me to make the decision. Ibur continued to push, mentioning how his father wanted me above all the others out of deep respect for Munster's goddess, Anu, not to mention *my* reputation. I made some offhand reply, and Ibur came back that the thought of our two lines linking up stirred his father greatly. 'Ah-ha,' I thought, 'so that's the game, is it, old Wily? Improve the line for your family?' Still, as I pondered it, I could see no harm in that kind of wish. Looking over Ibur, I found him to be reasonably intelligent and sound enough to hold his own in battle. Most likely his brothers shared these traits. Then I asked about dowries and such and Ibur related to me Emer's price of face and the anticipated amount of her *timmscra*—a sizable dowry that. Her relatives wanted to impress me. I asked what Forgall expected for a *coibche* from me, and Ibur named a price ridiculously small. Forgall was making it impossible to refuse, and still I could see no treachery in it. So I said yes. Ibur and I set a feast night and off he went.

"As soon as he was gone, I called in Druids and told them I needed a forecast on the marriage. Two groups of them went out and climbed the heights of the Paps of Anu. They made sacrifices atop the twin mounds. The answer was not long in coming, as very soon they came racing back to inform me that the reading of the entrails had foretold absolutely *nothing*. As if, one of them expressed to me, they'd sought the goddess with nonce words and she had ignored them like they were children. It was all too odd for words. I couldn't fathom it.

"Ibur returned on the appointed evening with a sizable wedding party. He and his two brothers formed a tight triangle around their sister, guarding her from sight until they had entered the feathall in my fort. Such a beauty they protected. Rich sienna hair, and dark lustrous eyes. You can't tell what Emer is thinking. I knew upon meeting her gaze that marriage to her would be an endless string of surprises—not necessarily all pleasant ones, either. There was a good deal of anger smoldering under those enchanting lashes.

"I had rows of woven pads laid out for the guests to sit on. A cauldron of mead. Four kinds of meats. Loaves of bread. And a whole night's entertainment: *filid* singing new verses to treble Brigid, a dance performance of the Second Battle of Magh Turad, and much more."

"So you married the girl," said Ailell.

Lugaid grinned, a wide white smile. “You think so? Well, let’s see.

“I had a large copper couch set at the head of the arrangement, and I wanted Emer to sit there with me, away from the rest of her family. I understand that, in Ulster, she’s expected to remain with her father until the moment he’s handed her *coibche*. My request defied the rule, but the last thing Forgall wanted was a commotion of any sort, so he gave the girl a severe look that said a great deal, then let her go. Her brothers tried to stick with her but she shoved her way through them and ordered them to stay away. She sat down beside me demurely, the picture of grace, with one foot tucked beneath her.

“I gave her my flashing smile that’s won me more concubines across the isle than I can count. And what does she do? Does she flutter her eyes or flare her nostrils like a wild mare? No, she does not.

“Emer grabs hold of me by both cheeks and pulls our two faces close enough to kiss, then says, ‘I am pledged to Cú Chulainn, whom I love and wait for. He has washed his hands from me, which no other man shall ever do. He would be here now except for my father’s treachery that has taken him away. If you marry me, you’ll *compound* that treachery.’ By this point, her father’s screaming blue fire to try and drown out her words. He clambers across the food pallets, squashing bread under his knees, splashing jugs of mead over everyone. He reaches up and grabs her by the hair and yanks her away before she can say more, then wrestles his way onto the couch beside me, still kicking his daughter away. Grips me by the shoulders, too—and I’ll tell you, close up, Forgall Monach stinks like something a ram would disdain. He starts babbling then that I should forgive his daughter her ridiculous crush on the young warrior of Ulster. ‘She saw him ride by *one* time,’ says Forgall, ‘and in her girlish way, gave her heart to him. Well, *he* doesn’t even know she exists, how could he? He’s off somewhere learning skills and improving his technique. Does that sound like a warrior lost in love? Of course not. You’re a rational man, Lugaid,’ he says. ‘You understand the way women’s fickle hearts skip like stones across the stream of comely warriors,’ he says.

“I looked past him at Emer, struggling with her brothers, at the fierce look in her eyes when she glanced over at me. I knew then that old Wily was lying. What she had said explained what the seers had failed to find. Forgall, gripping my arm till it tingled, was waxing his casuistry, no doubt about it.

“So, what do I do? I look him in the eye, give him a wink and say, ‘You’re very likely right, Forgall. She’s young and inexperienced in the ways of warriors, how our heads bob up at a sultry sidelong glance from a winsome vessel like her; never means nothing.’ And he’s nodding like a woodpecker at a tree bole by now. Oh yes indeed. ‘There’s just one small matter to clarify,’ I add casual as you please, ‘and then I’m sure we can get on with this.’ I put my arm around him and draw him close, ignoring the

stench. ‘You see,’ I tell him, ‘I was fostered by the Ulidians, and that makes me a brother to Cú Chulainn. Which, in turn, puts upon me the *geis* that I treat him in all things with good conscience. Now, if her story is tarradiddle—and I’m not doubting you for a moment when you say it is—then let’s set to this feast so I can get off alone with my bride as soon as possible, right?’ I gave him a nudge and a wink. ‘However, if there’s truth in her claim to have traded vows with my foster-brother—and it turns out you’ve deceived me into interfering with that—then in all fairness I have to tell you that when he returns from wherever you’ve sent him, both he and I are going to contest this union and we will without doubt resolve it by divying up the most fundamental parts of your person.’

The whole group of Ulstermen were laughing by this point. Duffach fell onto his back from the force of it and did not get up.

“I drew him closer, until my breath must have shot up his hairy nostrils. ‘For instance,’ I whispered to him, ‘I should very much like your *head* for a wine goblet, seeing as how I am unable to consume very much of the stuff at once.’

“His face had lost all its color and a look of horror transfixed him. I leaned back then, crossed my legs and said, ‘So, when do we marry, Emer and I—*father*, hah?’ in a clarion voice that stopped the commotion around us. Everybody looked at old Wily. And he got up, polite as you please, moved his boys out of the way, took Emer by the hand, and walked right out of that hall without a backward glance or a farewell, with his babbling attendants and sons following him like a wake. And that’s how Emer stayed single. She became known as the daughter Forgall Monach couldn’t marry off, a reputation I feel personally responsible for—to my credit.

“The tale spread, I expect, to all the kings seeking wives, that the Wily One had tried to fob off a girl already betrothed by her own hand. And nobody would have her, not surprisingly. He was still trying to give her away when Cú Chulainn returned.”

“And when did that occur?” asked Maeve.

“Oh, three or—”

“Hold!” demanded Ailell. “That would be the end of the tale coming before the middle.”

“And you would hear of Scathach’s teachings as I promised,” added Fergus. “Those took place at the same time Lugaid was devastating Forgall’s scheme.”

Lugaid bowed lightly at the compliment paid him. He and Fergus knew each other fairly well: Fergus had been king when Lugaid was first fostered into Ulster. Their familial ties ran close.

Maeve looked exasperated. “Very well,” she said. “But I would rather not spend a week here listening to the inglorious deeds of your prize pup. Let us try to sum him up before the cock crows, shall we?”

“Naturally,” replied Fergus. Behind him Duffach the Dark snorted in light sleep. Fergus looked down the line of warriors, the rest of whom

were awake. He offered someone else the opportunity to take up the tale. They all deferred to him. Fergus took a sip from his mug. "I'll tell it straight, then," he said to the room in general, but he looked at Maeve as he spoke.

X. THE FINAL SHAPING OF CÚ CHULAINN

1. *Bridging the Gap*

“The student camp of Scathach lay secluded in a grove of apples—the very grove that gives the Isle of Women its alternate name. The students lived there in a ring of thatched huts. Cú Chulainn and Laeg arrived in the grove at midday. The students all stopped what they were doing and came to see the remarkable chariot and its contents. Visitors to this camp were even more rare than in Domnall’s grotto. Laeg and Cú Chulainn remained apart from the group until one of the students came forward. This was FerDiad.

“He was a bold youth, older than Cú Chulainn by a few years. His face was lean and handsome; already a light fuzz sparkled on his tanned cheeks, over his cleft chin. For the rest of him—his body remained hidden underneath a peculiar layer of horn. This is FerDiad’s armor, but there’s some contention as to whether it’s a layer of protective clothing he always wears or the result of Scathach’s magic that’s transformed his skin into a polished, impregnable surface—like the body of a lobster, flexible but as hard as petrified wood. I’ve yet to meet him, for he lives at Iris Head on the sea. During their training, he and Cú Chulainn grew close. Some there are, say more than close.”

“Oh? And what does Fergus say?” asked Maeve.

“I, madam, never say either way unless I know. And all I know for fact is, they became friendly opponents in every combat exercise, constantly testing each other’s strengths and searching for weaknesses.”

“What did he mean: more than close?” Senchan asked Laeg.

“He meant they were intimate with one another. Which was true to a limited extent. Other circumstances shortly prevented its development.”

“Intimate?” Senchan repeated, looking dismayed and ill-at-ease.

“Is there something wrong again?” asked Laeg. “Honestly.”

Fergus mac Roich continued, “The other students soon gathered round Cú Chulainn. He asked where he could find Scathach and they took him

out of the grove to the bridge that led to Scathach's house. The Pupil Bridge it was called.

"The bridge spanned a wide, deep ravine not far from the grove—spanned it at a point where the ravine carved a complete circle out of the earth. On the piece of land in the center, Scathach had built her house. To become her pupil, as the students explained to Cú Chulainn and Laeg, one had to find a way across the craggy ravine to the house. The only obvious path was the Pupil Bridge, a construction of ropes and slats of wood. FerDiad warned them—getting across that bridge was not so simple a task as it appeared. One had to use skill and cunning to get to Scathach's house. This proved to her satisfaction that the individual had learned enough to qualify for her training before coming here. What the secret of the bridge was, no one would tell. All the students had sworn to reveal nothing.

"Cú Chulainn saw no point in wasting time. If he was to become Scathach's pupil, as Domnall had advised, he had to perform this task. He and Laeg got back aboard the chariot and drove to the edge of the chasm. Cú Chulainn took his spear and jumped down. For a time he stood and listened to the wind, sniffed the breeze and watched the bridge. Nothing seemed odd or out of place. He started across. Nothing happened. Expecting an attack at every step forward, he continued on. He came to the middle and turned back to Laeg with a befuddled shake of his head. At the other end, the bridge suddenly rippled, throwing out a great swelling that rolled swiftly at Cú Chulainn. The ropes creaked and wood cracked. He sprang forward to escape. Ahead, on the bank, Laeg hopped and gestured, shouting him on.

"He was fast but the bridge was faster. Its swell caught and tossed him off like a dog shakes water from its back. He smacked into the ground beside the chariot hard enough to leave a dent; but he rolled right over, leaning against a wheel hub, to see the ripple return to the opposite bank and the bridge become absolutely still again.

"Laeg cried out that the thing was alive. Cú Chulainn answered, 'Well, it's certainly willful.' He climbed to his feet and remained beside Laeg awhile. 'Crossing this is going to take some thought,' he said finally, 'but these others have done it, so we know it can be done.' They tried to puzzle it out.

"While this was going on, Scathach was watching from inside her house. Her daughter squatted beside her between two piles of yarn, weaving on a loom. Scathach informed her that a new student had arrived; but Uathach, her daughter, merely shrugged and went on weaving. She didn't care much for the students, many of whom she had found to be brash and self-seeking.

"Scathach watched Cú Chulainn start across the bridge a second time. He walked with his feet wide apart, stepping on the ropes along both sides

of the bridge, never touching the boards. She smiled ruefully at his ploy, closed her eyes slowly and shook her head once.

“The bridge rose up again. In the midst of taking a step, Cú Chulainn tumbled to one side. The bridge snapped up and flipped him over the ropes. He vanished from sight.

“Scathach clucked her tongue sadly. Knowing the meaning of this sound, Uathach moved around to the other side of the long red blanket she was weaving, where she could see the empty bridge. Now she was sorry she hadn’t taken a look at the student; she had assumed, you see, he would survive.”

“Laeg, meantime, had gone quite wild. He ran about, calling for help, and finally dashed onto the bridge without any thought for his own safety. Leaning perilously over the ropes, he peered into the chasm but saw no sign of his friend’s broken body. Then, right beneath him, the barbed tip of the Gai Bulga appeared. Laeg got down on his knees and craned out over the edge of the planks. There was Cú Chulainn, hanging from a guide rope that ran under the wood. He stared mutely at Laeg with great relief. Mute, as I said, because he carried the Gai Bulga in his clenched teeth. Laeg lay flat and hung his hands down to where Cú Chulainn could reach them. Removing one hand at a time from the rope, Cú Chulainn grabbed hold of his charioteer and climbed up him as if Laeg were a ladder. As they got to their feet, the bridge fluttered at the other end, warning against any attempt to go further. They went back to the chariot, defeated.

“Laeg sought a solution for his friend but could devise nothing against that spirited bridge. He shook his head sadly and confessed as much to Cú Chulainn. ‘That thing is like water, like a stormy wave,’ he said. Cú Chulainn’s head went up at this, like a hound pricking its ears. Yes, he agreed wholeheartedly, it was *just* like water. He embraced Laeg, then took his spear and bounded out onto the bridge again. Uncomprehending, Laeg shouted new admonitions after him, but Cú Chulainn didn’t listen now that he had his plan.

“The moment he reached the center of the bridge, it rolled up, snake-like, straight for him as he had expected. He crouched down, watching the boards rise up, one after the other, as the wave bore down on him. Then at the last instant, he gave his Salmon Leap, soaring high above the bridge, which, like a frog at a fly, snapped up at him furiously—so hard that it wrenched loose its pegs from the inner wall of the ravine and slipped from sight.

“A great crash shook the whole grove so that fruit dropped from the trees. Dust in a huge cloud blossomed out of the crevasse. Cú Chulainn came down on Scathach’s island in a somersault, then peered down at the undone bridge. ‘You’re no match for the likes of me!’ he shouted down at it. He set off for Scathach’s house.

“Both the women had watched aghast as Cú Chulainn defeated the Pupil Bridge. Uathach had continued mechanically to weave while she watched. Scathach gave her a glance now and discovered, in the middle of the red blanket, two jagged rows of yellow yarn. She observed her daughter with growing amusement. ‘I do believe this young man has bested *your* bridge, too,’ she said. Uathach blinked, then looked awkwardly at her mother. The warmth of a blush came to her cheeks. Scathach invited her to go and meet this new student, to see what he was like. If she desired him as much as Scathach suspected, then they might find some time together before he began his training. Scathach would go off to Cat and Cuar, her two sons, to continue with their edification until the new recruit was ready.

“Cú Chulainn arrived at the house. An old woman came out to meet him. She had a hideous face that looked the very soul of evil. Her voice was like the screech of a flock of crows. She claimed to be a servant of Scathach’s. He followed her inside. They passed Uathach’s loom, and Cú Chulainn began to laugh when he saw the uneven yellow weave in it. ‘Someone here has a jumbled sense of design,’ he commented. The old woman grew angry at this and struck him. He grabbed her and she cried out as if in pain from his grip. The sound of running footsteps then echoed through the house, coming closer. Cú Chulainn shoved the crone away as an armed warrior charged into the room. The large warrior drew up, seeing him, and lovingly brought up his sword. Cú Chulainn backed against the loom; the rocks weighing down the gathered strands of wool clacked together. The warrior whipped the air with his blade, swung to take off a head. Cú Chulainn ducked the blade, grabbed up the weighted strands and spun them over his head. He snapped them hard and the rocks broke free and flew at the warrior, who had the speed to dodge the first but was too close to escape them all. One broke his knee; another caught him above the eye, punching a dent in his skull that killed him.

“The gruesome old woman howled at Cú Chulainn, but he silenced her. He said, ‘I have not been treated well since I arrived here. What sort of servant are you?’ He asked for food and drink. The old woman shuffled out of the room. Cú Chulainn dragged the warrior’s body outside.

“In one corner of the room lay a soft pile of blankets from the loom. Feeling suddenly tired, he lay down on them to rest. He’d hardly dozed off when the old woman returned. Without opening his eyes, he identified each sound she made: the setting down of the tray, pouring of drink, rustling of her clothes as she brought it to him. This was what he pictured. But then the blankets moved, and Cú Chulainn opened one eye to find this woman lying beside him, her hideous face pressed close to his, her stale breath on him. He sat up and tried to push her away, but she showed remarkable strength and held him while she said, ‘Destruction upon you if you refuse me. Ten times terrible things to ruin your future with Emer.’

“At the mention of Emer’s name, he stopped struggling. He asked where a serving woman got the power to pronounce a *geis*. ‘The gods of all the

Druids will burst the heart of anyone who is not of magic blood,' he said. The old woman did not explain, but said, 'You killed my guard. There's no one to replace him save his slayer.' Cú Chulainn replied, 'If she sees it as fair, I'll take his place while I'm Scathach's student. But now I think I'll rest, alone.' He lay back, his eyes closed.

"There's more to it than that,' she said. This vexed him. He cursed the old woman and sat up again ... and there beside him was a beautiful naked girl. 'What sorcery is this, and which is the real you?' he asked.

"She told him, 'This is me, as I am truly, Uathach, your teacher's daughter. I saw your feat that defeated the bridge and I think you're glorious. Now you've replaced him who guarded me, who was also my lover. I no longer need a disguise for you.' Her hands travelled the country of him. 'I can show you how to get my mother's promise to teach you everything she knows. But you must give me what *I* want first.'

"He knew well what she wanted, which by now he wanted, too.

"And that's how Cú Chulainn came to be a member of Scathach's house. As you'll shortly see, this led to his meeting Aife.

"Uathach told him that her mother was out training her younger brothers and that Scathach rested nights in the boughs of a particular yew tree. She described to him precisely what he must do to secure all he wanted.

"He went that night to the yew tree and he could see the sleeping form of Scathach overhead. With his spear held close to his side, he did his leap into the tree. Up he somersaulted, hooking the hollows of his knees over a thick branch so that he swung upside down above Scathach. He put the tip of his spear between her breasts as Uathach had instructed. His voice a whisper, he said, "Death hangs over you, woman." Scathach opened one eye and observed the barbed spear nicking the valley between her breasts. She opened the other eye and looked up at her captor. 'That leap has served you well twice now,' she commented. She asked what services he demanded of her. 'Full training,' he answered, 'plus a dowry for my Emer and a forecast of my future.' Scathach consented to all three things.

"Cú Chulainn continued to live with Uathach, serving as her guard and lover, but he spent most of his time with her mother. He learned to juggle nine apples at once; to balance on the rim of a spinning shield; to hammer the ground in a way to send thunder into the nearby hills; to leap over a slashing sword and kill the wielder without a weapon *and* before his feet touched ground again; and, with Laeg, how to crouch and balance without support in a moving chariot, how to exchange places with the driver and still wield a spear. Other things, too, he learned. Often his training went in tandem with FerDiad's. Laeg also practiced with FerDiad, but FerDiad preferred to fight alone and on foot. As I said, the three of them became fast friends." He paused and drank again.

Senchan leaned against Laeg. "If she taught you, too, then you had to have gotten across that bridge as well as Cú Chulainn."

Laeg's eyes sparkled as if from intoxication. "Certainly."

“Well?”

For a moment he said nothing. His expression went from that of exasperation to mild amusement. “I climbed down the bridge while it was still hanging into the ravine. The contraption served nicely as a ladder. Once down, I waded the stream, then picked my way up the other side, which was not so formidable as the outer cliff.”

Senchan looked for all the world as if he had just lost his dearest friend.

“Well, you’re the one who had to know. Mind you, the bridge was alive and kicking the whole time I was descending. The thing was raging—it even twisted around at one point and tried to slap me against the cliff face.”

“It did?” Senchan asked with reviving adoration.

“I’d prefer to take on the whole of the Fir Bolg any day. Yes, I know you don’t know who the Fir Bolg are. Now, be quiet and listen to Fergus.”

“... got into a conflict with another of her kind: Aife. Aife is said to be a daughter of ancient Partholon, whose wife committed the first adultery in Eriu. That makes her as ancient as Scathach. Their contention was over disputed territories. Cú Chulainn and Laeg might easily have ended up *her* students instead of Scathach’s and history would have rolled out in a much different shape. They might not have been involved in this conflict at all.

“While Scathach and her sons prepared to battle Aife’s forces, Cú Chulainn came to his teacher and demanded the right to join the fight. Scathach tried to persuade him he was only a student and not part of it, but he had a ready answer to that—namely, that he was her daughter’s guard, not just any student. This fact notwithstanding, Scathach preferred not to have him along, perhaps *because* he was close to her daughter. Whatever her motives, she put a sleeping draught in his drink to make him sleep a whole day, by which time the combats between her trio and Aife’s appointed champions would be over. She watched to be sure he drank it all. For a moment then, she thought the potion had not taken effect: Cú Chulainn continued to argue as fiercely as before. Then, quite abruptly, he toppled over. Scathach left him and harnessed her chariot.

“However, an hour later, as she stepped across the body, Cú Chulainn’s hand suddenly reached out and clutched her ankle.

“‘Let go!’ she shouted.

“‘Not until you let me go with you,’ he replied, then twisted her off her feet.

“Uathach entered the room in time to hear this, and she cried out, ‘No, don’t let him have his way!’

“Cú Chulainn gave her a dark look. ‘You’ve just ended all that lay between you and me. Find a new log to warm your bed,’ he told her. Then he returned to his argument with Scathach, demanding the right to be her champion, which neither son could legitimately do, lacking enough skill. Scathach agreed grudgingly. After all, he had somehow overcome her po-

tion; to deny him what he wanted at this point might have been a denial of the gods. Uathach fled the room.”

2. Rope Tricks

“The tradition on the Isle of Women is the same as ours where warfare is concerned,” Fergus explained. “They let single combats decide their victories. Aife counted Scathach’s retinue and selected three of her own warriors to represent her. Theirs was the right to choose the form of combat, and they chose the Rope Feat. Aife’s group led Scathach’s to a wide clearing. Her three champions set about stringing a thick rope overhead, each end of which they tied around the bole of an oak. While they were thus engaged, Cú Chulainn went to Scathach and asked to be the first to represent her, as balance of this sort was the first skill Domnall had taught. Scathach accepted. Her own sons were able climbers but had learned few other of his feats.

“Aife’s three champions now introduced themselves: Ciri, Bin, and Blaicne, the three sons of the witch, Eis Enchenn. They had her looks, to be sure. When they removed their helmets, they revealed three wicked faces, all feathered black, with the dead onyx eyes of birds. They replaced their helmets and asked to know who opposed them. Scathach’s sons introduced themselves: Cat and Cuar. Cú Chulainn did the same. One of the bird brothers remarked derisively that he resented having to take on three boys instead of three men but would kill whomever Scathach chose. Once this decrial had been voiced, the three feathered fiends marched off across the clearing. At the other side, where the mysterious Aife waited, they stripped off their clothing save for the intricately worked helmets, climbed up the tree they had chosen for their terminal, and stepped out onto the rope.

“Cat and Cuar shimmied up their tree. Cú Chulainn jumped straight up, naked, and landed on the rope as if he did this sort of thing each day, which he probably did. Before the two sons of Scathach had reached the rope, he bounded forward, running on it as if it were a path. He did not yet unsheathe the sword his teacher had given him for this fight. The three champions walked lightly forward like one creature with six legs. Their weapons came up like hackles. The first of them, Ciri, crouched low and prepared to open Cú Chulainn’s middle. His sharp bird’s tongue flicked out of his bronze helmet. The shrillness of his cry made the oak leaves shiver.

“Both parties rushed quickly toward one another now. Their feet whipped along the rope. Ciri lunged to spit his target. His blade cut only air.

“In the instant of the bird-brother’s thrust, Cú Chulainn sprang up off the rope. He spun upside down in an arc above the three, his sword drawn; the blade swung like a pendulum. It cut a straight thin slice through all three helmets. He landed on the rope behind them, his bounce flinging the bodies free. They flew in every direction.”

Ailell laughed and clapped his hands. “*Very nice,*” he said.

“Cú Chulainn jumped down. He observed the bodies, nudged them with his foot. ‘Well,’ he proclaimed, ‘I won’t take any heads here and that’s for sure. I don’t trust these birds.’

“Aife called out angrily from where she stood, demanding single combat with ‘that clever boy,’ as she called him. He agreed to it, then went back to his starting place on the rope. Scathach awaited him there. ‘You’ve done a great thing here, but don’t let it swell your head now,’ she warned. ‘Aife’s worth a hundred of Ciri and his brothers. You jump over her and she’ll spit you down your throat and out your arse.’

“Then I need to know her weakness. Tell me what she values most in life.’

“That Scathach answered easily: Aife loved her chariot and all its trappings. Armed with this knowledge, Cú Chulainn took his place again on the rope. Aife hung back, unlike her students, while he danced to the middle of the rope and waited. His opponent came forward one step at a time, curling her toes tightly around the cord to keep from sliding. Up till now, Cú Chulainn had thought she wore a brown cloak, but he saw here that the cloak was hair, hanging to her knees. Her arms protruded from it. Her eyes were rose-red, her cheeks painted in woad—purple stripes. Where the hair occasionally parted, he could see her flesh beneath. Aife wore no armor, and the hardness of her musculature carved her features sharp and proud. She quite caught Cú Chulainn’s eye.

“The moment they met, he pretended to perform his leap again. Aife jumped up, too; and, as Scathach had warned, if he had tried his trick again, she would have had him. But he went straight up instead, meeting her in the air. Their swords clashed once, the force of it tossing them apart. The rope dipped and vibrated like a harp string when they landed. Cú Chulainn crouched low to ride out the vibration, one leg straight out ahead of him, balancing on his heel. Aife had more experience on the rope. She flipped herself forward immediately, throwing the force of her somersault behind the blow she now struck. Cú Chulainn brought up his sword edge-on to block her and she sheered right through it, leaving him a useless stub.

“He flung it away. Then his face took on a look of surprise and he pointed excitedly past her. ‘Look!’ he cried, ‘your driver’s got so involved

watching us, he's driven your chariot over the edge of the hill and toppled it!'

"Aife had to look. In that split-second, Cú Chulainn leapt inside her sword range. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her off balance. To catch herself, she reached straight out, and he tore the sword from her grasp, but also stopping her fall. He grabbed onto her hair and flipped himself like a wave right over her head. Now they were back to back. One sharp tug on her tan hair and Cú Chulainn had Aife teetering backwards. He dropped onto one knee and caught her over his shoulder, quickly rocking to keep his balance. Then he reached back and plunged both hands into her hair, grabbed onto her breasts, and hoisted her up on his back so she couldn't struggle. In this fashion he took her back to Scathach.

"Laeg met him where he jumped down, offered him the Gai Bulga. Cú Chulainn dropped Aife and took the spear. She rolled over only to have the tip of his spear prod between her breasts. Angrily, she charged, 'Your conduct is unfair.' He replied, he did not recall any establishment of terms between them. Nevertheless, he inquired after what she thought just. 'A life for a life,' was her answer.

"'To that I agree,' he said. 'I shouldn't want to harm so fine a teacher as yourself. But you must agree to my three terms first.' He removed the spear, let her sit up while he listed them. 'First, an end to your fight with Scathach and never attack her again. Next, you take me into your house and train me as Domnall and Scathach have done before you.'

"Aife complied with both of these terms. She asked what the third condition was. He replied, 'That you bear me a son, so that our blood may mingle and create an even greater warrior than the two of us combined.'

"She climbed to her feet—a full head taller than young Cú Chulainn. Beside her, Laeg was grinning. Aife studied the Hound's parts, his skill and bravery. 'Agreed,' she said.

"So, Cú Chulainn left the house of Scathach where his friend FerDiad stayed on to take his place. Aife gave him the last of his training on that misty isle, and he slept with her every night throughout."

"And did the woman bear a son for him?" asked Maeve.

"No one knows that, just as none, save possibly Laeg mac Riangaabra, knows what secrets he may have learned from her. But he gave her a gold ring that had been his from Deichtire, with instructions to pass it on to their child when his training was complete and Aife sent him out to seek his fortune. And they agreed on a name: the boy is to be called Connla.

"Before leaving the isle, Cú Chulainn returned one last time to Scathach's house. She still owed him on two points of his contract with her. She anticipated him, too—she had the *imbas forasnai* of seers and Sídh; after all, she's older than both. His dowry was there in a box. Scathach awaited him on her knees. He knelt before her, Uathach looking on fecklessly. Scathach gripped his shoulders. Her eyes rolled up and she began to chant to him:

“Salute the unvanquished,
 though short his life from now till death.
 In that span, many foes will fade.
 Red Blood is spilled, red are wives’ eyes.
 Twisting, bending, your body swells.
 Swells from fury, hot as Lugh’s light.
 But for the rest you’ll fight alone
 And pay a great toll in your person’s flesh.

Be wary of ravens and predatory kites,
 Beware of Maeve and Ailell’s niggardly honor,
 Win in water every day
 And collect your heads by the star-blanket’s light.
 Show no mercy when Maeve’s time comes,
 Or else sacrifice your life on some other day.
 Your future would kill ten different men
 So keep Emer close and avoid Morrigan.’

“She slumped over against him, her wicked face etched with weariness, drained of color. Her thin lips were bluish, as if she’d got ague. Uathach told him softly that he must go. Cú Chulainn chose not to press his grudge against her. He wished her well, then went out, across the restrung Pupils’ Bridge, which did not so much as flutter underfoot. In the students’ camp, he spent his last evening on the isle with Laeg and FerDiad.

“The following morning, he sent Laeg off ahead to the coast to have their chariot loaded aboard the *currach*. His farewell to FerDiad went unwitnessed. Cú Chulainn set off on foot, the Gai Bulga sheathed on his back. He followed the ravine that flowed beneath the Pupil Bridge. The ravine became a gorge, and Cú Chulainn’s path wove the heights of cliffs. He smelled sea on the breeze, tasted salt on the air.

“At one point as he walked the tortuous path, an old woman approached from the opposite direction, hobbling along with the aid of a staff. She had just one eye beneath her brow, to the left of her nose. The eye was shiny black like a huge bead. The ledge there was extremely narrow—barely enough room for one person between the sheer rock face above and the straight drop below. Cú Chulainn offered to lead her back down the path to a wider point where they could cross; he was in no hurry now. The crone insisted he move aside and let her pass right there. She said, ‘I don’t care for you one whit and wouldn’t follow anywhere.’ He stifled his annoyance at the choleric hag as he went to the edge of the cliff and made room for her to pass by standing right at the brink of the precipice. His toes dug into the rock; his heels hung out into space. He half-bowed mockingly and spread his arms wide as if in reverence of her, all the while shifting to maintain his balance.

“The old woman shuffled up the path. He looked up at her from under his brow, watching as his own image grew within her glossy black eye, smelling her breath as she neared—an odor of turned earth and worms. That eye, he knew that eye. In a flash he sprang off his toes just as the old woman stamped her staff where his feet had been, and a chunk of cliff-face exploded. Had he hesitated an instant, she would have sent him plummeting to his death.

“She cried out shrilly in exasperation. Cú Chulainn landed on the path where she had climbed. Her false face was gone when she swung around to meet him. He saw her as she truly was: a great beaked head of oily black feathers. Her pincer-like mouth clacked in irritation. He knew her because her sons had been so much like her. ‘Eis Enchenn,’ he said, ‘I defeated your sons fairly on their own rope.’

“She squawked and stalked toward him. ‘Killed them, all the same,’ she screeched, then swung her staff with surprising speed to knock him off the cliff. He flipped up and landed agilely on the staff as it whipped beneath him. His added weight drove the staff down, against a rock, where it split in two. Eis Enchenn stumbled off-balance. She tottered on the verge of the cliff. The Gai Bulga spun out of its sheath in Cú Chulainn’s hands. Its razor edge severed the witch’s head as her feet slid over the brink. Her spouting body dropped; the feathered head rolled down the path, screeching ‘Raaa!’ like a kite, until the path turned. The head rolled over the edge, its fierce cry trailing away. Where her blood had spilled out, the rock face was eaten away, smoking and hissing. Sections of the path broke free and clattered into the chasm, but Cú Chulainn bounded over them all.

“That was his final deed on the Isle of Women.”

In the corner, Laeg nodded. “An accurate and reasonably unembellished tale, if I may say so. That encounter with Eis Enchenn continued to disturb him ever after, though. His dreams were often haunted by those malicious black eyes; he was forever after paranoid of ravens, crows, kites. Which turned out to be to his advantage, as you’ll see, Senchan, once Murder’s Daughters meet up with us again.”

3. The Besting of Forgall’s Host

“Someone else must take over the telling,” complained Fergus. “I’ve exhausted my voice. Any more and I won’t be able to call out my warriors this morning.”

Beside him, Duffach the Dark rose up suddenly. Beneath his beetling brows, his blue eyes were hard and remarkably clear for a man who had

passed out not long before from drinking. His thin mouth, though smiling slightly in insolence, was drawn into a scowl from the scar at the left corner of his lips. "I'll finish the tale for you," he announced, then looked around to deny any objection; there was none.

"Fine," he said. Then, peering into his mug as he swirled the dark brown sediment from the bottom, he began to speak in his murmurous voice. His audience leaned toward him without realizing it.

"Forgall Monach heard that Cú Chulainn had survived the ordeal of training. He knew his time had come. This was the foretold adversary. Nevertheless, he tried to defy the stroke of fate one final time.

"When Cú Chulainn reached the domain that Forgall ruled, he found Emer held captive from him by an endless array of guards. Forgall's domain is called *Luglochta Logo*—something no one else has bothered to tell you, by the way. Once he had arrived, Cú Chulainn spent a full year before he got close enough to Forgall's earthen ramparts to even *see* Emer. All he got then was a glimpse of her from Laeg's chariot during a lull in the fight."

"Fight?" asked Ailell.

"Indeed. Forgall had fitted the landscape with a forest of warriors. He promised his daughter to every one of the soldiers he hired—whoever brought him Cú Chulainn's head."

"That is a ploy with some merit," commented Maeve. She glanced thoughtfully at her own daughter, Finnabair, curled up asleep beside watchful Flidais.

"It would seem so," Duffach replied. "The fools believed him. With Cú Chulainn dead, they thought the curse would be off Emer. I shouldn't have to tell you the outcome."

Maeve looked up from her abstraction. "But you do, dear Duffach, you must."

He bowed with impudent formality. "Of course. For the great spread-legged queen, anything." He drained the last of his drink while his audience expressed their individual responses to his comment, all of which he ignored as he continued. "Cú Chulainn whittled away Forgall's *whole force*. Row upon row of warriors. One at a time, in challenges. By the time he finally caught that glimpse of Emer on the ramparts, he had already begun to fulfill the terms of her riddles. Her guardians, who stood outside the fortress, who had the reputation of being as strong as a hundred men each—Cú Chulainn cut them down. Wheat to the sickle. Then's the time he looked up and saw her. She was the sun to him. His strength doubled just to see her there.

"Emer's brothers charged out with their three troops. Remembering the riddle, Cú Chulainn took on each troop separately. They were on foot so he jumped out of the chariot and faced them on foot. Dust swirled and blood sprayed in all directions. Grass turned red that day. What happened in the center of that maelstrom, I don't know, but I'd guess he took on his

wild aspect they call the Warp Spasm in Ulster. I've never seen in him the Warped One. I hope to the gods of my people that I never do, now we're on opposite sides. It served him well that day, I know. He slew every troop except for the brothers at the lead. He trussed them up and deposited them beside his chariot, what's called the Sickle Chariot—that also hasn't been mentioned before, but it's the chariot Domnall gave them.

“Now the fortress lay unguarded. Cú Chulainn sprang up, hurdling the ramparts. Forgall stood right below him, watching him sail overhead like a minor sun on its journey. The twisted visage of the Warped One may have terrified old Wily, or maybe the certainty of doom painted across his plain. We can't ask him to tell us because, whatever the cause of his panic, Forgall Monach cried out and careered blindly across the rampart. On earthen walls there are no rails as you know, and he stepped off and fell into the yard. Again there are tales of this: that he died of a broken neck; others, with an eye to the original prophecy, claim he impaled himself on the Gai Bulga. Anyway, he died.

“Cú Chulainn captured Emer's foster-sisters and planted them beside her brothers. He made all present swear allegiance to him, then released them. After that, he and Emer were husband and wife.” Duffach raised his cup and drank till it was empty.

“And there the matter rests for us,” said Ailell, clapping his hands. “It's a wonderful tale you've all shared. I thank you.”

Fergus became dismayed. “It's not just *any* crock we've spilt here; these are stories—*true* stories—about the one man who will oppose our intentions to steal the Donn. One man like a whole army.

Ailell nodded. “Oh, I no longer doubt the reality of him. You've drawn him for me: I can see the little two-legged whirlwind quite distinctly now. None of which alters one simple fact.”

“Which is?” asked Cormac, also embittered by Ailell's flippant reaction.

“Which is,” answered Maeve for her husband, “that your Hound has won his fame already by deeds that have filled the night and could, I do not doubt, fill another; and that Cathbad's prediction will come true by my hand—Cú Chulainn will now go to his tomb a young man.”

In the corner, Laeg chuckled. He climbed stiffly to his feet, then stretched. “She's rather headstrong, that Maeve. And a tiny bit premature in her assessment of how things stand.”

Senchan got up and followed Laeg out the door of the tent. “You mean, he doesn't die a young man?”

“Ah, now, I didn't say that. But youth, you see, is a relative matter. Look at me—I'm past six hundred years old and I might be thirty. How old am I then?” He inhaled the wet pre-dawn air and observed the hint of rose in the sky. “But it's no good my telling you. All that is for you to see. Come, let's stretch our legs before the army awakens. Hungry?”

“No. No, not at all.”

Laeg smiled. "Odd, isn't it?" He strolled past a string of tied horses. They rolled their eyes and shied away. A few nickered. "You can sense me, can't you?" Laeg said to the horses. "What grown wise men can't perceive, you animals know. It's what man traded in order to think for himself, that gift for touching upon the *other* world. Still, I wouldn't desire to be a grub."

"Laeg," said Senchan. "I've a question."

"Yes?"

"Well, Emer was of Ulster, wasn't she? And she and Cú Chulainn were ... that is, they contracted a marriage, didn't they?"

"Not all marriages were contracts as such, lad. Not every man and woman started fresh every year. But, in answer to your question, yes. Conchovor himself threw the feast to celebrate their vow."

"But, then, didn't she have to sleep with him? With Conchovor I mean?"

Laeg halted and looked at Senchan with admiration, then began to laugh. "Very, very perceptive. Indeed, that was so. And it had the poor bastard in a sweat, too. He'd already lost half his camp to the Black Army of Exile and he didn't care to give up the rest to the destruction of the Warped One. But it was also the law, which he had enjoyed the fruits of till now. Can you guess what happened? No? Well, actually, as before, it was the two Druids, Morann and Cathbad, who resolved things. They made their announcement before the king spoke at the feast, that the king would sleep with Emer that night. All eyes turned to Cú Chulainn—you could feel peoples' souls backing away. But he just sat happily on his uncle's right, moon-faced, delighted and drunk."

"I can't believe it."

"Oh, well, you see, Conchovor would sleep with Emer, to maintain harmony with Macha. To maintain order and harmony with Cú Chulainn, Cathbad and Fergus the Messenger spent the night *between* the bride and the king. Fortunately, because of all the wives he'd entertained thus, Conchovor's bed was uncommonly broad."

They walked on some way in silence. Around them, in the mists of dawn, the army began to gather itself together for another day's trek. Naked warriors bent and stretched to get their blood flowing. Some hacked and spit. Others went into the stream at Ath Gabla and poured chill water over themselves, rubbed it across their goosepimpled flesh, hissing, cursing. Up and down the lines, colors blossomed like flowers as clothed warriors came out, gathered, prepared to depart. From woods nearby, men and women shouted and laughed, making rude jokes about the people of Ulster, jokes no self-respecting satirist would have repeated. Laeg frowned at some of these as he went along. To turn the boy's attention away from such talk, he asked, "How have you liked the tales thus far?"

"Glorious, Laeg. And this camp. I never imagined anything like this." Senchan chewed his lip for a time, then said hesitantly, "I think I know why you brought me this far now."

“You should.”

“I think so. You want to teach me a different way of life, of seeing things. Of thinking.”

Laeg grinned widely. “That’s *absolutely* right, Senchan. You’ve uncovered the plot, then.”

“Yes,” replied Senchan, more self-assured now.

They continued on up the hill after that, neither saying anything further. At last, unable to wait any longer, Laeg turned and blocked the way. “Well,” he cried expectantly, “what is it I’m training you for? Let’s see if you’ve got it. What are you going to be?”

Senchan drew himself up proudly, the vast army below him, and said, “I’m going to be a *warrior!*”

PART TWO



XI. STRIFE AMID DISHONOR

1. Vocational Guidance

“A warrior?” Laeg had gone stiff. His neck grew blotchy red. “A warrior?!”

Senchan tried to shrink away. He could not find voice to reply, to protest his good intentions.

“And who, if you’d be so kind to tell me, will you be doing battle with? Old Selden the Master of the Farting Cows? His scabby children? I seem to recall you forswore that for fear of tackling the whole *tuath*.”

Senchan would have addressed that point but he remembered the rationalization only as something he had thought, not spoken. Laeg had heard it? Impossible. Or was Laeg overhearing his thoughts right now? Senchan stared hard at his guide and thought with all his might: “Answer me if you can hear this.”

Laeg’s brows knitted. His expression became perplexed. Behind him, a wagon rolled past, up the hill. Finally, when Senchan was satisfied that Laeg could hear him, Laeg made an exasperated burr and turned away. He began shouting—apparently at a stand of trees on the hill. “A warrior! Are you pleased with yourselves now, you pop-eyed pixies? Does this turn of events delight you? What more proof do you need to know this world’s had done with us. Leave it at that, can’t we? We mean nothing to them now. Look at him. Look! Nothing!” He grabbed Senchan by the jaw. “You don’t, do you? Not a clue. See? See him? All right, you feel some weighty debt to us for loosing those keepers upon the world. Well, I absolve you all of your guilt: it wasn’t your fault. Me, I quit! Now for pity’s sake send this poor bastard back home and let him get on with mucking up his life!”

The nearby stand of trees suddenly bowed toward them. A stiff breeze knocked Senchan back a step. He heard a voice in the wind, a whispery, scratchy sort of voice—the sound of branches clacking and rubbing together.

“Ssh,” said the trees. “Laeg, don’t treat the sss-center of your journey as if it were the destination. Don’t utter threats-sss. You’ll return to us-s-s yet ...” The wind died.

Laeg doubled up and tipped over. Senchan ran to him. Laeg’s thin face was paler than ever. He allowed himself to be hoisted up.

“We’d better listen to them, huh?” said Senchan. “Do we go with the army?”

Laeg nodded weakly. He said, “For now.” After pausing to draw his breath, he added, “Soon the time comes when I enter the tale actively and you must become your own guide.”

Senchan bit his lip to hide his fear. To be abandoned in the midst of these evil creatures ... Laeg again seemed to hear his thoughts, snapping at him, “A minute ago you wanted to *join* them. Are you so sure you’ve picked a proper vocation? Such matters deny haste.” Laeg suddenly moved off under his own steam, up the hill. “Come on now,” he called, “we mustn’t lose sight of the mercenaries.” He broke into a run and Senchan, sprinting to catch him, lost his chance to decide if he wanted to follow.

2. The New Challenge

The combined armies of Connacht rolled ahead once more, but the last of them had not left Ath Gabla when those in the lead—the mercenary *fiana*—encountered a new obstacle in the ford near Ballymakenny. The small stream bed there had been filled by the bole of a huge oak tree lying on its side. Its naked roots dangled with clods of dirt and grass like the hair of the Badb. Notches cut along it required Maeve’s Druids be sent for again.

Dressed in their white robes, the Druids wedged through the muttering, anxious army, which eyed them warily and grumbled louder still. On finding the king and queen near the tree, one Druid informed them, “Your forces grow restless and irritable and, if you don’t do something about these interruptions, they’ll soon be cutting each other up.”

Maeve told him to deal with his task and to let her deal with hers. The Druid went ahead a dozen steps, then sank up to his knees in the mushy ground; by redirecting the flow of the stream around itself, the tree had turned the banks to muck. Crying out, the Druid hiked up his robes and sank lower. One of the warriors, named Fraech mac Fidaig, caricatured the priest’s panic while wading in but reached out and tugged the Druid free. The salvaged, dripping priest stomped up to Ailell. “If you want that tree deciphered, then you’d better find a chariot to bring it to me or me to it!”

Ailell patiently summoned a chariot—one belonging to his son, Orlam—for the Druid, who reluctantly took Orlam's place on the platform. The driver led the horses in a tight circle, then walked them backwards; they took the chariot down the bank and into the muck, where it sank over its axle, near enough to the tree for the Druid to span the remaining distance and run his fingers over the letters. He called out to his group as he read: "No better route ... can you find than here ... no change of course ... can avail you ... I watch unseen, defying your continuance ... till one of your two-wheeled team can jump the bole first time ... Soon I think we will know one another."

The challenge floated back through the army, passed from one row to the next, until the last of them, still at Ath Gabla, had heard it. Dozens of chariots rumbled out across the lowland ridges from the body of the army, eager warriors ready to hurl themselves at the tree, while Orlam and his driver pushed their chariot out of the mud and out of the way, snapping the axle in the process.

Before long, Ailell controlled a line of two-wheeled carts stretching to the horizon. As he looked over the ready champions, he told Maeve, "I don't believe this will take long."

The queen did not argue with him but had ideas of her own. She called the warrior Fraech mac Fidaig out of the line and said to him, "I have a deed needs performing."

He held up his fist as was the way with his people. "I'm the one for it."

"My sentiments exactly. While I trust my husband's judgment that these brave men will have no trouble, still I would not care to miss the opportunity to hunt down this scourge, Cú Chulainn, while he dawdles. I want you to find him. Circle around our gathering and ... She broke off speaking as the first chariot in the line went rumbling past, picking up speed, the driver whipping his horses, the beasts wild-eyed. Dirt sprayed up behind the wheels; the chariot bounced over the lip and down the bank. The horses made their leap. Their forelegs sank into the muck but the force of their run threw their bodies further ahead in a sprawl that jerked the driver off his feet. The chariot tongue stabbed into the muck between the beasts, pulling their heads into it. They slid on their necks into the water. The chariot and driver flipped up over them and catapulted into the side of the huge tree. No one moved. The broken boards, rails, and one twisted wheel tottered back slowly with a plop into the mud. Most of the driver remained plastered to the tree.

With a plaintive glance skyward, Maeve turned to back Fraech.

"Circle around us, as I said, wade the stream if necessary, but see if you can catch him off guard while he enjoys our display here, which I'm certain will continue long enough for you to slay him. Bring me his head and your reward will be uncountable riches and unspeakable pleasures."

Fraech flexed his hand to show her his strength. "This will solve all our problems."

Maeve returned to Ailell's side. The debris of the first chariot had been removed. "You're so right, dearest. This won't take long at all," she said.

Ailell scowled, then shouted, "Next!"

3. In the Stream

The crash of chariot against immovable tree echoed through the hills to Fraech. He glanced back into the distance but the army could not be seen from this ridge. Fraech had counted fifteen such crashes so far. Maeve had been right—they would never surmount that tree; but, of course, that had been the intention of this warrior Cú Chulainn, whom Fraech had expected to encounter long before now. Apparently, the Hound had no interest in seeing his trap do its work.

Fraech crept along toward the stream. It lay far beneath him, the banks describing promontories. Here the stream was a river, full of depth and current.

A voice carried to him from beyond the bank, somebody singing. Fraech dropped flat. The singer spluttered and splashed in the water. Up on his knees, Fraech drew his sword and then loped ahead in a crouch. The river below came into view a little at a time, and he stopped the moment he could see the bather.

The man below was not large. He appeared to be well-muscled, and his hair was black. This had to be the one Fraech sought: all other *fir Ulaid* would be helpless from the Pangs of Macha for days to come.

Fraech took a minute to sort out a plan. Then he edged further upstream. Not far from there, the river curved. Past the bend, Fraech stripped off his clothing and, leaving behind his sword, slid down the bank and entered the water. It was so cold that he whimpered in spite of himself when the water reached his hips. He forced himself deeper, over his head. Then, stretched out like a log, muscles taut, he let the current take him. As he rounded the bend, he changed his position and floated silently on. The bather continued to splash about carelessly. Fraech tensed as he neared, took a deep breath and dove down out of sight.

The bottom was more solid than he would have thought. It allowed him to kick off upward with force enough to pound Cú Chulainn's back and toss him up out of the water. The Hound splashed back down; Fraech grappled for his throat from behind. He caught it with both hands and shoved the Ulsterman under him. His thumbs jabbed to crush the larynx. Beneath him, Cú Chulainn sank like a stone and Fraech had to follow.

In the utter darkness of the river depths, something like a cincture gripped Fraech by the ribs. For an instant he envisioned some monster

that had awakened at the sound of combat. Then, whatever it was sent him shooting up to the surface, the water tearing at his eyes. He burst from the depths, tumbling into the air, rising as high as the bank where he had hidden. Then he dropped. He cried out as he hit, and water jetted into his mouth. He knew he would drown now.

Something caught his hair. It suddenly pulled his head up. He choked and sucked in what air he could get. A gentle voice near his ear said, "Let me spare you, brave wrestler. You're defeated now."

"That's not ... allowed me. I'd be shamed before Maeve."

"Honor's a hard thing when you aren't winning. I must accept your choice."

Fraech drew one last deep breath and twisted to break free as his head was shoved down into darkness again.

Thirty chariots lay in a heap beside the stream. Nearly as many drivers lay there, too—most of them in pieces. Maeve had stopped bothering to watch. She sat in one of her tents, holding her dog and waiting impatiently for Fraech's return, which would end the need for this bathetic redundancy. How many chariots would they lose by then? She hardly dared imagine.

Ailell entered the tent. "It's not going to work, this jump," he said.

Maeve stroked her dog. "And it took only *thirty* failures for you to recognize it. Men are so quick to grasp a situation."

"Fergus mac Roich has agreed finally to put an end to it."

"He has? How?"

"He wouldn't say but rode off somewhere. We're waiting on his return now."

The queen cocked her head. "I wonder ... There are times I distrust him utterly and times ... He does not take prodding well."

"You care little for his wife, I think."

"Flidais? I never even consider her. She knew of my arrangements many years before she married him. In fact, I should expect her presence is a boon to us. After all, she is a Connacht woman. But if your comment means to imply that I should reinforce the bond with Fergus, perhaps I can find some time along this road."

Before Ailell could reply, the crowd outside the tent began to shout. "Fraech!" they cried. "It's Fraech—look!"

Maeve hurried past Ailell, shoving her little dog into his hands. The crowd had gathered at the stream bank. *Now*, thought Maeve, *I'll be rid of this gadfly Hound and be on to my reward*. She pushed through the throng. They parted to let her pass.

In the water, his head resting up against the tree bole as if listening to the roots, Fraech mac Fidaig lay. His arms rolled with the light current. His mouth was dark with the water brought up from his lungs.

Defeated, Maeve lunged away as members of Fraech's *tuath* arrived to retrieve him. The nine of them waded in and dragged him to shore, then hoisted him up and bore him off past the queen, who stood by disjointedly, her mind adrift in speculation on the nature of the Hound of Culann. Her displeasure contained a kernel of arousal, a sensuous curiosity about what that man might perform within the fur. She could not repress her nature even though she wished him dead on the spot.

The nine bearers carried Fraech toward their bivouac, far down the line. They had not covered half the distance when they were stopped by a bright red light that burst upon them. It colored every tree, every blade of grass, like a sunset. The light spilled from a hillside and, momentarily, a cluster of figures emerged out of it: nine women dressed in green tunics.

Behind the bearers, the whole army had stopped to watch.

The women wore torcs on their brows, sparkling gold around their red hair. They looked as much alike as sisters. The light, like a ramp, held them up. They came to the body of Fraech and took it gently from his people without a word or a glance. Then they lifted him high and bore him back with measured steps up into the ruby light. Once the women had passed through it, the light faded like a rainbow, retreating into the hill. Brown, then green, returned to the earth, color to tunics, sheen to metal. Those faces that had dared look into the light were flushed as from a slight sunburn.

"What time is it?" someone queried.

"Midday," came the reply.

"I thought so. The veil between the two worlds is thin today. I make it to be midday at the third of Macha's *noinden*."

"And that's a *sid*. We don't want to be here come nightfall."

"Well, someone had better jump that tree then." Murmurs of worried agreement passed along the line.

As if in answer to the request for delivery, Fergus mac Roich returned, on foot and leading his team of horses by their bridles. He could not have stood in the car behind them; it was filled with rocks and dirt. This seemed far more strange to the warriors than what they had just seen and they followed as if on a string. Near the bank, he turned his horses around and, as Orlam's charioteer had done, walked them backward until the end of his car lay right above the wreckage and gore of the muck.

Cormac and others from the Ulster camp came up and began to help him as he unloaded first the stones, which they piled up into a short platform out over the muck, and then the dirt, scooped out and patted down using boards from the wrecks around them, which, last of all, they laid down over the dirt. Fergus walked up the boards when they had finished. He jumped up and down to test the firmness of his ramp. Satisfied, he got into the chariot and drove his team back to where Maeve had her tent. Other chariots in the line moved out of his way. He continued back as far

as the *sid* before turning. Then he waited for the moment when everything was right.

With a snap of the reins and a bellow at his horses, Fergus rode the chariot forward. It lurched and bounced over the ruts dug by his forerunners. As he steered, he leaned over the rail to line up his wheel.

The two steeds pounded up the short ramp. Boards cracked, splinters of wood spat into the water. The chariot caromed off the first shattered boards as the horses made their leap. They cleared the tree by scant inches. Fergus and the chariot bobbed up high behind them. The wheels skidded across the bark with a shriek. The car bounced up, then vanished from sight. The crash that followed shook the ground all the way down the line. A great cloud of dust burst up above the tree. The army stood stock still. They did not know whether to wade the stream and see what was left or to just send the next chariot out.

Two hands reached up from behind the tree, and Fergus mac Roich pulled himself up on top of it and stood there, coated with dust, his hands on his hips. "Well," he shouted at them, "if everyone's satisfied that we've honored this challenge, I propose we move on!"

The whole army burst into cheering as one massive body with thousands of mouths. Maeve smiled at Ailell and said, "Sometimes I trust him."

Within the hour, the tree had been roped and dragged out of the way by two dozen drivers, creating a temporary dam across the stream. The warriors kicked down Fergus's ramp into a roadway across the muck. They plunged ahead hurriedly, but gave the *sid* a wide berth.

Maeve took her little dog and cradled him in her arms as she climbed aboard her chariot. Ailell reached up to squeeze her hand. In that moment the head of her dog burst apart, splattering them both with its brains. Maeve flung the dog down and scrambled back in the car. She whined deep in her throat. Ailell bounded over the rail to shield her with his body. He scanned the terrain until he spotted a lone white figure atop the *sid*. The figure raised one arm as if in greeting, then leaped out of sight behind the mound.

"He tried to kill me," Maeve said in a shaky voice.

Ailell bent down and picked up the bloody stone that had killed her dog. "No," he said, "he did what he intended, I think. From where he stood, such prodigious aim could have slain us both."

Color returned to Maeve's cheeks like heat to embers. "That hero has cost me more than I am willing to spend. Now he throws death in my face. I have done with honoring his delaying jests, do you hear? Send out as many as we can spare into those hills. If they have to level the land, I want his head hanging from my bridle. I want that above all else. Cú Chulainn and the Donn—both those bulls are mine!"

Ailell saw that their calculated foray into Ulster had become tangled and dangerous, but this was not the time to argue. He wished to protect his wife from harm. He would slaughter the manhood of the entire prov-

ince while they lay helpless if anything happened to his Maeve. He jumped down and called for warriors. Those nearest turned from crossing and came to him. His son, Orlam, would have gone, too, but Orlam's driver was still sifting through the debris of the jump in search of an axle. Orlam raged over this inconvenience, accusing his charioteer of disgracing him. Helplessly, he watched nine other warriors charge out naked on foot to scour the hills to the north. Ailell came up to Orlam and gripped his shoulder. "There'll be other battles, other feats for you. Don't be petty in your treatment of your driver. And don't pout, boy—there's no skill in that." Ailell left him then and went ahead with the army.

4. *Cu Chulainn Amends a Rule*

So busy was the charioteer wrestling free an axle shaft that he neither heard anyone approach nor sensed a presence nearby until a shadow fell across him. As he assumed this to be Orlam, he glanced around without rising, preferring to appear too involved with his muddy work to get up, thereby avoiding more insults or a beating from Ailell's hot-headed son. But the silhouette behind him did not belong to Orlam. This figure, with the sun cutting like a crown around its head, stood a full head shorter than even the charioteer himself and wore a robe with a hood. The man squinted and shielded his eyes from the glare. He gasped, let go the axle, and pressed back against the rubble. The figure must be headless! At each proposed eye socket, the depths of the cowl were pierced through by cylinders of sunlight.

The figure spoke gently, a soft amiable voice. "What is it you're doing here, man?"

The charioteer stammered, "Trying to replace the shaft for my chariot that broke in this bog."

The stranger placed his hand on the upright axle the charioteer had been prying at. "This one?" he asked.

"Yes. But it's—it's stuck, wedged by that wheel." His voice failed him as the stranger set down an odd, barbed spear, took the axle below the spokes of its top wheel and tore it loose from its couplings and collars and the wheel that had wedged it, which lodged in the mud below. From the remaining wheel, the stranger pried off the cap. He spun the wheel free and flung it casually over his shoulder. The wheel sailed over the top of the north ridge and out of sight. After inspecting the shaft for damage, the hooded stranger leaned it to where the driver could brace it up against himself.

The driver began to drag the axle up the bank. He glanced nervously at the figure as he went, and saw it now merely as someone in a long white cloak. The sunbeams—surely they had been a trick of the light. “This isn’t your normal line of work, is it?” he said.

The stranger shrugged in reply. “Whose driver are you?”

“Orlam’s. Son of Ailell, king of Connacht. Who are you, arriving so late?”

“Cú Chulainn,” came the soft reply.

The driver dropped the shaft and clutched his throat. “Ah, I’m dead,” he wailed.

“Nonsense. I’ve no quarrel with charioteers. It’s a rule of mine not to fight them. My own will join me soon enough—if he can untwine himself from the thighs of the *cumal* he’s in love with. Where is your partner now?”

“Partner?” asked the driver; he had never regarded his relationship with overbearing Orlam in those terms. “He’s sitting on the other side of that tree you laid down.”

“I must visit with him. You stay here now.” He stepped over the axle where it had fallen. The charioteer saw the tip of his profile passing, then his back with a sun-spiral woven in gold thread between the shoulders.

Cú Chulainn bounded up from the debris to the tree bole. The driver thought he rode the air like a bird, and he watched as Cú Chulainn leaned over the tree and dropped from sight. Utter silence followed. The driver shifted his stance and slapped at a bee on his arm.

The cloaked figure sailed up into view onto the tree once more, jumping from there over the driver, landing behind him on the makeshift road. “Turn around now, face the tree,” he ordered the charioteer, who readily obeyed. “Lower your head a little, like you’re bowing to the king.” Trembling, the driver complied. Something wet and warm was placed on the back of his neck. “Now,” the gentle voice continued, “you must go all the way to where the army is with that prize upon your shoulders. But don’t tarry, I warn you, before you reach the camp. I’ll be watching.”

The charioteer nodded, the weight shifted, and Cú Chulainn warned, “Ah, ah! Careful with your prize. Off you go. By the time you come back I’ll have your cart repaired for you. Mind the stream now.”

Low to the ground, the charioteer edged off. Blood began to drip from his neck. He could guess what it was he carried and knew better than to stop. His back soon began to ache.

The army signaled his approach to the king and queen once his identity had been discerned. He had not reached the army when those two stopped him but obedience to them required him to linger. Ailell’s face drained of blood and Maeve’s eyes narrowed. The charioteer leaned further to let the weight fall forward. The severed head of Orlam spilled to the ground beside him. He stretched up, flexing his shoulders. Quickly, he explained how the hooded creature had come upon him, what they had said to each other, and what amazing things the Hound had done. He

scooped up Orlam's head, relating how Cú Chulainn had ordered him not to stop before reaching the body of the army. Before he had replaced Orlam's head, a sling-stone cracked open his own head and flung him to the ground between the two monarchs. They jumped apart. Maeve shielded her face.

A white-cloaked figure vanished into the woods to the southwest. "It would seem," Ailell said, "that he's amended his rule regarding charioteers. "You find this amusing? We have lost a close fosterling."

Ailell did not answer. He called out to the nearest warriors and sent them off to the woods. Fists hammering their shields, bellows and screams of ferocity echoing after them, the men and women sprinted for the trees.

They did not catch him for all their zealous effort, but they did manage to drive him into a trap.

5. More Than You Can Chew

Ailell's nine warriors had scoured the hills around Ballymakenny all afternoon to no avail. They had returned to the ford where the chariots lay in piles and, finding Orlam's chariot rebuilt but unattended, they had searched the area until one of them came upon his headless corpse. Cú Chulainn's trail from there was easy to follow and they charged off again, two of them in the borrowed chariot. The trail led them through a glen from which they could smell the campfires of the army. They wove in and out of the trees and finally lost all trace of the Hound at a ford there. This final vanishing act dashed their hopes and they dropped down on the banks. They had not rested five minutes when the sound of many roaring voices brought them to their feet. "What is it? What's going on?" they asked one another. One of the nine, named Lon, splashed through the stream and climbed up the high bank on the other side. He saw through the trees a single white-cloaked figure racing across the landscape. He could not believe the speed with which the figure ran, and he understood with a weary admiration why they had never caught sight of the Hound before this. Far behind this figure, Lon saw warriors in vain pursuit. "It's Cú Chulainn," he told his comrades, "and he's coming this way!"

The others jumped up. "Get rid of that chariot. Drive it off. Hide yourselves." Lon hissed, "Up here!" and waved them across. The swift padding of feet could soon be heard, growing louder every second. Then the pace slowed and the sound of a splash occurred below them.

The nine jumped out as one, dropping down into the stream. The figure in white had a bare moment to look up. Lon glimpsed the face beneath the cowl and he thought, *This is just a boy.*

The weight of all nine men fell upon Cú Chulainn and buried him in the streambed. They lay, all nine of them, shifting around to catch their breaths and to keep all parts of their prey under the surface. They would have gouged and chopped him but their own pressing weight kept their weapons trapped, unusable. Minutes passed, the cacophony of the pursuing warriors increased. Then the water began to boil.

Those nearest the bottom of the pile cried out. They felt the body beneath them wriggling, shifting, changing shape. Panic seized them and they wrestled to get free. A massive, gnarled hand shot out where no hand should have been. It waved about with reptilian grace. Suddenly, it clutched one of them by the face and lifted him from the pile till he stood on his head. The hand flung him across the stream where he smashed against the bank. Lon tried to slash the hand with his dagger. The point stuck in the palm, the twisted fingers caught the blade and snapped it in two. Lon tumbled back into the stream. The whole mass of warriors began to rise as if a mystical isle were ascending beneath them. Another man spun from the pile and crashed into the bank beside the first, then two more skimmed the stream, dead. Lon bobbed up to see the emergence of the monster. The sight froze the blood in his veins. The water hissed and bubbled all around it. He might have fled if he could have thought to move. The hideous thing of knots crushed the last man clinging to it, then reached out for Lon.

Beating at their dented shields, shouting their hoarse threats, the trailing warriors pounded Cú Chulainn's path, emerging beside the stream in time to see something enormous dive beneath the surface, which began bubbling fiercely. Behind, it had left nine bodies implanted in the opposite bank. The warriors eyed one another: no one of them would cross the stream. Soon the bubbling stopped. The threads of steam on the glassy surface faded. The warriors walked along the bank, their weapons raised, but nothing presented itself. Finally, as night set in, they trudged back to their camp to inform the king that his group of nine had been destroyed by that most horrible of water-beasts, the half-fish, half-dragon thing called the *wurruum*. As for Cú Chulainn, maybe the *wurruum* had gotten him, too.

Upon hearing this explanation, a jester from Ailell's retinue jumped up. The thought that the Hound might have perished inspired him and, beside the central bonfire of Ailell's troops, the jester invented his dance and song. "I know no man, no boaster, who killed what vexes while those who vex and swear to kill sat by and hoisted their boasting. If I were a warrior instead of me, no boast, I'd have taken his head before the beastie did. But that's how it always goes: the *wurruums* they feast last of all, nibble, nibble, nibble."

Though his words nettled some, most of the men and women slapped their legs and laughed. The jester capered and bowed to each, then suddenly in mid-leap spun forward and fell on his face in someone's lap. Still

believing this part of his act, the warriors to each side shoved him back on his feet. Their gaiety died in their throats as they saw the blood spilling out from around a stone embedded above his ear.

Ailell knelt beside the jester. “By the god of our people, is there any doubt left he’s still out there? His toll today is twelve. I wonder how many of them mocked him. There was no *wurrrum!* Now, douse the fires, quick—there are plenty more stones in the fields below.”



“I don’t understand this at all,” said Senchan.

“You don’t? What could be more obvious? Their conduct has been remarkably derisive. If they treated him with due respect, they’d offer a single combat between him and their champion. That is the proper conduct in these situations—divination by battle. They ought to expect no better than his random assaults. Ailell is barely beginning to appreciate this.”

From where they stood, below the ridge of encampment, they watched the fires flicker out, heard the faint hissing, and saw the golden figures fade into the blackness.

Off to their left a figure in white jumped up where, to Senchan’s eye, no one had been. The figure ran to a pile of small rocks and dropped down there. “What’s he doing now?”

“Waiting,” Laeg replied, “for the army to settle in. That way they won’t know of his successes before dawn.”

“Successes? What can he do? The fires are out.”

“The fires, yes. But, lad, they can’t put out the stars. Look again at the line of the ridge, select yourself a cluster of stars and stare at it for awhile.”

Senchan obeyed, choosing a grouping of four large stars. He refused to blink even though his eyes began to ache with the strain and tears flooded them. His effort was rewarded finally: one by one, each star disappeared, only to reappear momentarily as the one beside it vanished. He rubbed his eyes and stared again. “The warriors,” he exclaimed, “when they stand or move about, their bodies block the starlight.”

“Just so.”

“And in the morning ...”

“In the morning many will have expired, by first appearances from a mysterious malady, but soon enough identified as the work of the Hound—a stone for a trademark. Not so soon, however, to quell the superstitious tales about the Morrigan’s nocturnal slaughters from starting. In truth, the three sisters have quite a different plan for confounding Maeve and Ailell.”

“Which is where we’re off to next.”

Laeg ruffled his hair. “Bright lad,” he said. The two of them folded into the dark, leaving Cú Chulainn to his long night’s work.

6. The Raven and the Bull

In the part of Cuailnge called Temair—the area where Daire mac Fiachna resided—the great bull called The Donn stood placidly chewing long grass from around the base of a slender, mottled standing stone.

Now and then the bull would raise his massive head and scan the open, sloping field to Daire mac Fiachna’s house. He would wonder vaguely why no one had come to tend him these past three days ... ever since that runner had arrived. The Donn remembered the runner well enough, linked as he had been to a chill of prescience. The Donn could not carry the connection further than that because no deeper intelligence lingered in the beast.

He had seen women emerge from the house time and again, to gather water and then return. They would no more have set foot in the bull’s field than he would have let them live had they tried. Tainted through his incarnations by furious stupidity, the Donn embodied the most hateful bigotry and prejudice.

Something—a fluttering sound—drew his attention away from the house of his keeper. He looked around but saw nothing. He sniffed but smelled nothing. The shadow of the standing stone stretched bulbously in front of him. The fluttering came again and something at the tip of the shadow unfurled.

Above, perched on the top of the stone, an enormous raven sat. Even the dim-witted bull could tell that this bird was not of the normal breed. Its wings stretched out easily the length of a fence post. Its beady eyes were full of blood. Seeing them, the Donn became agitated, recalling that somewhere beyond the visible landscape lurked an old enemy that color. He pawed the ground, at first digging a trench around the stone, finally knocking it askew.

The bird flapped, then began to speak in the language of the bull. The Donn hesitated in amazement and listened to the chant.

“Wise you are to be restless so,
 When time draws near that you should go.
 For coming this day across your land
 is the plague called Cruachan and her *fiana* bands.
 This raven speaks the truth to you
 In telling that death is all they’ll do.

Death of man, of horse and stream,
Death of the Donn lies within their scheme.
Escape the snare before it's sprung
and follow me to Slieve Cuilliu.
No time to dawdle, nor women to mock
Else the Donn never slaughters Finnbennach.”

The raven flapped its wings again, breaking the trance it had woven. The bull had bellowed then, his voice resounding from the hills. His herd came running, always obedient, and followed as he lowered his head to charge the low stone wall that hemmed the field. Stone flew through the sky, crushed to gravel from the impact.

Women ran from the house in time to see the Donn escape over the hill with all his cows. The women could do nothing to bring him back; but even if they had thought of a way, they would not have interfered because they also saw the giant black bird that perched on the bull's horns. Daire's *ben urnadna* muttered, “Morrigan,” and the others nodded to themselves and whispered for protection to various gods. Back inside, Daire mac Fiachna whimpered in pain. The women drew back into the safety of the house.

7 Maeve's Shield

All that day the army pushed hard and watched the endless hills for any sign of Cú Chulainn. Shouts of “There he is!” burst sporadically from over-eager or tired and red-eyed warriors. The thing spied would suffer attack, and the blind ferocity of some led them to strike at the object before realizing it was a sheep or a pale standing stone.

The army proceeded to the place called Es Ruaid, where the mouths of three rivers formed a wide waterfall. Behind the fall lived magical beings known as the Harpers of Cain Bile, who were older than the most ancient invaders of the isle—than the lost warriors of the woman Cessair—but who might easily have been children by appearance. The Harpers had learned their art from a nameless race much older than themselves and had offered it first to the tribe of Nemed when that people sailed onto the beaches a millennium before. No mortal had ever sung as sweetly or played with as much grace as the Harpers of Cain Bile, and whenever someone came near their cataract, they emerged from the water, their skin as pale as the moon, their eyes like the blue flowers of bugloss; with their silver harps, they would play music to banish all cares.

The clamorous approach of the Connacht force brought the Harpers out to soothe with their art. They rose up out of the water and floated through the wood. Their leader went out ahead. When he finally saw the army, he raised his harp to play, but before he could strum a single note, members of that massive force cried out, "There he is!" and broke formation to charge, howling, at the harper. Spears shot up, forcing him to dodge back into the trees. He called to the others to flee for their lives. The leader and most of those nearest at hand made it safely back beneath their waterfall. Others, cut off from that retreat, changed into deer and escaped in that way by outdistancing their pursuers.

Much later, after all the luminous musicians had returned beneath the cataract, the Harpers exclaimed that these new invaders were insane and apparently opposed to the idea of music. This saddened the Harpers greatly, but they reasoned that the ways of men had become too perilous and incomprehensible to penetrate. They resolved not to go out and play for the like of such barbarians again. And they never have, though the waterfall of Es Ruaid remains.



"Late that same day the army entered Cuailnge. They crossed the wide strand of Ath Lethan directly, having reached it while the tide was out. The high cliffs seemed to forbid them entry, which served merely to churn their pugnacity so that they began hacking away at the ground on the way up from the shoals, and they chanted their discordant war chants, rhythmic petitions to numerous tribal gods, gods who would have clashed under other circumstances but who now, in belief, would be allied in a thirst for our blood. The warriors began to kill everything in sight, slaughtering innocent beasts and fowl, leveling copses, all the time challenging Cú Chulainn, becoming petulant when he did not answer the invitation."

"Where was he all this time?" asked Senchan.

"Here on the heights of Slieve Cuincu with me and his wife. He raved all day at the treacheries performed by and for Maeve and Ailell, but mostly at Maeve. In his mind, she bore responsibility for everything that had happened. He swore to me that he would kill her if he ever got a clear shot. That became his obsession finally, to kill Maeve. Emer tried to talk him out of it. She warned him that a woman's heart could retain the yearning for vengeance an eternity, the way a lake can hold onto warmth long after the sun has set. Poor Emer." Laeg went up to the hut where she now pleaded with her husband. Senchan came up beside him to peer in. He still found it hard to believe that this man who sat there holding his wife's hands and shaking his head in gentle refusal was the same one who had

embedded nine men in a hillside. What kind of being was a hero? How much god and how much man? And, because of the godness of him, how much of humanity did he lack?

“Emer,” said Laeg, “knew the futility of reasoning with Cú Chulainn, but she had the precognitive intelligence to sense that their future would be tainted by this conflict. She worked her argument every way to warn him that making an enemy of Maeve would prove both futile and jeopardous; but, well, men often fail to listen to what they themselves haven’t thought of, their hate blinkering their reason. Especially warriors do this.

“Maeve had traits similar to Emer’s—more incisive, too. She could feel Cú Chulainn’s threat, almost as if she could hear him all that distance away. That day she selected a brace of tall warriors from the various *fianna* and had them encircle her, with their shields kept up before them to create a solid, impenetrable wall around her. She never left her tent after that without first assembling these men, and to speak with her anywhere in the open, Ailell had to pry his way through them. At first, he worried at her delusion. Maeve insisted, ‘The White Hound wants my head and, each time he kills someone else, he grows more eager to have it.’

“Finally, after being pressed to see Emer’s wisdom too long, Cú Chulainn stormed from Slieve Cuinciu down mossy slopes to the invaders’ camp. That they had penetrated so deeply into Ulster riled him further. He called himself belittling names to goad himself into the Warp Spasm, but it wouldn’t come. He paced and circled the encampment for hours, stomped the ground, seeking one sight, one clear shot at Maeve. He failed to see her at all. He had marked her red tent but no one came from it.

“Then at last, the tent opened and the woman came out alone, bare-foot, and carrying a cup of wine. Her torc gleamed in her white hair. Cú Chulainn spun his sling and snapped a stone. It shot through the camp so hard that the blast of its passing bowled warriors aside. The stone sailed true and the queen was dead by the third step she took. Cú Chulainn jumped in glee, astonished at the ease of it.

“At that moment the tent parted again and a group of shielded warriors emerged. They marched in a circular formation directly over the fallen woman, but not with the urgency that should have compelled them. Something moved in their midst. Abruptly, they turned around and chugged back into the tent. Two servants came over and picked up the body, which Cú Chulainn now saw was naked and was not that of Maeve at all. The servants dragged her off toward Ailell’s tent.

“He had slain a *cumal* dressed in Maeve’s clothing, carrying the queen’s cup, her hair powdered white. He surmised that the real Maeve had been inside that ring of shields and that his haste in acting had probably cost him any further opportunity to attack Maeve directly. He mourned the slavegirl, detesting the killing of innocents. Emer had been right in telling him to wait. Now his anger could no longer be so easily satisfied.”

“What happened then?” asked Senchan.
Laeg only replied, “Come and see.”

8. The Split

Inside her wide tent, Maeve sat upon pillows, a fur cloak drawn around her shoulders for warmth. Her white hair lay piled like a cloud around her head, held in place by a gold ribbon torc. In a brazier nearby, a fire burned, and one of her bondsmen tended it to infuse the tent with a little heat. The bondsman heard the tent open and looked up; as quickly he averted his glance. Three Druids entered.

The three wore animal skins in the form of heavy robes: two were furred like Maeve’s; the third skin was sleek and dark, the man inside it had antlers strapped to his head. Maeve nodded to him. “Lothar,” she said by way of greeting. The horned Druid bowed. He sat down with the other two behind him, a triumvirate.

“You wish to know where the Donn can be found,” he said flatly, “with no time to waste in search if it’s hidden away.”

Maeve said nothing.

Lothar removed a two-headed spike from his robe and stuck it into the ground between himself and the queen. He reached back to one of his companions, who gave him a trussed rabbit that might have been conjured out of thin air. Lothar took the struggling rabbit and held it up over the two points of the spike. He stared maniacally into the rabbit’s eyes, muttered a chant for the rabbit to hear. The animal stopped its squirming, soon went slack in his hands, It closed its eyes, asleep.

Lothar impaled the rabbit on the spikes. With great care then, he pried open the carcass and drew out a string of wet entrails, laying them across the palm of his other hand. He lowered his head and narrowed his eyes, seeking the magical pattern in the slimy intestines. His eyelids fluttered.

The rabbit’s carcass jerked suddenly, violently. Then it rose up on the spikes, swelling and rippling from within.

The bondsman gaped at what he was forbidden to watch. He covered his eyes and crawled away into the shadows. Maeve’s eyes glittered with the fire in the brazier.

Out of the hole where Lothar had drawn the entrails, a black needle stuck up. The needle rocked back and forth, forcing its way out. More of it appeared, becoming wider until, quite suddenly, it split down the middle and let out a raucous churr. It wrestled further out. The carcass stretched up on the spike until Maeve was certain it must burst. She checked her belief against the Druid, but he continued to lean over the guts he held up.

Blood dripped from between his fingers into the black beak struggling to break free. The hole widened and the head attached to the beak popped through. Then the tissue of the carcass gave way and the entire body erupted out of it.

For a moment the bird stood on the carcass, its body spotted with bits of fur, gleaming with blood. Then it squawked again and flew up to escape.

Lothar's whole torso twisted and dipped suddenly. The bird in its desperation did not even see the point of the antler that pierced and impaled it. Briefly, it squawked and flapped, then it hung like a garland of moss from Lothar's headpiece. Still with an eye to the rabbit in case of a further revelation, the Druid reached up and plucked the raven from his horn and stuck it on the spike.

His eyes rolled back and his hands opened, spilling the slick intestines in the dirt. He shook, his teeth chattered. His right arm shot out stiffly, fingers splayed as if trying to reach Maeve. She instinctively leaned away but saw immediately that he had not been trying to grab her. As quickly as his arm shot out, it dropped. The double spike skewered Lothar's hand. Instead of trying to pull free of it, he pushed down inexorably until the body of the spike protruded through his wrist. His fingers dug into the two corpses.

Maeve concentrated on his face—the pure white of his eyeballs; the stricture that seemed to combine terrible pain with glee. She watched to see the moment of insight when it arrived. Druid magic had always captivated her. As a child she witnessed their rites and over the years had developed a theory that something incalculably ancient and huge fed them its power in spurts, in fitful bursts. At some point she had divined that this ancient force was female and that it could be opened for her as well.

Listening, extending her senses, she had brushed against that feminine force in its dark, enchanted lair; she had drawn from it like any Druid would; also like them, she had not found the way to harness more, to make it see her or give her all she wanted. She lacked Lothar's training but she had a trenchant intuition. To “hear” the opening of the path between this Druid herdsman and the bull—that mattered, that was important.

Lothar's face relaxed. He drew a deep breath like a newborn's first. Maeve drew breath with him, in tune to the changing rhythm of the powers at play. Lothar leaned up and wiped the sweat from his face with the hand that had been impaled. It revealed no marks to show that the spike had pierced it. On the ground, just a few loose feathers and tufts of fur remained.

Something thumped in the shadows behind Maeve and she turned to find her bondsman lying on his side in a faint.

Lothar announced, “The Donn has fled Temair Cuailnge. One of the three Morrighu has warned him of our coming and opposes us by telling the bull that we mean to kill him. Gone to Glen Gat, hidden with his

heifers in the Black Cauldron. Trapped there—the Cauldron’s a bowl between mountains with nowhere to run. Morrigan taunts the bull as well as us.” He tore the spike from the ground as he hissed the last word. The divination had ended. He got up, and the furry triumvirate filed out.

Fergus and his Ulster companions would surely know the location of the Black Cauldron. But the Morrigan might as easily drag the bull somewhere else in an attempt to stretch the conflict out past the *noinden*. Maeve needed a way to deceive the three sisters. A way to trick and slay that faceless murderer, Cú Chulainn, as well. Her husband desired to deal with *that* singular curse; she would let him. They would split up their forces. His would continue into the heart of Cuailnge as if nothing had changed. Her army would steal north along the highroad of Midluachair and take the bull. Then she and hers would drive their prize ahead while he and his protected their back against the spectral sling expert.

The thought of her coming triumph sped her heartbeat. She would find time for Fergus, too.

9. Disarming Mac Roích

Ailell stood by as his wife’s portion of the army rolled north, glazed by the light of dawn. She had with her a herd of captured cattle, driven out in front of her army by herdsman under the guidance of the Druid Lothar—in this way to disguise their purpose and identity from the Donn until they had sealed off the Cauldron. With her she kept the warriors of Munster and their king, Lugaid mac Nois, and the Black Army of Fergus mac Roích.

This last troubled Ailell. Servants in his pay had overheard conversation in which Maeve wished that Fergus were mated to her. Such talk might easily have been something spoken in passion—as Ailell truly knew it to be—but he could not afford to dismiss it completely. It indicated that Maeve might at some point overlook a casual treachery by Fergus, one that could lead to Ailell losing more warriors. Lose too many and Maeve would indeed gain the upper hand over him. What Ailell needed was a whip hand over Fergus. As the last of Maeve’s force moved out of sight, Ailell called to his charioteer, Cuillius.

In quilted leather breeches, bare-chested and cold, Cuillius came running up. Ailell told him, “Today, I’ll drive the chariot. For you I’ve another task of more value to me. I want you to join that army along the highroad, but stay out of Maeve’s sight. Watch her and Fergus, find out what they say, what they plan. Follow Fergus’s activities closely. But, Cuillius, above all, find me power over him.”

Cuillius grasped the torc at his throat. "I'll see it done," he said. He rushed off to exchange his leathers for a brown tunic and robe, dull colors to suggest a low caste. He would blend in with the herdsmen and no one would give him a second glance.

When he reached the highroad, Cuillius stood for a moment on a ridge from where he could look in two directions and see the two armies, the one pushing north, and the other, the one he had left behind, moving northeast to cross the Cronn. For an intense moment he experienced complete freedom. But the torc at his throat weighed against his neck. He remembered himself and ran over the ridge and down the slope.

Maeve had her tent pitched on cold dry ground near enough the Gatlaig River to hear its torrents. Her herdsmen had already set out for the Black Cauldron while she and most of her warriors waited here for word of the capture. She had not been in the tent more than a few minutes when a steady rain began to fall. She invited Fergus to come in and keep warm and, she said, to discuss tactics, an offer she had often used before when she wished his company in bed.

He saw to his own men first, and he found Maeve screened off at the rear of the tent. He peered around the linen screen. She had shed her heavy tunics and cloaks to snuggle between blankets of fur. She told him to come in and sit. "Where would you like me?" he asked.

"On *my* fur, of course," she replied as she flung back the top blankets. Fergus unfastened his wet cloak, watching her taciturnly, revealing no hint of the thrill that ran like ice water through his chest at the sight of her. Whatever he said of her anywhere else, however much he disagreed with her mad methods of warfare, he knew that no other woman anywhere matched her. Any attempt to refute so obvious a fact would have proved futile; Fergus had never bothered to try. He loosened his belt, lowering his sword to the ground. Naked, he slid into the warmth she held open for him.

Outside the tent, soaked, shivering, dripping, Cuillius sat amidst Maeve's servants and slaves, awaiting her call. He and the others huddled as tightly as interlocking swirls in carved design, but gained precious little warmth. Cuillius had thieved a hostage chain earlier; its collar, attached round his throat, hid his torc.

The tent opened and a face stuck out of the slit like a baby's head protruding from the womb. "The queen calls for wine!" yelled the bondsman and he thrust out two goblets. "One of you go and strain—"

Cuillius snatched the cups and scurried, splashing, across the yard. The wine casks stood off beside a wagon, where they had been lowered to the ground. A perforated bronze strainer hung by its handle on the hook of one cask that was in use. Cuillius raised the lid, then leaned his head against it to keep it up while he fit the strainer in one of the cups and dipped the cup into the green pine barrel. Next he took out the strainer and flipped

its gritty contents over his shoulder. He repeated this for the second cup, then let the lid slam down into place. With his hands over the tops to keep out the rain, he carefully wove his way back to Maeve's tent, the hostage chain clinking as it dragged after. The household bondsman, watching for him, parted the opening and let him in.

The heap of Fergus's clothing with the sword laid on top drew Cuillius's attention briefly as he looked around—he had never been inside this tent before. His gaze returned to the sword again.

The servant took the wine from him and went to the rear of the tent where linen draperies formed little chambers, the way some larger farmers' huts were cordoned off by hangings. Cuillius heard Maeve's voice, muffled by the drapes. Quite suddenly he knew what to do.

Before the bondsman returned, he had emptied the scabbard, thrown off his false collar, and dissolved into the sheets of rain.

Ailell could not stop laughing. His charioteer found the humor infectious but could only shake his head in appreciation, having laughed himself out on the run back from Maeve's tent.

He had not shown his prize to the king until after describing how he had played his part: his cleverness grew in the telling. Then he had hauled out and presented Ailell with the blade that Fergus called *Leochain*. "It's so delicate in weight and balance," he had said, "that it's a wonder it hasn't broken in battle."

Ailell sat down on a low table. "Take the sword and place it in our four-wheeled cart, under the boards of your chariot seat. Wrap it carefully, though, tie it securely—we wouldn't want to unman Fergus utterly." This engendered a new fit of laughing from him. "I can't ... I can't imagine, can you, what pleasure she'll elicit from him now he's deprived of his point!"

Cuillius carried off the sword, tears of joy running down his face.

Ailell dispatched a runner to Maeve's encampment to invite Fergus back for a friendly game of *buanbach* and a "tactical discussion." By now, the king felt certain, Fergus would have discovered his loss. Ailell instructed his household servant to set up his *fidchell* board instead of *buanbach*, then sent for a wood-carver. This was going to be a sweet lampoon, he thought.

The runner met Fergus returning on the highroad. The invitation—notably the reference to a tactical discussion provoked the warrior, eliminating any doubt in his mind as to the whereabouts of his sword. He lifted the runner aboard and drove more urgently than before, the runner shouting directions as though thinking that Fergus did not know the lay of the land.

Upon arriving, Fergus made his way through a throng of attendants straight to Ailell's tent. The moment their eyes met, Ailell cracked a smile but inhaled deeply to recover. Fergus glowed with embarrassment. "Odd," he growled, "that so overseeing a king should be laughing while his war-

riors face the unknown thing that Macha's Curse can't touch. Or are you, perhaps, a king who overlooks instead?"

"I'll overlook your barb," replied the king, "out of modesty. Come, sit at the board. It's good to relax with a game while ... chatting."

They took their places on furs piled around the raised board. Gold kings and queens stood at the center, the warrior pieces pegged in around them. Fergus raised one eyebrow. "This isn't *buambach*."

"I changed my mind—a royal prerogative. Why should it matter which game we play? You know them both, and I like the look of this one better, the kings and queens forged in battle. And, speaking of things forged, am I wrong or do you seem to be lacking the filling for that crafted scabbard?"

"Play the game," Fergus replied flatly.

They began then, working in silence. Fergus outmaneuvered Ailell in the early moves, hemming in those center pieces, taking two of Ailell's warriors. The king leaned over the board, scrutinizing his position as a hawk might view a battle. Without looking at Fergus, he commented, "Even if you were to win a victory here, you couldn't take my place. That is all I wished you to know. Kings and queens are not the same as warriors—something I know far better than you, else you'd not be displaced from the command of Ulster. That stings your sensitive warrior's pride, even though you mask yourself well, and that serves to prove me right. Fondle and coit all you like, Fergus, but remember that those hills so sweet are only half the plot of land. The portion on which you do not lie is rocky, sharp and high. Ah, there's my move."

Fergus stared at the game board until the red blindness passed from his eyes and he could delineate each gleaming piece again. He took long to pick his next move.

The game continued on through the day while Ailell's army journeyed ahead without him. Word of the match reached Maeve as all things did. Late in the afternoon, she arrived with Finnabair in tow. She took her place adjacent to them and tried to discern the source of the undercurrent of stress. She thought at first it was simply a matter of men and their childish nature to dispute over games. Her presence put Ailell off his game briefly and he made a faulty move. Annoyed as Fergus took another of his pieces, he muttered, "It won't be the fault of mine if this gold king is impaled on the point of the silver monarch. The queen will have done it."

Then Maeve understood: *this contest comes off the board*. "Don't you find," she asked Ailell, "in your devotions to this action worthy of Tamun the Stump—incredibly stupid?"

Ailell closed his eyes and sighed. "You are incredibly distracting."

"So I have been told by many."

"I wouldn't dare try and count them. I haven't enough digits."

"Jealousy in you?" she asked, truly surprised.

“No. Merely concern over this one who is seeking openings in my defenses. Nothing more than that.”

Fergus spoke up at last, tired of the tension. “It’s in your defense I’m here. The warring that goes on is confined to this tent—and it’s the same war as brought all of us out to this alien plain. While you bicker over me, the sleepers crawl back toward daylight. Before long they’ll be up and we’ll be the ones in the center of the board, ringed around by Ulster. There’s my counsel you so distrust. Now let us get on with this,” he snarled at Maeve, “and the sooner we’ll get back to the game we’re all of us playing.”

Maeve sat dumbfounded. In the space of a few minutes she had seen jealousy in her husband and hot temper from Fergus mac Roich. Behind her, Finnabair looked from one to the other of them but gained no insight into the matter. Whatever the text of the argument, Finnabair lacked the gift for reading it.

In the early hours of the morning, Fergus managed to eliminate all the warriors of Ailell’s and had separated the gold king and queen. He looked to win within five moves. However, with the warriors gone, Ailell’s two crowning pieces gained new freedom to move. King took queen, then both ensnared the silver king, leaving the scattered silver warriors powerless to act. Fergus conceded the game.

“Bravely fought,” remarked Ailell. He stood, his legs stiff. “And now, as you’re going out to face the world again, you’d best take this to disguise your infirmity.” He removed from under the furs a large wooden sword with a rough, knobby grip. “At least it will fill your sheath till the errant blade is recovered.”

At last Maeve grasped the specifics of the game.

Fergus took the carved parody and wedged it into his scabbard. He said, “It’s a fitting jest, but don’t pass till you hear the last of it. Since I’ve nothing but a stick to display, you’ll understand that I’m neither able nor willing to kill any more Ulstermen for you.” Maeve started toward him but he put out a hand. “And you, madam, will have to entice another champion to take on the Hound. I’ll speak with him, bargain with him, lead my army toward him; but hereafter I represent no one save me and mine on the field.” He turned abruptly and tramped out.

The king and queen repressed their mutual recriminations. Finnabair blurted out, “Will somebody tell me what’s happened?” When no one did, she shoved over the *fidchell* board and stormed into the dark.



Senchan picked up the silver king and inspected it as he leaned back on the furs where Fergus had sat. He had not fathomed the rules of the game he had just witnessed. Seeing his look of distraction, Laeg said, “Do you know much about folly, lad? About pursuing an idea, a goal, blindly and at overwhelming cost? It’s an attitude that can take a game like that one and turn it into a massacre, and only skill can prevail. Sometimes skill can triumph, and save one from one’s own folly. Sometimes.”

“Whose folly was this?”

“All parties concerned, really—but mostly Ailell and Maeve’s and it’s a point you should take note of because hereafter it will guide everything. It’s as follows: Ailell is seething with jealousy and a sense that Maeve is flaunting her sexual appetite at him, but he cannot admit this even to himself, because it would open grave doubts in him about his own character. Maeve, likewise, cannot admit his jealousy either because she has held his tolerant nature up to the world. How can they be wrong, both of them? Impossible. And so they act as you’ve just seen. Mark that now, it will answer many questions that will arise. But back to the game off the board.

“Fergus’s departure and Finnabair’s indicate to the waiting messengers and servants that the king’s tent is no longer inviolable. The first runner enters and informs Queen Maeve that the Donn has been taken, but not without some cost; specifically, the loss of Lothar. Upon seeing the Druid out front, the bull acted as if he had a grudge against Lothar, almost as if he perceived that Lothar had been the one to locate him. The bull stampeded the herd, Lothar fleeing for his life, but not fast enough to avoid those iron-black horns. With Lothar hoisted in agony, the Donn then circled the Cauldron, all the while shaking his head back and forth till he had literally shredded the Druid to bits.

“Maeve, regretful of his loss, is too gladdened by the news of the capture to spend much sorrow. A brief discussion ensues, plans are drawn up. The runner departs to inform various troops to prepare for departure from Ulster.

“Then enters runner number two. Cú Chulainn has struck again, while the army marched ahead along the Cronn. Many more were slain as the board was played. Worst is that one of the king and queen’s seven sons named Maine went up against the phantom warrior and died.

“No sooner has this sorry news been voiced than a third runner, out of breath, arrives in their midst to inform them that the Donn has escaped again, to Bernas Bo. It will require more force to take him and lead him out of the province. Things have not looked bleaker, which is to say, the direction of the game has shifted. They have the prize almost in their grasp but they can’t get to it in order to get out. Now they have to call a truce. They have to talk with Cú Chulainn. And, as you saw, they’ve just royally screwed their go-between.”

XII. CU CHULAINN'S ONE MAN STAND

1. The First Covenant

Cruachan's army camped that night near a ford on the Cronn River where the king and queen's son Maine had fallen. Atop one of the ridges separating the camp from the Cronn, Ailell watched as a *cromlech* was erected over his son's body. One of Ailell's foster-sons named Etarcomol came up to him as he stood beside the raised stones. Excitedly, Etarcomol directed him to look down across the ford, where a fire could be seen. Maine's mourners grew agitated at this sight; they began howling and stamping and beating their chests. Two came up to Ailell and begged to be sent creeping down to kill Cú Chulainn in the night.

"What?" cried Ailell. "And add your heads to his collection? All you'd do is incite him against us again—slinging those sod-balls of his all night long—any of you goes out: if he fails to kill you, I won't."

Overweening Etarcomol replied, "Well, Lugaid Allchomaig is already gone out seeking him."

Ailell glared at his wife. She stood in her protecting ring beside the *cromlech*. "Remember, when this is over, who invited the king of Munster." He gestured for the slaves to lower the capstone on the *cromlech*, then walked hurriedly away.

Etarcomol scurried up to Maeve and shoved his face through her guards. "Mother, I'll go and kill him if you like."

"Oh, shut up," she snapped. She and her guards turned and clattered after Ailell like an armored ouroboros.

Lugaid mac Nois Allchomaig tore a hunk of bread from the loaf Cú Chulainn held out to him. The bread was cold and doughy but all they had. In his haste, Lugaid had forgotten to bring something from his own ample stock of provisions. He tried to appear content with this meal although it tasted more like collected bird droppings than bread. He passed the loaf on to Laeg mac Rianganabra. The young charioteer bit off a section,

then threw the last pasty lump to Cú Chulainn. Laeg leaned back on his hands against the frosted hillside. The grass cracked beneath his palms.

Cú Chulainn said, "I've seen you in amongst the invaders, Lugaid. And once, at night, I recognized your form crossing the ridge to relieve yourself and held off casting my sling at you. Your whiskers are distinguishable even against the stars."

Lugaid scratched his thick red mutton-chop beard that left his dimpled chin naked. He had considered shaving off the beard, sporting just the heavy mustache. Perhaps that wasn't the best idea after all—at least not before he was back home in Munster. Lugaid dismissed this matter for now; the thing he had come to ask was far more pressing. He had intended to bring up his solicitation right away but, full of doubt, was more like to bring up some of his half-digested bread.

Cú Chulainn spoke up, "Did *they* send you?"

"They? No. They hadn't even arrived when I set out. They were off building a monument to one of their boys—one you struck down today. Probably camped by now, though." Peripherally, he spotted something glittering in the darkness and turned his head to peer past Laeg. The fire was reflecting off the rails of a chariot back behind them. Lugaid assumed it must be the one they called the "Sickle Chariot," although the fire did not reveal to him a cause for that agnomen. He noted that the rails of the chariot were bare of heads; Cú Chulainn had taken no trophies as yet. "I've seen a fair bit of your handiwork about. You know, it's amazing what grows on trees these days."

Cú Chulainn's face twitched with a slight smile. Laeg grinned.

Cú Chulainn said, "I heard what happened between you and Emer. She speaks greatly of you. You're clever in your dealings and I must owe you something for the taunts upon Forgall the Late Obstacle."

Lugaid thanked his gods for the Hound's perceptiveness. "Well—if you feel like that—then I'd much appreciate it if you'd spare the rest of my men from your hand. We joined, you know, out of allegiance to a debt owed Maeve's father. All we've come for is the collecting of the bull, which is taken, so it's whispered about. We might be retreating if that's how it is. Ailell'd as soon be off before Ulster pops up out of the mists around him—at least, I'd think so."

Cú Chulainn nodded grimly. "So long as he abides by the codes. But no one's come to challenge me yet and I'm sure that's Maeve's doing. The whole world knows her worth."

"She's a great queen, my friend. I'm not saying nothin' against her."

"That's fair, Lugaid. You don't bend from your view and that's well with you. I'll spare your force with two provisions: First that you point them out to me with signs—I can't be responsible for men I don't know; and second that you and they leave off the battle if Connacht's force is still here when the pangs let go."

“I’ve no quarrel with Ulster, either, now have I? That’s all fair, ain’t it? And I’ll do this,” he tugged on his whiskers, “to indicate my man.

“But you do that all the time,” answered Laeg, “even when you’re off alone, pissing in a stream. Are we to consider the stream under your command?”

“Only so long as I’m pissing in it.”

“You were raised in Ulster, all right,” Laeg mused. “And lucky for you, else the Cronn would rise up and drown you for your impertinence next time you micturate.”

Lugaid snorted. He stood, straightening his tunic and cape with a flourish that masked his toss of the dungy bread into the fire.

“Tell Fergus that I’ll apply the same to him if he desires,” Cú Chulainn said. “Plenty of his people are tied to me in some way, even arrogant Duffach. I’ve little care for such slaughter as Conchovor’s brought home once already.”

Lugaid turned back. “Oh, yes—about Mac Roich. He’s had a falling out with them. Word is, Ailell’s charioteer stole his sword while he was off accommodating the queen. Looks as like that’s true, too—he’s got some ugly, knobby, blunt end sticking out his scabbard.” He found himself unable to repress a smile and quickly turned to the darkness again. “Fergus says he told them right out that he’d have nothing more to do with killing Ulstermen—so he’s halfway to your terms already.”

“What base treatment of so fine a warrior!” exclaimed the Hound. He leaped up, grabbed up the stone he had been sitting on, and flung it angrily into the night sky. “Tell him I’ll speak with him whenever he can.”

Lugaid nodded. He hurried to his chariot and only when aboard did he glance back at the short figure standing menacingly beside the fire. Dealing with semi-divine beings was a dangerous and delicate thing. Nearness to godhood only made people crazy.

2. Further Bargains

The Leinster camp was in a state of turmoil as Lugaid drove past it. One of their members had been brushing down his horse when a stone the size of a cask came shooting down from the heavens and killed him. Lugaid heard people crying out about this awful omen, about stars beginning to fall, a signal of the end of the world. Knowing the truth but guided by his hunger for a real meal, Lugaid drove past. He figured to make a cursory report to Ailell first, to get the indigestible work over with.

Outside Ailell’s tent, Fergus mac Roich caught him and they began to discuss Cú Chulainn’s offer.

Inside, Ailell could hear the murmurs of the two men—their voices carrying far in the cold, crisp air. He tried to pick out the gist of it, but succeeded only in identifying them. That they whispered infuriated him. He got up, tossing back his furs, and strode outside. “What are you keeping from me?” he demanded. “Have you assembled in collusion now? Over what? Fergus’s unmaning by his own hand?”

Fergus smiled ironically. “It wasn’t my *hand* I was using.”

The skin on Ailell’s skull drew tight. “I don’t care to have to be watching the both of you for tricks when it’s the Hound of Culann who’s my enemy.”

“Let’s go inside,” Lugaid suggested.

In the tent, he told them both what had occurred at Cú Chulainn’s camp, including the offer made to him and Fergus; but he kept his “signal” to himself. “He thinks highly of you, Ailell, but he resents that no champion has been selected against him.”

The king was thinking on other matters. He grabbed the two men by their sleeves. “What would you think of keeping the more select among my troops in with your own? That doesn’t break your vow or even alter it. It would give you each a greater command also.”

Fergus threw off Ailell’s hand, his bracelets clanking. “You’d ask this of me? Lugaid, I couldn’t debase myself to the degree that this man asks. Go back to Cú Chulainn for me and ask him if he accepts what Ailell proposes.

“Now, wait—”

“It’s only right,” agreed the king of Munster.

“Tell him for me also that my sign will be spikes,” Fergus added.

“I’ll go.” He glanced inquiringly at Ailell.

“All right,” Ailell conceded. “Tell him because it’s honorable. I’ll give you a salted pig and a cask of wine to offer him into the bargain.” He had these delivered, then waited alone.

When Lugaid came back without the pig or the keg, Ailell grinned with delight. “He accepts,” Lugaid assured him. “He says you can put your men anywhere you like—if he wants ’em, he’ll find them anyway.”

“Why, the cockscomb. Very well, we’ll see what he can find.”

During the night, the king planted over a hundred warriors of his own in amongst Fergus’s and Lugaid’s forces. In this way he anticipated getting them home again while Maeve’s forces would suffer the greater losses. The men of Ulster and Munster built their central fires larger and expanded their rings to canton the new additions from Connacht; they shared their space, for the most part, with something less than enthusiasm. The plan shortly reached MacRoth and he reported it directly to Maeve. By morning, the entire army would know.

At dawn Ailell awakened to shouts and the clang of swords and spears against shields. Still wrapped in his heavy fur blanket, he ran out into the icy gray and pink landscape, following the clamor, which came from

Fergus's Exiles. A throng of warriors circled that encampment; they were so intent upon the scene that Ailell had to pry his way through them to see.

Bodies lay scattered around the embers of the fire. Ice coated some of them, frosted the beards of others. "He went back on his word," Ailell mumbled to himself. He called out to Fergus, who was not on the scene. As he scanned the faces of the Ulstermen, Ailell realized that they had changed; all the exile warriors—Duffach, Cormac, even, he now saw, Fergus—had limed their hair, stiffening it into curled spikes. The spikes on Fergus's head had bleached nearly white at the tips and shone like metal in the early light. Fergus looked to Ailell like an avatar of a sun god: Belenos incarnate. Wherever he turned, he discovered the Ulidians, men and women, coiffured the same way. One or two—that would not have been uncommon; the warriors of Ulster often limed their hair; but all of them? In one night? He recalled suddenly Fergus's parting words to Lugaid last evening; "My sign will be *spikes*."

Glumly, the king roamed through Ulster's camp, kicking at the bodies, naming each of them, thirty dead in all and not one with spiked hair, every one of them belonging to his group.

Fergus came up to him. "Life's not improving much for you, is it?"

"Don't think for a moment I don't comprehend this deceitful scene.

"I should think an idiot could comprehend. The Hound's been barking again."

"I was referring to *your* treachery."

"My treachery? What would that be? You heard Lugaid say that Cú Chulainn wanted a sign from me and you heard my answer. You didn't ask what it meant, you were so deep in your plot, but you could have, and you'd have gotten an answer."

Defeated, Ailell shook his head. "At this rate, I won't have a warrior left to face him. We should have engaged him in single combats from the start. I could have sent the whole army north while a combat was waged on that eastern ford. But my wife insisted on her methods—on the efficacy of them. They've certainly been effective at reducing my numbers."

"And that's not her plan at all, is it?"

Ailell closed his eyes. "Will you go and speak with Cú Chulainn for me?"

"I'll not. You've used me enough lately and—" Fergus stopped as a cry went up from the opposite end of the camp.

The call had come from one of the king's herdsmen. The man had discovered a naked body. He led them to it. It lay doubled over the hammered copper side-screen of Ailell's two-wheeled chariot. The king feared the worst and would not touch it. Fergus turned the body. Its skin peeled where it had frozen to the metal rail. The stiff corpse belonged to Cuillius.

A large hole had been punched in his chest. One pointed facet of the stone that had slain him shone with the blood that had crystallized around it.

Fergus emitted a soft, sarcastic chuckle.

Ailell goggled at him. “You’ll never be anything but a warrior, mac Roich, just as I told you.”

“Yes, you seem to set great store by that fact, as though it mattered to me that I’m not a king in Ulster. However, since kings are above warriors, you could do one thing for me. You could tell Cuillius—if your power can reach him—that he may keep my sword a while longer, if he thinks it might assist him. I’ll look forward to his reply.” He strolled off through the crowd, chuckling to himself again. Duffach embraced him, grinning like a wolf.

Ailell grabbed the herdsman who had brought him there. “Go fetch Mac Roth. Doubtless, you’ll find him near my wife’s tent. Tell him to sound the alarm to move—but not loudly now, no *carynx* fanfares, no trumpeting at all. And north, we’re moving to Bernas Bo.”

3. The King on the Field

Laeg was standing guard that morning on a rise above the camp at the ford. He called out that someone approached now, coming out of the hazel trees at the base of the ridge. Below, Cú Chulainn threw off his furs, which tossed up a powder of snow. A layer of snow covered the landscape all around and more was falling. Dressed only in a loincloth, Cú Chulainn stood. His breath rolled out like smoke. “Who is it?”

“A short man, dark as a sunburn, with a close beard and a sharp beak. His brooches look bronze. He carries a hazel wand in his broad left hand.”

“A Druid is he?”

“And a sword with jeweled ivory hilt in his powerful right. Sword and wand touch above his head.”

“A herald, offering wisdom and war, some secret knowledge there. I guess I won’t prepare for battle yet.” He squatted on the fur and started to rub snow over his chest, sucking his breath as the coldness charged his blood.

The herald, MacRoth, climbed the hill. He studied Laeg as he approached, noted the ends of trousers beneath the heavy fur that Laeg wore against the cold, and guessed that this must be somebody’s driver. “Whom do you serve?” he called out.

“That man, there,” answered Laeg, gesturing over the crest. MacRoth nodded to him and continued down the slippery hillside that was void of footprints before him. He turned his head and looked at Laeg again. It disturbed him vaguely that Laeg had not left that rise all night.

The youth at the bottom of the hill rubbing snow all over his nearly naked body did nothing to steady MacRoth’s nerves, either. This had to be the one he sought; surely no other Ulsterman could be about with the Pangs still at work. His brow knitted; he glanced up the hill again. Then, how was *that* one standing there? It was too much to dwell on just now.

The boy—MacRoth could not think what else to call him—stared up nonchalantly with snow melting down his blood-suffused face. It became obvious that he was waiting for MacRoth to speak.

MacRoth made a sound like a sheep bleating, then asked, “Can you tell me where to find the warrior called Cú Chulainn? Is he asleep?”

“Well, it’s said that between the Monday after Samain feast and the midweek following Imbolc, Cú Chulainn never sleeps. He just rests his head against his spear from time to time. Mind you, I don’t trust such things.”

“Yes, well, do you know where he is?”

“Why?” the boy asked. He had such a mellifluous voice, thought MacRoth. “What would you wish of him?” He got up, standing no taller than the Messenger. From beneath the furs he took out a red tunic sprinkled with gold. It was sleeveless. The boy’s arms were strangely muscled in tight ridges, as if he had been magically created from lengths of rope, his skin stretched tightly over the skeins. Whereas, thought MacRoth, his face was so ... untroubled. Not a line showed there. The black brows arched as if painted on, in a perfection that many women might have envied. So, too, his long lashes and black eyes. The boy’s mouth was wide and full, his nose small. It could have been a woman’s face, and a beautiful woman at that. So smooth the cheek .

“What would you wish of him?” the boy repeated.

MacRoth jolted out of his reverie. “I’ve a message from the king of Connacht, an offer to Cú Chulainn to switch his allegiance to the lords of CruachAn.”

“Cave or Rath?”

“Cave—no, no—Rath, of course.”

“It makes a difference. No doubt this switch is in return for wealth, land, and all the women he can eat.”

The boy’s mocking boldness flustered MacRoth. He stumbled through a few words, then shook his head and started again. “If he will pledge to Ailell rather than to the—” he refrained from calling Conchovor a tyrant deluded by power, as Ailell had done “—the king of Ulster.”

“Surely no man of honor could expect such a one as Cú Chulainn to sell off his foster-brothers so cheaply. He has a large family to support these days, you know.”

"I'd heard, yes." He found himself moving into rhythm with the boy's offhand jesting. "Is there any agreement, then, you think he might make?"

"Concessions from Cú Chulainn? Let me see. Yes, there's one I can think of."

"What would that be?"

"Now, I can't very well answer for him. You have Ulstermen in your camp, don't you? Ask them if any knows what the fellow might require."

"I shall do that upon my return."

"Well, then, good luck to you on your way home." He returned to dressing and drew on his white cloak and hood, thereby removing the last shred of doubt in MacRoth's mind as to whom he addressed. He climbed back up the hill with the easy gait of a youth, back to where Laeg squatted. If that other face had been as gentle as a girl's, this one contained the leanness of a fox. A fox that had seen the world and all its surprises.

"Enjoy your visit?" Laeg asked without looking away from the horizon. "He likes you, you know. You're an honored man, MacRoth."

"He knew who I was?" When the other did not reply, he asked, "Why should he respect me particularly?"

"Because it's told that you can cover all Eriu in a single day, on foot."

"I don't see—"

"You can outrun him. He respects your skill."

"Oh, I see."

MacRoth returned to camp, still refreshed by his conversation with the Hound. He told his story to Ailell and the Ulstermen. When asked to clarify the riddle, Fergus laughed at the king again. "You know already—he yearns for an honorable struggle. He's Ulster's champion, the king on the field. He wants acknowledgment, trophies. Heads."

"I'll give him the chance. If Fergus delivers the offer." He gave the gathered warriors an expectant look. Not all of them were of Fergus's Black force; he would not be outmaneuvered this time.

Etarcomol swaggered forward. "And I'll go with him."

"I don't want you," Fergus replied indignantly.

Etarcomol addressed the king. "How do you know this slaughterer can be trusted with the likes of Cú Chulainn? You need someone there to bend him to accuracy." He sneered at Fergus who, in reply, clutched his sword—only to recall at the rough touch that he had no sword.

Ailell did not care to have his foster-son pestering him all day, which was what would happen if he did not let him go. "He's to be under your protection, Fergus. Swear a *geis* to that."

Fergus stared coldly into Etarcomol's eyes. "You can't force this on me. But I'll watch him, on the condition he makes no attempt to harass or provoke Cú Chulainn. He's too much like Bricriu for me."

"And who is Bricriu?" asked Etarcomol.

"A deceitful, bragging, petty, self-seeking creature whose father was a maggot and whose mother a dog's turd."

Etarcomol took a step toward Fergus, his hands balled into fists. The group of men around Fergus drew their swords part way, their teeth gleaming with eagerness. Etarcomol hesitated and reflected upon the wisdom of studying cloud formations.

Ailell waved them to put away their weapons. He grabbed his foster-son by the hair and dragged him away. “He’s all you’ll have between you and the Hound. Don’t be flatheaded enough to provoke your sole protector.”

They went out in separate chariots, Etarcomol with his driver, Fergus alone. When Laeg saw them emerge from the gap, he called down to Cú Chulainn again, first describing Fergus: “large man with a crannog’s rudder stuck in his belt.”

“Yes, riddler, I know who that is,” Cú Chulainn called back. “Give me another.”

“The second one’s a thin man with a face damaged by malice.”

“I don’t know him but I don’t much care for his looks.”

“Understood.” Laeg threw off his fur and took up a long spear. He waved Fergus over the rise with the spear but stepped out and blocked the way for Etarcomol, whose driver obediently reined in despite his passenger’s snarls of contempt. Etarcomol jumped down and proceeded on foot, watching Laeg sidelong; Laeg addressed the other driver and did not attempt to hamper Etarcomol further.

Cú Chulainn embraced Fergus heartily. Fergus praised Emer’s beauty. Cú Chulainn blushed and praised Fergus’s integrity. He offered food and drink from the gifts Ailell had sent.

“Thank you, but that isn’t why I—” he looked over his shoulder at the hill “—why we’ve come. It’s in answer to your offer. Ailell’s accepted, on the grounds he’ll lose less men if he sends them out against you one at a time.”

“No matter what he believes. Combat is more proper. The sling is useful, but I’d rather face a foe.”

Footsteps approached from behind Fergus. He said, “In that case, I expect he’ll start sending them out as soon as we return. Good luck to the gods of your household.” He started to go. As he drew even with Etarcomol, he grabbed the other’s upper arm. Etarcomol threw him off to continue forward. “Boy,” growled Fergus, “I warn you, as I said, the moment I leave here, my guardianship over you ends. Come now or suffer the consequences.”

Etarcomol’s reply was to curl his lip at Cú Chulainn. “This is what all the quivering’s about? I don’t see anything here worth so much jelly. This is nothing but a pretty boy barely old enough to be off the nipple.”

Cú Chulainn said to Fergus, “You had to swear to protect *him*?”

“I did. He’s fostered to the king, though with no more joy than in my custody.”

“Then I won’t harm you,” said the Hound to Etarcomol, “even though you whittle at me with that knife between your teeth.”

“I’ll be the first comes against you,” Etarcomol boasted.

Fergus had heard all he could stand. He yanked Etarcomol off his feet, then twisted his arm up behind him and walked him to his chariot. “Take the viper home,” he told the charioteer, then went to his own vehicle and drove off. Etarcomol’s driver followed across the ford. Then the warrior snatched the reins and shoved him out of the way. “I can’t wait longer to deal with that child.”

Laeg called out that the second chariot had turned about with the warrior at the helm, his spear up and at the ready.

“I can’t ignore the obvious statement being made here,” Cú Chulainn mused. To Laeg he called, “Come take the reins and let’s meet him at the water!” Laeg raced down the hill. He bounded to his place aboard the chariot. The twin horses picked up their heads and pranced in place, champ-ing their bronze snaffle bits. Cú Chulainn removed his white cloak as he got in behind Laeg, but did not strip down for battle.

Etarcomol’s chariot reached the river and, as the warrior saw the Sickie Chariot emerge from behind the rise, he turned his vehicle parallel and gave the reins back to the driver with a warning to obey him.

Laeg drew his chariot up broadside, barely a foot separating the wheels. In his red tunic, Cú Chulainn leaned on the rail. “It’s your fault if this goes further.”

“It has to go further, little boy, so I can take your skull home.”

Cú Chulainn answered by swinging down over his rail, grabbing the top of Etarcomol’s wheel, and tearing it off its axle. Etarcomol cried out. He slid across the boards, doubled over the rail and fell onto the frozen bank. The terrified horses jerked ahead suddenly, dragging the chariot up the hill. It bounced off the axle, tossing the driver out.

Etarcomol clutched his spear and splashed into the shallow water toward Cú Chulainn, who tossed aside the wheel and drew a sword instead. Etarcomol made a threatening thrust with his spear and Cú Chulainn wove an intricate swirl around it with his blade. The warrior’s tunic fell from his shoulders, sliced through. “There,” said Cú Chulainn, “is proof of my skill. Now go home alive.”

“No.”

“Oh, yes, you’re right. I forgot.” He swung down and took Etarcomol by the hair, lifting him off his feet. With a flick of the blade, he sheared off the warrior’s hair along the scalp. Etarcomol fell back into the river. “There now,” said Cú Chulainn. “You have a skull to show your friends. Go home alive.”

Etarcomol screamed and, slipping, clambered to his feet. He gripped his spear close under the point and jumped onto the rear of the Sickie Chariot. With one hand on the rail, he jabbed madly at Cú Chulainn. The Hound danced over the wild thrusts twice, the second time stamping down

the neck of the spear. He spun his sword and sliced through the top of Etarcomol's head, not stopping until he reached the navel. The body folded over and toppled back into the stream. "I have my limits," the Hound said to the corpse.

He heard the rumble of another chariot rebounding through the gap. The chariot emerged; it was Fergus mac Roich returning. Fergus had discovered the absence of his ward and come back to stop him, but too late as he now saw. He jumped from his chariot before it had stopped. On the way to the river he saw the broken chariot and the driver climbing to his feet in the snow.

The body and its internal parts floated amidst thin ice in the dark water. "Little dog," Fergus said, "this disgraces me." He drew his wooden weapon. "I've nothing but this against you, but I'll hammer you into the frozen ground if need be."

Cú Chulainn lay down his sword and leapt over the rail, onto the bank. He knelt before Fergus. "No disgrace can be got from dealing death to those deaf to good faith. This strutter bragged beyond the binding of a hundred *geisa*. What was I to do?"

"And what am I, who still lives and must now bear another flagstone of dead flesh upon my back—what do I say to them?"

"Ask his charioteer."

Fergus called the driver to clear the matter up. "Three times this youth tried to send him away and each time Etarcomol refused and tried to slay him. He left no choice, none."

Fergus went down to the gory body and began hauling it up. "I suppose not. His kind never do. I'll need two small spancel hoops with pointed ends, little Hound."

Cú Chulainn went off and returned a few minutes later with branches fashioned as requested. Fergus took them and pierced the corpse's heels with them, then twisted the ends together. He tied a line to them from the rear of his chariot. After taking aboard the displaced driver, he bid Cú Chulainn farewell again and drove back to camp. Pieces of the body were flung off along the way, leaving a trail of markers of an odious nature to guide all future combatants.

The camp had been reduced significantly in size: Ailell had sent most of his people north. The circle of twelve who protected Maeve was chugging across the camp. The battered, vacated corpse scraped to a stop in front of them. Maeve peered out from between two shields. "Etarcomol. My, how you have diminished," she said scornfully. "You always were an empty boy." She withdrew back inside the wall and they moved on.

A small cromlech was erected for the youth. The Druids came up to Ailell and asked what they should put on the letter he would carry with him into the next life. Ailell had nothing to say. Maeve shook her head, too, having no messages to send over and nothing kind to say about the deceased. The king offered the honor to anyone who wished it.

With his hot cup of wine, Fergus got to his feet and offered to give Etarcomol an epitaph. “For me, say that he goes to the Isle of Youth lacking any guts.” Then he sat down unsteadily, again.

4. Single Combat

Ailell stepped into his tent and found his wife seated near a brazier. She offered him a cup of wine and he sat beside her to take it. “It is Estremnidean wine, dear. I brought two kegs of it on my household wagon, since I knew you would forget it in your provisions.”

“And you were right.” He drank the sweet red wine. Maeve brushed her hand across his throat. Her nails clicked on his gold torc.

“We must decide who to send out against him. Which warrior do we want facing him first?”

“We have plenty to select from. Although,” he added, “none from Ulster or Munster will participate now.” Slowly, in the ensuing silence, his face screwed up with anger. He set down his cup and slapped the ground. “Who *is* this pup? He’s used fostering as an overwhelming obstacle. I know Fergus knew of his presence out there long before he told us—he had to—he could have warned us if he’d been honest.”

Maeve refilled his cup as an adjuration toward calmness. “He is a warrior, Sweet Tongue, as you yourself have pointed up so clearly. His honesty takes its own form, requiring him to answer your questions but not to volunteer what you do not know to ask for. Stop treating him as an equal, Ailell. Remember as I do that he always speaks the truth but leaves it unfinished where possible. Ulster warriors are as protective of their knowledge as Connacht Druids. One day they will guard their tales so closely that the world will forget about them and remember only you and me. See him as I do and you will learn how to trust him.”

She was right of course. He studied her beautiful, genuine face and was reminded of the divineness surrounding her that he had perceived on their first meeting, just as she had seen the attributes of a king in him. “The Great Queen,” his warriors called her, and indeed that suited. He admitted to himself that he had won his fame by uniting with her to the envy of every hopeful swain in Eriu, of all those Ulster advisors who had tried to marry her to that boy. If possession of the Donn increased her power, then it increased his by association. She would effectively unsex Ulster, spread the wings of her supremacy like the raven quills of the Morrighu over them, and he would be beside her. She was right, as always. He should not obsess himself with Fergus mac Roich when the real enemy was time. To gain more of it, they must pit someone against their unseen foe. He sipped his

wine and pondered. “If we had time, I’d send for Cú Roi—pit dog against dog—but we haven’t the luxury. What do you suggest? Give me a name.” He touched her shoulder.

“What about Nad Crantail? He is among our best. His holly spears have such balance that he might well inflict death on the Ulster upstart from a great distance—before the boy realizes a combat has begun.”

“What can we offer him to do it?”

Maeve slid against him. “I have given that much thought. It seems to me we should offer him Finnabair in marriage.” Ailell glanced around and Maeve said, “She is not about. I sent her off earlier to my tent where she is now bathing and receiving a manicure.” She kissed his neck. “Warriors will want more than a few cattle and some land. They would do anything to be tied to our line. That is why so many came, after all. That is the underlying and unspoken reason.”

“Really?” he murmured distractedly. His hand had snaked up under Maeve’s robe to cup her breasts.

“I have researched it most thoroughly, my dear.”

“Then ... we should approach him with this offer.”

“I’ve already sent out little Maine Andoe to ask him.” She unfastened his tunic belt.

“Have you? That’s good,” he whispered as he undid the clasp at her shoulder and began to unwind the red cloth from her. She was such a prize. How could he ever be at odds with her?

Nad Crantail agreed to fight and kill Cú Chulainn in return for Finnabair. She knew nothing of the plot and did not understand the lustful look he gave her when he passed her in the doorway of her mother’s tent.

Nad Crantail loaded his chariot with nine spears he had carved himself, each one meeting his rigid specifications of balance. The tip of each had been burned black over a fire, then carved with a bronze-headed axe into a point like a long black thorn. He placed a pointed helmet on his head and climbed up beside his driver. Members of his *tuath* ran beside the chariot, shouting and cheering and beating on their oval wooden shields. In response, Nad Crantail stepped out and danced on the chariot yoke between his horses.

On the ridge to the east, not far from the grave of Maine, three figures climbed to the snowy crest. These were three selected Druids—one in white, one in brown, one in black robes. The white one was Maeve’s Seer, who would watch over the combats and divine their outcome. The brown-robed Druid was of the *filid* class and would watch in order to recount the battle for others. The black Druid was the *brithem*, who would rule on disputes and points of violated law. The three sat on the side of the ridge with a clear view of the ford below. The boy seated near them studied

their hard, humorless profiles, their shaved foreheads and squinting eyes. He thought them eerie, not like Cathbad, who had a warm spot in his heart; but even with their untold secrets and divinations, they did not disturb him half so much as Maeve did. He could not imagine going alone into her tent, a warrior taking instructions, accepting her touch and more. Maybe Laeg was right, Senchan thought. Maybe he ought to be thinking of some other occupation. But how did that explain his being here?

The brown-robed Druid turned and looked straight at him then. The priest got up and came toward him. Senchan thought he would faint; his heart seemed to be rising in his throat. The Druid came to a stop inches away, then leaned down over him. Senchan fell flat against the hill. The Druid scooped up a handful of snow and turned away.

“Look at this,” he called to the others. “A flower, blooming out of season, right through the snow.”

“Let me see it,” said the White Druid. Once he held it, his expression clouded over. “Why, it’s dog’s bane.”

“An omen, surely,” said the Judge.

“No question,” agreed the one in brown, reseating himself. He glanced back at the sound of people approaching—members of Nad Crantail’s *tuath* clambering up the hill. “There he is,” one of them cried. The Druids flung away the flower and watched the chariot come to a stop below.

Nad Crantail jumped down with his bundle of spears and weaved through the grove of trees to get a clear shot.

Across the ford, Cú Chulainn had been passing the time in the practice of bird catching. Laeg would toss up the Gai Bulga at a passing dove and Cú Chulainn would jump over the spear and, at the pinnacle of the jump, reach out and nab the bird. Upon landing, he spoke secretly to his prey, then released it; the bird always returned when called. It was a trick that Scathach had taught him.

Nad Crantail saw him and selected a spear from the bundle. He hefted it, then with a sudden dash, let it fly. He took up another.

“Look,” cried Laeg as he saw the first spear sail out of the grove across the river.

“Marvelous!” said Cú Chulainn. He leapt high up, making his dove call and catching the shaft of the spear between his toes, so lightly that it carried him on up through the air. A dove flew to him and he placed it beneath his tunic. As the spear dropped away, another shot past and Cú Chulainn caught a ride on it. He made his call again and more doves flew to him. He stuffed them under his tunic with the first, at the same time somersaulting away from the second spear, snagging a third and then a fourth.

His clothes soon bulged with flapping, captured birds that did more to buoy him than the catena of spears. He laughed heartily at the great game. Across a brown, snow-dappled heath, Laeg raced along beneath him in the chariot. When one of the spears came down and stuck in the floor-

board beside him, Laeg yelled in surprise. His voice frightened the birds both in and out of Cú Chulainn's red tunic, and the whole flock took flight. Cú Chulainn rose higher than any spear could touch and glided away on the wings of doves.

To the audience on the hillside, the picture was quite different. The people shouted and jeered: Cú Chulainn had run away! The tribunal did not know what to think but held to the omen of dog's bane as evidence that this was so.

Senchan knew they were all wrong and shouted at them, but they could not hear him any more than they could see him.

When the *tuath* and the Druids returned to camp they told their story and all the remaining troops save Fergus's hooted and made derision of Cú Chulainn.

"He's aptly named," went one squib, "because he certainly crawled off like a dog—with his tail curled under him."

"He belongs with the pigeons."

"Birds of a feather, eh? Except he's featherless—not even a man!"

"If Nad Crantail didn't exactly triumph over the Hound, at least he *winged* him."

The Black Army stood by and listened darkly to all this noise. Fergus said, "It would have been a better day had he not been there at all."

Among them, Fiachu was the first to give out. He disappeared in his chariot before anyone noticed his absence. From the river ford he followed the tracks of Laeg's chariot through the crackling scrub of the heath until he saw the two men sitting at a fire. They invited him to join them in an afternoon repast of the birds they had spitted. He refused bitterly.

Cú Chulainn set down his meal. "Why so harsh, brother? If they all saw it, didn't they find my sky-sailing feat worthwhile? You should thank that fellow, whoever he was—"

"Nad Crantail."

"—yes, thank him for his addition to it."

"Addition?" Fiachu yawned in disbelief. "He was trying to kill you."

Cú Chulainn exchanged glances with Laeg, who shrugged, not knowing what to say. With a sudden, unassured laugh, Cú Chulainn asked, "But why didn't he use real weapons? Did he think he could harm me with pointed sticks?"

"Of course he did, you little fool! And think how that 'great feat' of yours looked to the Druidic triumvirate—they're back in camp now, composing slurs against you. Nad Crantail says he can't fight you fair—you don't even have a beard. Lucky for you most of them have gone off to fetch the bull."

"What?"

"What I'm trying to tell you. You've been treating this as some game—some entertainment for your pleasure. While you're having fun, the enemy's

run off. Taken the Donn again.”

Cú Chulainn began to twitch. Laeg scrambled for a jug and flung its cold contents over Cú Chulainn’s head. The water hissed and turned to steam against him.

Laeg advised Fiachu, “You have to learn patience with him. Calling him names and showing him discredited could—could—well, he might explode in every direction and tear us to pieces for lack of something appropriate to kill.”

“What do we do?” asked Fiachu. He glanced at Cú Chulainn, who sat in seeming oblivion, still quivering, eyes bulging.

“Go tell Nad Crantail that Cú Chulainn’s preparing for a real combat to prove that he wasn’t running away. I’ll have him cooled by then and reasonable, but he’ll want to set off after Maeve’s army, so tell your champion to meet us at the next ford north, and to get there first if he wishes to prove himself.”

Fiachu hurried back to his chariot and rumbled away. Laeg hoisted Cú Chulainn’s broiling body onto the boards of the Sickle Chariot. “My poor friend,” he said, “why must you suffer these fits? Sometimes I wish you were a bit less tainted by the divine and more like the rest of us.” He tried to stand Cú Chulainn in place, but both legs had locked in a sitting position. In some way Laeg did not understand, his friend was caught in the middle of a transformation. He recalled the time that the women of Ard Macha had been forced to drop him in three separate tubs of cold water to bring him to his senses: He had caused the first two to burst.

Laeg finally roped him up against one rail, then draped the white cloak over him. Kneeling, Laeg waved a hand in front of him, but Cú Chulainn continued to stare, pop-eyed, at nothing.

“That will never do. You look positively ten years old with those big cow eyes of yours, and that spearthrower wants a full-grown foe. Let’s see what we can do.” He went back to their fire and heated some water, which he then poured on the ground beside the chariot, making a puddle of steaming mud. He scooped up a handful and slapped it on Cú Chulainn’s chin, then tore up some brown grass and stuck it to the mud. The final effect was blotchy and uneven, but it would do from a distance. Then, placing the Gai Bulga in beside him, Laeg went off to yoke the horses.

The three Druids arrived first after Nad Crantail. Behind them, the din preceded the other audience by an hour.

Ulster’s champion had reached the ford not long before Nad Crantail. Laeg had dragged Cú Chulainn out of the chariot but found him still paralyzed. Beside the ford there was a short standing stone commemorating some noble deed or warrior all but forgotten. Laeg dragged Cú Chulainn there and propped him upright against the stone while he roped him in place. The stone came up to the top of his shoulders and would be obvious to anyone, Laeg saw at once, so he snatched up the white robe

and draped it over the stone and warrior, completing his own transformation of the Hound.

The first clear view that Connacht's warriors and the Druids had of their opponent was of a deformed, hunchbacked figure rocking sluggishly from side to side.

Bemused by what he saw, Nad Crantail walked over to Fergus mac Roich. "Tell me the truth now," he demanded, "is that Cú Chulainn?"

Fergus squinted. "I think so."

Nad Crantail shook his head, flustered. "I don't know. I was further away earlier, but I'd swear his face wasn't half so dark then. And he looked, well, smaller."

Fergus cleared his throat. "He's known to puff up when he's angry.

Nad Crantail mumbled to himself and wandered back to his chariot. He took a bronze-tipped spear, set it down and removed his clothing except for the pointed helmet, his torc and his leather belt. He waded into the ford. The water stung his feet. "Are you Cú Chulainn?" he shouted.

"What if I am?" came the reply from the deformed figure; it was actually Laeg, hidden behind the stone. Cú Chulainn moaned and raised his head. The presence of his enemy in his field of vision cleared some of the fog from his brain.

"If you are the Hound, then I'm here for you. This time I've brought a 'real' weapon." He waved his spear. "I hope it finds a place in your heart."

Cú Chulainn stiffened up. Before Laeg could think of a reply, he yelled, "Let's hear the terms of your combat!" Laeg shook hands with himself and slunk back to the chariot.

Nad Crantail looked to the Druids, found them nodding in agreement. Good, he thought, here at last was a true combat with a true, manly, bearded, opponent. Behind him, members of his *tuath* began to slap blades against shields.

In the Sickle Chariot, Laeg took out a scythe and started rapping it against the rails, a musical clanging that rang above the thunder of the wooden shields. Over the din, Nad Crantail called, "We throw our spears and no dodging. How does that suit?"

"No dodging," agreed the Hound, "but jumping up is allowed."

"Done!" the warrior cried and flung his spear with all his might. Cú Chulainn leaped over the shot so hard that he snapped the rope and tore free of his clothing. The spear cut between his feet and split the stone in two. Still afloat, Cú Chulainn chucked the Gai Bulga up into the clouds. He landed beside the stone, his naked form revealed to them all.

"He's just a boy—that's not a real beard!" someone shouted.

"He cheated!" cried another.

"Shut up!" ordered Nad Crantail. "He kept to the rules."

"Thank you," said Cú Chulainn. "You have my permission to dodge my spear by jumping straight up, too."

"Fine. Throw it, then."

“I did, already.”

Nad Crantail had a presentiment of disaster but did not have a second to act on it before the Gai Bulga plunged down through the point of his splendid helmet. The shaft stuck out where the point had been, vibrating like a plucked string. Nad Crantail gasped, his eyes wide. He managed to keep his footing. “Let me say good-bye to my folk now,” he asked. “I know it’s my time.”

“Go.”

With blood like tears on his cheeks, he wove unsteadily back to his adherents, now silent and grim. Suddenly, he began to laugh wildly, but this changed into an uncontrollable fit of crying. The fit ended abruptly; the warrior stiffened up and said, “Some other will have to take his head.” He began to giggle. “I’ve got his tooth in me, and it burns. It’s fire in my mind. No one—no one will take him till you pull that tooth.” His people watched him go, slack-jawed in response to his erratic farewell. He had been such a controlled, impassive man; somehow, that spear had unhinged his mind.

Dragging his shield and sword across the river with him, Nad Crantail stumbled through rushes and scraped his way to Cú Chulainn. He held out the sword and said, “I’m yours.” He was grinning but his eyes wept.

“I must tell you, brave man, that my spear is such that it can’t be drawn back out but must complete its journey.”

Nad Crantail waved his hand as if this were a triviality. His grin sickened.

Cú Chulainn grasped the ferrule of his spear and shot it down with all his might. The point burst out under Nad Crantail’s ribs and drove into the hard ground, its wicked barbs hung with flesh like strands of moss. A geyser of blood spouted from the helmet. Cú Chulainn took the tendered sword quickly and severed head from body before the body hit the ground. Removing the helmet, he handed the head to Laeg, who carried it back and tied it by its plaited hair to the chariot rail, the first prize.

Cú Chulainn laid down the sword and stood to go, but a call from the other side of the ford stopped him. The Druid in the brown robe had come forward.

“What is it?” asked Cú Chulainn. “The fight’s ended.”

The Druid held out his hand and started down to the water. “Give me your spear,” he said. He had overheard Nad Crantail’s warning to his fellows and thought to capture the “tooth” with guile.

“Name some other gift, I’m tired.”

“Only that. It’s a foul and grim device that no warrior ought to have. It abuses the rules of combat—”

“This brave man didn’t think so and it was his place to rule it so, not yours. Ask the *brithem*, poet!”

“Give it me or I’ll assemble such a satire about you as no one has ever heard. Give it me or I’ll make you crawl under a rock and never show that

smear'd chin again, little muddy beard.”

Cú Chulainn hung his head. “I shouldn’t like that. Here, then. Take it.” He threw the spear underhand. It skimmed the river. The Druid bent down to snatch it, splashing as he stepped out. The blade skipped on the ripple he made, jounced over his outstretched hand and into his forehead. He jerked up sideways and stood there, swaying.

“How do you like my gift?” inquired Cú Chulainn.

The Druid was cross-eyed trying to look at it. “It stuns,” he said, then fell over on his side.

Cú Chulainn went and took his head also. He held it up and said to it, “Words may be dangerous, poet, but you can’t hide behind them.” He went to the chariot and tied that head beside Nad Crantail’s. Laeg gripped his arm suddenly and pointed northward. A great chimney of smoke split the sky. “That’ll be Maeve and company. See, the rest there are hurrying off to join her. They’ll all have to cross somewhere further upriver.”

“Then we’d best outstrip them.” Laeg pulled him into the chariot and took up the reins.

“Laeg,” said the Hound, “I felt as though I’d died, lashed to that stone, as if I were someplace else.” He sighed. “But I hope you don’t have to fill your jug too often on my account.”

Laeg was grinning as he drove his team into the water.



The departing chariot seemed to drag the world away with it for Senchan. Darkness swallowed him. The pinpoint that was the world receded like the end of a tunnel, the mouth of a cave.

Laeg’s disembodied voice echoed around him.

“The smoke comes from the house of Celtchar mac Uthidir. He, himself is snarled in the pangs, but his wife and her women aren’t. His wife, named Finnmor, has slowed Maeve further.

“The queen’s intention was to make Ulster suffer for all the trouble caused her. Also, she thought to cause enough conflagration that, should Ulster rise soon, it would be too busy stamping out fires to chase her down directly, for which reason she has rolled flat everything in her path. Her army’s like boulders. Farms laid out, fences ungrounded, the cattle herded inevitably ahead of them. In keeping to the bargain made with Cú Chulainn, no cattle were to be moved from the ford where combat took place. Nothing, however, had been said governing cattle picked up along the way.”

“His plans went for nothing, then,” Senchan protested to the dark.

“It’s never for nothing. He had slowed them down again, split their forces. Between him and Finnmor, they cost Cruachan’s army a day. When you emerge from this place between moments, it will be after the battle of Maeve and Finnmor. Celtchar’s wife has been driven back, the house put to flame, and most of the women defending it killed or captured. It’s a minor battle you needn’t see. Someday, when you’ve time, go to a map and note all the place names with Maeve as part of them: Maeve’s Hill, Maeve’s Lash. You can follow her army by the places it christened.”

“So where am I going to come out?”

“Gotten used to this sort of travel, have you? You’ll come out at the Flurry River. What happens there ... I can’t tell you.” A hazy outline appeared in the darkness.

“You look like a ghost, Laeg,” Senchan marveled.

The hazy figure grinned mischievously and replied, “Boy, I’ve been nothing else since first we met.”

XIII. TALES OF FURTHER COMBATS

1. An Offer of Finnabair

Laeg and Cú Chulainn cut south below Maeve's force, then west across the Gatlaig River and into the narrow valley of Glenn Gat, skirting the Black Cauldron. The valley lay empty in its destruction, no longer of concern to anyone. Mists like a layer of gray stone buried the depths and it would have been all too easy to imagine the ghosts of Connacht's recent victims drifting through that land. Around their road the small trees grew wide apart, twisted black trunks taking on fantastic shapes in the fog.

The rushing horses spun the mist away and kicked up clods that sometimes struck the trees just below. The dead branches shook like angry fists at their passing. Cú Chulainn could smell the death in that valley and Laeg preferred not to view anything but the road ahead. Finally it plunged down to where a causeway—a short corduroyed road—led them across the wide marsh where the mist took birth and then ascended once more to link with the high road of Midluachair. The tightly packed logs of the causeway spoke like thunder beneath their wheels, The thunder retreated into the depths of haunted Glenn Gat like a war chorus of a dead army on the run.

They left the high road and arrived at a ford along the Flurry River north of the Cauldron. There they made camp in a broad copse. The Flurry offered few fords; this, the widest and safest, would have to be the one that Connacht chose if they wished to get their cattle across quickly. They would have to come here.

Cú Chulainn asked Laeg how long it would be before Ulster rose up, but he could not say for sure. "As many hours as make up the time since that boy came to warn you. Less, perhaps, for those who heard his message before you. More for those in the north. Two days to four, I'd imagine."

"Then we should be thankful of the numerous fords between here and Crich Rois."

He had barely finished speaking when Laeg raised a hand to quiet him and strained to listen. They heard a distant rumble. “The army!” Cú Chulainn cried. He got up.

Laeg continued to listen, motionless. “Wait, Cucuc,” he said a moment later. “It can’t be the army. Whatever this is, it’s coming at us from the northwest, and the army’s over there.” He pointed to the east.

“I hear cattle. Someone’s driving a herd.” He climbed up on the rails of the chariot. “I can see their mass now. Herdsmen in bright cloaks, and there’s a huge black monster in their midst.”

“That’ll be the Donn.” Laeg scrambled to his feet. “They’re coming to meet Maeve and Ailell here.”

Cú Chulainn dropped down onto the boards. “We ought to meet them first I think.” He pulled Laeg up past him and they sent the horses galloping anew. Across the shallows, they followed the road, but stopped and drew up broadside to the approaching herd where they could still see the Flurry in case the army cropped up.

One of the herdsmen on horseback rode ahead of the herd and came up to them. With some skepticism he eyed the youngster standing on the rail. From his angle there were no heads visible; those hung on the far side.

“How did you come by so many cattle?” Cú Chulainn asked appreciatively.

“We found them at Slieve Cuilinn.”

“Stole them, more like. All the herdsmen of Ulster are struck down by Macha’s Curse and their cattle have scattered these past days when there weren’t any women to watch them.”

“Is that a fact? All the men are laid low, you say? So what is that to me—only boys like you are left running free. Now move aside and let us pass.”

“What’s your name?”

“My name?” He nudged his horse closer and prepared to draw his sword. “Buide mac Bain—the name that’ll be on your lips when you die, boy.” He pulled the sword and swung it up across his horse, which bolted forward at his kick.

“Not swords, mac Bain. Let’s fight with spears. Here’s yours!” Cú Chulainn flung the Gai Bulga. The herdsman rode right into it. The spear pierced his side and the barbs severed his sword-arm cleanly. Cú Chulainn bounded off the rail with his own sword drawn and landed beside mac Bain where he fell. “Now,” said the Hound, “let me tell you *my* name.”

That name shaped Buide mac Bain’s lips as braids of his hair were looped around the rail beside the other trophies. “Let’s take that bull away,” Cú Chulainn said to Laeg.

As they neared the Flurry River ford, the Cruachan forces sent runners ahead to seek the herdsmen. The runners returned shortly with the alarming news that Cú Chulainn had gotten there first and slaughtered their

herdsmen. Soon the ford came into sight, with the cattle of Ulster, including the Donn, gathered together on the far side, hind legs bound by spancel hoops, and tended by a short figure in a white cloak. Maeve shook with such rage that half her press of shield bearers stumbled forward. She went to her husband as camp was officially declared. "What do we do now? He plagues us everywhere we go."

Ailell eyed her in some doubt: her fits of temper were growing more virulent; she had always been such an imperturbable woman. But she'd always had her way.

"I've had a thought," he said. "Fergus's tales have this boy training on Alba, correct? Then shouldn't we be seeking someone else who's passed the same rigorous course?"

"You have someone in mind?"

"Ferbaeth."

"But he's an Ulsterman," Maeve replied, "governed by Fergus."

"Yes, I know. But I also know he has intentions regarding Finnabair. If we plied him with wine, he just might shift his allegiance."

"Oh, wise Ailell." She embraced him. "You must go and get Finnabair and this warrior right away."

"I? And what will you be doing?"

"I have another idea, courtesy of your suggestion. I must go and speak with MacRoth, then I shall join you." She kissed him.

Not much older than Cú Chulainn, Ferbaeth had been a friend of Naise's. He had not acquired many more friends since the episode of Derdriu, preferring, much as Cú Chulainn did, to keep to himself. One could speculate from his example and that of FerDiad and others, that those who had gone to Alba had given something away in return for their skill, something that left them cut off from their fellows. It might have been that they recognized in themselves some danger to mankind, or perhaps in mankind a danger to themselves.

Ferbaeth had been courting Finnabair since before the cattle raid. She had more color in her hair and cheek than her mother—Ferbaeth would have said it was because she was more human. Where her gentle, soft-spoken naiveté had come from, no one could say. Ailell sometimes claimed inebriously that she expressed his uncontaminated placidness. Whatever the truth, Finnabair had won Ferbaeth. He was with her when Ailell sought them out, and together they went with him to Maeve's tent.

The queen had laid out bread and cheese and silver cups of wine. Her household servant was trimming the mold from the slab of cheese as they came in. Maeve said, "We serve most warriors beer, but for one on whom our daughter dotes, only wine will suffice. Please sit upon the rushes, Ferbaeth, and you beside him Finnabair." The girl did as she was bid, but she eyed her parents suspiciously.

"What a trial this whole expedition has been," lamented Ailell. He began to recount the tribulations he had personally endured. The tale was

a long one and called for many toasts in honor of the many dead. When it became obvious that Ferbaeth had drunk his limit, Ailell patted his back and said, "We think of you, Ferbaeth, as our hope, our defender, our champion out of all the army."

"You do? I'm unprepared."

"Naturally," Maeve agreed, "but think nothing of it. We have considered this throughout the journey and it is our desire that you have Finnabair."

The girl hugged her warrior and gazed, starry-eyed, at him. She had grown as drunk on their praise as he had on their wine. "You've had as much training as Cú Chulainn," stated the king. "More, I should think," Maeve rejoined like a Greek chorus.

"You're as fierce."

"Fiercer."

"As strong."

"Much stronger."

"A slayer, a slaughterer, the champion of the armies combined."

"Say that you will kill Cú Chulainn for us. For Finnabair."

Caught up in her parents' chanting, the girl cried, "Oh, you must, you can!"

Ferbaeth set his cup down clumsily. He had trouble meeting the weight of all three expectancies. "C'hulinn' s my fosser-brother, like ever'one. Sworn f'rever." He pounded his fist against his chest.

"Finnabair would be your wife forever. Surely that is more binding than this pledge of fosterage that is spread so thinly over an entire province."

Ferbaeth lowered his head, trying to crawl through their argument, but there were no holes big enough. "All right," he said. The beads in his plaited hair clacked as his head snapped up. "Tomorrow, I'll go cut off 'is head."

"Tomorrow!" Maeve cried. Ferbaeth belched and toppled like a stone into Finnabair's lap. "T'morrow," he muttered. The queen gestured at her daughter. "Take him back to his tent, dear. He won't be brave again until he has slept some."

The girl lifted him with the help of the household servant. They carried him between them out of the tent.

Ailell looked into his wine cup. "Marvelous viniculturists, those Estremnideans. Should we hold them responsible for this blunder, do you think?" Maeve stared at the doorway, refusing to look at him. "Maybe, if he had eaten more cheese ... So, dear wife, who *else* desires Finnabair?"

"Half the encampment," Maeve answered through her teeth.

"Could we possibly target someone particular in that rather expansive group, hmm?"

"That brother of Lugaid's."

“Larene? Yes, he does, doesn’t he? Lugaid won’t like it a bit, but Larene’s full of himself, so there won’t be a need to pour wine into him. He’ll be easy to deceive—I know his cloth.”

“Then go tailor him to suit before we lose the light.”

Ailell paused to finish his cup of wine before leaving. True to his word, he had Larene back in the tent within half an hour. Finnabair returned once Ferbaeth had been put to bed. The strong wine had made her sleepy, too. Ailell had her sit beside Larene. She greeted him with a moony smile. Soon she had laid her head against his shoulder and begun to snore softly.

“A perfect couple, you two are,” whispered Maeve. “Why, what handsome children you could create.”

Larene nodded thoughtfully, then put his arm around Finnabair’s shoulder and gave her a squeeze. She nestled closer against him.

“We’ve decided to give her to the man who brings us Cú Chulainn’s head. What do you think of that plan, Larene?”

For a moment the vainglorious warrior blanched, but as quickly he put on a steely look. “Is that all? Why, I could do that for you before the sun sets. For this beauty, I’d take his head twice.”



Alone in the corner where he and Laeg had listened to the tales of Cú Chulainn’s childhood, Senchan shouted at them, then rolled to his feet and bolted from the tent. He ran straight into Laeg outside. Tears dripped from Senchan’s eyes and he looked away from Laeg in embarrassment and disgust.

“What’s wrong? What is it?” The boy said nothing. He began chewing on his lip. “You’ve seen the new twist in the plot, haven’t you?”

“They’re stupid. You’re all stupid.”

“Who is?”

“You. The warriors. All of them.”

“Why?”

“Because they are. Maeve can trick any of them into anything. They’re all too dumb to see what she’s doing. They’re all too busy being clever and puffed.”

“Does this mean you no longer care to be a warrior?”

“I hate them.”

“What about Fergus? And Cú Chulainn? Or the female warriors, who are for the most part exempt from the tempting offer? What of me, and Lugaid and even Cathbad, who was a warrior in his time? Are they all petty, strutting swashes?”

Senchan pouted.

“You ought to have more wisdom than you’re displaying here. You’re no lip-pushing infant who needs constant dusting off. You dislike treachery? Good for you. But it isn’t being used on you. You think that all warriors—all brave heroes—are uniformly alike off the field, all brave, wise, and clever men who remain untarnished by more ignoble lusts? Balls. If she made the same offer you just heard to her whole army, they’d gather up and go after Cú Chulainn en masse. The only thing stopping her is that the Exiles and Munster and probably the women would take sides against her and there’d be a real bloodbath. We’re men and women here, boy. We suffer from what all men suffer: infirmities of character as well as body. Don’t confuse generality with individuality. Look at Ulster as a province, with a curse laid on it for a boast, because its character as a synthesis has been fashioned around that one thing—boasting. But Fergus is an Ulsterman. So, too, Cormac and Cathbad, whom you dearly admire. Reconcile that if you can without turning them into flesh.”

Senchan stared up at the sky and gulped a deep breath.

“You’re watching human beings.”

“Except for Cú Chulainn,” replied the boy with a quivering smile.

“Well, yes ... of course.”

Behind them the tent door parted and Larene swaggered past.

“I will agree with you on this, though,” said Laeg. “That it’s remarkable *he* has the strength in his neck to hold up a head that size. On the other hand, it makes him easier for us to follow.”

2. Double Folly

Lugaid’s heart stopped when he heard what his brother intended. Cold snow seemed to have filtered into his chest, encrusting his heart. He knew his brother well—knew the futility of trying to talk him out of his murderous plan. Left with just one avenue of hope, he took his chariot and rode across the ford.

He came upon the two defenders of Ulster in amongst the trees. Their embraces were warm, but Lugaid stepped back immediately. “I haven’t much time, and I need an enormous favor of you.” He then explained how his brother had been beguiled into committing himself with “a carrot called Finnabair that they’re waving under every nose that pokes into their tent. They’ve duped Ferbaeth to take his oath to kill you, too, so’s the story. He was, and still is, drunk, which is all that’s saving him so far.”

“Ferbaeth will change his mind when he sobers. We’re too close for such combat. For you, old friend, I’ll spare your brother. But I must incapacitate him at least or duty will require him to come at me again.”

“I shouldn’t care if you hammered the shit from him, so long as the remaining five percent survives.” He hugged Cú Chulainn again. “You are a good friend.” Reassured, he returned to the camp.

Before an hour had passed, the quiet of the copse was broken by the sound of chariot wheels rolling, hooves drumming on the cold ground. Cú Chulainn stood behind a tree and watched Larene urge his chariot on past. Cú Chulainn caught the rear rail and let the chariot yank him in.

When he heard the feet of his guest strike the boards, Larene swung around. He wore leather armor and a crested helmet, but even thus protected his nerve broke and he tried to flee over the rails. Cú Chulainn caught him in the air and spun him around to get a grip on his middle. Then, holding him out of the car, he began to squeeze Larene’s ribs. Quite literally he produced the effect Lugaid had jokingly suggested, and he continued to squeeze with one arm and steer with the other, the end result being an evacuated trail that led across the ford and back to the edge of the army’s camp, where Lugaid waited. As the chariot passed the Munster king, Cú Chulainn tossed his drained brother into his arms, then jumped out and ran off before anyone realized what had happened. “The Ford of Larene’s Spoor,” they called that place afterward.

Ferbaeth sat holding his head in his hands. He had blank spots in his memory—for instance, just how he had gotten back to his small tent—but he remembered all too clearly what he had promised Maeve and Ailell. His brain swelled against the inside of his skull when he stood, but he knew what he had to do and, under cover of the uproar over Larene’s remodeling, he sneaked out of the camp and went into the trees across the river in search of Cú Chulainn. He found the Hound in conversation with Fiachu mac Firaba, but they spotted him slinking toward them and stopped talking. Cú Chulainn leaned toward Fiachu and said, “It may be good that you’re here for this.”

Ferbaeth steeled himself and came boldly the last part of his journey. “I’ve come to renounce my friendship to you,” he informed Cú Chulainn.

“What?” Cú Chulainn was dumbfounded. “To me? I’m your foster-brother. We spent time on Alba together.”

Ferbaeth rubbed at his eyes. “It can’t be helped. I swore an oath. And I’d look a coward before Finnabair.”

Cú Chulainn bit back his acid reply. He could see that Maeve had done this. She breathed evil on everyone who accompanied her. “Take your friendship with you when you go!” he snarled.

He flung curses among the trees as he stomped through the underbrush. A holly-tree had been struck by lightning, snapped off low, leaving just a sliver of a trunk. Blind in his anger, Cú Chulainn slammed his foot down onto the sliver. It thrust through his heel, up inside the skin of his calf, popping out below his knee. In his angry state no pain touched him; he stared at the protruding needle as if the leg belonged to someone else,

as if the dripping sliver were some unexplainable deformity. He bent down, took the shard beneath his heel and tore it out of the ground with part of its roots. In an instant he had drawn it out of his leg; then he flung it away and clamped his hands over the wounds where blood had begun to gush.

Throwing off clods of dirt, the sliver spun back through the woods. Ferbaeth was walking away dejectedly, Fiachu remaining behind to avoid taking any side in the matter. A spray of dirt assaulted Fiachu as the jagged stump spun past. He cried out. Ferbaeth raised his head at the sound, and the sliver drove through the back of his neck and wedged out between his teeth.

Fiachu ran to him but the young man had died in an instant.

Cú Chulainn, having heard Fiachu, too, hobbled hurriedly back. He shut his eyes in anguish over this misadventure. “Probably this is better than if we had fought tomorrow, do you think? We could only have shamed each other and our province. If only he’d listened.”

“I’d say your point was well-taken.”

Cú Chulainn hissed. “Don’t try and cheer me with a joke. Look at all I’ve done today. I took three heads when their pointsman provoked a fight. One was a Galeoin! I’ve no quarrel with Galeoin. Then I gave up Larene to help Lugaid, and now Ferbaeth’s lost to the fit of temper he spurred. Wasted lives, and still no combat here. It’s Maeve, always Maeve, like a worm in every bite of apple.”

Fiachu picked up the body. “I’ll take him back and explain. But choke the anger in your mind, Cú Chulainn—or Maeve’ll make you pay. Pay dearly.”

“Many challenge me. My reputation reaches places I’ve never been. The time must come for me to lose. So Cathbad predicted and so I accepted. I’ll pay when I have to, not before.”

Fiachu did not try to argue further. As he tramped away, he called back, “Who do you think will come out next?” His question frightened a large crow from overhead. It cawed and flapped away. Whatever Cú Chulainn answered, the crow drowned it out.

3. The King of Buan’s Daughter

When Cú Chulainn walked out the far side of the woods, he found two figures approaching from the west. The first was a woman in a small chariot. A grotesque, demonic horse with round white eyes pulled the cart. The wheels did not appear to meet the ground but this might have been an illusion in the snow. The woman wore a bright red cloak that rode low across her breasts and was gathered above her elbow. She had pale skin

and her hair was as red as the pleated cloak. Her brows were this color, too, and were feathered oddly against her forehead. To one side and behind her chariot, a man walked along, driving a strange cow with him. Like the horse, the cow had wide, blind eyes. Cú Chulainn felt he ought to have gleaned something from this but his brain had gone numb to any memories. The herdsman, oddest of all, looked like a rough carving. His body bore pock marks all over it like weathered stone. He wore a squat conical cap and a rope belt around his naked torso. At that distance his dusky face contained vague gouges for eyes, a bulbous nose and a wide, triangular lower lip. This group stopped at some distance. The woman climbed down and approached him alone.

She saw the gash in his leg and her face clouded with concern. He stood rooted while she bent down and draped her cloak around the wound. His leg went as numb as his mind. The color of the cloth grew darker, a silhouette of his calf. The stain—if that was what it was—spread out and vanished into the redness of the whole cloth. When she withdrew it, the wound had healed. Cú Chulainn stared at it, trying to force one coagulated thought to the surface. He could not have said how much time had passed while she knelt.

A question jumped into his mind and he asked it. “Who are you to do such magic?”

“I’m the daughter of King Buan.” She had a soft, scratchy voice that made him itch for her sexual favors. Her identity did not surprise him: the oddness of her had already pointed to the *Sídhe*. The cow and horse looked like nothing so much as creatures from *Manannan’s* sea herd. The weird man was grinning foolishly—an open, black hole of a mouth, toothless.

“You’ve travelled far to be here,” Cú Chulainn said. “Why?”

“Because stories of your greatness have reached even to us. And, hearing them, I fell in love with you. Come deep into the glen and lie with me for a while.” She held out her hand.

Her pale fingers drew him as if she held a cord tied around his waist. He took two shaky steps, but resisted. The muscles stood out down his back. “You can’t expect me to abandon the ford now. Surely if you love me as you claim, you won’t threaten me with such disgrace.”

“I want you, all of you.”

“That much is evident.” He managed to take a step back. “I’ve no time for you or any woman when the whole countryside stands open to these invaders. Go away if you love me.”

Her fingers flexed. His heart thumped and his throat tightened. “I could help you,” she suggested, “if only you’d come with me. Come away. Think of the reward for all you’ve done.” She plucked a gold brooch from her cloak, which then slid down her milky body.

Every thatch of hair on her shone like twilled copper.

Cú Chulainn dug in his heels. He fought to breathe, gasping, writhing in her clutch. He knew that she lied. No one friendly to him would have

tortured him so. “None of what I’ve done,” he hissed, “has been done so that I might part a woman’s legs. Take your help with you as you go.” The mute herdsman frowned.

“If you don’t help me, I’ll hinder,” she threatened. Her fingers pointed accusingly at him. “In the moment when you need your abilities most, I’ll wrap your legs to trip you and keep you from your leap. Locked in place, you’ll be cleaved by your enemy’s sword.”

“No daughter of Buan ever concocted such a threat. If you interfere in my combat, I’ll put a wound in you that no one else can erase.”

The pointing hand began to reshape into a ribbed claw. “Then, I’ll drive the captured herd across the ford and trample you underfoot.” Her body spread out and down. Her fine breasts inflated and sank onto the flesh of her mottled belly.

“Then I’ll sling a stone from the stream into your eye and that socket will stay empty unless I make it otherwise.”

The woman cackled. Her hair darkened to glossy black and sprouted more thickly on her scalp, condensing into feathers. Her beautiful face became a horror with bulging eyes and a great wide grin that stretched nearly to her ears.

“Then I’ll become a lure to lead the Donn against you and he’ll tear you down the middle.” She splayed her spindly legs wider apart. From the feathered hair that curled from her navel to her thighs, a pink bulb emerged and descended to her knees. The brown talons of her feet dug into the cold ground.

“If I see your like in the herd, I’ll hurl a stone to shatter your skinny legs. But tell me, pestilent thing, which terrible sister are you?”

“The Badb, Cú Chulainn, whom no man rejects except for death.” Her eyes had become beads. She clawed at the ground and her enormous pudenda swung against her legs.

“Bilious bird-hag, my fate’s formed already by Cathbad. I owe you nothing.”

The Badb squawked like cloth ripping. Black feathers erupted down her body. She swept up at him and he flung himself onto his back. Her talons clicked past him.

When he rolled to his feet, the chariot, horse, and heifer were gone. The herdsman remained: a roughly carved stone figure planted in the ground, its member poised, its expression vacuous.

4. Battle with a Beard

While Fiachu and Cú Chulainn had spoken, Maeve and Ailell had plied another warrior with the offer of Finnabair. Contentious Loch mac Mofemis had drunk their wine and heard the list of his skills and rewards. The king and queen made one small error in judging Loch—to urge him into battle, they described his opponent as a mere child” and “a youth ripe for killing.”

Loch climbed to his feet and tossed his cup away. “I don’t fight children,” he declared. He refused to be swayed.

When he had gone, Ailell said, “Marvelous. What now?”

“He has a brother.”

“Naturally.”

And so, as the Badb threatened Cú Chulainn, another mac Mofemis entered the king’s tent—an older, quieter man called Long. He had no such qualms about his opponent. He would have fought an infant if he had done the things Cú Chulainn had. As to the matter of Finnabair, Long already had a wife, but not an *adaltrach*—a wife-mistress, subordinate to his wife. Not wishing to waste time, he refused a second cup of wine and, with a cursory salute to the gods of Connacht, who were not his gods, he went out to meet his fate.

In a nearby tent, younger Loch was still fuming over the idea of challenging a child to combat when he heard the women servants of his camp wailing in despair. He thought: So, some other fool has taken up the challenge and died; how many incompetents there are hereabouts, that one child can defeat them all.

He reached down to a chain clipped through a stake beside him. He yanked hard on the chain and a young girl tumbled into his tent. She was dirty, covered in rags and bites from sleeping in the hay with his dogs. Her slave collar was brass and had turned her neck green. Loch ordered her, “Go out and see which idiot’s died now.” He unfastened the chain from the stake and dropped it.

The girl reeled in the chain. She lived for moments such as these—the brief periods when she could run on any trivial task or errand. There had been a time, when she was very young, when no one had chained her; sometimes she had dreams about that time, but it would not come again. Her’s was the slave’s life, best survived by the pretense that serving was an honor. That way one escaped at intervals, to fetch water or carry a message.

None of this was apparent to Loch, who considered all slaves to be an inferior breed, inferior even to his hounds. How often he had watched one of them scurry off, that look of idiot delight on their otherwise blank faces. He could not imagine that a slave might surprise him.

The girl returned at a stumbling pace, her head—in fact, her whole filthy torso—swaying to and fro as if she were drunk. She shuffled up to him without raising her head. Loch saw that her face was striped where fresh tears had washed away some of the dirt. In that moment he had a vision—of something bright and spinning that scraped his throat with rime. He clamped his hands around his neck, then reluctantly viewed his palms, expecting blood.

The girl had gone to her knees in front of him.

Loch tried to shout at her but found his voice throttled. He coughed. “What’s matter? Who’s died?” He cleared his throat.

She sniffled and smeared her face with the back of one hand. “Begging muster’s pardon. It’s yer brother.”

Loch mac Mofemis could not accept this. The girl was an idiot. She had seen a headless body and assumed it to be Long. Her meager tick’s brain couldn’t distinguish between two tartans, much less two similar shades of a cloak. What nonsense. He batted her aside as he went out to see for himself.

The crowd was carrying the body right to him. He stopped dead outside the tent. They brought the body to his feet. There were the rings and bracelets and silver bands of his brother. The torc had been taken with the head. Loch realized coldly that he was now the family leader—he must have that torc. Like it or not, he would have to confront what he had rejected not an hour ago.

Ailell had set a feast for him, knowing full well that he would have to come. Ailell repeated their offer to him in Finnabair’s presence this time. She seemed to take no notice, however, sitting blankly beside them. Was she grieving over his brother, he wondered?

“We want to apologize,” said Ailell. “We’re sympathetic to your plight. After all, if we hadn’t exaggerated Cú Chulainn’s youthfulness to you, your brother would still be alive and you would be ... be receiving so much honor right now for having slain him.” Just then, Maeve came in behind Loch.

“I’d rather fight a man than a whelp,” he persisted.

“Why?” Maeve asked. “Will you turn from him if he fails to meet your specifications? Your brother is slain, your family left without its head both literally and figuratively. Should I send out others before you so the Hound might age like a cask of wine? What do you want, mac Mofemis? He was old enough when he brought down Nad Crantail. He had a beard then.”

“People say it was just mud and grass he’d smeared on.”

“People chatter. He still owns your family.”

He smashed his cup against the ground. “All right! I’ll strike him down once and for all.”

Before he could leave, Maeve reached out and grabbed his arm. “One request. Your brother fell already at this ford. Rather than fight where the waters are tainted, demand your confrontation at the next ford along.”

Ailell fretted. When Loch had gone, he said, "I'm worried that he'll reject the battle when he sees Cú Chulainn at last."

"That is no longer a problem. Before he returned, I sent my bondsmaidens down to the water to taunt the Hound. They pretended to bathe and call out to one another how no one else will face Cú Chulainn because he lacks proof of his manhood. They suggested to each other loudly that he ought to smear his face with berries. Shortly after that, they were 'surprised' by his appearance on the banks above. He had purpled his chin with woad and, more than that, he held a patch of grass to his jaw while he addressed them."

"And while he's gone downstream to fight his new battle, we can steal across and take back the Donn, hmm? It breaks no rules since the bull's already on the other side of the ford."

"You concern yourself too much with your *fir fer* rules of combats. 'Fair play' decisions would not apply to this in any case because Loch's duel has nothing to do with our combats. He has gone out of personal revenge—a family matter meaning nothing to us."

"You have a fine interpretation of the law. What do you think are the chances Loch might actually succeed?"

Finnabair sniffled. Maeve said, "What do you think are the chances of divine intervention on his behalf?"

5. The Baddb's Promise

Duffach brought the news of Loch's impending combat to the Ulster camp. "Gone to demand back the torc mac Mofemis. Hot-blooded by all accounts."

"So it might do to have witnesses," Fergus concluded. He and Duffach set off together. They became confused upon finding the ford abandoned. Numerous chariot tracks led further downstream and the two men followed. They heard the shouting of a small crowd before they arrived at the second ford. Here were the Druid judges. As the two arrived, Gabran the *fili* made his way through a fen of rushes to the water's edge and proclaimed that there would be a great trampling in that place.

Cú Chulainn waded into the water. It reached just below his knee at that spot. Loch mac Mofemis came in. A shieldskin of carved horn covered his shoulders and chest. At this distance, Loch saw that the darkness on Cú Chulainn's chin was a stain like a rare birthmark. He colored with shame. Why had the boy done this, unless to make fun of Loch's pride? Angrily, the Connacht warrior waded in deeper and took the first swing at his enemy.

Cú Chulainn blocked the blow with his shield, then, using its raised umbos, battered Loch away. Loch stumbled, slid, but kept his footing. He splashed forward again. Cú Chulainn moved back for a better stance.

A huge black eel coiled suddenly up his leg. It stretched to his other leg and snarled his other foot, all with such lightning speed that Cú Chulainn was lashed off his feet.

Loch bounded forward, seeing his chance.

Cú Chulainn strained to keep his head above water. The eel slithered up his body, its weight bearing him down. He managed to block the first of Loch's blows with his shield again and raised it blindly to take the next. The eel slid around his throat and dragged his head under the water.

Loch swung with all his might. The shield caught the force of his blow, but the blade slid off and bit into Cú Chulainn's arm.

The water shot up in great gouts as the Hound and eel wrestled. Loch might have killed him then but the violent thrashing and the slapping tail of the eel knocked him sideways time and again. Even so, he got in enough unfended blows to dye the water red.

"By Macha's Mane," Fergus exhorted Duffach, "he's going to die if we don't do something."

"You can't interfere in a combat and you know it." The black *brithem* glowered at Fergus. "All you can do is call to him." Duffach added softly, "Make him mad."

"Sometimes you amaze me." Fergus shoved his way forward, to call out, "Look at that shrunken little dwarf out there. Even the fish can best him!" The crowd started to laugh, some to jeer. Fergus went on derisively, "What did that infant expect to gain against the likes of a real warrior like Loch? And with half of Maeve's army watching, what an embarrassment. I don't dare think of the nasty things that Gabran will say about him afterward." The crowd added their own ridicule. Fergus moved back through them.

"You couldn't have done more if you'd been Bricriu himself," Duffach assured him.

A huge geyser burst up in the middle of the Flurry, sending Loch sprawling, crushing flat the reeds. At the top of the spout, Cú Chulainn squeezed the eel's throat and slit its belly open. He plunged his hand into the gash and tore the slimy monster from its hold. With all his might, he flung it at the crowd. It flew past them and smashed against a boulder. Everyone turned in time to see the eel rupture into a dense black cloud.

Cú Chulainn plummeted back into the stream, seeming to push the geyser back down as he fell. A towering wave formed below and began to roll up the river.

At the previous ford, the Donn had been taken and the other cattle were being escorted back to the camp. The wave appeared with a rumbling. Herdsmen screamed and ran for their lives. The cattle panicked and galloped in every direction. The wave caught many, sweeping men,

horses and cattle along with it. Part of the escaping herd stampeded into the Connacht encampment, ripping through tents and trampling dozens of hapless victims.

Cú Chulainn had terrible wounds on his legs and arms, but the eel had taken the slashes aimed at his belly and head. He wove forward again, up to his knees in blood as much as water. Loch waited for him, shifty in his stance.

Behind Cú Chulainn, the air clapped with thunder. Out of nowhere a small herd of cattle appeared. They hit the water in an instant and he dove for safety. He came up spitting. His fingers had found a good smooth stone under the water. He dropped his sword and pulled his sling from his belt. All that remained was to identify the Badb among the cattle.

He found her slinking behind them in the guise of a she-wolf. Before he could get a clear shot off, she had turned the herd away from the fleeing crowd and was driving them back at him again. Cú Chulainn flung the stone, then made a leap to carry him over the horns of the steers bearing down on him. The stone sailed true and burst the wolf's eye. The cattle slowed and began to wander aimlessly. He drove them out of the river, but the wolf had disappeared.

Loch hung back now. His opponent was obviously weakened but not to the extent he couldn't fight; and getting close to him might prove fatal, too, if whatever these demons were tried another ploy against him. Loch scanned the riverbank.

Where the cattle milled about, one huge red heifer suddenly broke from the herd and charged down toward the shallows. The other cattle turned and followed, more like an army of ants than a herd of cows. Cú Chulainn swung about to see the heifer, her head down, coming straight at him. He tumbled out of her path into deeper water. Diving down, he collected another stone, fit it in his sling, then kicked back up. He burst from the surface in a somersault that carried him over the herd. Upside down, he located his target and snapped off his shot. The wide flat stone cut through the forelegs of the heifer and she crashed down on her knees. Her body sank out of sight as the water turned to red froth around her.

Silence fell upon the scene. The cattle had become bovinely sluggish once more. The crowd dared to edge back to the bank. Cú Chulainn dragged himself back into the middle of the stream. He began to shiver.

Fergus thought that he must be entering his Warp Spasm; instead, Cú Chulainn's eyes rolled up and he began to chant.

"I stand in solitude
against all comers, even those
who are not human try my edge
to see how sharp I am.

"Blades grow dull if not honed
I take the challenge from these

Thieves of cattle and our courage.
But, Conchovor, come soon now, rise and challenge!

“I am the only tree not knocked flat by the wind.
You others had better find your roots again.
No fortress wall is built of just one stick—
a barrier takes many many trunks.

“Now I grow weary.
Laeg, send me my best
If I’m to challenge another fool
in this contumely contest!”

He made clicking noises in his throat as he came out of the chant. His eyes opened wide and blazed like prisms catching the sunlight. He sought for his sword in the blood-muddy water and found nothing but Loch’s shield floating there.

Loch realized that if he did not strike now he would have no other chance. He wrenched free of the muck and slogged at Cú Chulainn again.

Fergus stopped breathing. His belly became a knot.

6. The Old Woman’s Cup

Loch swung a fierce blow in a roundhouse. Cú Chulainn scooped up the shield and fended him off. Loch swung again with all his might and the shield split in two. The blade slit across Cú Chulainn arm’s.

Something flashed on the surface of the water. Members of the crowd skittered back, thinking some new monster was about to arise. Others observed the figure of Cú Chulainn’s charioteer waist-deep further upstream. They watched what appeared to be a silver needle skim past the bank where they clustered.

Cú Chulainn flung the halves of shield at Loch and leaped out of the shallows. Loch fell back from the killing blow he had intended. He glimpsed something bright beneath Cú Chulainn’s foot, something candescent that moored his attention. For a moment he forgot his purpose—long enough for the Gai Bulga to seek a space beneath his horned plating and snap out from the Hound’s foot as if with a will of its own.

Loch tried to slash down at the mangling spear but he lacked the speed and cut the water behind it. By then his fingers were stiffening and pain had overtaken his thoughts. He slid down in the water and sat with it up to his armpits.

Cú Chulainn said, "Yield to me."

Loch said, "Done. The family mac Mofemis needs its torc no longer, now it lacks the head for displaying."

"True words. You won something, anyway."

Loch mac Mofemis shuddered. His head sank against his chest. He might only have been sleeping in the water, but everyone knew he was dead. In leaning forward, he had brought the tip of the Gai Bulga out into view, where it showed like a hooked beak in his back.

The Druids declared the combat at an end and gave the ford to Cú Chulainn. The champion tottered toward Loch. He moved with mechanical purpose. The world grew dim in his eyes. The air buzzed in his ears.

Laeg helped Cú Chulainn sit in the back of the chariot, then hurried off to gather herbs for the seeping wounds that laced him. While Cú Chulainn sat there, a crippled old woman came hobbling, leading a cow along the edge of the water. He wondered if she were some peasant who had stolen one of the scattered herd. He smiled to himself as he watched her. His world had gone pale and dreamy.

Seeing him, the old woman limped up from the stream. She had one eye and squinted to hide the lack of the other. As she climbed the bank, she kept one hand pressed hard against her belly as though it troubled her. The cow plodded dully after her.

"Sir," she said to him, "you look turned inside out. I can see bone and muscle and vein where I'd be expecting skin. Would ye be dying?"

"Not, no," he wheezed. "Weary enough, though ... to beg a cup of milk off you."

"That I'll gladly give." She drew a cup from beneath her ragged cloak, stepped back to the cow, and bent under it to squeeze a teat of its pendulous udder.

When the cup was full, she carried it to him. "Here's to ye, sir."

"And good health to you." He sipped the warm milk, savoring it as if it were the gift of life. "May you be blessed by all the gods of our province for the kindness of your cup."

The old woman straightened up and stopped pressing at her belly. "Let me refill it." She took it from his weak fingers, returning it to him full after squeezing from the cow's second teat.

Cú Chulainn drank, eyes closed, in ecstasy. "My blessing on you again," he sighed when he was done. Milk dripped from his chin.

The old woman raised her brows as if in alarm. The empty socket on the right of her nose filled up with an eye. "Here, here, now," she said, taking the cup away from his trembling grasp. His chin rested on his chest. She filled the cup from the cow's third teat and fitted it back into his hand. She had to place his other hand around it to keep him from spilling the milk. "You need drink one cup more to restore yourself, my lad. Just one more."

He wanted to fall back asleep in the chariot, but the woman sounded so fearful for his health that he mustered the strength to drink down the third cup. The milk was sweet and satisfying.

Dimly, he saw a hand reach under his nose to take the cup away. It was a slender, milky white hand with red lacquered nails.

This troubled him enough to rouse himself from his lethargy. He forced his head up, whispering, “Emer?”

The illusion of Buan’s daughter stood before him. She smiled in smug satisfaction. He understood how he had been tricked. “If I could,” he gasped, “I’d repeat my work on you.”

“But you can’t now and you’ve done more than you imagined you would, for which I thank you. Three seems unlucky for you. Perhaps four would suit you better.” She offered him the cup once more. “Drink this one and your wounds will heal up for a time.”

“How long?”

“That’s my secret. If you wish any strength at all, then drink it.”

“You’re an evil bitch. Evil. You’ve lied to me before.”

“Evil has no allegiance. I’ll save you for my own reasons.”

He saw clearly that she was telling the truth. He reached for the fourth cup. When he had finished it, he found the Badb was gone. The cup turned to dust in his fingers. He shook, then teetered back onto the rough boards and fell asleep.

In that sleep he dreamed that six more warriors came to collect his head. They glared at him with rodent eyes, rabid with the urge to slice up his life. He sprang up and swung his sword in a great arc that seemed to stretch for miles, lopping off treetops and hilltops as well as six heads. He saw himself from high above, the way Tuan watched the Battle of Magh Turad—saw the bodies spout their fountains, saw the rolling heads blink and lose sight; saw the sky turn black as if a raven as big as night had spread her wings over the earth. He tumbled out of the sky and sank into himself. The blackness followed.

When he awoke, Laeg sat with him, looking very grim. Behind Laeg a young boy appeared, all hazy like a ghost. Cú Chulainn closed his burning eyes and woke a second time, from the dream of having awakened.

XIV: THE TREACHERIES OF MAEVE & AILELL

1. *Cu Chulainn Meets Maeve*

“By my reckoning,” said the queen in the firelight, “the first Ulstermen will rise up in two nights. After that, the plague of pain will let go swiftly and we can expect to be confronted by an army that has the advantage of surrounding us. I say the time for your warrior ways is over. We have abided by rules of challenge invented by a barbaric caste who drink till they are drunk, then slaughter each other without regard for those self-same rules.”

Fergus mac Roich drew lines in the ground with a stick, seemingly deaf to her. Duffach started up angrily but was pulled down by his belt. The other warriors who filled the cramped tent muttered or made disagreeable faces. None contradicted her as yet. She obviously had more to say on the subject.

“These methods of arbitration—some of you have used them to Ulster’s advantage ... perhaps all of you. Well, I am neither a warrior nor some third-rate sovereign to be led onto the boar’s tusks by such a pack of hounds, and I will have done with you and your challenges now. Go and complain to Ailell of your wounded pride—it means nothing to me. I have the Donn back now and will tolerate no attempt to slow my progress further. You are warned. Dilatory behavior hereafter will reap lethal reward.”

Fergus stopped drawing in the dirt. He dropped the stick and dusted his hands, all the while giving Maeve an up-from-under look. When she refused to meet his gaze, he turned it on her Druids in the hope they would rule against her. The priests lowered their eyes. Of course, he thought, they would see everything her way; they would side with her if only to defy the warrior class. Warriors preferred simple answers—life or death, black or white, while Druids demanded that codes be observed, laws enforced. Cathbad had told Fergus once, “Warriors are fires, blazing hot, and Druids simply the firetenders. We stoke in accordance with in-

structions from the gods. Much of the confusion that arises is due to the gods' being more fickle than any man, doubling our task. We must act, often, beyond our instructions to ensure that the blaze doesn't consume everything."

Fergus considered that Maeve's glaring error lay in her failure to recognize that the code of single combat always held sway, even in those drunken brawls she dragged into the dispute. It was so ingrained in a warrior's character that the code replaced instinct; ply him with drink, take away every shred of thinking and reasoning power—the warrior would still be left with that code.

He scraped the dirt with his stick again. There was no point arguing that with her. She could not see it from her position. Her needs dominated her thoughts. On the other hand, so did his. Deep down inside, Fergus knew what he wanted: a bloody confrontation between Ulster and Connacht, a battle so fierce that every hand in Ulster would answer the call, a clash that would put Eogan mac Durthact in front of him. That was what Fergus needed. Had he confessed this lust to Maeve, he was certain she would have understood, even sympathized with him; but she would not in any way have allowed it to sway her. Fergus resigned himself to doing nothing. Screaming at Ailell—and there were some set off now to do just that—would gain nothing, for Ailell was of that different caste, also. No, he told himself as he stabbed the stick into the dirt. The hopes of Fergus mac Roich rested with the Hound of Culann.

His wounds had receded within the hour of the Badb's promise, but Laeg kept him smothered in balms nevertheless, knowing that the magic of the weird sisters would lapse at the most treacherous moment. He intended to treat Cú Chulainn as if the healed wounds had festered.

The onset of night found them at Focherd, seated by their fire, chewing tender slices of boiled beef. Cú Chulainn's arms and legs shone like milky quartz from the unguents smeared on him.

A messenger from Connacht emerged out of the darkness. His name was Traighthren, and the two warriors invited him to share their meal. Grateful, he squatted beside their fire and rubbed his arms. After awhile, he said, "You know, there are runners everywhere right now, out looking for your camp?"

"We've seen their torches," Laeg replied. "It's simple really—we knew you'd retreat once you'd stolen the Donn. So we came here to Focherd to stop you. It's the most direct way, but wherever you went, it wouldn't have mattered much. It's all lowland around here. Anyplace else, you'd have to cross the Nith and its tributaries at least twice." All the while he chatted on, Laeg eyed the messenger scrutinizing Cú Chulainn. What tales would the armies have invented by now? And what would this fellow add when he returned? A description of some polished, gleaming creature with

slicked-back hair and not a trace of a wound on him? That ought to set them all jabbering. “Why are you trying so hard to find us?”

Traigthren realized he was being asked a question. “Ah, well, to put it simply, the queen—Queen Maeve—would request a meeting with Cú Chulainn on the heights of Ard Aighnech this morning before dawn. He is to come unarmed and alone to her. She will come unarmed, too, with only her female attendants to protect her from him. This much trust is put forward.”

“She could trust me with her life if I didn’t want it so badly,” Cú Chulainn said. “Go tell her ... I’ll come. And alone.”

Warmed, Traigthren stood. With a final scrutiny of Cú Chulainn gnawing at a bone, he ran off into the darkness again.

“You must be mad to agree to it!” Laeg chided.

Cú Chulainn observed him over the bone. “Why?”

“Because her laws are above yours and mine. She holds to Druidic law and that law states that battle codes of equity apply to warriors alone.”

“Where is the fault in that logic?”

“It isn’t a fault, it’s the specificity of the thing. Druids define a warrior as someone with a weapon. If you give up your weapons, you’re governed instead by Coward’s Law, by which legality you’re fair game. Unarmed, you can be sliced as they see fit. The Connacht Druidry will support it by saying you renounced your rights.”

Cú Chulainn tossed aside his bone. “That smells peculiarly of Maeve.”

“It should. Sometimes, Cucuc, you astonish me. You tell me constantly that she’s not to be trusted, that she reneges on every promise or else fills her offers like a meatpie with chunks of deception. Yet, here’s an offer—obviously to destroy you—and you accept it with complete credulousness. In many ways, my dear friend, you are as innocent as Finnabair. If you insist on going alone, at least for your driver’s peace of mind take a sword!”

“Very well. But I’ll hide it under a leather shirt, strapped to my back. If she’s straight with her offer, then I’ll appear straight in my acceptance.”

Not many hours later, while Laeg tried unsuccessfully to sleep, Cú Chulainn climbed the height of Ard Aighnech, guided by the light of a torch. At the top he found the queen awaiting him and encircled by fourteen cloaked bondsm maidens, their identities owned by the shadows. With their rigid postures, they reminded him of standing stones, a ring guarding an altar stone. All he could see of that “stone” was her feet. For days he had observed her concealment within her circle of shields. He found it hilarious that even here she feared him enough to hide behind her women. Then his eyes narrowed. There was something too martial in the positioning of those cowled *cumals*. Women warriors might stand that way, but not slaves.

“Maeve,” he called out, “a *gift* for you.” He flung his torch into the midst of the circle. The stones took life, scuttling like crabs away from the fire. Their hoods fell back. Fire revealed hard female faces, some painted

up for war, some scarred by it, all of them intent upon him. As they moved out, they bent down to pick up javelins hidden in the trampled brown grass and patches of snow. Cú Chulainn scowled as he reached under his thick shirt and drew his sword.

Fourteen javelins shot across the height, flying toward one point. Cú Chulainn began to spin in place, his blade whipping up and down his body. This was the Windmill Feat, the Feat of *Cuilithe* that Aife had taught him. Faster than the eye could follow, he spun. Every spear point met his sword and snapped away at an oblique angle. The wide row of warriors found their neighbors' weapons shooting back at them. Without shields, they could only dive for cover. Ten of the women fell, impaled on their own steel. The remaining four turned to Maeve for orders, but she had fled. They drew their swords and advanced on Cú Chulainn. He still spun, fueled now by anger, his blade whipping. Like a water spout he suddenly moved, skimming the grass. The warriors tried to unite, to encircle him, but he bobbed and whirled and lopped off all four heads.

Maeve had barely reached her tent when the call went up that something monstrous was descending upon them. Down from the height, the spinning pillar whisked, nearly transparent in its revolutions. Rocks away from it. The thing passed from view into a stand of trees and holly shrubs, and some of the nearer perimeter guards ran up to attack. Before the thing appeared again it was preceded by bits of bark, twigs and branches, all flung off the windmill with enough force to pass through other trees, rocks, and perimeter guards. The survivors abandoned their plan and scattered for their lives.

The whirlwind entered the camp, shredding tents, casks and wagons, throwing off burning peat from fires. The warriors learned quickly that the wind had a razor's edge. It blackened the snow with blood and steaming debris that was barely recognizable as human.

Its path deflected this way and that randomly. Everyone ran in every direction to avoid it, crashing into one another or accidentally flying straight into the lethal spout. It veered up the side of the height again, then spun away, vanishing down the road toward Focherd. People came out to watch the departure, young Cormac among them.

"Maybe that thing will go kill Cú Chulainn and his driver," someone offered.

Cormac replied, "You idiot, that *was* Cú Chulainn." He saw Fergus mac Roich heading for the king's tent and went after him.

Ailell met them outside.

"Have you had enough?" Fergus asked.

"How many?"

"Who knows? Twenty, maybe thirty. Most are unidentifiable. And that's not counting the fourteen women who ascended Ard Aighnech with your wife but didn't come back."

“And I sent five others,” Ailell confessed glumly, “to take him in his sleep.”

“You’ll never learn, will you? Your province may be the center of wisdom as Maeve so often espouses, but his skill supersedes your wise counsel. It’s the well-handled weapon that kills.”

Ailell glowered at him. “How well do you handle that weapon of yours, Fergus?” He noted Cormac shaking his head in exasperation.

“Go on,” Fergus urged, “make your jokes. She’s lost more warriors than you so the bull won’t give her what she wants just now. But you’re a long way from home. And you still have to cross Muirthemne again, *his* home.”

“What can you suggest?”

“Go back to single combats. Honor his way of life that much.”

Ailell seemed about to argue but finally hissed a great jet of steam into the darkness and said, “For now. But we’ll send one every hour to hold him in place while the rest cross elsewhere and head to Dun Dealgún. We’ll sort out a new course and strategy by then.”

Fergus and Cormac walked away together. “We should go ahead of the rest,” Cormac suggested. “Don’t you think?”

“Probably. I just hope that, without us there to jibe him, he doesn’t get trapped the way he did with mac Mofemis.”

2. Class Struggle Defined

“How can they get away with this?” Senchan demanded. “How can they cheat Cú Chulainn?”

“It isn’t cheating.”

“What would you call it—fair play? Rotten bastards.”

Laeg cocked an eyebrow. “Oh, and is it name-calling now, my brave lad? Perhaps it isn’t fair—not to the modern eye. Perhaps it isn’t fair to anyone, anyplace, any time. What you must understand is that you’re observing two separate strata of my world in collision. Druids versus warriors. One brand of mysticism confronting the other. Here, sit down there.”

Senchan got down, crossing his legs petulantly. Laeg had pulled him out of the encampment, back to the circle of stones on Muirthemne Plain. Looking at them, he realized there were only two stones unexplained. One was the strangely polished one that finished the ring. The other was the huge center stone, the one Laeg had trembled to touch years ago when this began.

The sun rode low in the afternoon sky. Senchan could hardly believe this was still the same day as when he had arrived, yet that was what Laeg insisted. “Tell me what you’re thinking,” Laeg said.

Senchan’s lips pressed together. “I,” he began, but faltered and looked away.

Laeg moved around a stone and hunkered down in front of him. A wry smile played on Laeg’s lips and returned the sparkle to his eye. “The Dagda bless me if you aren’t worried on his account, just like Fergus.”

“What if I am?”

“What? It means you’ve come to care how it goes for him.”

“So I do. Now everything’s held up because of this interruption.”

Laeg sat. “No, no, not interruption—clarification. You’re operating under a misguided presumption and it’s vital you understand how it was, why these things that look inexplicable to you were the natural inclinations of the individuals—why Maeve scorned warrior laws and how she could support defying them. Above all else, you must come to understand this.”

“Why?”

“Because without knowledge of what holds up the tale, the telling gets lost. One false turn and there’s no truth thereafter. This is a good example. The order of Druids is as old as memory can recall, old as the *Sídhe* and the invasions that all the bards know. The Druids worship knowledge for its own sake but consider that knowledge to be of danger to the world. Since they’re the only ones know just what they’re guarding, I find it hard to argue with them on that point. Everything they know is kept secret: their communing with the gods—secret, both in manner and location; their skill at forming weaponry—secret; written language—secret. Just the sliver of history dividing you and me reveals their wisdom. You have your writing now, open to those who take the time to learn it, and where are the tales? Who recognizes the skill needed in the telling, save for a scattering of monks and a handful of toothless antediluvians?”

“I do.”

“Yes, but Senchan, who else has shared your experience? Right now you have as much knowledge as any bard of my time who sang these adventures.” He got up and strode from stone to stone as he spoke. “Druids and warriors are utterly polar. Druids nurture knowledge. Warriors slaughter it. The advantage goes to the Druids because of their secrecy: warriors fear them. Their skill with words makes them too dangerous.

“You said that before. How can words harm you?”

“Oh, come now, Senchan. Haven’t I used words to provoke you, to turn you around? Hasn’t your foster-father hurt you more with his curses and scorn than with his fist? Which sting lasts longest? And *his* attacks are brutishly spewed jibes. Imagine a group of mysterious people whose whole existence is bound up in the precise manipulation of language to either support or tear down individuals. Remember Levarcham, who was so skilled

at her craft that all Ulster avoided her? People in my time would jump off a bridge or crawl up inside a beehive rather than confront a satirist. A good satire spreads like fire. Embarrassment hangs over it like smoke; and the wider the fire the thicker the smoke, until the shame presses so much the victim can't bear it. They die. Words kill them.

"Satirists are part of the Druidic order. They protect the order from prying warriors. Cú Chulainn has no such people at his disposal, and worse than that, Connacht is the center of Druidry. The best of them are there. His one protection is his divinity.

"Druids side with kings over warriors. Always. Cú Chulainn's specialness fends them off, yes, but the rules that govern his life as a man of Ulster do not rule Maeve and Ailell or their advisors. They exist on a level above the warriors' code, along with the Druids, and this allows them to manipulate that code."

"But Cathbad—"

"All Druids, Senchan. Cathbad's more sympathetic to the code because he once blundered along as a warrior. Nevertheless, had he not been struck down by Macha's Curse, he would have been by my side at every ford, mocking the warriors who opposed Cú Chulainn, though Cathbad was not a satirist as such."

"What is he, then? A judge?"

"That, and more. Cathbad's a rare one. He combines all aspects of Druidry, and he's renowned as are few others. He is a *teacher*."

Senchan's brows knitted. "But, then, wouldn't he have to side with Connacht?"

"No. His allegiance is to his province, to the king and queen on his level who govern his province, a choice elected for him by the gods. In his case, as you saw, by the Bull Dream, which the gods control. Druids did not oppose one another as warriors do. Their conflicts rage *through* the warriors."

"What about the Donn?"

"The Donn embodies the warrior in its wildness, in its willful intractability." He pushed away from Macha's stone. "But now it's time to go back, to make action of my words."

Senchan got up and walked to the last stone—the one of polished facets. He tried to pass through it and smacked his head on its cold surface.

"Ah, not that one. We're not quite there yet. We return through Setanta's stone." Senchan came back, rubbing the bump on his head. "The combats are far from over," Laeg explained.

3. Finnabair

Cú Chulainn's camp at Dun Dealgún lay in amongst a cluster of great stone blocks, all of which had been hauled from a quarry and deposited here, many of them already chiseled into tall standing stones, but others on their sides, rough and as yet undetailed as to their final appearance. Lugaid sought him out and found him there, sitting cross-legged on a wide block, watching the sun rise over the hills, a wide band of purple sky under golden-edged clouds.

The king of Munster reached up from his chariot and clasped Cú Chulainn's hand. "Ailell sent me," he admitted. Laeg came up behind him and, climbing up on his rail, pulled himself up beside Cú Chulainn. "That's not such a terrible thing," he said.

"I'm beginning to wonder, myself," Lugaid replied, "but that's my lookout. Ailell's decided to stop offering his daughter to the army."

"More like he's running out of warriors to accept the offer."

"And she's not got the sense to see how she's being used," Laeg added.

"True," admitted Lugaid. "She lacks some of what her mother has too much of."

"That's probably the cause of it just there—not enough to go around."

Lugaid mac Nois laughed. "It's refreshing to engage in such dialogue as this. I've missed it lately."

"They didn't send you out just to tell me Finnabair's been taken off the board."

"No, I'm here to pronounce the best part of the piece. Ailell wants to offer his Finnabair to *you*."

Cú Chulainn sat dumbfounded, his mouth hung open. Laeg scratched his hair, then said, "One can only admire his gift for machination. Who could have foreseen this?"

"Surely it's a great hoax."

"I think not. He seemed fairly adamant in the particulars."

"You know me, Lugaid. I don't trust him a whit."

"I told him he's wasting his time."

"But you must tell him he isn't. That is, if he cares to assemble a celebration, lead her out and betrothe us. Then I'll accept."

It was Lugaid's turn to be shocked. "How can you say that?"

"Why, it's simple. He brings her out, gives her to me as my *adaltrach*, since in no other way can I comply—and Emer must agree first—then I'll swear to leave off murdering his army for a while. Of course, my good father-in-law and his party will be expected to stay around a bit. Think of the time this gambit of his can devour."

Lugaid nodded, then broke into a grin as understanding dawned.

After he had gone off, still laughing, Laeg said, “We must be prepared for anything.”

“Yes, but Ailell has more warrior in him than his wife does. Ulster *must* rise soon. The Pangs have to leave off, or else I’ll drive this incursion from our province myself.”

Laeg replied solicitously, “There are times, my friend, when I do not understand you—and no man or woman knows you more intimately than I.”

Cú Chulainn’s sparkling eyes hooded. “I often do not know myself. Sometimes it’s as if another’s will seeps in and spurs me to greater deeds than I think possible, while I watch myself as from a secure place within—the mortal side standing apart and observing the godly half at its purpose.”

Neither of them spoke after that. They jumped down from the stone block and went to the chariot. A short time later, with the dawn a band of fire behind them, two figures appeared on the hillside. Laeg pointed them out.

Cú Chulainn buckled on his sword, tucked his sling into his belt. “At least no one will be disguised as a hand-maiden today.” He wove his way among the assemblage of stone blocks and pillars, pausing when he could glimpse the two coming down the hill. At the far side of the blocks, he stepped into view and called, “Ailell, I’m here to receive your generous gift.”

The king waved and called back, “I’ll betroth you two from here if you don’t mind. And she’ll come back with me after—you’ll get her once all the terms are settled. But not before, assuredly.”

Cú Chulainn shaded his eyes and squinted at the man dressed in the king’s robes. It certainly was not Ailell, even though the imitator had made a brave attempt. One more deceit had been practiced. He could not believe for a moment that Lugaid had been a knowing party to it; no, the king of Munster had been tricked, too. Cú Chulainn loaded his sling from the debris around the nearest pillar, then started up the hill.

The “king” pointed at him. “Don’t you come further, treacherous wretch. I’m not willing to see eye to eye on this.”

Lights began to flicker around Cú Chulainn’s pupils.

“Um,” the impostor stammered, “kings are above warriors—stay down where you belong.” He glanced back up the hill, sizing the distance to the crest. Before he could take a step, a flying stone took him off his feet. Unintimidated by high pronouncements, the stone passed through him and continued on.

Cú Chulainn ran up, his sword drawn. The body beneath the robes was familiar to him. “That’s the king’s fool, the one called Tamun the Stump,” he muttered, more to himself than to the girl standing rigidly beside him. The identity of the trickster offended him more than anything Connacht had done to him so far. They treated him as no better

than a fool by this; but they must have been certain that the deceit would work—they had allowed the fool to come here with the real Finnabair. She could not bring herself to look at him, but he studied her face carefully, her figure the picture of grace even in this moment of terror. He could understand why so many warriors had come against him for this prize; but even as he acknowledged her beauty, his rage erased his reason.

He grabbed her piled, braided hair and dragged her off her feet, snatched up the leg of Tamun the Corpse and pulled him along, too, to the base of the hill.

Cú Chulainn selected a stone that had already been partially worked. Mallets and chisels lay on the ground around it as if the mason had been seized by the Pangs in the middle of a stroke. The stone would serve for the Hound's purpose. With one swift, deft cut, he sliced the stone in half vertically, so hard a blow that the groove was left smoking. Putting away the sword, he embraced one of the halves and lifted it up, over his head. Then he flung it down. The stone embedded in the ground. He repeated this with the second stone, and the two stuck out of the hillside like two calcified fingers as high as his head.

He picked up Tamun by the back of his tunic and one leg and swung the body around and down onto the tip of the wider stone. The corpse cracked and split through the middle, impaled.

He turned abruptly to Finnabair. In all that time she had not dared to move. Her eyes bulged from the pressure of fear. Her repeated, flicking glances at him told her that the beautiful boy who had slain Tamun and looked her over on the hill was turning by degrees into something nightmarish. The Warp Spasm had begun to contort him, tying him in knots of fury. That by itself would have been hideous enough; but the twisting of his muscles had triggered the release of the Badb's Curse and all along the ridges of muscle that pulsed and blistered on him his skin split open like the skin of a broiling sausage, spewing blood and flesh over the stone, over the grass. Such was the Badb's intention, to destroy him by his own unnatural powers while he, in his blind rage, could not help but tear himself apart.

He roared and grabbed Finnabair by her braids again, ripping them loose from the jeweled pins that held them. Before she knew what he had done, he cut the three lengths of hair from her head. Then he gripped her around the waist with fingers swollen and as gnarled as roots, and he lifted her upside down over his misshapen head. Her skirts slid down around her torso, enclosing the both of them in a darkness redolent with the smell of her. "Hereafter," he burred, "no one but I will satisfy you. No more carrot for your family to hang 'tween the army and me. No-more-fools!" She heard gravel scrape and sensed his turning. His hands shifted to flip her back over. He swung her down.

Driven between her legs, the tip of the stone tore her open. She shrieked in unimaginable pain. The sound, like that of a whole flock of birds, ech-

oed and re-echoed all the way back to her father's tent. Her skirts settled over her legs and the stone that spread them. She hung there, her feet just off the ground, body twitching, head tilted to one side, her mouth slack and spilling drool. Her unblinking eyes stared through the monster that, puling, stumbled back from her. More wounds spurted open, spraying her with his blood.

Now his form began to dwindle: the Badb had won; the full transformation could not take place. His eyes rolled wildly. Pink foam flecked his chin. He began to wobble back through the maze of stones, smacking into them, smearing them with red shadows of himself and coating himself with their thick gray powder. He emerged on the other side in his mortal form but nearly unrecognizable under the coat of bloody gruel.

Laeg saw him fall forward and roll the distance to the lip of the embankment and over the brink. He dropped like a stone into the swirling Nith. The dark water began to bubble and hiss. By the time Laeg reached there, dead fish covered the surface. They had poached to perfection.

4. Turning Back the Clock

Ailell sat in a dark tent where he had ordered his daughter placed. Three Druids had cared for her since they had found her beside Tamun. She had not awakened. Her eyes would sometimes open and move, but in an ungoverned manner. A feverish sweat lay on her brow and lip, and she made tiny whimpering noises every few minutes; but she could not hear him when he called nor make any coherent sounds of her own. "Cú Chulainn has put some terrible *geis* upon her," suggested one of the Druid doctors. Ailell ignored the suggestion—the Druids had been unable to succeed with any cure. Of course they blamed the Hound. Ailell blamed himself. How did that indefatigable youth see through Tamun's disguise? Had the fool screwed up his part? Ailell had thought the likeness uncanny or he would never have allowed Finnabair to go off at all. How could someone who had never met him recognize the difference? Why had he not listened to Maeve this time and sent warriors to protect his girl?

His thoughts stopped at Maeve as against a wall. MacRoth had returned from wherever she had sent him. Within an hour he had gone off again, doggedly leading three satirists along with him. Ailell couldn't fathom it. Later, when Finnabair was well, he would confront his wife over this enigma. For now he must stay at his daughter's side.

In locating Finnabair the army had found the bridge across the Nith unguarded and no sign of Cú Chulainn. They had pushed on from there to the ruins of the earthen fortress called Breslach Mor.

It had been an exceptional journey: no one had died. Not one stone had come flying into their midst, not one spear or errant chariot had appeared to hinder their march. No river monsters, no whirligigs. Outside, mallets clopped against tent pegs, warriors hunted up game for food, and servants blew on sparks to get the dozens of fires going beneath the cauldrons full of snow. Inside, Ailell tried to guess why the Hound had let them be, why he had not killed Finnabair, and how long they had before the demon child of Ulster set upon them again. How long before his daughter would be well and whole?

He stretched and drew aside the fur blanket on the door, then slowly scanned the bluish landscape of hill upon hill. "Where do you lurk now, Warped One?" he asked. Finnabair moaned and he dropped the fur and turned away.

The answer to his question lay not far from Breslach Mor on a western height called Lergas. Dozens of cromlechs covered the flat snow-covered height like monstrous petrified mushrooms. The two heroes were at the very center of the cemetery. Laeg had made a bed of grass covered with cloaks and had put Cú Chulainn upon it, his spear and sword at his side. Wind slipped through crevices and made the cromlechs howl. The stones kept the force of the wind off them, but the sound had Laeg fidgeting and glancing fretfully into the blackness under each capstone. He had chosen the cemetery of Lergas to ward off the Connacht army, figuring that none would set foot in here, while Cú Chulainn regained some strength. The idea had not been to frighten himself to death.

He left Cú Chulainn and crept off to gather wood for a fire. He wanted to build it up before night set in, ostensibly to keep his friend warm; in truth he did not care for the idea of roaming through Lergas in the dead of night for a few sticks to burn.

Upon returning, he set down his wood and lifted the blankets to check Cú Chulainn's wounds. They still seeped like cracks in a wine keg, and Laeg had already used the last of his herbs to salve the worst of them. Things did not look hopeful, he admitted grimly. He put some snow in a small pot and melted this over his fire, then added some leeks and dried marjoram he had scavenged.

Wind moaned in one of the furthest tombs; others picked up the sound like a chorus of despairing souls. Laeg edged nearer the fire. He would not be sleeping this night. The soup was thin, yellowish. The smell, at least, made him feel good.

He fed some of it to Cú Chulainn, and soon the warrior came to. His darkly ringed eyes barely flickered. His stiff mane of black hair stuck to his cheeks and neck.

"Where ... is the army now?" he wheezed.

"Below. We're on Lergas."

"They've crossed the river, come far. Ulster?"

Laeg shook his head.

Cú Chulainn's hand brushed against his weapons. He gripped the Gai Bulga, fumbled for his sword, then used them to maneuver himself to his feet, Laeg protesting all the while. The effort of standing, even braced by the two weapons, took all the strength from him. Seized with unendurable despondency, he screamed out into sky, a warrior's scream that wound through the *cromlechs*, bursting out from the hill.

A thousand eyes in Breslach Mor looked up at the hill where the black gravestones stood ghostly, then at each other, then back at the food which suddenly became quite important.

A few strands of mist wove out of the tombs. Laeg did not see it at first—he was too concerned with catching Cú Chulainn as he fell, laying him down and piling the blankets on him again. After he forced the Hound to take more soup, he stoked the fire and lifted the pot to take some soup himself. That was when he saw the mist—and the form it had taken. It hung over the edge of the hill, an amorphous thing with huge eyes and teeth, the spaces between those features filling with deeper blackness every moment. The pot and wooden spoon dropped from his hands, forgotten. Never in his fiercest nightmares had he anticipated seeing the Nemain take shape. She was a huge head, shot through with stars. Her bared teeth opened and a howl emerged that shook the whole hillside.

The blackness rose up, whirling, then swept down, out of sight. Still he did not move, listening to her howl. He knew where she had gone and he was more than glad not to be in that camp. After quickly ascertaining that Cú Chulainn would be all right, Laeg skittered through the *cromlechs* to the edge of the hill.

The night had split in two with the Nemain's cry. The entire camp rattled from the sound. Weapons fell over; casks blew up; teeth set to chattering so hard that the ivory cracked in some mouths. Two dozen warriors dropped dead on the spot as the blackness circled the earthen walls, unable to penetrate into the fort, or so it seemed. The forces of Connacht huddled, shivering, their hands to their ears. They lay on top of each other and yowled like dogs or leaned up to their fires, close enough to singe their beards but close enough as well to mask the substance of night that beat at the ramparts.

Laeg, meanwhile, had been distracted by a red mist that had begun to creep down the hillside, rolling like a centipede over his feet. He rushed out of its path, then turned to watch it flow like a river of blood beneath the Nemain and into Breslach Mor. Once inside the desiccated ramparts it swelled, filling up the fortress until the fires dimmed to dusky glows. Within the mist, the warriors lost sight of one another. The Nemain spun suddenly into the sky. Her howl trailed off, died.

The mist spilled out, filling the entire valley beneath Lerga. Its color seeped into the landscape, turning everything ruddy as if beheld in the light of a blood-drenched moon. As Laeg looked on, a bright figure formed in the mist on the far side of Breslach Mor and strode into the thick wall,

reappearing instantly on the near side as if it had jumped the distance. Laeg held his breath. Some instinct told him not to act out of fear and not to move just yet.

The figure became a man, dressed in clothing from another time and place. The light soaking the valley did not play upon him. The green of his cloak that floated out as if buoyed on the wind—that color could clearly be seen. Great gold and silver lines interlocked across it, and more such lines twined all along the border. A silver brooch as big as a fist rode on his breast, flanked on each side by the ram's-head tips of a huge, twisted torc. The man carried a javelin and a shiny black shield with an umbo of gold in the center and two wild, mythic horned beasts jutting from either side. His hair was short and curled, blond. The face was long, bony and somber. A helmet, resting back on his head, had a bird mounted on the tip, and Laeg could now see five prongs of a spear tip over the man's shoulder: he was dressed as if for some great battle. Laeg drew behind the nearest cromlech, then panicked and fled back to Cú Chulainn. The warrior stirred. "What's happening?" he asked. "I had a fierce dream."

"A man is coming." He was about to describe him but saw that Cú Chulainn was staring past him.

The man stood not far away, between two graves; he leaned on the butt of the javelin.

"Who are you?" Cú Chulainn asked. Laeg could barely hear him and was surprised that the man did.

"I'm your father, Lugh Lamfada, called by your cry. You've made a valiant stand, a brave defender—both of you. The Hound of Culann is great indeed." His speech was strangely accented, thought Laeg. He came forward, saying, "However, if I don't see that your wounds heal, the Morrigan and the Badb will have their fill of you.

"I cannot—the armies—"

"Enough. You've no choice. And the armies will go nowhere." Lugh put his cool hand on Cú Chulainn's brow. "Sleep. Let *me* guard Muirthemne as you once did when another hound had fallen." The warrior's eyes fluttered closed. Lugh sighed deeply and looked back at Laeg. "You've done well with your salves, defender of Ulster's defender."

Laeg acknowledged the compliment with a sheepish smile. He drew his dagger out from behind his back, returned it to its sheath.

The god cocked an eyebrow.

"How long must he sleep?"

"Three days. His wounds are infected from within by the Badb's milk. I will have to turn time back to save him. He will sleep his time in reflux and awake two days ago. So too for the army of Connacht and the cursed of Ulster."

"But Macha's Curse!"

"Will continue two nights extra—four more in all. Yet no one laboring under it will notice. They'll live it only once and they'll arrive in the same

place. You and I and the army trapped by the Sídhé below, we will witness four more days of war before Ulster can stand. It is for this time that I stole away a king's sister and made this marvel."

Laeg was still trying to make sense of the tangle of time. "I don't understand the complications involved," he said.

"You're not meant to. Only those who stand outside time can see how the strands of individuals weave together and apart."

"Gods and Sídhé," Laeg muttered. "Yes, and the dead. One day you'll unravel it, I promise." Lugh laid down his javelin. "You must rest now, too, and leave to me your guarding. You aren't permitted to see this." The god suddenly looked into the darkness beyond Laeg and said, "Nor are you, young one."

Senchan flinched and went rigid: He had come to think of himself as invisible to the things he watched. He glanced at Laeg but found the charioteer asleep on the blanket beside Cú Chulainn. Then he looked back at the god and found Laeg—the older Laeg—standing there, ghostly, beside Lugh.

Laeg said, "I have unraveled it, just as he promised, see? You will, one day, too. If you were allowed to remain and watch now as you'd like, you would go mad and die mad." He faded away.

Lugh Lamfada laughed. The freed amusement encased Senchan, teasing him with gentle mockery, pushing a smile on him, while his eyes squeezed shut and his body floated down beside the fire. Lugh laid out a fur there before Senchan reached the ground.

The god stood over his three charges complacently. He knew their futures, each of them, and found each worthy of his fond attention—even the youth from out of time.

5. An Army of Children

When he awoke, the first thing Cú Chulainn asked was, "How long have I slept?"

"Three days," his father told him.

"Then the armies have escaped. I've failed!"

Lugh sat with him. "No one has escaped you. While you slept deeper than dreams go, the mist of the Sídhé blanketed the army of Connacht. It lifted while you still slept, but before the enemy could gather their wits to push on, an advancing force was spotted, and the warriors, rather than load their wagons, took weapons down and prepared for battle."

"Ulster has risen, then."

“No, Setanta. Time has folded over on itself in order to effect your cure, and as a result Ulster cannot come to your aid for four days more.”

“Then who came to attack?”

“It was the Boy Troop—the child trainees of Emain Macha. Too young to be ruled by Macha’s Curse, they had sought this army twice through the retrogression before discovering Breslach Mor.”

“They’re very brave, those children. I used to play hurling with them till the sun went down. How many came?”

“One hundred and fifty, led by Conchovor’s young Follamain. Ailell took charge and led a similar force out of the ruins to the plain north of here. Few of his opponents had real weapons; most carried wooden practice spears or their hurling sticks. Macha’s Curse deleted many of them old enough to own their weapons.

A gloominess shrouded Cú Chulainn’s voice as he asked, “And how did they fare?”

“None lived. Not Fiachu’s little brother, Fiachna the Blood-spiller—a great name for one so small—nor Follamain herself, although Ailell would have preferred her for a hostage against the day of battle with Ulster. Follamain took a real sword from one of her fellows who had fallen and began slashing her way toward the king, roaring till her throat was raw that she would not desert the plain without the king’s head for a trophy. She slashed warrior after warrior who tried to block her advance but finally found herself trapped between two groups at once and could not defend herself against the superior numbers and skill.”

“This is more tragic ...” Cú Chulainn broke off and turned his face away to stare up at the clouds riding the sky like soft chariots. “Think of all those who will awaken in four days to find their pride cut down ... while they could do nothing. Was there ever a grimmer dawn?”

“Such are the consequences of the Pangs, Setanta.” Lugh reached out and helped his son to stand. Cú Chulainn inhaled deeply the crisp air and wiped at his watering eyes. His muscles shook off the cold. He stretched his arms, then bent down and pressed his palms flat against the earth. Scars remained from the fierce wounds but his body had reformed, hard and tight and ready for any conflict. “Will you fight beside me to avenge that slaughter?” he asked.

Lugh shook his head. “The song sung here is yours alone. I will watch with pride in my heart. Good-bye, Setanta.” He embraced his son, then strode into the sun that crested the hill between two cromlechs. The javelin spun in his hand, flashing sparks off the dawn. Soon only the sun remained.

Cú Chulainn made a fist. Strength surged down his arm. “Laeg,” he called, waking his driver, “the time for single combats with these butchers is past. So many betrayals have a price.” The shimmer of lights burned in his eyes. “Prepare the Sickie Chariot.”

6. A Grím Vehicle

On either side of the chariot that Domnall Mildemail had given Laeg there were screens below the rails, which ran from front to back at the height of the wheels. The inner side of these screens had been hammered into trumpets and triskeles that exactly duplicated the design work on the exterior and gave the impression that the screens were all one sheet of copper. However, the inner panels, attached to the inside of the rails, formed a narrow enclosure and could be removed. Laeg slid them out of their grooves in the floorboards and set them aside, then turned to the implements they had concealed. Some were simple crescents, others had intricate hooks and barbs worked along their cutting edges. As Domnall had taught him to do, Laeg removed each sickle and fit it into the slot designated for it.

The first two, the largest, clipped into notches in the hubs of the wheels. Smaller ones fit into holes hidden along the bottoms of the rails and under the boards at the rear. Laeg had to slide some of the heads out of the way to attach all the sickles.

Another panel at the front opened to reveal the armor for his horses and the battle dress he would wear. He decorated the stallions first, cautious of the barbs and thorns worked onto their headgear and bridle-bits.

He drew off his tunic and cloak, rolled them up and tucked them into one of the emptied compartments. The tunic for war was made of quilted leather like his trousers. It was sleeveless and cut open at the sides so as not to hinder his movement.

He strapped on a girdle over this made of pounded gold, decorated with rows of rings and discs. The helmet came next: a massive structure with a squared-off base that angled out past his shoulders. Each side showed the curved horn of a ram in relief and, at the top, a stylized bird's beak projected out. The raised ridge of the beak ran all the way down the back of the helmet like a tail. For all the work and its size, the helmet weighed hardly anything at all. Laeg buckled it beneath his chin.

He unrolled a cloak of white feathers and clasped it in place on the leather tunic. Last of all, he took a small thimble-cup containing saffron stain and with one finger, dipped in it and drew three large yellow circles on his forehead and cheeks. Now he was ready, the sun upon his face. He replaced the panels and stood back to admire the gleaming chariot.

Before climbing in, he went around to the horses and chanted to each a spell of protection that Domnall had taught him, a spell to make them appear as spectres before the enemy. Finally, taking his goad, he climbed

up and grasped the reins. The horses shifted, jingling their trappings. Laeg called, "It's done, Cucuc!" The hilltop of graves revealed no one.

The warrior appeared from behind a cromlech upright. He carried his full compliment of weapons and armor: assorted spears, darts called *del chbliss*, dozens of these; his sword hung against his leg. He had put on a black leather shirt and, over it, a tunic of twenty-seven skins that had been stitched into a thick quilt worked with beeswax to make the surface hard and glossy like horn. Laces under his arms attached the two sides of the tunic and could be undone easily, quickly. After climbing up behind Laeg, he set the spears upright in their holders. They swayed like bladed trees. He pulled his round red shield from off his back. Its edge of silver was as sharp as his spears. He placed upon his head a helmet that shielded most of his face, with wide eye-holes that offered good peripheral vision. A spike on top ended in the figure of a hound with its jaws open.

"Now we go," he said. The helmet reverberated as from the voice of death.

The chariot shot forward, spears waving, heads swinging against each other and against scythes, the horses prancing proudly to the edge of the hill, knowing that this was what they had been trained for, this their reason for living.

Breslach Mor lay deserted, its ancient rubble augmented by fresh trash and debris. To the north they saw carrion-birds come to feast. The snow on the plain had turned muddy brown from the passing of so many. The dark track led both north and south, nearly the width of the valley itself. Cú Chulainn insisted they first go north, to inspect the scene of battle.

The birds fled at their approach. Neither of them paid the birds any heed. Their eyes were drawn ineluctably to faces of the children. Many seemed only sleeping in their downy beds, cloaks hiding their wounds, the grayness of their flesh. Faces stared up at the two men with shock and disbelief, expressions that had already outlasted their time. Cú Chulainn saw mouths everywhere calling to gods or to mothers and fathers, faint voices echoing in his head. He could not shut out the sound though he turned his attention to other things, to hands reaching for blunt weapons, willing in their posture to take up the fight again if only ... Did the distant fathers know what had happened? Would these ghosts haunt the empty playing field on Emain Macha come next spring? Yes, if only by their absence, bestowing silence. Unnatural silence was always haunted.

The floorboards creaked behind Laeg. He tilted back his head to see over his shoulder; the wide helmet blocked all but a sliver of the Hound. That proved enough. The visible arm and leg were rippling, twisting, cords of muscle rising up with ropy texture. The leg rotated with every pop of new muscled knot until it had twisted backwards below the knee. The skin turned vein purple.

Finger joints swelled with lumps that cracked. Laeg goaded his horses. The chariot flew past Breslach Mor. He heard the laces of Cú Chulainn's

tunic snap free. The helmet with the hound on top clattered on the floor and wedged up between Laeg's foot and one screen. The Boy Troop had done this; grief had unleashed the demon.

Filling the wide basin of a dark green valley, the army soon came into view. The thing behind Laeg heaved and growled. The mossy ground, devoid of snow, was full of ruts and gouges from those who had come before. The chariot crashed across this landscape, the sound of its approach causing those at the rear of the army to draw up. They shielded their eyes, thinking at first that a straggler in the army of children had found the resolution to attack; then they saw the enormous thing that bent the boards behind Laeg, and they began to run.

The air grew points suddenly—dozens of small darts came whizzing like wasps through their midst, each of the *del chbliss* sailing until it had found four targets. People and horses sprawled across the paths of those still alive. The chaos alerted those further ahead, who slowed up to take stock of the commotion and saw the single chariot veering off to encircle them. They took up their weapons, shouted and flicked their reins, bounded off to chase the new-found foe, unaware as yet of the nature of the swollen thing hunched down in the back of it. The chariot swung around suddenly and charged into their midst.

Warriors scattered in every direction, seeing the gleaming armament, but the scythes cut a swathe through them, spreading carnage like two long barrows on either side. Shredded bodies piled high.

Then the fiend leaped out of the vehicle.

Its hair stood out in needle points, gold at the tip, red in the middle, and black at the root; a weird glow connected the points, spitting and sizzling. The forehead of the creature stuck out like a block of stone over its eyes, one of which had popped out and now dangled down the monster's cheek. The bottom half of its face was all mouth. It bellowed its rage at them and the nearest could see the lungs at the base of the gullet, glowing red as a brazier. The thing stalked forward, twisting its body with each step. Lumps ran like living things, like moles, beneath its warped and swollen skin.

The monster charged, flinging the last of its darts. It took spears from the first victims and shot them through two or sometimes three opponents at once. Some fled it and ran blindly into the path of the returning chariot. Others, bounding in from further ahead, cleared the corpses only to confront a vision that stopped them in their tracks, where the spasming monster tore them apart, flinging limbs and heads into the sky. Blood and flesh fell like hail over the whole plain. More fools rushed in every moment to add to the rain.

The monster's forehead split and black blood jetted up. The creature bellowed like a bull—many thought in their final moments how like the Donn it was. The bodies piled higher and higher around it while every

weapon glanced off or bent against its rippling skin. Nothing could touch the thing, and the flow of battlers ebbed as, realizing this hard fact, they scrambled for their lives out of cold, clear reason.

The monster's corona smoked and flamed. The creature lowered its head and impaled on its spiked hair the few who remained nearby, flipping them up as a bull tosses away a hapless trespasser.

The chariot slashed through the pile of bodies and the monster bounded into it. The wheels sank deeper into the dirt but rolled, spitting up rock and earth. Laeg navigated the gory obstacles littering the field. The cart shook as the Warped One shuddered down onto the floor and began to untwine. The lumps sank in, the right eyeball slid back up the cheek and into its socket; the other eye pushed back out; flesh moved like eddies of skin to reshape the creature as it shrank. The spikes of hair uncoiled like snakes and hung in a blood-clotted mane. The bright corona faded away. Pale, Cú Chulainn's head lolled onto his chest.

No one came after them.

At the scene of the incredible carnage, the king and queen counted their respective dead in disbelief—Ailell from the back of his chariot, Maeve on the ground, roaming the scarred field, shoving aside her Druids, protected by her shieldbearers.

"What happened here?" she called to her husband, her voice sharp with disgust. "I see so many of ours in the dirt but not one Ulsterman. Not one whose face I don't know."

She got an answer of sorts from the survivors, most of whom were drenched in the blood of their fellows. They described in conflicting detail the horror that had taken them.

Maeve dismissed the descriptions, but she listened to the awe in their voices, the shock of remembering. On the chariot and driver, their specifics agreed: a tall man in a helmet, with sun discs painted on his face.

"One of Domnall's students from Ablach," Ailell summed up.

"Which one, though? Fergus! Where's mac Roich? Bring him here!" she shouted.

Fergus was sought out and led forward. He grimaced at the scene of battle, an expression that the others who came with him mirrored. Fergus could not believe that Maeve needed to have the cause spelled out again. Nevertheless, he obliged her.

"Cú Chulainn?" she snarled. "You'd make him responsible for this? And the driver his charioteer—that mac Riangabra? You make him the source of every body, every dead, your victor spoiling my plan. Then, where is he? Where?"

"Gone. The Warp Spasm did this. Now he'll need to rest, to sleep deeply."

She answered derisively, "Warp Spasm. Damn your tricks and tales."

Fergus lost control of his temper at last. He grabbed three of her shieldmen and threw them out of the way, then crushed Maeve against the others so that his breath blew back her white hair. “My tricks? Damn your own tricks, you foul bitch! Your lies brought the whirlwinds into our camps, cut down warriors against the starscape, and left this ugly purlieu.” He pushed her into the open, then dragged her over to one of the piles of bodies. Her guards looked on, unsure of what to do. Ailell leaned against his chariot rail, his eyes those of a goshawk that has found its prey.

“*This* is your reality.” Fergus stuck his hand into the mass of flesh, then smeared the warm blood over her face. “Taste it! It’s your blood—you made the hole that spilt it. My tricks, oh mighty queen, can’t compare. Go back to your dazzling Druids and have them drag out their cauldrons for you, see if they can dip these lifeless sausages in and give you back anything.”

He turned away and stalked the gathered, taciturn Druids. “Here, show this army your amazing skills at reviving the dead, you quivering, secretive bone-rollers! Commune with the gods, tell us how this fits into the great scheme. Justify it like you always do—they’re only warriors after all, aren’t they? But if I set to slaughtering you, how many do you suppose I could get before one of you could call down doom or think up a lampoon excruciating enough to kill me? Maybe all of you, heh?”

“Fergus, enough!” shouted Ailell.

The Ulidian warrior cuffed a Druid out of his way, but made no reply to Ailell, knowing who was right. He continued on, with his own uncertain force following. He had not gone far when he encountered MacRoth. The messenger looked tired and worn. MacRoth read Fergus’s mood instantly and stood aside to let him pass. They eyed one another briefly with suspicion, but Fergus’s followers prodded him on. He continued to peer back at MacRoth. A moment later, he bumped up against Lugaid.

“By my gods, man,” said Lugaid, “we could hear you five miles away.” Behind him, Larene studied his toes. “What can you do now that you’ve near strangled the queen yourself?”

“I’ll tell you what I can do ... I can get drunk. Care to join?”

Lugaid clapped him on the back and they walked off to set up a tent.

MacRoth turned away then, also. One corner of his mouth had begun to twitch.

XV: FERDIAD

I. MacRoth's Return

They set Maeve's tent up in a stand of leafless oaks. MacRoth followed close on her heels, but distractedly, blind to the work going on, the servants on their knees, still roping the last of the pegs. He did not come to himself until he had reached the doorway, then turned and said, "Good job, well done," gesturing at them to let them know he had noticed; they looked to him to tell them when their performance particularly pleased Maeve. A thousand insignificant gestures went unnoticed by all but MacRoth.

Inside, he could not see a thing because the shadows of the oaks lay upon the tent and no fire had yet been kindled. He listened for a sound to indicate Maeve's location. When she spoke up, he jumped.

"What are you doing there? Come and sit and have some wine."

He focused on her shadowy form in the deeper reaches and made his way to her across straw and furs. She had set out pillows for him—or for someone, he thought.

MacRoth took his cup and had just touched it to his lips when he heard a soft moan. He blinked at Maeve. The moan came again, a soft, viscerally erotic sound. His look inquired.

"But what's she doing?" He tried to find her in the darkness, but identified only a large pile of furs behind Maeve. It shifted.

"What does that sound like to you?"

"Well, I'd rather not say." He pinched the tip of his nose.

"What she is, is in heat or something very akin to it. Ever since Cú Chulainn shoved his pillar up her, she has done nothing but lie in those moist furs like some salacious Sow Goddess. Ailell thought she was dying at first, but there is nothing particularly wrong with her any more than with rutting animals the world over, save that she is useless in future propoundments. All she wants is him, her *bound*. All she can say is his

name, endearingly, while she drives herself into a state of thorough lubricity.”

“How ... unusual.”

Maeve sighed heavily. “I am far more concerned with your news. Is he coming?”

“Madam, he is. The prizes you offered had no effect as you suspected. He wouldn’t come for Finnabair or half of Magh Ai or all the gold in Leinster. Once he made that clear I brought in the three satirists. The first sang a piece describing FerDiad as the recluse who hid from mankind because he had failed shamedly in his training. ‘The Cast-off of Emain Ablach,’ was what he called him.”

“How did FerDiad react?”

“You could see him wince if you looked hard enough. The second satirist went into a trance and chanted a divinely inspired poem about the ‘turtle called FerDiad, who lives in a shell away from all society, cursed by his strength to love a weak man’s life.’”

“And?”

“It wounded him, from the look in his eye. Wait until you see him, too. Unlike anything I’ve ever encountered. And you’ll realize why I say that second satirist was divinely inspired.”

“And what of the third?”

MacRoth swallowed some wine. “Frankly, she never got to recite. She came before FerDiad—he had ordered us out by then—as we were leaving. Her hair was all wild about her head and bardic robes, and she whispered to him that she knew a chant taught her by Levarcham, who had learned it in Ulster before they threw her out, about him and Scathach’s other student, Cú Chulainn.”

“Ohhh,” interjected Finnabair.

“With—with that, he dropped his cup and doubled over, crying out, ‘No more, no more!’ He agreed then to return here and listen to your proposal.”

“So, that is the point which pricks him.”

MacRoth said, “Be advised that might prove an undoing if you’re not careful. His deep regard for Cú Chulainn might force him to die rather than give in. He’d likely do a lot for his dear friend.”

“Then, we must act to destroy his illusions on the subject. As always, MacRoth, you have brought not mere fact, but fundamental speculation. No better messenger exists.”

“Madam,” he replied, too overwhelmed to feign protest.

“If you have finished your wine, you may go. Know that, when this is resolved and my bull in Cruachan, I will find some significant reward for you.”

MacRoth choked on the last of his wine. He slapped his chest and got to his feet, forcing himself to wheeze, “They’ll be here tonight.”

“Good. I will see a meal laid out for them. FerDiad can stay in my tent until he can be accommodated otherwise. Yes, tomorrow, then. Tomorrow it will end for Cú Chulainn.”

MacRoth had gone. Finnabair, in her furs, moaned, “Ah, Cucuc.”

2. The New Champion: The Eighth Stone

Fergus rested his head in his wife’s lap. His eyes wore the faraway look of a mind nullified by intoxicated reverie. Flidais and her husband were in their small tent, a three-sided affair with the open side facing the Black Army’s central bonfire. Fergus could just see, from where he lay, the smoke rising into the gray sky past the doorway. The smell of beef and pork sizzled on the air. Besides him, Duffach, and Lugaid and his crippled brother Larene (who had to make frequent journeys from the tent because his bladder no longer dealt well with more than one cup of beer) also occupied parts of the floor in semi-lucid states of abandonment. Of them all, Flidais alone remained sober—an ancient custom that still endures, as do the sober wives.

Duffach belched, tried to heave himself up into a sitting position, found that not as pleasant as he had hoped, and flopped back down.

“I’m boiled as an owl,” announced Lugaid to the tent ceiling. The image struck him as Particularly satisfying, and he added a long, low, “Who-o-o,” as proof.

“How they’ve used us,” Fergus said suddenly. “Flidais, tell me please what it is in a woman that causes us fools to follow her even though we see our folly clearly from far away.”

She gazed down into his dark eyes. “Fergus, it’s not what’s in the woman, but what you men wish to find there—what you put in her.”

Larene began laughing, an obnoxious nasal monotone that ended in a coughing fit.

“Did you allude to something basely sexual, wife?” Fergus asked.

“You see my point? Everything has a sexual side, though, to answer you. Who do *you* know that’s sexless?”

Duffach decided he was cooked on this side and rolled over onto his stomach with a grunt. The sharp blue of his eyes was enisled by two pink seas. “Fergus,” he said when he was comfortable, “did you marry Flidais for her wit?”

Fergus raised his head. “No, I—”

“He married me for my sex,” Flidais put in. “You growling bear.”

Larene fell, alternately laughing and wheezing, against Lugaid, who toppled over.

Fergus dragged himself to a sitting position. “Here we are, victims to the boy who slaughters like some spirit, unremitting and indomitable in his course. That little beardless shrimp, defender of Muirthemne, sure more Ulster’s Hound than Culann’s.”

Duffach grunted. “I’d as soon gather up every one of us and go cut him down as hack at anything else. End it. No more treacheries, subtleties, that I don’t even fathom. One open fight. Kill’m and be done.” He spat.

If he meant this to be ironic, the wryness was lost on the others. Fergus became coldly sober. “If that’s your feeling, then take your black tongue from my house, you. The last thing you slew with pride were the girls in Ard Macha. Beware, Beetle, Conchovor’s warriors don’t peel you like a birch tree and use your hide for a tent flap in a feast hall—a warning to drunken boors to keep tight rein on their tongues.”

Duffach leaned up. “And they called *you* a king once!”

Fergus struck him across the jaw with his clay cup, which shattered. Duffach fell but scrambled up. He made it to one knee before Fergus grabbed onto his tunic and hit him again in the face. Duffach fell as far as Fergus let him before being yanked back for a third blow; but Fergus tired then and finally picked up the unconscious man and flung him out into the dirt.

Duffach’s body landed at Ailell’s feet. The king, with Druids and attendants who carried casks of beer, stared unfazed at the body.

“Mac Roich,” Ailell called out with uncharacteristic riancy, “I’m always pleased at how my Ulstermen keep in shape.” He stepped over Duffach. “Now, if you’ve had your exercise, I’ll come in and tell you about Maeve’s unannounced guest.”

“What do I care who she fleeces?”

“Oh, this, I think, will capture your attention—what there is left to capture.” He ducked inside.

It was some hours later, after the sun had set, that Fergus mac Roich with thumping head found himself stumbling out to the River Dee in search of Cú Chulainn’s campfire. He was not too clear on why he had decided to set out. Somewhere in the midst of his beer-glazed memory, he recalled swearing to Ailell to kill the Hound. It would have been preferable to shrug that off as a dream, but Fergus knew better, even if he could not account for how he had travelled this far—a state of astonishment suffered universally by those who have drunk twice their limit. Navigation was a tight, hard thread that took every bit of brain-power left him.

He slid down an embankment, clattered onto a rocky strand and splashed into a stream. The cold shock jarred him awake. He gathered himself up and tottered ahead, wading to his knees. It was Fergus’s good fortune to tumble where he did: a hundred yards downstream would have seen him dragged under the turbid surface where this stream joined the river.

Fergus tried to get up the opposite bank. He made it halfway before slipping back down amid a spattering of pebbles and dirt.

A short figure appeared on the palisade above, a light silhouette. "You're not stealthy enough to mean anyone harm," said the figure, who by his voice Fergus identified as Cú Chulainn. "I thought the bull might have escaped from the sound of it, and maybe I was right." He reached out. "Here, now, take my hand and I'll pull you up."

"Stay back, little Hound. I might lack the underhanded skills of Maeve's favorites, but I've come for you just the same."

"Really?" Cú Chulainn lightly mocked. "It's either an incredibly skillful or expansively dim-witted warrior who comes to combat armed with a rudder rather than a sword. Or did you intend it to steer you across the Dee?"

"Don't taunt me. Ailell got my oath—"

"By applying his liquor till you're fuddled?"

Fergus gathered himself up. "Nevertheless, I swore not to give you up till you yield."

"Draw your steering stick then, and have at me." He sprang off the embankment, somersaulted and landed on his feet beside Fergus. "Do your worst," he said.

Fergus fumbled the huge practice sword from his scabbard. His breath steamed and his teeth chattered. Sobriety pushed back the last of the cobwebs in his skull, bringing with it a reluctance to play this out any further. "You're too close," he said, then finally lowered the sword and said, "Faa!"

Cú Chulainn said, "Fool sot, my own charioteer will happily tell you that such rules as Ailell has invoked to bind you don't apply to unarmed men, which is what you are unless you're thinking of beating senseless a few fish. So long as the king of Connacht has your sword in his keeping, you can't *be* forced to do battle. That's established in the *fir fer*."

"But I gave my word," replied Fergus in a muddle.

"Then, I will yield to you now and withdraw for the moment, provided that you'll swear to do the same before me when Ulster rises."

"Gladly would I agree to that." He stuffed the stick back into its holder and sank down wearily to a cross legged pose.

Cú Chulainn remarked, "And here I thought that Maeve was the great intoxicator."

"She is. Let me tell you how great: there's a new combatant for you in the morning."

"I expected no less after the slaughter."

"My foster-son, the vivisectionist."

Cú Chulainn grinned, then squatted down beside Fergus. "That's more the Fergus mac Roich I've known, the hard stoic of Ulster."

"No—I'm no Ulsterman now. I'm *ecland* like any mercenary. I have no home."

"Not to me, foster-father."

“Then sit a little longer and hear what this old man was to bear to you on lips cold with creeping death. The one coming at you tomorrow is your own foster-brother by Scathach: FerDiad.”

All the good humor faded from Cú Chulainn’s face. He squeezed shut his eyes as if a wound had opened in his belly. “Tell me that you’re lying.”

“I would it were so, but she has him here right now.”

“What cause has he of anyone to come to her aid?”

“I don’t know. No one gets near him. She keeps him sequestered in her tent, thinking to spring a great surprise on us all in the morning no doubt. Ailell has a spy in her household who saw him arrive under heavy robes so as to disguise his face. Her Druid satirists brought him in.”

“It could be someone else, then.”

“No. As I say, it’s FerDiad. MacRoth had instruction to bring him.”

“MacRoth.” Cú Chulainn jumped up, shaking his head wildly as if to fling all this information out of his brain. “Can he have abandoned his love for me so readily? For a few cows or even Maeve’s slaving lips?!” He yanked at his hair.

“I wish someone else had borne this news.”

“No, Fergus. Better you than anyone. Of all the warriors on Eriu, I trust you most.” For awhile he stood silently beside the water, then said miserably, “Just when I think Maeve has played every possible treachery on me, she reaches into my life and finds one more path into my heart.”

“It’s—well, it’s partly the fault of the Black Army. We related tales of you both to Maeve and Ailell early in the journey, in hope of turning them away.”

Footsteps sounded overhead. Laeg appeared on the palisade. “There you are. I’d begun to wonder what you’d found and my mind conjured up impossible new treacheries.”

“You should have been a seer, then,” Fergus said by way of greeting. He got to his feet. “It’s time I steered my way back with my ‘rudder.’ We’ll all be on hand to witness, tomorrow. Prepare, little Hound. Believe me when I say she’ll find some way to prod him against you.” Outspent, he splashed across the stream.

Laeg asked, “What was that cryptic adieu all about?”

Cú Chulainn pulled himself up the bank, then told about FerDiad. “How can I prepare for something so unthinkable?”

“It’s best, I think, that you spend this night with Emer. She ought to hear of this, and once battle’s engaged there’ll be no time. Tell her to prepare a place for you to lie afterward—we both know there are going to be great wounds to both sides. And listen to her wisdom. Ride her riddles.”

“You?”

“I shall remain here to patrol the ford and guard your weapons.”

“At dawn, then.” He scampered off to the chariot.



Left alone above the stream, Laeg sat quietly. Soon his older, ghostly self came and passed into him, reshaping his form. “Let me tell you of FerDiad,” he said abruptly. Senchan came and squatted down where Cú Chulainn had been. “FerDiad had been removed from warrior society ever since returning from Emain Ablach. His body had begun a transformation under Scathach’s guidance, a transformation that continued after he had returned home, where he continued to practice, to hone his unrivaled skills.”

“But didn’t he love Cú Chulainn still?”

“Oh, yes. As much as I, surely.”

“Then why didn’t he refuse?”

“Remember what I explained to you about words, about their power? Only Cú Chulainn has exemption from the threat of satires. FerDiad may share his skills, but not his divinity. Had the Druids fashioned *full* satires rather than hinting at what they might do, then FerDiad might have killed himself out of shame.

“MacRoath had made other offers in the queen’s name, including sex with herself as usual. All this was offered to him again when he arrived at the camp, and he accepted the proffered wealth but not the licentious encounter with the queen. He had altered too much in form to comply even had the desire been there—I can’t say what actually lingered of his former self but I suspect that particular conatus had atrophied. That created a further threat to FerDiad, because no one ever spurned Maeve. His terse rejection of her earned him her undying resentment. She collected six mercenaries whom she passed off as warriors to guard him before the battle. In fact she intended to have them kill him once he served his purpose, for which service she’d grant them, the six, *everything* previously offered to FerDiad.”

“Then he’s going to win!”

“I didn’t say that, did I? The two combatants have skills in different areas. No comparison is fair. Each has a ... well, a gifted charioteer. Only one of the two will walk away from the combat, and Maeve has arranged to eliminate whichever one that is. And that’s all I’ll tell you now except that the last dark stone in the Ring of Muirthemne is FerDiad’s stone, and it’s called, ironically, The Friend’s Stone.”

Senchan grew gloomier. “If that’s the last, then he *does* win ... except there’s the one in the middle, isn’t there?”

“I’m handing out no more clues, I told you.”

The chill left the air. Senchan glanced around but could see no source for the sudden warmth. All was darkness. “Right now,” Laeg continued, “FerDiad sleeps alone, fitfully. Cú Chulainn lies with Emer, their bodies

riddling and seeking as always. It's only left for you and me to pass through that faceted stone. This will be our last pass, Senchan, our last crossing together." Laeg reached out suddenly.

Senchan took his hand. It felt empty, hard, colder than the night air. He had not anticipated this hollow sense of finality that filled him. He found that he wanted the tale to go on and on unceasingly. Eternity bound these stories; more than anything Senchan wished to become part of that, to become immortal in order to relive it all—even the fearful moments every day, forever. To laugh with wry Cathbad and his peevish *vathi*, weep for Derdriu, and fight alongside Cú Chulainn. It seemed he had never known any other life. How could Laeg mean to end it all?

Brightness burst upon him—the late afternoon light over Muirthemne Plain. The stones threw off long indigo shadows. The one cast from Setanta's stone shaded FerDiad's as the two observers walked somberly into the hard and polished megalith, so near to the stone where they had begun their journey years earlier. Why, Senchan asked the unseen gods, could it not continue for as many more?

3. A Man Alone

Before dawn, Cú Chulainn returned to Ath Dee. Emer had sent him out dressed as if for a feast. She urged him to present himself to the armies before the combat began so that they might see his beauty to give them a comparison against the monster that had scythed their ranks the day before. As he knew that his wife's counsel always contained more meaning than appeared on the surface, he obeyed, dressed and drove the chariot to the hill above Maeve's camp just as the sun crested the opposite horizon. His white robes burst into flame with that light, molding him into a figure of gold and purples and pinks.

The early risers below caught sight of this apparition and their tocsin cry awoke the whole army. Servants and slayers, virgins and seers, warriors of every rank, all emerged from their tents, gathered around their fires, to see the luminous observer on the hill.

They saw a short youth with his hair plaited. Two long thick strands of it hung below his shoulders—the tips blond from previous limings, the body and base of the hair black like his brows. The rest of his hair coiled in a tight knot against the nape of his neck. His pallid face could have belonged to a girl—that was what the nearest observers agreed—making him seem a gentle and fragile creature. His eyes sparkled like emeralds cut in seven facets. His jewelry was all of gold: torc, armlets, hasps and girdle.

He wore his enameled scabbard low on his hip. The shield he carried was the red circle with its gold scalloped edge and interior discs.

Maeve came out in her bulwark ring. They blocked most of her view with their helmet-top decorations. She grew waspish at having to ask for descriptions from these illiterate men and finally climbed up the backs of two of them, setting her knees on their shoulders, yoking them like a team of horses by their braids.

“That?” she scoffed when at last she saw him. “*That* is the whelp? You mean to tell me this girlish boy is the devastator of half my army? I don’t believe you. I refuse to believe you. I have better warriors than that in slave’s collars!”

Led by MacRoth, a tall, cloaked and hooded figure emerged from her tent. He held his red cloak closed with a hand that was hard and shiny like a beetle’s carapace. This figure’s deeply recessed eyes took in the scene in sharp, swift flicks. A voice that made the bulwark members think of dry places parched by the sun issued from the red folds. “Believe it. I tell you, that is Cú Chulainn.”

“But he is a child. Why, Finnabair is no older.”

“That *child*, at the age of four or five, went to Emain Macha and bel-lowed for an enemy to kill because he thought himself disgraced by some warrior who’d refused him combat. One of Conchovor’s ‘wives’, called Mugain, saved the fortress and countless lives by leading all the women out against the babe. They went naked. He was so mortified, seeing their bodies displayed, that he turned red as a crayfish and hid his eyes with his cloak. The women laid hold of him somehow and threw him in a tub of water. The Warp Spasm, incipient even then—not outwardly expressed as such, but inwardly tumultuous—made the water boil and the tub burst apart. So the women dropped him in a second tub. It sizzled till the wood cracked, Mugain and the naked women finally shoved him into a tub of ice water and he cooled at last. The spasm retreated that fueled his blood-lust, leaving that beautiful, guileless child in the water, naked himself but still ashamed to witness the nakedness of the women.”

“An abbreviated version has been given me before of that tale, although, naturally, when so godly a man as yourself tells me, I must accept it. Perhaps I should go naked to meet him, then kill him close up.”

MacRoth eyed her skeptically. “I don’t think the sight of a nude woman troubles him much nowadays.”

The glowing boy on the hill retreated from sight but returned momentarily, carrying a cluster of severed heads. He held them up, called out their names. Grumbings issued from the scattered clusters; some voices began to keen, others to babble in frenzy.

And still, thought Maeve, he was too pretty for the task. Too precious a thing to live long. Like a fragile dragonfly, he must flutter and expire in a twinkling. She climbed off her warriors and ordered them back inside her tent.

Once inside, FerDiad sat beside his charioteer. He kept the cowl tight around his face but Maeve could feel his eyes on her every moment, like insects, and she did not care for the sensation. “Is there some question you wish to ask me?”

“Only if it’s true what you told me last night—about what he said.”

“That to defeat you would count as no great feat? Of course. Now I must go and be with my husband for a time. We will be on hand for your battle and I should not need to tell you that our hopes go with you and your guiding forces.” She paused in the doorway. “Perhaps, after the battle, you might find time to reconsider my offer ...”

The red hood shook violently its refusal.

“Ah. Well, it is a small thing.” She left him, glad of the going.

“He should never have spoken that way about me. His denouncement stings like a Druid’s verse.”

His charioteer replied, “I don’t believe for a moment that he did.”

“The queen says otherwise. In any case I’ve no choice so long as all the Druids in Connacht are preparing their cruel lampoons. You must go and prepare the chariot.”

“This is so foolish, FerDiad. We can still escape this, just walk away.”

“Where to? Where’s the place the words won’t find me—where I won’t hear how I fell in love with him because of his feminine looks and his soft ways and made love to him on the Isle of Women, or how I came to him time and again, but was shunned aside for Scathach’s daughter and Aife. Aife. How sharply these people can tip their barbs and turn what was beautiful into an ugly, obscene union, making us monstrous.”

“Why haven’t they preyed on him, then? Why don’t their threats work on him as well?”

“It’s not the same. He isn’t like others.”

“Neither are. you, I have to point out. Surely you remember the days with Scathach as they really were.”

“Some,” the rasp sounded a melancholy note. “Not all anymore. My mind’s lost so much ... as I changed.”

The charioteer said, “Once, when I was your steward at Scathach’s house, we went for a feast there. A huge, hairy fellow had taken the job for awhile as her steward. We went across the Pupil Bridge and, at the door, Setanta deferred the honor of first position to you. You went in, but that steward, he resented you and thought you too proud, so he stuck you in the back with his cooking fork—a big, long one with three prongs like Manannan’s trident.”

“My armor—”

“You wore plates of horn then. Don’t you remember?”

FerDiad said, “So he stabbed me from behind, the coward.”

“Yes. And Setanta saw it from the doorway. He rushed in and killed that steward before he could stick that fork into your throat. Setanta car-

ried you into another chamber, made sure your wounds were treated. That was the time you agreed to the transformation.”

“I agreed.... Did she tell me of how my mind would ...”

“She warned you that your thoughts would be reshaped as well, yes, that.”

“What did I answer?”

The charioteer lowered his head. “You and Setanta—all of us believed we were invincible then.”

The red robe trembled. “Oh, why didn’t you tell me this story when the Druids baited me? I never should have come—I loved him and we were lovers. How can I be here? Ogma, my god, how am I here?”

4. First Blood

They arrived at Ath Dee and found no one there to meet them. Here the ground was hard clay, dark, spotted with stones the size of fists.

The sun had barely risen. FerDiad lay down in his depression while his charioteer kept watch. He did not have to keep it long. With Laeg at its helm, the Sickle Chariot came down the slope from the north. “Is it them?” asked FerDiad.

“It’s them. Laeg, looking lean as always. Setanta behind him, doffs his cloak now, sports a purple tunic—against that his skin’s like snow. Such a proud stance they’re taking.”

“What are you, a bard in their service? Your every word pricks.”

“I had a dream last night,” the charioteer tried.

“Yes, and?”

“The Hound of Culann stood upon every ford in Eriu like a giant Fomor with a leg for every stream. No one got past without paying him tribute. He stamped on those who opposed him, squashed them flat into the earth.”

The red robe billowed; petrified fingers closed on the charioteer’s neck. “The Morrigan has put things in your head. I need help, support, you give me paeans. Save versification for your funeral oratory—to him or me, it won’t much matter. To the worms. You’ve been a friend. Don’t desert me for feeble visions.” The Sickle Chariot came up beside theirs, wheel to wheel.

Cú Chulainn said, “Who is it dwelling in that cloth cavern and claiming to be FerDiad? You’ve hidden your face because you know that he and I are friends.”

“You were his servant, devoted yourself to his needs. He was your superior and you cleaned his weapons, brought him food.”

“That’s true. He was further along in training at first and I learned much from him. But still I hear nothing that merits my calling you by his name, gravel voice. Why should I trust anyone who denies such ties as he and I have for the liquid thighs of Maeve?”

“It’s better to die in fair combat at the hands of a professed friend than from the slow degeneration of satirical repetition. The queen bitch would kill me either way. Choice alone remains to me.”

“A third alternative’s better, I think. Dead Druids don’t often speak of irony.”

FerDiad made a sound of exasperation—a clicking noise like the scuttling of crabs. “Oh, yes, for you that’s the sweet answer. No Druids can rule you because your father’s a god who rules them. But I lack your lineal good fortune.”

“That’s a weak argument—false in every way. No man needs listen to the false phrases poured upon him, whether they raise him up or crush him down. A lie should always be squelched and the position of the liar is an irrelevancy, or else he would speak the truth.”

“The more powerful the liar, the more powerful the lie.”

“There we agree. And so the more powerfully do I strike him for it. Druids take one blow only, they’re that lofty.”

“Well, *I’m* not a liar,” FerDiad proclaimed. “Your blows are all empty wind to me. I have a battle to join. We could chatter the day away and never agree. The time for that is passed. Now is the time for seeking death.”

“Others have sought it before you. None has gone home unsatisfied yet.”

“Perhaps, but none who know you so well have come till now, so strut some more for us, spider-mite. Thrasonical midget. You display your beauty, then boast a thousand deeds no one’s ever seen.”

“If you think that, go sample Connacht’s army and hear otherwise. But you don’t dare—you know already that none shaped by Maeve’s meddling have succeeded. Count their heads on my rail. See any you recognize?”

“None.”

Cú Chulainn leaned toward the cowl. “Neither do I.”

One ossified hand reached up and jerked back the hood while the other unclasped the robe and let it fall. FerDiad was naked defiance.

The surfaces of his skin shone like polished horn. His whole body had grown hard in this way. At the joints the armor lay interfaced like a crab’s claw, protecting the soft flesh beneath but not hindering movement. His torso had no hair on it and, like horn, striations were embedded in the surface. His genitals had been lost to a sharp tine that jutted from between his jointed thighs. His face had also turned to horn. The cheeks had sprouted ridges, squared and planed. His cornflower-blue eyes hid in pits between the cheeks and rippled brows. Above this, his red-gold hair stuck up, a sedgy topknot. Even his ears had developed points and bumps and chiseled dimples. Horn hung in fangs around his mouth.

Cú Chulainn sought for evidence of the youth he had known in Scathach's camp. Not even the eyes revealed that person. They, too, in their way had ossified. Nevertheless, he knew this was FerDiad.

"So, you are yourself despite your dissimilar temper. I implore you now to remember our mutual love. Break off this quest for death."

"I remember nothing of it." His jumbled mind had indeed forgotten already the story his charioteer had told him that morning, that he had recounted a hundred times before. "I'm not made for love: I'm a machine of war that loves no squint-eyed demon such as you. I've never fought a girl before. I hope my honor can survive it."

"Your honor might, but you won't. Again I beg you turn back."

"Coward. Nad Crantail proved it. I see it myself. I—" He stopped himself and turned away. "I've come too far!" His voice rattled with anguish. "Once you step off the cliff, you can't step back."

"I see that not all the hardness is on the outside, as Scathach warned. We have to begin. You were here first and you have the choice of weapons. The Druids will want to know. They've arrived while we argued. Along with an audience to entertain."

FerDiad did not look at the crowd behind him, but he called for the Druids to hear. "Darts, first."

Laeg turned the chariot and drove back across the stream, where Cú Chulainn jumped down. He pulled off his clothing except for the wide sword girdle of gold. He reached up and Laeg handed him his round shield, then his darts.

Cú Chulainn went into the stream and, as he looked up at the rise behind FerDiad, he saw one of the Druids gesture for the combats to begin. Then he heard the Druid's voice, faintly.

FerDiad entered the stream and let his first dart fly. Cú Chulainn caught it in his shield, then flung his own, following it quickly with a second. FerDiad embedded the first in his shield as Cú Chulainn had done; the other spun off his carapace and stuck in the ground behind him.

They each drew and flung another dart, and then another and another, the darts flitting like wasps between them, wounding neither. Darts made new patterns in the enamel of their wooden shields, dotted sketches left when the used darts were drawn and thrown again, hard enough to knock a normal man off his feet. FerDiad's clawlike feet anchored him in place; Cú Chulainn's toes curled like talons around the edge of a submerged stone, rooting him.

The darts spun, whizzed, thumped all morning long. Some of the crowd drifted off and returned to find the combat still enjoined. Finally, Cú Chulainn called, "Some other selection, if you would. This is fruitless."

"Hurling spears, then. My skill there will prevail."

Both men took up larger shields and long-bladed, sleek spears. FerDiad made his first throw as Cú Chulainn turned from Laeg, and the Hound barely had time to sweep his shield across himself, deflecting the spear. It

stuck into the stream, the shaft vibrating. Angrily, Cú Chulainn threw his spear, but FerDiad skimmed it easily off his shield.

Retrieving the spears took both men deeper, till the shallow ford became the distance between them. Still they drew no blood, but the effort of continuous propelling and dodging in the deeper water exhausted them quickly. They dove and swam madly for their spears so as not to give the other a free shot; this act repeatedly sent sprays of water up over the crowd, who had moved in along the river, some dangerously close.

Hours passed while the two went on, mechanically throwing, seeking an opening. Their breathing came in labored gasps, in shudders. The cold water numbed their fingers and toes. The crowd, unable to believe the duration of unblemished assault, began placing bets as to who would make the first mistake, take the first wound, and who would be the ultimate victor.

Then FerDiad scored. Cú Chulainn stepped onto a stone and it gave way beneath him. For an instant he tottered off—balance and in that instant FerDiad flung his opponent's spear. It turned on the lip of Cú Chulainn's shield, and lightly slit his arm from elbow to shoulder. Runnels of blood gathered and dripped from his hand. He stared at the wound, disbelieving. Both of the spears were in his possession now. He bellowed as he flung FerDiad's at him, then snatched up the one that had cut him, his own.

FerDiad blocked his spear and hurried to retrieve it, swimming with one arm; in his eagerness and exhaustion, he forgot the other spear's location for a stroke or two, until it flashed in the periphery of his vision. He raised his shield as best he could. The weapon skimmed it, hit the water flat and flipped up, the blade sliding between the segments of horn at his elbow and slicing into the pink tissue. He drew it out, sucking air through clenched teeth as he did. He threw it back, but the shot went wild.

After that, both of them revealed their weariness and, because of it, began to make mistakes. Neither scored anything close to a fatal wound, but by day's end both bled from dozens of gashes. Even FerDiad's plated shell had not completely withstood the violence of Cú Chulainn's throws when a fresh wound or nick had angered him. In some places, the horn had cracked or been chipped away, revealing the wet flesh beneath.

By sunset, when the Druids terminated the contest, the two were soughing with each breath. They crawled like infants after their spears. The Druids testified that the combat had been fair but would have to continue the next day in order to decide anything. For now, the army would have to remain where it was. Maeve left the scene in a fury.

The two warriors got to their feet laboriously, nodded across to each other. Each showed great respect in his weary glance; they waded into the middle of the ford, there embraced and kissed like old friends. The bond had been resurrected.

Turning away, they tossed their weapons to their respective drivers, who helped them out of the water and into their vehicles.

Awed by the day's spectacle, the crowd went off quietly; six among them wore glum faces, having to wait another day for their own glory.

5. Second Combat

The two champions spent the night on beds of rushes. Ailell sent Druids to both of them to treat their wounds. Maeve resented giving any solace to Cú Chulainn, but the king pointed out that rules of extended combat required such fair treatment when the opponent's side could not provide it and she would have to live with that. She tried giving added care to FerDiad, ordering her own healers to mix restorative drinks for him. Unfortunately for her, the plated warrior sent many of these to where Laeg sat watch over the robed figures ministering to Cú Chulainn.

By dawn the next day, both men had regained their strength and the wounds of both had glazed over from the salves applied.

They met once more at the stream, but today neither boasted nor argued with the other. FerDiad called out, "What weapon do I take up this morning?" Today Cú Chulainn chose.

"Rather than repeat yesterday's deeds," he replied, "let's take up our heavy, thrusting spears and face off from our chariots." Even as he said this, he knew that neither of them would succeed at it because neither heart was truly in it.

They mounted up behind their drivers, who were on their knees. The crowd had begun to move back up the ridge to give the two teams room. Once more a Druid came forward and blessed the combat. Once more, the two friends fell to fighting.

All through that cold, lowery day they rode back and forth on the flat land beside the river. With each pass through the ford, they slammed their shields against each other and tried to perforate the other with their leaf-tipped spears. Their wounds multiplied, some so deep that the spear tips grated against bone. The planks of both chariots grew slick with blood. The drivers flung it from their hair, wiped it from their eyes. Nevertheless, the two warriors stayed upright, urging their drivers on, the horses gray with foaming sweat, eyes wild and teeth gnashing at the bits. Laeg's arms ached as they had not done since he was a novice under Domnall Mildemal. The veins stood out like tree roots all along him and his temples thundered from squinting against the strain, the sweat and blood. FerDiad's driver fared no better.

Wayward thrusts kicked sparks from the rails or cracked open one of the bobbing, swinging heads hung there. The bronze screens on both vehicles developed dents and holes. It was a wonder that neither lost a wheel rim.

Cú Chulainn spotted a Druid descending from the crowd and he called out, “Enough, FerDiad. See ... our keeper comes ... our horses are lathered, drivers ... spent. Even my spear has lost its edge—look, it’s curled.... We’ll come here again, no choice.” He fit the crimped spear into one of the embrasures along the edge of the floor.

The drivers brought their chariots broadside and the two bloodied warriors leaned out again, this time to hug one another, smearing each with the other’s blood. They would have professed their undying love and deep esteem, but neither had enough energy left to speak the words.

The chariots parted, leaving behind a savaged, rutted ford.

6. Combat with Swords

The Druids that night were appalled by what they were expected to heal: these wounds cut too deep or stretched too wide for salves to seal: whole segments of muscle lay bared; the gloss of organs could be seen in places. Even the most arcane of prescriptions lacked any efficacy in the face of such a rending. A healing cauldron was briefly considered but rejected as too dangerous, since more often than not the warrior’s personality was erased in the treatment, leaving him a healed automaton guided by some dark and wicked power, sometimes even a threat to the healer himself. No one cared to try that experiment with the likes of these two battling giants. The most the Druids could do was to lay charms and potent amulets across the worst wounds, then to chant incantations, charging the charms and sealing off the perpetual streams of blood, after which soups and potions could be ingested with some restorative effect. They dared not predict how much.



“Maeve, as you might expect, desired to move the Donn further south again,” Laeg explained to Senchan, “but this time she had foiled even herself. The intense combat had captured the mind of every warrior on the plain and none was willing to aid her. The rules of *fir fer*, of honorable men, held sway. Ailell dismissed her suggestion with the simple argument

that she had brought FerDiad here and now she could bleeding well wait for the outcome of her machination. For now, Crich Rois was her home.”

“But they can’t expect to really continue this another day? They can’t even stand up.”

“They will. They have to. If it took three or five days, the warrior fought on—that’s all the creed he had—unless someone yielded. If Cú Chulainn yields here, then as he represents Conchovor on the field, he is giving Connacht safe passage with the Donn. For him not to get up is to forfeit, so long as FerDiad gets up. And neither can know if the other has come to the combat unless he gets up, so both get up.”

“What if FerDiad yields?”

“Then Maeve and Ailell are enjoined from going to Cuil Sibrille for another day. In this particular instance—if you’ve been keeping track of your days since Lugh’s intervention—such a defeat would carry us through the ninth night and Ulster would begin to recover. Of course, Maeve knows nothing of Lugh’s having rolled back time. Right now, she sits in her tent, fearful that Ulster has already thrown off the Pangs, but not truly believing it. She has, in fact, surmised that the Curse may just continue so long as the danger exists—so long, in other words, as she remains in Ulster. But the fear still gnaws at her that Fergus and the Exiles receive messages from Ulster and might be conspiring to slow her army down. Ludicrous; but you see, Senchan, it’s human nature to assume that all other people live up to or down to your own level. Maeve, willing as she is to defy anyone or anything because of her certainty of her own supreme privilege, is absolutely positive that everyone else she deals with would do the same as she. That’s not to say there aren’t some who would.”

“But not Fergus mac Roich.”

“Not Fergus.”

Senchan folded his arms and brooded. He believed now that he had begun to understand what Laeg had been trying to teach him about the battles he had seen, but he could not yet put it into words, and that seemed important. All these bits of information, of explanation and motivation, in some way were designed to clarify what Laeg wanted him to realize. The circle—and he smiled at the metaphor—the circle remained open. The ring was complete, the Friend’s Stone being the last. He saw that great stone in the center as the point of total comprehension. What more did he have to realize in order to become that stone?

Laeg stood and stretched in the moonlight. His yawn became a spray of mist. “I must go back to my youth and Cú Chulainn’s side. Dawn’s coming soon. All the weapons have to be accounted for, ready for the call.” Then, as though he had listened again to Senchan’s thoughts, he leaned down and added, “Don’t strain yourself in seeking answers in all this. What knowledge comes, comes by the story’s end, and it’ll fit into place on its own like a silver piece pegged into a *fidchell* board. Don’t get

so wrapped up in your musings that you miss the events of the day. It only goes round once. For you.”

Then he was gone, a shadow.

They met again at the ford. Their wounds glistened with rawness, but the amulets and incantations had healed them enough for the potions to prove resurrectionary; they could walk, stiffly, under their own power.

Cú Chulainn crossed the river to speak with FerDiad before the Druids signaled the beginning of combat. The chance would not likely come again. He saw the chips and gouges that he had put into FerDiad's loric surface, wet bands of muscle beneath it, clear blood transmuting gouges into blisters in the shell, and he understood that FerDiad had fared no better than he.

“Your blue eyes have gone dark like an eclipse,” he said softly so that FerDiad alone would hear. “They've fallen into your head.” He placed his hand gingerly on FerDiad's arm. “And the horn has softened like wet wood.”

FerDiad tried a weak sneer. “You think to scare me from another trial by describing yourself?”

“No, dearest friend. If you'd come to me like this that first morning, I wouldn't have known you. This I'll tell you now because it's the last chance I'll have—a royal cow has enchanted all the bulls hereabout save you and me, but we're the ones dying.”

FerDiad nodded. “True. That's a conundrum on the path.”

“Yes, and too big to go around. Give this up. Ulster hasn't arrived yet. It would merely delay—”

“Setanta! Think what you're asking of me. Could even you bear so much shame, wear it on your face when you've not even a beard to disguise the contortion? Did you ever fight only half a fight? I fled from the barbs that tongues throw off and you want me to step into their path again, and with less claim to denial!”

Cú Chulainn lowered his head, admitting that FerDiad was right.

“Of all those who might walk Eriu with me—even Emer who can run riddles like a spider weaves—there's none I love more dearly than you. My anger's been siphoned away with my blood and replaced by regret. I'd as soon stare into Balor's killing eye than take a sword against you any more.”

“It's no different with me, when I can remember ... but death is all I see now. The nearer I come, the more my mind opens to memories that might have cured me before.” He reached out and wrapped his arms around Cú Chulainn.

“This rips out my soul,” whispered the Hound. He freed himself from FerDiad's hold and sloshed hurriedly back through the stream, almost blind to direction. Laeg met his gaze and read all that had been said, they were that close. He turned his eyes from that penetration, lifted his chin.

“Now,” was all he said. Then, turning, he called, “It’s your day for weapons. What’s your choice?”

“Swords and shields,” answered FerDiad.

Hearing this, the crowd of hundreds edged nearer, the better to witness that kind of fight. Ailell was among them, and Maeve within her ring. Fergus and Cormac stood together and fretted about the weary look of Cú Chulainn.

FerDiad had his weapons but waited for the Druid’s brief blessing—the whirl of mistletoe—before wading into the water.

Cú Chulainn drew down his helmet, took up his shield and stepped down into the cold swirl of the ford.

On foot, with swords, their movements quickened. Running and leaping played as great a part as slashing and stabbing. Both swords had been forged in Druidic ceremony; neither bent nor dulled though they hammered a hundred times. Sparks flew up from glancing blows on umbos and rims. People pressed in too closely went deaf from the screech of metal. Splinters of enamel and wood flecked the water.

Not until the afternoon did either man score against the other, but by then their previous wounds had begun to seep from the feats, the leaps and tumbles, that stretched the skin, peeling it from the thin tissue that retained the precious fluids.

Cú Chulainn cut a great “V” out of FerDiad’s forearm, but striking that petrified skin was like hewing rock. FerDiad responded with a feint that tricked Cú Chulainn into leaving his back open for a moment, and FerDiad sliced away a long strip of his skin. So it went, until the two were as ashen as two birch trees and Maeve was storming back and forth through the crowd, demanding to know why, if she could overpower the whole prevaricating province, these two warriors could not knock each other down.

Finally one of the Druids came forward and said, “Hold!”

The single syllable contained enormous awe and reverence; even the priests lacked the ability to cope with this. The only occurrence they could remember remotely akin to this was when two Sídhe warriors had cut a path through Cruachan, chopping each other to bits only to have their severed parts grow back together at night that they might pick up the battle again the next day. These two, though, lacked the power to heal themselves after combat.

The two fighters had dropped their shields at the cry. They slid to the ground, side by side, without a word.

Through the night both men shivered uncontrollably. Layers of skins were piled upon them, packed around them, but had no effect. Their lips turned blue as if they swam in dreams of ice. More chants and ointments and charms were applied. One Druid tried using his hazel wand over the entire ford to nurse everything. In failing, he admitted that the dolorousness of the situation would have yielded more readily to a wand of yew.

The other healers did not make excuses—they could see from the beginning that this matter lay beyond their combined skill. Surely, this would not go on. Surely, when the sun came up again, these two once-proud warriors would not be able to stand.

At the same time as the Druids made this prediction, in other remote parts of the province, a scattering of men tried to sit up for the first time in what seemed an eternity.

7 Death Blows

As the sky reddened and the Druids clustered to pronounce their offering to Belenos or Aed or Neit—depending upon which province they hailed from—Cú Chulainn and FerDiad in their separate camps labored to their feet. Their charioteers helped them. Laeg leaned Cú Chulainn against the top of his head while he strapped the broad girdle around Cú Chulainn's waist, let the warrior sag across his back while he bound the sandal thongs up empurpled calves, cinching every strap fiercely. "I should be binding your flesh together instead of these thongs," he muttered, "it would go better if I did." The Hound burbled a laugh. He reached across Laeg's back, took his helmet, and fit it over his head, pressing it down over hair that was stiff with blood as if from a liming. His eyes flickered with their strange crystalline sparks—the only sign that he had the strength to fight. He scanned the weapons Laeg had laid out for him but made up his mind immediately. One weapon alone drew him; one that had not been used before against FerDiad, either here or on Emain Ablach. He had one certain skill that his opponent lacked. But his hand trembled violently when he tried to pick the deadly spear up. His fingers brushed the shaft.

In the other camp, FerDiad went suddenly cold. His eyes opened wide, deep in their caverns. "It's today," he said hoarsely. His charioteer stepped back from him. The meaning was clear.

"Will you at least wear your iron girdle, then?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then you have a chance." He uncovered a metal device shaped like an inverted cromlech. The base looked much like a quern stone used to grind corn, a hollowed bowl that, once strapped in place, fit like a cumbersome codpiece. Leather straps harnessed it to FerDiad's shoulders. The weight pulled open some of the wounds around his collar. His carapace creaked. He let the charioteer put a leather skirt and silk tunic over him to hide the new armor.

"Now you need guard just your upper body. The lower half is safe."

“Give me more of that drink Maeve sent me. I’ll need all the strength I can find. Only one of us outlives today.”

These two set off and arrived at the desolate ford before Cú Chulainn. FerDiad got down and began to practice with each weapon from his arsenal, more to inure himself to the pain than to refresh his skills. He spun his shield on the tip of his spear, then flung the spear into its target before the shield dropped, and caught the shield by its straps. The early observers began to chant his name and their excitement fueled him for awhile, long enough for Cú Chulainn to arrive and see him. “I can’t believe his recovery,” he told Laeg. “Somehow, he’s got his strength back today, while mine’s still in short supply. Listen, if I fall under his attack, you must curse me, belittle me the way Fergus did when the Badb tried to kill me. And listen for my call to you. Unless I see my doom in him, I can’t use *it*.”

Laeg stopped him by the shoulder as he tried to leave. “What that means is that you’d kill him without the Gai Bulga if possible, but that rather than die yourself, you’ll kill him with it.”

Cú Chulainn gathered himself up. “So?”

“Either way you have to kill him. Why let him shave you down to the bone before you do it? Why offer your throat at all?”

“Because ... because it’s all I can do.” He went to the ford.

FerDiad had stopped performing by then to catch his breath. Every speck of his body burned with pain, but pain that he could control. Pain equaled life. From where he sat on the rear of his chariot, he called, “Your choice today. What do you want?”

“I want to fight in the ford. Where it’s waist-deep, but without spears or any weapons at first. Let’s work our feats against each other.”

FerDiad’s driver whispered fearfully, “The weight of that cincture will drag you down!”

“Hush.” To Cú Chulainn he replied, “Nothing would give me more pleasure.” In part this was true—at least Cú Chulainn had not demanded short spears in the stream. He thanked the Triple Goddess for that much hope. The crowd took up the chant again as he strode for the stream.

He and Cú Chulainn found a place where the water sloshed around their belts. They closed and began grappling with one another. The water made Cú Chulainn’s flesh slick and difficult to grab hold of, while FerDiad’s horn had been smooth and polished from the start. They stumbled, trying to clutch and pull, succeeding only in tearing at the new skin that covered their wounds. Rocks on the bottom cut them anew when they fell. Their battle soaked the crowd repeatedly.

The air smoked with their ragged breaths, while they jumped and twisted and wriggled like eels. The grappling went on for hours. Cú Chulainn called for his shield. FerDiad turned away and his driver threw his to him. The two men fit their arms into the straps and swung back around, colliding with a reverberating clang. They slammed into one another again and again but neither could make the other one budge. Cú

Chulainn changed tactics, jumping upon FerDiad's shield and trying to swing his own down into FerDiad's head. Before he could complete this, the shield beneath him bucked and threw him off with such force that he landed on the bank. He got up immediately and somersaulted out into the middle of the ford, then onto the shield again, his toes gripping the edge hard enough to crimp it. FerDiad had expected no less and drove his knee hard into the base of the shield, a blow that ground Cú Chulainn's teeth together and flung him away like water thrown off by a dog. He landed flat on top of his own shield on the hard ground above the ford. Blood flowed down his back in webs. He did not get up.

The crowd murmured excitedly: The Hound had been dealt with at last.

Laeg recalled his instructions and ran forward, shouting, "What kind of hero is it lets himself be slapped aside like an offending branch? Your roots can't run very deep if his like can rip you out of the ground so easily. You callow little child, what made you think you were capable of deeds worth remembering? Go home and learn to fight."

The crowd adopted his jeers, added catcalls of their own, jibes of every sort, the Ulster exiles shouting loudest of all because they understood Laeg's purpose, while Maeve shrieked to silence them in vain.

Cú Chulainn dug his fingers into the clay and pushed himself onto his knees. His shield had been caved in from his elbows and knees. He called for a change in combat—allowing all weapons—but he did not draw the sword in his belt. Instead, he ran down the bank and sprang, landing like a snake around FerDiad's shoulders, battering him before FerDiad dumped him in the water. The crowd hooted and mocked him.

Cú Chulainn shook fiercely. The water began to bubble around him and the twisted aspect of the Warp Spasm began to wring the beauty out of him. He rammed FerDiad. They drove each other back and forth across the body of water, slamming together so hard that their shields cracked and split. The thunderclap from their collision scared the horses behind the crowd. The horses broke free of their spancels, bolted down the hill and into the encampment, which alarmed the cattle enough to send them scattering ahead in all directions, pummeling the tents and crushing provisions. The majority of the crowd turned reluctantly and deserted the stream in pursuit of the animals. Just six armed warriors and three Druids remained, grim with purpose.

The frenzied combat continued unabated. The two men drove the water out of the stream. Fish flapped on the banks. Huge tidal waves rushed away in both directions, spilling over as they ran.

Cú Chulainn stepped on one of the fish that lay on the exposed bottom. His twisted foot slipped.

FerDiad, seeing his chance to stop the monster from taking form, plunged his sword to the hilt in Cú Chulainn's breast.

The Hound tumbled back against the bank. He stared in amazement at the carved ivory handle protruding and the blood spilling out around it. When he breathed, he thought he could feel the cold metal of the blade press against his heart.

FerDiad waited, his hand raised to signal for another weapon if Cú Chulainn did not submit now.

Cú Chulainn's face rippled as the Warp Spasm drained off. His eyes closed under a bubbling brow. "Gai Bulga!" he cried out in a burbling voice. FerDiad dropped his hand to call for his spear. His blood went cold. He sought his shield and reached for it as the water came crashing back to fill up the channel. It swirled up his body, snatching the battered shield and carrying it out of his grasp. He dove after it in desperation. Coming up, he turned to see a shining white sliver skimming along with the rushing water. Cú Chulainn was nowhere to be seen. Had the surge snatched him? FerDiad looked around for signs of the corpse.

Like a geyser, the Hound exploded out of the water. Too hurt to make his full leap, he slapped the base of his palm against the butt of the spear.

FerDiad twisted and did what he could with his chipped shield—moved it all around to try and block the shot, But the tip of the spear broke through the cracked wood and split the horny surface of FerDiad's skin. It tore out of his back, spinning him around from the part of his lung that was wrenched out with it. Then the spear glided in a wide arc and rode the stream back to Cú Chulainn.

Now the water had calmed, but the Hound had not. He was in his mettle, so practiced in this that he acted by instinct against the pain, the terrible wound, against his desire to spare his friend. He leapt high, caught the spear between his toes, and shot it across the water once more.

Weakly, FerDiad tried to hide behind his shield again, bracing his head and forearms against it, deaf entirely to his charioteer, who wanted to throw him his spear as commanded.

The Gai Bulga slid under the shield and skidded against the curve of the iron cincture, down around the projecting nub of the codpiece. The device that was to have saved him deflected the spear sideways. One barb snapped off against the codpiece, but the force of this spun the spear up through his raised thigh. It tunneled under his skin, climbed his body, up through his abdomen. The remaining barbs snipped and snagged all his organs, dragging his insides into his chest, spleen and liver bulging out the initial wound.

FerDiad's shield smacked the water. He raised one hand, but doubled over, vomiting blood. He saw himself reflected there, a dark, alien creature with spurs and thistles for a face. The pain prodded him and he winced. When he could speak, he called, "That trick is still your best feat. It's surely caught me. Do you ... always save the best for last?" He made a little laugh that turned into a cough. "Ah, Setanta, I'm undone!" He fell into his reflection.

Cú Chulainn rushed to him, catching him under the arms and dragging him across the stream. The effort of pulling the body from the water brought sparks to his vision. FerDiad's head slid down against the hilt of his sword that lay in Cú Chulainn's breast. The Hound gasped. "Even in death you attack." He dragged himself up over a mound and down beside the chariot. Then he and the body slid to the ground. Dizzy, half-blind, he hunched over and caressed the chiseled face that remained as hard in death as in life.

He began to weep. Distantly, he was aware of Laeg calling to him, but any meaning in the sound failed to penetrate his cloud of remorse. The voice changed, became FerDiad's voice, drawing him away. The world was turning red before his eyes and he thought that he must have died, too, and was passing now into Magh Mell. A trance of mourning settled over him and he began to chant without knowing it.

"FerDiad, I've forsaken you
When I should have turned my back
And made you go.
Wouldn't disgrace have been better
Than this state of decay we've joined?"

"What for, this? Your pride? Couldn't you
Deal with satirists—serve them up?
Am I the only one exempt from their evil?
Surely, you didn't do this for Finnabair—
She's no more than a wine strainer to your blood.

"FerDiad, good friend,
I've lost you. Now you've gone
On your journey to your Int Ildathach,
But I'm following, from the stroke
You delivered upon me.

"I'll leave your torc,
Rest in passing with you.
We're both past caring who wins
In contests over the Donn,
Though I regret not aiding Ulster more.

"Glorious FerDiad, my foster-brother,
Until you arrived my time in combat was sport
Maeve sent only lesser warriors to challenge me.
None so skilled or valiant as FerDiad—
You altered everything with your arm and eye so keen."

His chant continued, drifting into tales of the training they had endured, but he made no sound to show the world that he still lived. The mellifluous chant lived with FerDiad in his mind. Laeg was presently the sole defender of Ulster.

He stopped yelling at Cú Chulainn as he saw the six assassins making their way to the river with set purpose. As one they met FerDiad's charioteer and cut him to quivering pieces.

Laeg grabbed Cú Chulainn by the hair and cursed him in the hope that anger would rouse him. Cú Chulainn's eyes remained glazed.

The six murderers carried their dripping blades into the river, past a broken shield that floated face-down.

Laeg pushed away from Cú Chulainn. He turned to the chariot and took up a spear. Hefting it, he swore to take as many of them as he could, promising Macha their hearts. He would not be cut down easily the way the other driver had been.

The six disappeared from sight behind the mound.

A sound—a scrape—came from behind the chariot. Laeg whirled around, his spear up over his head in both hands.

The tip of a sword touched him under his chin, and he froze up, staring into six blue and baleful eyes.

XVI: ESCAPE AND PURSUIT

1. *Ulster Rísing*

“Senoll Uathach!” exclaimed Laeg.

The long, lined and pock-marked face broke into a canine grin. “It’s me an’ nobody else. And do you know the Sons of Ficce? Two good warriors, fostered to me for years now. We’ve been down and out, cramped and crippled up with Macha squeezing at our guts. I’ll tell you, Laeg, what troubles come at you in life, there ain’t none as can foul you up like Macha’s Pangs of Pregnancy. That—”

He stopped speaking as he saw the first of the six assassins come into view on the mound. Senoll Uathach, an old veteran of more battles than Laeg had freckles, did not have to ask in order to see what the six had in mind. “Slings, boys,” he ordered.

The six slowed up, confused by the quantity of victims awaiting them. Their hesitation was brief, however; whether they took two heads or twenty, it was all the same to them. They swung their shields off their backs and came on.

Three sling-stones flew across the ridge. One smacked a shield with a report like a crack of lightning. One shattered a kneecap and a third a skull. The assassins drew up again; they had gotten used to being a group of six; the idea that anyone might harm them, much less reduce their ranks, had never been considered. The four assassins let themselves be provoked to anger. They began to yell as they ran down the slope. The Sons of Ficce took up their javelins. Laeg, aboard the chariot, pulled Senoll up, took the reins, and snapped the horses to a gallop. The assassins dispersed to avoid the sickles spinning on the hubs. They saw their targets—Cú Chulainn and FerDiad—and both looked dead. If they could just collect those two heads, then they could escape this unbargained-for batch of Ulstermen.

Laeg and Senoll flung two spears, grabbed two more and drove in for a kill. Two more of the assassins fell from the flock of spears, while the sons of Ficce pressed the remaining two. One assassin leaped back to avoid

a blow by his attacker and put himself in the path of a sickle that lopped him in two. The other saw this and panicked, leaving himself open to a straight thrust. The two sons of Ficce cut off the first heads of their careers as warriors. They began to dance around, shaking their gory trophies up at the skies to show the gods they had skill.

“Mind you,” Senoll observed, “them boys is daft. But they got their heads.”

“Well, whatever troubles come my way in life, I hope they’re all as incompetent as those six were. Now, go calm your idiots down—the army’s just over the hill and they’ll have ample opportunity to expand their collection. Right now we have to get Cú Chulainn out of here before they send along the others to take him.”

Senoll looked where Laeg pointed and he sucked in his breath. “Never in my life have I seen wounds like that. Are you sure there’s anything worth bothering with here? Why, he looks all but drained.”

His point was well taken: Cú Chulainn’s skin, where no blood coated it, had turned as gray as an overcast sky.

“He’s alive still, but he’s gone to the edge of Magh Mell with FerDiad’s ghost.”

“That’s FerDiad?”

“What’s left of him.”

“I thought it must be one of them crusty Fomor,” Senoll said as they reined in beside the two. Laeg got down and grabbed hold of the corpse, but it took both men to pull him off Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn’s hands continued to stroke the air where FerDiad’s thorny cheek had been. Then his fingers curled and the glaze left his eyes. He blinked wearily and groaned. Laeg knelt in front of him. “You have to cut him open, retrieve the Gai Bulga,” Cú Chulainn whispered hoarsely. His head lolled, nearly touching the sword hilt. They loaded him on his chariot while Laeg went and hacked through FerDiad’s back to get at the spear. It had punctured every organ in him. Cú Chulainn had to be laid on his side.

The Sons of Ficce and Senoll squeezed in around him as Laeg drove south to the house where Emer awaited them. At each stream they came to on the way, they drew up and one of the boys jumped out and returned with clean water to bathe the Hound’s wounds. He went into a feverish trance after awhile and pulled himself upright against a screen. Staring at nothing, he began a chant, his words nearly nonsensical to the passengers.

“Crimson in hair
Gone down the roots
Coloring the body crimson, too.
Dead, ill-met at the ford.

“The tree unrooted,
Birds without feathers.

What's the difference
From that to the unmade man?"

"What is that he's saying?" asked one of the brothers.

"The riddles of FerDiad, I expect," Laeg called back. His attention had been drawn away to the east. Soon he called out and pointed, then waved one hand to a chariot that swept past them, seemingly out of nowhere; only Laeg had seen it. The sole inhabitant was a strikingly tall man with a gray flame of hair blowing back from his long forehead. He nodded grimly as he passed, but did not slow up. His chariot bounced and rattled as it shot ahead into the narrow brown valley.

"The plague's lifting! That was Cethern off to find the armies!" Senoll cried.

"But he had no spears with him," one of the brothers remarked.

"He wouldn't—only weapon he uses is a silver spike, long as your arm. He can put it through three men, pfft, like spittin' a pig."

"I hear he's a generous man," Laeg mused.

"If you're referring to the generous crop he reaps in battle!"

The armies of Connacht were on the move away from the ford Ath FerDiad: Maeve had named it when the Druids returned and reported the outcome—reported, that is, that FerDiad and Cú Chulainn had slain one another. She lacked the time to wait for proof from her six hand-picked men but rejoiced in the assurance of double deaths while her tent was broken down. She and her husband rode out at the head of their forces, the Donn intractably in tow. They picked up more of their people along the way, who had run off in pursuit of their horses. Abandoning roads, the army cut straight up and over the rolling terrain.

The queen sent MacRoth to look for signs of Ulster stirring and he returned before an hour had passed. He had seen Cú Chulainn's chariot with Laeg and three strangers in it but no sign of the Hound. Before his queen could take her pleasure from that information, MacRoth warned of sighting the single chariot containing Cethern. Maeve had word of that passed along by runners. The army watched expectantly for their new enemy. Even with their straight retreat, they did not travel much farther that day, only to the place called Smirromair near Mount Oriel, because the combat at Ath FerDiad had taken up most of the day.

Once camped, Maeve met with Ailell. He said, "I know something of Cethern. He's called 'the Generous.' I'm sure we'll find a way to negotiate with him. All the same, some cautious preparation should be made.

"Rann!" he called to one of his stewards, a chubby boy, "go find the two warriors Bun and Mecon and tell them to triple-team the guards. Three to every post." He turned back to his wife. "That should solve the Cethern problem." Then his brow knitted and he began to stroke his beard. "Still, if one is up here, there must be a hundred more up elsewhere who don't yet know where to look. That number could be doubling every hour.

A camp may not be a wise idea now, my dear, else we'll arise at dawn to find heads on every hillock and spears at every horizon.

"It is a night without a moon, Ailell. And the land from here to Cuil Sibrille is uncharted by our people."

"Fergus could lead us."

"Yes, if you can interest him in the subject at all."

"Damn him and his army. I'll melt his sword down for snaffle-bits."

Maeve ignored his comment and mused, "The real questions now are how many hours have we before Macha's Curse is swept entirely away, and how many hours after that will lapse before Conchovor hears of our presence?"

"And what is your guess?"

"It would seem likely that the Curse rode the wind, outdistancing any alarm that might have been raised. Perhaps no alarm at all was heard. My belief is that this Curse will lift completely only once the danger passes—once we cross their border. The nearer we get to it, the more will find themselves able to navigate once more. But our camp should be safe. Cú Chulainn is dead. They have nothing else remotely like him, and we still have the better part of the Galeoin."

Ailell withheld his opinion on her praising of the same force she had desired to slaughter just one week before.

2. The Alarm at Emain Macha

Sualdam mac Roig came to his senses and found himself on a plateau of Slieve Cuilinn. His stomach muscles ached as if he had picked up some enormous weight and in so doing had torn the fabric of his body. It did not take him long to remember what had sent him to those heights where the rain had soaked him and the snow covered him beneath his shield, his only protection against the elements. He was weak, ravenous, and aching like a man twice his age. He considered going home, but his message had to be delivered first to the king. He picked up his spear and hurried on as best he could through a sea of dead scrubgrass.

Soon he came to the Midluachair Road, which stretched like a curl of smoke across the landscape. A wagon stood abandoned there. Its owner was not to be found. Perhaps the owner had fallen off when the Pangs hit and the dumb beasts yoked to it had continued blithely on. Sualdam did not care. He clambered aboard the four-wheeled vehicle and snapped the reins. The two ponies reacted sluggishly but picked up speed after Sualdam found and applied a willow whip.

Midluachair continued past Emain Macha all the way to the tiny peninsula from which the Skerries were visible. Sualdam drove down from the road and across the plain south of the fortress, past the playing fields where his son had bested the Boy Troop in their games.

The lower rampart of the hillfort lay empty, undefended, as did the huts he had just passed. Sualdam called out. Somewhere a crow cawed as if in reply. Nothing stirred on the hill. Sualdam stopped the cart, grabbed his spear and shield, and hurried through the staggered passages between ramparts. No one challenged him; no one appeared. The three fortress buildings that Conchovor had erected stood silently, as lifeless as three skulls. He reached the top and paused to look out over the fields. It might have been an idyllic scene—plots of corn waving in the sunlight, the animals grazing carelessly—except for the lack of any human presence anywhere.

He found the entrance to Craebruad barricaded. He pounded his spear against the wall. “Is anyone about in there?”

Footsteps scuffled, then a sharp, female voice answered, “I hear you. Now go away, we’ve trouble enough in here.”

“What? Are you an idiot?”

“Hardly,” came the humorless reply. “I’m a Druidess ministering to the king and all who lie here. What are you that you can move?”

“Me?” He did not know how to answer that. “I’ve come to warn you of what’s happening.”

“A little late, old fellow—it’s happened already, don’t you think? Now be off, leave us.”

Sualdam quaked with ire. “Old? Listen you—I bring warnings of great plunder, devastations—”

“We all know about the crows—we can see the fields from up here, you know.”

Sualdam shook his spear at the door. “Listen to me, you pustulating bombast—where’s Cathbad? Bring me somebody who has a brain and can use it!” He jammed his spear into the barricade and tried to pry it open. “Get me Cathbad!” he shouted, then kicked the wood.

The woman shrieked, “Get away, how dare you, I’ll put a *geis* on you to rot your nose.”

“You’ll put a *geis* on *me*?” he screamed. He flung his round shield at the door. Its razor edge stuck in the wood, knocking the spear aside. Sualdam stamped the ground, jumped up and down in a circle. He tripped over the spear shaft, cried out and fell toward the barricade. His chin hooked over the rim of the shield and the finely honed edge cut his head off.

From deeper recesses of Craebruad, a dark voice erupted, “Whatever is going on out there?”

The priestess explained in a voice still foaming with wounded pride, “Some obnoxious old messenger who wasn’t dropped by ...” The priestess paused then, realizing that Cathbad, too, was standing up.

“Open the door,” he said, exasperated.

“But—”

“Open the door, I command it. Don’t annoy me, I’ve no patience right now. Here, get out of my way, go tend to Conchovor, he’s starting to sit up.”

The barricade was unbarred, drawn back. Cathbad came face to face with the bloody, scalloped shield. He stared down at the headless corpse and frowned. This was not at all the sort of unpleasant scene one wanted to deal with first thing after a Curse.

Within the central chamber of Craebruad, Conchovor sat wincing, his hands pressed to his belly. He sipped at a potion the Druidess had made for him, one of indescribable foulness. His eyes pained him as if they had sunk so deep that they were squeezing against his brain. The potion made them water.

Cathbad backed in through the linen curtain. He carried a large shield like a bowl behind him.

“I know that shield,” Conchovor exclaimed. To the priestess, looking on dumbly, he repeated, “I know it.”

“You’ll know its contents, too,” said Cathbad. He set the shield on the floor between them.

Sualdam’s head rested upright in the center of the wide bowl, his eyes closed in death.

“Oh, no,” the king mourned. “That’s my sister’s husband.” He looked blearily at Cathbad. “How was this done?”

The Druid shot a stiff look at the Druidess. “An unfortunate accident, a misunderstanding. That aside, Sualdam has come far to give his message and I think it only fair to hear him out.” He drew the hazel wand from his belt and flourished it over the shield; he muttered something underneath his breath.

Sualdam’s eyes fluttered, rolled around in their sockets, then came to rest at Conchovor. “Why, this is most uncanny,” said the head. “I’ve just died and now I’m back again.”

“Just for a while,” Cathbad explained, “to tell your news.”

“Cathbad? I can’t see you, but I’d know that voice. At last, someone who will listen. You know, your doorkeeper’s a witless louse.”

“Your news, Sualdam,” Cathbad urged. “My powers aren’t unlimited and you wouldn’t like to be one of my bodiless *vathi*, believe me. It’s a diminished life. What do you have to tell?”

“Murderers!” Sualdam blurted, so abruptly that Conchovor tossed his potion. “Invasion. Plunder!”

“Who’s plundering?” asked the king.

“Maeve and Ailell mac Mata—he for revenge on you, she to add the Donn of Cuailnge to her herd. Many die, hampered by Macha. Cú Chulainn went to withstand them alone, but he’s fallen now. Time is short.

They make their escape through Tailtiu's cemetery while a brave handful take them on. The Boy Troop's in its grave from them. Cú Chulainn—he's in his house, Emer ministering, weeping at his wounded state, knowing she can do little to save him." Sualdam screwed up his face. "Now, how did I know all that?"

Cathbad moved around in front of him. "Your news ends, Sualdam. The bridge must close now and you've got to be on the far side of it. Return to the Many-Colored World. One day we'll meet there again."

"Life ends. Cathbad. My brother, Conchovor. Remember when I set Bricriu on fire? That was a time." His voice began to fade, the color draining from his cheeks. "I wish I could have seen my son once more ..." The eyes shut, the lips moved a moment longer, then stopped. The wetness on his cheeks was all that remained to show that he had lived again.

Conchovor looked away from him. "Father, who else is up and moving?" Cathbad's eyes went wide at hearing himself addressed in that manner after so long. Conchovor shrugged. "The Pangs seem to have driven out the remnants of Othar. Back to his barren crag. Now, please, who?"

"Your son, Finnchad of the Silver Horns. Fergus the Messenger's child, Illan, then Coirpre, Fingan the Healer."

"Finnchad first, I'll see him. Have the Healer set out now to Muirthemne. Cú Chulainn surely needs him. We'll gather our best as they climb up, and set out after the thieves. Illan knows his father's art, so have him sound the alarm." He glanced again into the shield. "Later, we'll honor our lost ones. For now, may the Dagda guard your soul, Sualdam, and the souls of the others who fell while we were powerless. Here, help me up." He reached out.

3. A Gathering of Healers

Laeg mac Riangabra squatted at the edge of the wide plateau on which Cú Chulainn's house stood. Behind the house Mount Oriel loomed another three hundred feet, the first third of its snowy expanse dappled by orange bracken and evergreen fern. Laeg leaned against an iron-tipped javelin from his chariot stock. He wore his cloak tightly around him.

The first fires of Maeve and Ailell's encampment shone as stars on the distant landscape. The army was a dark, roiling shape—ants swarming over some decaying animal in the last glimmer of twilight. They would pass the night down there, inadvertently under Cú Chulainn's house. Had they known where they were, Laeg was certain they would have sent someone up the hill to raze the house and kill Emer. That was why he stood guard, just in case. He remained more troubled, however, by the need for

a healer. Emer had some skill in the art, mostly at dressing wounds. She had coated them with what herbs she had preserved and wrapped the worst of them in muslin.

More, much more, would be needed if Cú Chulainn were to arise from his bed before the battle was over, if at all. Laeg wished that the situation had been different, that the king or queen of Connacht had been so wounded, for the law in Ulster proclaimed that no person who thieved from his neighbors had the right to ask for nursing, and Laeg would have enjoyed refusing those two any aid. All of Ulster would have turned them out. He imagined them crawling from house to house, dying by inches, by hours.

The twinkling lights brought him back to himself. Perhaps he ought to sneak down into their camp and somehow snatch one of their healers, one of the ones who had come out to help when Cú Chulainn had fought FerDiad. He lowered his head into shadow out of which only steam poured. His body shifted under the cloak. The hair grew further down his back. When he raised his head again, he was older. He glanced beside himself. “Here’s an unusual request for you,” he said to Senchan. “I want you to take my spear and stand guard while I go down to the exiles and try to procure a healer.”

“Me?” Senchan did not know what to think. Suddenly he was being asked to take an active part in the tale. His palms began to sweat. “What if someone comes? I don’t know how to throw a spear.”

“No matter. First of all, no one’s going to come. Second, if anyone does come, what they’ll see is me—for that’s how you’ll appear to your corporeal audience.” He offered the javelin to Senchan. “Test its weight. Find the precise point of balance and learn where to hold it so that it tips neither forward nor backward. Practice with it, but don’t lose it in the darkness. I won’t be terribly long.”

Senchan watched him, awestruck by the simplicity of it all. He studied the tip of the spear, touched it a bit too hard and ended up sucking blood from his finger. The situation made him ambivalent—after all, what had he done to deserve such trust as this? Well, to hell with practice. He squatted down as Laeg had done, resting his weight against the spear.

From behind, a gentle voice asked, “How goes the watch, Laeg?”

Senchan jumped up. Emer stood nearby, weariness in her pose. She was such a small woman—no taller than her husband who languished within the hut. Her face, under the wrapped auburn braids, belonged to some elfin princess like the ones Senchan knew of in faerie stories. She came nearer, came and put her arms around him and kissed him. Then she opened his thick blanket and tucked herself inside it for warmth. “I wish this were Samain Eve, so that time could stand still for a night. He’s as close now to the line of life and death as the whole world is that night. It might give him time to replenish. I keep binding him but every time I look again his

tributaries are flowing. Little rivers running over their banks. Oh, Laeg, soon I fear he'll run dry. I look on his lips and think of blue."

Senchan recalled that her speech was never quite free of riddling. Not sure how best to reply, he just nodded and faced the valley nervously. His side seemed to be on fire where her hand covered his ribs. In his whole life he had never been this close to a woman. Not like this. He envisioned Derdriu flaying against the standing stone and suddenly knew that the heat from Emer was the heat of Derdriu, and he had become the stone.

Emer said, "Soon Imbolc comes to blow away winter, and the breezes after won't chill me like this." She hugged herself to him more tightly. "I do so love you, Laeg mac Riangabra. You're a living shield without which he couldn't come back each time. He's the hard pellet and you're the sling that speeds him home. Let me bring you food, you must be starving."

"Yes, in fact ... could you bring a double portion?"

She smiled archly, a faery face. "Of course. I shouldn't want you to starve, either, Laeg who isn't Laeg." She kissed him quickly and danced away, leaving him to wonder dazedly how and what she knew. Had she been teasing him all along, or was it when he spoke that he gave himself away?

Before Emer had returned with his food, Senchan saw Laeg climbing back from the encampment. A few others followed, no more than dusky shapes. Laeg seemed to be supporting someone. Senchan ran to help but stopped when he saw who it was: Cethern, the gray-haired warrior who had driven past so regally; only now his flowing clothes had been reduced to a bloody tatter and he kept one fist pressed tight against his middle, where his bowels were trying to squeeze through. The trailing figures, Senchan discovered, were three robed healers with oddly shaved heads.

"That's how it is," Laeg said. "I go down to get me three healers and come back with another patient."

Cethern groaned in an attempt to express mirth.

"How did you like guard duty?" Laeg whispered. "Nothing happened of course."

Senchan hid his blush. "No. Nothing." He heard the whispered chants of the healers as they drew abreast of him, then bolted ahead to help Laeg.

In the hut they lay, Cethern beside Cú Chulainn on a bed of rushes. Emer grew more dispirited to see him in such a sorry state.

Cú Chulainn stirred and opened his eyes. The lights surrounding his pupils flickered as dimly as distant stars through a cloud. He spotted Cethern, then scanned the room. His eyes rolled. He rubbed them as much as his dressings would allow. His voice was raw. "Laeg, I must be dying, for I see one of you for each of my eyes.

Laeg suppressed a grin. "There's but one of me, Cucuc."

Cú Chulainn closed his eyes for a long moment, then dared another look. His features relaxed. "There, one of you fades away—I must be getting better."

“By the minute.”

He reached up to draw Laeg to him. “But tell me, was it a dream or did I slay FerDiad?”

“You did, in a great combat.”

“Then, I did accompany him to Magh Mell, so red it was. Who are these three characters with the amulets? Healers?”

“Fiachu mac Firaba secured them for me from Ailell’s own.”

“There’s a proper jest.”

“I thought so, too. The Ulster Exiles now know that you’re alive. It seems that Maeve’s bards have been singing your epitaph with FerDiad.”

“I look forward to surprising her. Tell me, is this bloody stick-figure beside me Cethern the Spikewielder?”

“Is,” groaned Cethern, “and if no one minds, I’d much value a healer’s prognosis.”

Laeg moved back to let the first healer sit beside Cethern. The bearded healer moved Cethern’s hand away from the wound in his belly. Cethern’s intestines popped into the gap.

The healer shook his head. “This is a fatal wound. You’re going to die.”

“Is that a fact?” wheezed Cethern.

“It is.”

“Then why don’t you go before me and warn them I’m coming.” He slammed his fist against the healer’s forehead. The priest fell over, dead. Cethern clutched at his bowels as they tried to spring out. He tucked himself back inside the wound. With bloodshot eyes he regarded the second healer. “How do you see things?”

Reluctantly, the second man shuffled up and bent over to inspect Cethern; he was not about to sit. “I’m sorry,” he said, expressing his regret at the hopelessness of the situation.

“You’ve good reason to be,” Cethern replied. He sat up suddenly and struck the healer a blow in the face that sent him flying back into the remaining robed man. The two crashed down, the bottom man unconscious, the one on top dead.

“Cethern,” Laeg said smartly, “I didn’t bring these healers up here so that you might exercise your fists. I won’t be able to get more, so would you mind not asking the third one for his advice until *after* he tends to you? Provided I can even get him to go near you now.” He knelt and shook the last healer.

“Listen to him,” Cú Chulainn argued. “How did you get such wounds?”

“Well, I—” He stopped speaking as a spear that had been standing upright where the second Laeg had disappeared suddenly floated up and settled horizontally just above the floor beside him. No one else seemed to notice it, so Cethern chose to ignore it, too. “I attacked the camp below. They must have had word I was coming, ’cause there were three to a post. I slew a batch—all their outer guard—but they crowded me from all

sides. I could see Ailell directing them and I dragged my way toward him. Men and women took me on, replaced, as each fell, by another. It was a gauntlet I ran with the king as the goal. Just before I cleared the way to him, two of his sons—two of those boys they named Maine—split open my gut and drove me back out of the camp, where I fell. They would've taken my head for sure but the two started arguing about who should have it. I lay there, listening to my fate being bickered over. That's an unnerving thing, I'll say. Then the boys came to blows and their father strode in and slapped them and sent them away, and I was forgotten. I'd've died if Laeg hadn't come along."

Laeg had awakened the remaining healer and now shoved him over to Cethern. "Now, listen to me, Spike—you let this man do his work. Don't you punch in his face or twist his neck or anything else. He has to attend to Cú Chulainn as well as you."

"All right—but only because I don't want Cú Chulainn's death on my hands."

"I thank Figol, god of knowledge, for imparting that much brain to you."

"When I'm better, I'll fix you right for such a slur."

Laeg grinned. "I shall petition for your swift recovery."

They heard a chariot approaching across the plateau. Laeg hurried out, followed by his "floating" spear.

"Your house is haunted, lady," Cethern proclaimed.

"No, I'm sure you're wrong," answered Emer. "May I give him soup?" she asked the healer. He let her spoon broth to Cethern, but after the first few spoonfuls, the broth reappeared, trickling out of the gap in Cethern's belly. Emer hesitated, then put down the bowl and wooden ladle.

"Lousy healer," Cethern muttered. "Can't even plug a leak."

Laeg returned, carrying his spear himself this time. Behind him, a short, spindly man with wavy hair came in. Laeg introduced him. "This is Fingin, Conchovor's healer. He says Sualdam brought news to Emain Macha this dawn and the king sent Fingin to tend your wounds."

The other healer bowed out of the way to the Druid of superior skill, but watched from behind as Fingin worked on Cú Chulainn. The Ulster healer unbound the bandages and studied the wounds, especially the chest wound. "A hard man gave you that. Who is your patron god?"

"Lugh Samildánach."

"All his aspects, is it? Good. I'll chant to him in all guises while I grind marrow for your wounds." To Emer, he asked, "Have you the bones you used to make your broth?" Then he went to Cethern and began to press and prod the numerous open wounds, describing them as if the healer attending him were a bard, memorizing the data. "This," said Fingin, touching his chest, "was done by two huge men, much taller than you."

"I'd been brought to my knees."

“If you say so. This was a javelin, this a sword with teeth on one edge. A woman warrior did it unless I’m mistaken—see how she put all her force into the blow? And the angle’s odd, yes, definitely a woman, much fiercer blow than by a man.”

“Maeve did it—are you happy?”

Fingin went on, undaunted. “And this,” he pried apart the belly wound, “was done by two who like their work. A tandem effort. Brothers, possibly?”

“Two Maines—one like his mother, the other like his father.”

“Yes.” He sat back on the balls of his feet, his arms crossed. He hummed tunelessly for a few moments. “And who’s your family god?”

“Luchta.”

“You should have asked him to make a shield for you. All you can do now is pray to him. I’ll chant and make marrow balm for you, too, but the best we can hope for here is to forestall the inevitable. No, I’m afraid you’ve let a whole herd of bulls trample you and there’s nothing for it.” The second healer put some distance between himself and Fingin. “Best you should make your peace with Luchta.” He stood, fatigued, and took bones and a quern stone from Emer.

Cethern’s cheeks swelled and darkened. He rolled over and tried to kick Fingin, but Laeg cried, “Cethern!” and deflected the kick with his spear shaft. Cethern’s foot landed on the other healer and sent him sailing out the door.

Cú Chulainn closed his eyes and groaned.

4. Senchan’s Dream

The sky that night was full of stars and contained the tiniest sliver of a moon.

Laeg and Senchan did guard duty together, which consisted mostly of huddling for warmth and drinking the warm beer that Emer brought them. The fires in the valley tricked Senchan’s sleepy mind into thinking it beheld a lake reflecting the stars. As he peered into the “water,” one of the lights swelled like a growing bonfire and swallowed the rest.

Senchan found himself among the armies of Connacht in broad daylight. Pandemonium had seized the camp. People raced in every direction, chariots rolled, bounced, careered. Armed groups of various sizes ran every which way. The noise deafened him.

On two promontories at either end of the camp, two wide, ugly men stood. These two were hefting stones from two piles of boulders and flinging them out over the camp. The stones smacked together at the apex of

their arcs and the shattered pieces rained down on the camp, striking, squashing, killing those who could not get out of their way. Senchan named the rock throwers to himself; Cú Roi mac Daire and Munremoir mac Gerrcin, two squat, troll-like creatures with arms like trees.

From the east, the fur-covered and fanged father of Cethern came bounding, leading his wild *tuath* who were likewise hirsute and snaggle-toothed. Fintan was the father's name. Among his band, Senchan saw Cethern's younger brother, Crimthan, who had no such teeth and carried weapons instead. One body of warriors, all of Munster, stood their ground to meet this onslaught.

Cethern's wife, FinBec, drove her chariot through Cruachan's camp, skewering anyone within reach as she headed for Mount Oriel and Cú Chulainn's house. She had been told that Cethern was dead.

Senchan watched how Ailell and Maeve responded to these various attacks. Warriors skirted around and came up the two promontories from the far side, forcing the two ugly men to leap off. Amazingly, neither died from the fall but sank into the ground up to their thighs. Ailell had them captured before they could wriggle free, and made them yield.

FinBec made a full sweep through the camp before continuing to Mount Oriel, unscathed. Maeve led a force around Fintan. The only member of that family she wanted was Crimthan. The rest she had slaughtered except for the old man. Held at bay, Fintan roared with anger and bit through the arm of one of his captors, but he hesitated when Maeve put her dagger against Crimthan's throat and demanded the old man pledge his loyalty to Ailell. Fintan had no choice and complied. Maeve released Crimthan then. She sent father and grandson away. No one else in their *tuath* survived that attack; over a hundred furred and fanged bodies lay, teeth bared even in death. Senchan knew that this was the end of a race, and that these people would be legend by his time.

Ailell and Maeve gathered their forces quickly and pushed on for Taitiu. On the way more groups and individuals beset them. Senchan saw Cethern himself come swooping down from Cú Chulainn's house. He had a bronze wheel rim wrapped around his middle to hold his insides in. Ailell saw the warrior cutting a swath through the army again—straight for him as before. Cethern foamed and raved, insanely fierce in what he knew to be his final assault. Ailell saw this, too. He removed his king's torc and put it around a small canted standing stone halfway across the field. Cethern fastened his gaze on the torc, sought and blindly hacked away at the idol, spittle dripping from his lips, his eyes glassy, bulging. All the while that he chopped the stone, a brace of warriors surrounded him and had an easy time of cutting him apart. Finally one of them cut his legs out from under him and another took off his head. The legs kicked powerfully—one heel knocked over the chipped stone. The arms grappled randomly, ripping up bloody grass, finally just squeezing it. Ailell did not retrieve his torc until all the parts of Cethern lay still.

More attacks beleaguered them as more of Ulster arose. The royalty of Connacht tricked and defeated every enemy. Senchan saw it all in a feverish reality where each act was too fluid, every line too sharp and light too bright, where colors burned his eyes and everything he saw was too close, too clear. The names of all the challengers stacked up in his brain. The last of them to come was Rochad.

Rochad was the young leader of a tribe, his father having died not long before the Pangs. He led his troop against Ailell with great reluctance because, at one time, the king of Connacht might have become his father-in-law. In childhood, fostered Rochad and Finnabair had been infatuated with one another and had often pretended to be married. However, Rochad's home lay in Ulster and after his fosterage he returned to his family. Now, despite many fond memories, Ailell had become the enemy and Rochad must strike him down.

Maeve described his approach to her listless daughter and was rewarded by Finnabair's stirring out of her oblivion at the mention of his name. "Rochad," she mumbled. "Rochad ... I've loved him my whole life. Is he as handsome as when he lived near us?"

"More so it seems to me. Why not get up now, go out and greet him before a conflict develops between us?"

Finnabair hurried to her mother's chariot. Two more filled with soldiers flanked it. Maeve explained to her, "I would not dare let you go out unguarded. Look at what happened the last time."

Finnabair touched her raggedly chopped hair and nodded to her mother. The warriors maintained a respectful distance as they followed her, so that she broke through the front lines seemingly unaccompanied. Rochad saw her and rushed forward. His people drew up uncertainly.

He jumped aboard her chariot. They kissed and embraced tightly, murmuring devotions. When Rochad opened his eyes, he found the chariot surrounded by a dozen armed men. He turned to the people he had abandoned, but they had already panicked and fled the field with more Connacht warriors in hot pursuit.

The soldiers escorted Maeve's chariot slowly as the queen had ordered them. Rochad and Finnabair spoke as friends—it was obvious she had not been party to his capture. She still loved him deeply as he loved her.

Maeve had ordered a small tent erected beside hers especially for Finnabair and Rochad. She declined to see him at first and simply left her daughter and the young man alone.

Rochad, whatever his skills as a warrior, lacked any defenses against Finnabair's guileless devotion. They sat beside a brazier and talked of the years that had separated them, each description erasing the passage of time, moving them closer together, until they were the children they had once been with nothing left that divided them. They made love and lay together that whole night, deaf in their vacuum of adoration to all the cries and clash of battle. They drifted warmly to sleep in each other's arms.

The untended brazier burned out. In the darkness, two shapes entered the tent. They remained no more than a minute, but when they left, Rochad had disappeared.

The pain from the hands gripping him brought Rochad sharply awake. He found himself thrust naked, held upright, before the king and queen of Connacht.

“You *still* love Finnabair, that is obvious,” Maeve said slyly. “If you go home now, young man, she will be yours and this trifling conflict will remain someone else’s concern. You no longer have a force to command in any case.”

“I do love her.”

“Then yield for now. How simple, and Finnabair to wife.”

“I’ve dreamt of that since I was ten, before your Black Army killed my older brothers. But I’ll do as you ask.”

“Excellent,” said Ailell. He clapped Rochad on the back and gave him hot wine. “We’ll enjoy your return to us.”

This time the two guards escorted Rochad politely. They left him alone in his small tent, allowed him to dress and tell Finnabair what her parents had decided, what he had agreed to. Once the Donn had been conveyed from the province, he would come to Connacht and be wed to Finnabair. Her parents had promised. They kissed excitedly and Rochad went out. The two guards took him to the perimeter of the camp, some miles back. Afterward, they wended their way back to their post, barmy with laughter, and stopped here and there to tell others how Maeve and Ailell had tricked that poor love-struck puppy Rochad into yielding without a skirmish. In this way, the tale spread swiftly through the wide camp.

The guards had not returned to their posts for five minutes when seven warrior-kings barged into the royal tent. They complained that they had caught wind of the pact struck with Rochad and had, by accident, discovered that they were *all* betrothed to Finnabair.

In the adjoining tent, the girl awoke and could not help overhearing what was being said of her. She got up and pushed her way into her mother’s tent.

The loudly bickering warriors faltered in their demands at the sight of her.

Shame boiled up in Finnabair like lava at the sight of their cormorant faces. It scorched her throat; blisters erupted on her perfect cheeks. Her nude body withered as they looked on—even her father and mother were incapable of coming to her aid. Her ribs protruded, the hair sprinkled from her head. She split open where Cú Chulainn’s stone had penetrated, where hapless Rochad had penetrated. Maeve shook and began to shriek and could not stop. Blood and gore pooled around Finnabair and she crumpled like a burning clump of grass, a skeleton of twigs and slough.

The spellbound onlookers were so horrified they could not breathe. Maeve’s keening had heated and thickened the air. The shame from

Finnabair spread to the seven like a disease; none of them died from it but none escaped out of that tent a sane man. So much shame, borne all at once, had chewed a path into their brains.

Senchan ran leadenly like a sleeper from a nightmare—to snap bolt upright, sweating and unnaturally alert, beside Laeg.

It was night. The fires of the camp lay below ... but closer now. He glanced behind him and found the landscape littered with barrow mounds and cromlechs, the latter looking like giant fossils trying to climb out of the earth. In the midst of them one tent had been erected.

“Where are we?”

“Where? In Taitiu—where Ulster buries its heroes and kings. It’s a very sacred spot and no one would dare come up here who isn’t a friend.”

“But when—how are we here?”

“Can’t you deduce it? We’re here because we’re following the armies. Cú Chulainn’s in the tent, sleeping while Fingin’s marrow-mash revives him. You think you’ve had a dream, but it’s no dream, it’s a vision. A vision like Druids have, like Cathbad had with the bull’s blood and Duffach, the night the Nemain came. Don’t ask me how you had it—I don’t pretend to comprehend these things. But it’s a very good sign so far as our benefactors are concerned.”

“Then, Finnabair’s dead?”

“Soon enough she will be. Regrettable by any standard.”

Senchan pushed at his face. “Then, can we save her?”

“It’s already happened, you see, even though it won’t occur for a few more hours, boy. You’re centuries past it, really.”

“NO!” He threw off his fur and got up. “I don’t care what you say, I’m going.” He ran off down the hill at breakneck speed.

A red, dusky light surrounded Laeg. The earth shuddered beneath him. “Oh, really?” he said as if in answer to an unheard question. “And just how shall I stop him, hmm? Let him be. He’s had a powerful dream, you said so yourselves, so leave off. His time’s nearly spent, after all.” With a sound like a demon’s belch, the red light faded. Laeg burrowed deeper into his furs.

Senchan arrived outside the tents just as Rochad was being escorted through the camp. He watched until the young warrior and his guards were lost from sight, out where a dozen large central fires stippled the night. Then he stole into the smaller tent.

Finnabair slept curled like some tiny animal, withdrawn and defenseless. Senchan cautiously drew the furs up around her neck. She had such a simple, clear beauty, one that was artless, unadorned. He sat beside her and thought of Derdriu, so much like her in many ways. Both of them victims, he thought, out of their single-hearted ingenuousness: they were born to be victimized, too honest in conduct to escape exploitation. Idly, his hand brushed through her bobbed blonde hair.

His regretful thoughts carried him into a numbness of dispirited thought, which did not release him until voices outside the tent began calling for Ailell.

Senchan stiffened, looking from the sound to the sleeping girl. Her face wrinkled as the piercing denunciations burrowed into her dreams. Senchan glanced wildly about for something to shield her with and finally, in a panic, he bent down and covered her ears with his hands. He pressed his whole weight on top of her to muffle the calls from outside. Her scent enveloped him; her hair tickled his nostrils, and he very nearly forgot his purpose, but she sighed and he pressed harder on her ears.

The yelling went on and on, with Ailell's voice, loudest of all, cutting through it, silencing the others. This had not happened in his vision and Senchan relaxed. He lifted himself off her.

Finnabair awoke. For a few moments she continued to lie there, but then pushed back the furs and got to her knees and listened to her father's strident denunciation of the seven warrior-kings. She heard Rochad's name mentioned. Immediately, she got to her feet and padded to the doorway.

Senchan pursued her, beside himself in consternation. He hadn't stopped the dreadful outcome, only delayed it. He snatched up a dented black pot from the shadows and, with both hands, struck Finnabair on the back of the head. The contents of the pot sloshed all over him. Finnabair collapsed in his arms. He flung the pot away and it clanked across the ground. The voices in the adjoining tent went silent.

Ailell stuck his head in through the tent opening. His daughter slept in a sprawl in the middle of the enclosure; she had kicked off her covers and knocked over a chamber pot, but she hadn't been awakened. Ailell thanked every god and goddess he could think of, even Macha. He crept in and replaced the furs over her. Those stupid suitors, he thought as he looked down at her, what terrible damage might their thoughtless avarice have done to her if they'd awakened her with their bickering? None of them, not one, had performed their appointed duty—to eliminate the Hound of Ulster—in order to deserve her. So far as he was concerned, none of them deserved her regardless of what they could do, a subject on which he had a few poignant ideas of his own. Satisfied that Finnabair would not awaken, Ailell crept out to rid himself of the seven fools.

Senchan tried to ignore the smell of himself. He tried wiping the acrid contaminant off against the furs. He started to leave, then went back and, on one knee, brushed back Finnabair's hair and kissed lightly the edge of her mouth.

She sighed and said, "Cucuc."

Senchan frowned for a moment, but his discouragement evaporated. He had saved her! She was alive. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, might die before this was all over, he smelled like the ditch in back of a feasthall, but Finnabair was alive! Finally he had done something important. He had saved someone. His life had meaning.

5. Conchovor's Force

Senchan and Laeg watched dawn come up over the hills behind them, the light outlining the graves and stones that had been so alive to Senchan the night before. His excitement had cooled somewhat since rescuing Finnabair—in part due to the sustained itching that his “bath” had caused him—but not enough to dispel his eagerness over the forthcoming battle. “What now?” he asked Laeg when he could keep quiet no longer.

“Now comes Ulster. You recall that Conchovor directed Cathbad to send a number of people to him after Fingin. Do you remember the name Finnchad of the Silver Horns?”

“One of his sons.”

“Bastard sons, yes. Well, subsequently, Conchovor sent Finnchad out with orders to retrieve the heroes of Ulster. The young man, wearing the antlered crown that had earned him his name, went outside to find more people milling about, weak, tottering, but happy to be able to stand again. From on the plain he heard a pandemonium of voices, and he climbed onto the rampart to see the whole of Emain Macha teeming with warriors, a babel of heroics, some of the boasters in chariots but most on foot, and every one blowing his own *carynx* as to how he would deal with the cause of the nine-day affliction, even though none of them knew what that cause might be. Finnchad jumped down from the rampart and ran back up the hill, through the crowd, to get his father.

“Conchovor returned with his son, taking Cathbad along with him. The imperious Druid silenced the horde, welcomed them, then stepped back so that Conchovor could explain to them the cause of their plight and concern. The din redoubled, threats and promises of slaughter climbing into the sky, drowned out shortly by the louder clamor of weaponry against shield face, boom and clang, *carynx* and bodhran. The multitude turned as one and surged away from Craebruad, a human torrent that flowed over Slieve Fuait, swept down on Fernmag, down the western edge of Crich Rois and around Lough Ramor. More men and women joined them as they pushed forward, including Eogan mac Durthact and his *tuath*.

“Below Ramor they encountered tangential Connacht forces, mostly plunderers, but with some scouts mixed in—the latter stationed on the heights of Slieve na Caille. The plunderers had no chance and were trampled. Heads went to Celtchair mac Uthidir, Amargin, Cú Roi (who had promised Ailell only to go away, but hadn't forsworn a return), and Aengus Fer Benn Uma, who like Finnchad wore horns—only his were of copper and he hung his entitlement of heads from them so that he ap-

peared at first glance to be some many-headed monstrosity. Apparently flies did not bother him. The multitude incorporated as well the Devouring Queen of Dun Sobairche, who has no known name other than that, which may or may not refer to her skill in battle. Follamain, Laegaire, the sons of Lete and those of Fiachtna, Senoll and the Sons of Ficce, who had spent their time after delivering Cú Chulainn to his house sounding the alarm, and who joined the main body of the force with many more warriors who had assembled at their call. I could name them all night. Suffice it to say that there were so many gathered and making such noise that, as had occurred from the thunderous passage of Connacht's forces at the beginning of the raid, the Nemain was released from the tumuli atop Slieve na Caille. She swept down ahead of Ulster's advance, down onto Connacht's escaping ..."

He stopped speaking as the dawn's light was blotted to a roiling blackness and he and Senchan were buffeted by a cold wind that seemed to come from every direction at once. The wind carried a voice on its currents—a deadly howling that whirled in a wide ring around the whole of the army. Tiny glowing creatures were flung off from the wind; evil, yellowish things with cracked, empty skin like the cast-off shells of cicadas. Their own yowls echoed the Nemain's high shriek. In the camp, people scattered, gathering their belongings, throwing implements, stores and weapons onto wagons, tethering their terrified mounts.

"Ailell watched warriors topple from unendurable fright, others run from chattering horrors. He cursed the Morrighu, damned the Nemain to be crushed under the Dagda's foot like a slug. He shouted to the skies for all the spirits of the dead slain by Cú Chulainn to rise from their tombs and plague the Ulstermen."

Senchan glanced back worriedly at the dark graves, anticipating the emergence of armed spirits.

"No," Laeg assured him, "none are coming. Ailell's curse was devoured by the Nemain's demons, although pursuit of his words made them leave off chasing warriors. His words never reached the dead, if he ever had the power to raise them."

They watched Ailell beckon to MacRoath and yell to him in the midst of the storm. MacRoath bowed, then ran off to the west, quickly outdistancing those who had escaped at the first echo of the Nemain.

"It's time we went along, too. When the Sleep of the Marrow Mash lifts from Cú Chulainn, we'll have arrived at the scene of the final confrontation."

XVII: BATTLE OF THE BULLS



1. MacRoth's View

The armies had reached Cuil Sibrille, intending to return by the same road they had followed on the way up into Ulster's heart, from the hook on the Blackwater to Cruachan. MacRoth rejoined them there. He waved the leaders to a halt as he came running up; the front ranks halted, word passed back to the king and queen, and Maeve and Ailell pushed to the front where the messenger stooped, hands on knees, catching his breath.

"I climbed the heights of Iraid Cuillen," he told them, "and from there I could see north to the tumuli sites of Slieve na Caillighe. The first thing I saw was strange lights on the plain to the north—flashing sparks as if the *Sídhe* had come out there.

"As the sun climbed higher I saw also what I thought was a layer of mist, but it wasn't mist—it was dust, a giant whirlwind full of sparks. In front of it, coming at me, all kinds of forest creatures and cattle and pigs were running, fleeing the storm, which swept along the ground, billowing and expanding out at the sides."

"Some other unnatural manifestation of the *Morrighu*," suggested Ailell. "I cursed the fates last night and now they plague me for it. We must turn south and try to outdistance the wind, even if we have to invade Meath as well."

"Stay and let me hear another interpretation," Maeve insisted. Fergus mac Roich had been listening to MacRoth from a discreet distance. He wore a curiously mocking smile. "What is funny, Fergus?" the queen addressed him. "Share the joke for once." The king and MacRoth turned to see him.

“What’s funny is Ailell misreading the tokens of his doom with such expertise. You think that dust cloud is something arcane. It’s not. That wind is the coming of Ulster. The flashes within it, all their brandished, polished weaponry glinting when the sunlight catches it. As I’ve said, Conchovor’s come and he’s ahead of you now. Once he discovers that, he’ll turn and sweep you up.” His eager eyes locked with Ailell’s.

“There’s no way for us to go home without a fight.” Ailell brooded. “We lost a goodly number of our best—yours and mine, wife—to the late, great Hound. How are we supposed to withstand this confrontation?”

“We have enough. Our forces are surely greater in number still, but just as surely more of *them* will rise up. The best thing for us is to face them now, cut our way through them before they grow any larger, and get safely home where we can defend against all comers.”

“For once your advice is persuasive,” agreed Fergus. “Not based on the moment’s expedience. For once you’ve thought ahead.”

Maeve hardly acknowledged him. She addressed MacRoth: “Go back out and watch where that dust goes while we gather ourselves and prepare to meet it. We shall do as my husband suggests for now and skirt their main force by going south for a time.”

“How nice to know I’m supported,” Ailell cut in.

MacRoth escaped before another argument could begin and soon lost sight of his own people. Not long after that he found the outstretched whirlwind again; the head of it, he soon saw, had come to a stop at a hill called Slemain Midi on the far side of Lough Owel. From there the Ulstermen would have plenty of warning of anyone’s approach through the neck of land between the three lakes of Owel, Derravaragh, and Ennell; unerringly, the Ulstermen had blocked the route that, even now, Ailell chose for his army. The Ulster Druids must be remarkably percipient, he thought, or might they even have planted the notion in Ailell’s mind? Whatever the case, his job was to learn all he could. More than that could not be hoped for at this turn of events.

For many hours, his eyes as sharp as a hawk’s, MacRoth memorized the faces and aspects of that gathered, tumultuous force, counting heads and weapons and vehicles. Maeve had been right: Ulster’s present horde lacked superiority over hers. At least, he thought as he ran off again, that was good news to bring back.

He found his own army near Lough Sheever, a tiny body of water. Before she let him report, however, Maeve called Fergus and Cormac from their group to listen and identify the individuals described. The first few, MacRoth knew.

Conchovor: “With his hair bleached yellow, curled in waves to the middle of his back. His face is narrow in the chin and he wears his beard forked, each side twisting to a point. The elfin look of childhood still resides upon his face, in his soft gray eyes.”

His son, Cuscraid: “Easily picked out by the stammer that’s earned him his nickname. His hair is blond and worn identically to his father’s. Also, his tunic’s of the same royal green, his gold jewelry reflects the same design.”

“Another leader is tall as Conchovor but older. His gray hair is thin and far back on his skull. He has yellow eyes and a face that seems chiseled from some hard wood. His nose comes to a sharp point, his cheeks go deep. A thick mustache covers his lip, as gray as his remaining hair. They call him Laegaire the Victorious. His father, Connad, is there, too, and frankly looks no older than his son—since *his* hair is curly and black.

“Others I’ve seen before, too. Handsome young Rochad has returned for this final battle, accompanied by his *tuath*—at least there’s *one* cowardly group you needn’t fear.”

“How could he have defied our pact so simply?” Maeve said.

“Perhaps nearness to you two affected him,” suggested Fergus. Ailell shot him a cold glare but Fergus was unintimidated.

MacRoth interjected loudly, “And Munremoir, the tree stump that walks. He’s carting around a black shield now instead of stones—a shield the size of a tent. Still another is very grim and proud. Hair like a flame, swept back like a whitecap. Him I don’t know.” He cocked an eyebrow at Cormac.

“That might be Fedlimid the Wave.”

“Another leader—his face belongs to a wolf. He has popping green eyes and bright orange hair, oiled and drawn back at the sides, loose and jagged on his forehead in front. Canine teeth, a short black beard—a face you’d never trust.”

Fergus grew more excited with each depiction. “His weapon and colors, tell me!”

“The weapon ... it’s a forked javelin. Yes—the shaft cut short for close work. His color’s purple, everywhere.”

Fergus tilted back his head and his grin was tight. “I could ask for no more than that.” He clasped his hands to his mouth and walked away, all other matters swept up and forgotten.

Ailell said to Cormac, “MacRoth just described Eogan mac Durthact, didn’t he?”

Cormac nodded.

“Continue,” Ailell bade.

The messenger described others whom he had not recognized. Cormac named each one: Furbaide, Conchovor’s sons Fiacha (named, ironically, for Fergus’s son) and Fiachna, Celtchar mac Uthidir, Amargin. It was a protracted list. Even so, when MacRoth had finished, many heroes remained unaccounted for. Conall Cernach had not arrived and his absence made Ailell feel safer; but he knew that Maeve had been right, that more were arriving every moment and that now was the time to move, while

that body of fighters awaited more recruits and while Fergus chomped at the bit to get at mac Durthact.

“The time for talk is past,” the king declared. He sent Cormac and MacRoith to tell everyone that war was imminent.

2. The Morrígu

Conchovor’s scouts spied the forces of Connacht approaching from the northeast, a place called Ath Fene, a humid lowland full of tiny lakes, cattails and soggy peat-glazed, at present, with patches of ice. The king and his Druids rode out to meet this force.

Upon seeing him, Ailell and Maeve selected Druids of their own to accompany them to meet with Ulster’s king. Scornful of the young man who had once made suit for his wife, Ailell would not speak with him directly.

Cathbad, in a robe of white, raised his arms above his head, holding a wand of ash between his hands. “My lord Conchovor welcomes you to the field of battle,” he proclaimed.

His opposite number replied, “And the overwhelming king and queen of Cruachan look forward to your challenge.” Ailell whispered to the Druid, who then added, “The king would know what you want here.”

“Will he not address me himself?” Conchovor asked, his cheeks flushing.

“He will not.”

“Fine. Then you may address your questions to *my* Druid.”

Cathbad glared at him irresolutely, then cleared his throat, hemming and hawing until he concocted a reply. “We’ve come to request a truce till morning with you.”

“Why should we want that?” Ailell asked through his Druid. “It only allows you to add to your strength.”

Cathbad bent to Conchovor. “Why *should* they want it?”

“You know why. Tell them.”

“Yes. Well ... A truce would—a truce would serve both sides. So great a battle as is no doubt about to be fought requires strength—that is, rest. Otherwise, our warriors—yours and ours—won’t perform their best feats and history would speak belittlingly of our clash. If you won, that would shame you.”

“If?” shouted Ailell. Then he bridled his resentment and spoke in a harsh whisper to his Druid, who said, “The king accepts, though for the need of your side, not his, as his army is *always* ready to perform to its fullest and would gladly tackle you this minute. But, rather than spend

eternity listening to Ulstermen whine of how they lost the battle from lack of sleep, he grants you your nap.”

“You should remind your overlord,” Cathbad replied hotly, “that it’s *we* have had nine night’s ease while his gathering poked and prodded our territory like some halfhearted lover with a flaccid phallus. He should be thankful of the opportunity to stiffen his weapon.”

Ailell’s face had gone completely red and his eyes bulged from their sockets. “In the morning then!” he barked, then snatched the reins from his driver and wheeled the chariot around. Maeve looked back at Conchovor as her husband drove them away. He *was* lovely, but Ulster would never have allowed her the power she had in Connacht, not with Macha already in power. And look at what had happened to that girl, Derdriu. Maeve pushed up beside Ailell and studied the backs of their two horses. “My, wasn’t that fun?” she said.

Ailell shot her a glance to kill but Maeve continued to stare distractingly ahead all the way back.

The excitement of the camp charged Maeve as she walked through it to her red tent. Warriors huddled in clusters around small fires and when they looked up at her passing, she saw an ecstatic savagery in their faces. This was what they lived for—the coming of battle. She considered that she understood the mind of the warrior better than anyone else; after all, she had used and discarded more of them than she could count. They always displayed plenty of enthusiasm in sex but she knew that sex was merely one way of passing time between battles for them, that they loved warfare far more than sultry, coital afternoons. The few who had gone against Cú Chulainn in single combat had already won honor, if only through death. The impending fight with Ulster would change that, would give them all the chance to parade their skills, their strength. The survivors would keep alive the names of those who fell. Immortality was a curious thing.

She saw that, where there had been bickering and contention previously, there now existed only harmony and comradeship: they had become one vast being, all the parts striving for exactly the same goal, honed and oiled for this one challenge.

The distance between the two camps was that of Ath Fene. Each could see the fires of the other, the colors of the tents and tunics. Both sides sounded the alarm when three enormous ravens descended from the northern sky.

The black birds circled each camp before finally settling in the middle of the plain. A dense mist wreathed out of the ground where they landed. It whirled like a waterspout up into the clouds. A carrion wind blew through the camps and the birds twisted and grew. One became like darkness itself, a ragged spectral shape with moistly shining eyes.

The second one became the hideous sexual monster that had confronted Cú Chulainn in the guise of a Síthe princess.

The last more than anything resembled her father, Ernmas. She was a rotted corpse, with flesh replaced by mud and detritus. Worms crawled through the holes in her.

These were the three: Nemain, the Badb, and Morrigan. They stood back to back around the whirling spout and hissed their chant. The suspired words carried to both armies, stiffening hackles.

“Welcome to the field, ripe fruits.
Put down your roots and grow here,
Wither and enrich our soil.
Spill your seeds in the delirium of battle.
Alone, here stands Ulster
Against all of golden Eriu, allied—
A division to outlast you.
It pleases us, your offer to pour out your blood
While your fundament fails,
Fertilizing your grave,
And we, ravens, pluck the savory, sightless eyes.”

They paused, changed positions, and made one final chant:

“Woe betide you, Ulster! Glory to Eriu!
Mangle bodies, mangle flesh—the more we honor you!”

The whirlwind left the ground and shot into the sky, sucking the three sisters with it. The clouds slammed together thunderously and black feathers floated down over the field of battle.

3. Laeg's Telling

“They gave the armies of the other provinces all the praise and warned Ulster that it will fail!” Senchan exclaimed.

“They did that, indeed,” agreed Laeg. “And you’ve responded just as those of Connacht, Munster, Meath and Leinster did, as the three intended no less.”

“You mean they were lying?”

“Simply a matter of interpretation. Isn’t it reasonable that the Daughters of Murder itself might be more inclined to honor most those who are about to feed their obscene hunger?”

They walked up the grassy hill of Uisneach, where Cú Chulainn lay in his tent. He remained too encrusted with wounds to join the battle. Each time he had tried to arise, Fingin the Healer had forced him down again, then put him back to sleep with phrasings and lore given to all Druid healers from the god Dian Cecht, the master of the Leech.

Around the hill a red twilight grew. The stars wheeled in the heavens; first one, then dozens, then hundreds spattered the sky and, like the sliver of the moon, arced to the horizon. The red darkness became red dawn. The entire night had passed while Laeg and Senchan ascended the hill.

Senchan turned to look out at the fires scattered across the land. He imagined how the camps had passed the night: in boasts and embraces and gestures of good luck; in calls and chants to their various gods—nearly as many in name as the quantity of *tuaths* gathered here, but some called upon by both sides, worship pitted against worship. From that Senchan saw the absurdity of calling upon deities for help when it was men who confronted you. Gods were neither for nor against you: gods were deaf. Skill was everything, action the essence.

Inside the tent, Cú Chulainn sat up with effort, throwing off layers of fur. He was bound, arms against his sides, by a cocoon of hazel twigs looped into spancel hoops. “What’s happening now?” he asked.

“Early morning, gray in the sky. Time for warriors to chant in their sleep—Duffach the Dark and even Ailell. The battle’s about to be engaged.”

“I have to go and—”

“Nonsense.” Laeg ducked into the tent and forced Cú Chulainn to lie back. Where FerDiad’s sword had pierced his chest, the wound was as big as a hand. Between the bindings, it glistened icily with Fingin’s salves. “Why do you think Fingin went to the trouble of tying you down? If you try and break free, I’ll bring him back here and have you put to sleep again, and you’d miss the whole affair.”

Cú Chulainn shot him a look of betrayal. “You wouldn’t do that. We’re friends.”

“That’s precisely why I would do it. That army below comes to clean the debris of your combats. Would you share your honor or steal theirs? Let them have their day in the sun. They won’t outshine you.”

“Then ... you must stand outside and report everything that happens.”

“That I’ll gladly do if it keeps you here.” He piled the furs over his friend again before going out.

The battle began with the morning still gray and unwarmed by the sun. Stray cattle dotted the marshy plain; during the night they had broken loose and scattered while their herdsmen slept.

“Right now the first blood of the battle is coloring the earth,” Laeg called to Cú Chulainn.

Senchan looked down but saw no warriors. “What heroes are fighting?” Cú Chulainn called back.

“None. It’s our herdsmen contending with Connacht’s over the rightful ownership of the stray cattle. Now one of ours strikes one of theirs with a staff. Another leaps upon him, and the servant boys apprenticed to our herdsmen pry the Connachtman off and swarm over him.”

“The Ants of Ulster!” Cú Chulainn cheered.

“More like hornets. Now more are running out from both sides. This battle may start over our cattle as well as our bull, with the weapons of choice being sticks.”

“Where are the kings?”

“Still sleeping, though this fracas will likely awaken them, which is what the inattentive herdsmen were trying to avoid. The tops of the hills are lit by the sun but the valley will be dark for some time yet.”

A shout echoed up from the plain, calling for the men of Macha to put on their arms and leather. It came in an eerie sing-song.

“That sounds like Conchovor possessed,” Cú Chulainn said.

“Or else Fiachna, who sounds just like him.”

Another voice took up the chant, his verse telling the Ulstermen to take back their cattle, retrieve their honor, and silence the satires before they were composed.

“That’s Laegaire Buadach.”

“Definitely,” Laeg agreed. “Unmistakable. It’s an omen, like a wind sweeping through the camp, gripping each soul as it glides through the tents. If we can hear it, so must Ailell’s army this cold morning. There he is, too, out at the front edge of his army. He’s gesturing fiercely. There go some of the servants from the plain. His people are gathering behind him. I can see the flash of their weapons.”

“Quick, then, Laeg—drive down and warn them. Connacht intends to catch them napping!”

Before Laeg could so much as reply, a new voice rang out in the Ulster camp more loudly than its predecessors. On the hill of Uisneach they heard every word.

“Rise up swiftly all you heroes
before the treacheries of Ailell mac Mata fall upon you
as they did upon Cú Chulainn so often.
Quick up! Defend your land and strike strongly,
knowing honor is the bracelet and ring upon your hand!”

“Well said,” Cú Chulainn called to Laeg.

“But it wasn’t you,” said Senchan.

“No. It was Amargin with the Chant upon him. What’s important is that the army’s alerted.”

The herdsmen from both sides continued to fight in the middle of soggy Ath Fene, beating one another with staffs and clubs. Suddenly they drew up, turned and scattered, leaving the contested cattle behind. Some of the cows ran, too. A second later the sound of *carynxes* blaring reached the hill, a sound like many loons upon a lake.

“That’s started it for real,” cried Cú Chulainn.

“The warriors are coming forth naked, some of them have torn out through the backs of their tents! They were sleeping and came up running before they were awake.”

“That’s training for you.”

“There’s Conall’s chariot. Footmen all around it. Across, there’s Lugaid in his and a wall of men from Munster. Amargin’s racing out from the other end of our camp. Now the first wave comes behind these leaders, crested by Conchovor and Cuscraid. There’s no stammer in his throw—he’s spit two with one shot. Ailell’s had his people join in threes: three warriors, three chariots, swinging in from all sides, a pincer. They’ve even split up the Galeoin irregulars that way. We’ll have to cut down triple-headed threats to get through them.”

The hill of Uisneach shook from the thunder of those wheels, feet and hammering weapons. The two waves crashed together. Chariots tipped and overturned, horses brayed as they were pulled down. Warriors were crushed beneath the vehicles, others leaped with their spears into the thick of the fray while still others circled the perimeters and beat their shields and fouled the air with scabrous names for the enemy, bellowed threats of maiming and castration. Hot springs of blood jettied into the sky where heads flew and tumbled. Servants ducked and dove in the midst of the melee to retrieve for their masters the trophies they had won, some becoming trophies for someone else. Cattle, trapped between the fighters, were slaughtered and used for bulwarks to drop the careering chariots. Spears shot through the air like striking hawks and the sky resounded with the thump of them against shields and in breasts. Bodies crushed beneath wheels, bodies flung from the force of the blow that slew them, bodies dancing a death jig before tumbling to twitch without a head to guide them.

Laeg described it all.

Senchan stared, transfixed, too overwhelmed to even blink.

“Where’s eager Fergus mac Roich in all this?” called Cú Chulainn.

“I see him back in their camp. He’s sitting without the slightest intention of coming to the field. The pen holding the Donn is back there, too. Three rows of warriors guarding it.”

“Everything in threes—that’s Druidry at work. But I can’t believe Fergus sits by with Eogan mac Durthact out there.”

“All the same, it’s so. Others of the Exiles are with him. Now Ailell runs up to him, obviously infuriated, gesturing vehemently.”

“What’s he saying, do you think?”

“I’m not sure.” Laeg glanced at Senchan. “Shall you and I find out?” he asked quietly, with a nudge.

4. Leochain

“Neither I nor any of my people will join you!” bellowed Fergus. “How often must I swear to leave off tackling the people of Ulster before you hear me?”

“You are *useless* to me,” cursed the king.

Maeve hurried over, followed by the men who had once formed her circle of defense. “What is it has our cold-blooded exile so hot now?”

“He won’t go out on the field. He’s turned coward on us in the end.”

Maeve saw the ravening look of Fergus’s eye, the urgency he held in. She could practically taste it. The very core of him opened to her, the enigma solved. He was a man of a single desire. There was room for no other. She grabbed her husband by the shoulder and said, “Give him back his sword.”

“What?”

“If you want him to fight, then return the tool with which he does his work. You’ve had your joke long enough, husband—no longer is it a triumph of any sort.”

Ailell hesitated but finally decided that he had reaped enough enjoyment from his masterly prank. “Go to my chariot,” he ordered his new charioteer. “Under your pedestal you’ll find a linen bundle. Bring it—and be careful of it!”

The charioteer ran off. Fergus got to his feet. Cormac, Duffach and others gathered around. They had already dressed or undressed for battle and made no pretense of their eagerness to be out there on the plain. The driver returned and gave the bundle to Ailell. The king unwrapped it, then handed Leochain to Fergus. The warrior reached out, his fingers trembling, and gripped it. With reverence, he pressed it to his cheek. “Now I’ll give you some blood,” he said, “and both of us can quench our thirst. Lucky for Ailell it’s not his life burns my brain. Lucky for king and queen alike.” He tilted his head to one side and looked at them as if contemplating a sacrifice. Suddenly, he charged off, sweeping up his shield as he passed it, jumping into his chariot. He flung the large wooden practice weapon away, sheathed Leochain. He tore off his tunic and cloak, then snapped the reins. Behind him, the other members of the Black Army had already

dispersed to enter the fight. Fergus craned his neck in search of the swarthy features of his enemy.

The soft ground was laced with ruts, acrid peat squishing underfoot, mud everywhere. More amazing still was the amount of dust kicked up from the dryer points, the particles clogging throats, faces streaked by it, faces smeared darkly. Any one of them might have been Eogan's—but there! A stain of purple in the swarm. For an instant the slaughtering sea pulled apart and that sun-burned face he sought rose up and the large eyes fixed him, blinked like a lizard's and ducked back into the fray.

Fergus bellowed at his horses and slapped his reins hard. Warriors dove away from his spitting wheels. One woman was knocked aside by his horses but came up in time to hurl an attacker into the spokes of Fergus's wheel. He leaned far out over the rail as he reached the cluster of men in purple. Leochain whipped the air, taking one head after another, making no judgment as to which of them might have cut down the sons of Uisliu, or which his own sons. He extinguished every life as resolutely as a farmer harvesting crops. Behind he left a red and purple road that his exiles trod.

Then there were no more warriors to protect the king of Fernmag. The weasel's muddy face, spattered with blood, found itself alone.

Fergus leaped the rail, his horses pounding on without him. Eogan jabbed with his five-pronged spear and swung his razor-edged shield to gut Fergus, but mac Roich skirted both of them and slammed Eogan back with the shield he had brought.

Eogan's voice slithered through the sounds of battle. "Come test me, since you've called for my death so long. How many years has Fergus mac Roich hidden in a woman's skirts and sworn to brave deeds undone? I don't fear your words."

"It won't be words I use to open you." He jumped forward and struck high. The sharp shield went up and knocked Leochain aside. At the same moment the prongs of death shot out from below. Fergus dodged quickly, but the tips scraped his naked ribs.

Eogan sensed success and stabbed his spear in again. Fergus held his ground till the last fraction of a second, then spun around and with all his strength brought his sword down in a swirl, like an executioner, and chopped the prongs away.

Eogan drew back a useless stick cut flat across the tip. Hooked on the tips of that cruel weapon, a hundred or more warriors had fallen; he had used it against every sword, every feint. This left him aghast. He flung the stick away and swung his shield with both hands in the straps, hoping to disembowel Fergus with the cutting edge; but Fergus had watched Cú Chulainn fight FerDiad and had seen everything that a shield could do.

Eogan tried to batter him and managed to drive him back toward his chariot, far enough for Eogan to snatch up a spear from one of his fallen accomplices. He tried to hem Fergus in against the wheel of the car. Fergus knew the maneuver and made careful retreat until his heel touched the

rim. He shifted his stance and pretended to fall back, pinned. Alert for that moment, Eogan struck with both shield and spear. Fergus sprang onto the wheel hub and from there made a leap against the shield as he had seen Cú Chulainn do, using it as a springboard to carry him over Eogan to the ground. Off-balance and out-maneuvered, Eogan tried to swing the shield behind him, but not before Leochain had flicked the distance like a lizard's tongue and sent his head tumbling. The body sank as if into a bog, doubled over the shield, then slid down the edge, performing an evisceration upon itself before it finally hit the ground.

Fergus stood among the slaughter, staring blankly at the head. The deed had been done, his son avenged, but his lust for the kill would not lift. A small, sane voice within the tumult of his mind questioned if this was how Cú Chulainn felt at the point of transformation. Fury built up like a storm inside him. He had killed mac Durthact and it meant nothing. The dead remained dead, and no one was avenged, it was just one more head rolling on a slick field of blood, one amongst a thousand. Would he have to kill the world, the universe, to be at rest?

The battle, which had allowed the two men space till then, closed in upon him again. Instinctively, Fergus began to slaughter. The blade moved ever faster in his hands. His skin turned red and blistered down his arms. Foam like on a rabid dog bubbled from his mouth. He became a death-machine, silent, sweeping, insane, inexhaustible.

Then something slammed against his sword so hard that his arms shook. A feathered spear slapped Leochain aside and Fergus came face to face with Conall Cernach. Conall, his wavy hair hanging to his waist; his bright blue eyes like sky seen from within a cave, they lay so deeply under his brow; the slight smile on his lips that never quite left no matter how much he fumed, his white tunic miraculously untarnished by the gore and mud enclosing them; Conall was a figure out of a dream, and Fergus believed it to be a dream because Conall had not been present when the battle began. Conall leaned closer and spoke in his soft rasp, "You're doing an abundance of killing here for a woman's arse. Still, I've seen men kill for less." Then Conall stepped out of the dream. Fergus glanced around but could not find him again. He thought that he must be mad, truly berserk. He turned and something slapped at his blade hard enough to throw him off-balance. He came around and found Conchovor there, glaring from within his tall, plumed helmet. Some small bit of the anger spinning inside Fergus broke off and attached itself to Conchovor, who had created the rift that put them here. Fergus howled and struck. Conchovor blocked the sword with his shield. Fergus chopped and hacked away at that shield, the famed Ochain. Conchovor could easily have wounded him on one of Ochain's projecting cones but chose to defend only in hopes of wearing down his opponent, whom he still loved.

Fergus yelled, "What are you that you stand in my way now?"

“Your better, that’s who. Once your king, who was helpless to stop your boy’s dying, and one who can’t let you continue to slay your old friends.”

At the mention of Fiacha, Fergus went deaf and blind and struck more swiftly, fiercely than ever. With one fist he knocked Ochain aside, leaving Conchovor helpless against the next blow. Leochain thirsted. Fergus brought his arms up, hands clasped together.

A body slammed into him from behind, legs wrapped around his middle, hands pulling back both his wrists so that his shield, on his back, thumped him in the head. He tried to throw the rider. The voice of Cormac blasted his ear. “Stop this, Fergus! Kill my father and you kill yourself, blotting out *any* memories you can endure. Would you banish the last of him?”

“How am I supposed to stop when the sword is still hungry?” Fergus cried in anguish.

“Go elsewhere. Go up on those hills and beat the earth till your arms are numb. But don’t slay where you can’t tell friend from foe!”

Fergus began to quiver, but he lowered the sword.

“Get away now, father,” Cormac insisted.

“Cormac?”

“No, I won’t come. His argument against you is just. If I hadn’t sworn to harm no Ulstermen here I might well finish what he began.”

He turned smartly and led Fergus off, shielding him from attack, though no one came near them. Fergus looked on the warriors he passed with eyes unfettered of reason and no one who looked back was fool enough to get nearer.

Three hills stood to the north. Fergus climbed their heights alone. They were jagged hills, young mountains sharp with peaks. From the top, he looked down on all the fighting and could not remember the climb, the last thing in his mind being the sound of Cormac’s voice instructing him to turn his anger aside. Wind whistled in his ears and he found himself wailing with it, his voice become that of another wind, rising to a bestial whine. His body shook, his teeth chattered together. The muscles worked along his arms and his fingers flexed around the hilt of his sword so tightly that the cross-hatching on it was imprinted into his palm.

His voice rose and he keened, “Fiacha!” The name echoed and returned, nature teasing him to greater madness. He swung the sword, spinning from the blow. Leochain sheared through the tip of the peak. Rock spun out and dropped onto the battle. The peak crashed into the middle of the fray, squashing a chariot, snapping its axle flat.

Fergus tumbled halfway down the hill. Cut and scraped, he got up and raced to the second peak. Wind swept tears from his eyes. “Fiacha!” The name scorched his throat.

5. The End of It All

“What shook the ground then?” called Cú Chulainn.

“Fergus mac Roich,” answered Laeg. “He chopped the top off a hill across the plain and now” —the hill of Uisneach shuddered again— “he’s cut into another. There’s just one properly peaked hill left and he’s no doubt planning to top it, too.”

“What cause can he have?”

“Rage—he very nearly killed Conchovor from—”

“Let me free!” Cú Chulainn demanded. “Untie this hazel hoop, Laeg. I can’t be held back any longer.”

Laeg ducked into the tent to protest but, seeing the hard set of Cú Chulainn’s jaw, he bent down.

“You should know, though,” he said, “that Maeve entered the fray with her sword and shield. She’s cut a swath through Ulster, dropping them as if they were stalks of corn.”

The ground shook from Fergus’s third blow.

The hazel bonds began to snap before Laeg touched them. He saw Cú Chulainn’s body ripple as if some live creature ran beneath the skin of his chest. The color of him darkened, empurpled with blood. Laeg backed away. The last of the bindings popped and Cú Chulainn the Warped One rose up.

Laeg mentally kicked himself for relating the specifics of Maeve’s work. Now it was too late.

Maeve caught sight of some of her warriors pointing excitedly to the hill of Uisneach. There, a monstrous thing came skidding down the hillside. At first she told herself this was some trick of the Morrighu’s, some phantom to taunt her and terrify her army; but the twisted creature reached the edge of battle and began slaughtering Connachtmen, and Maeve knew then that the Hound of Ulster lived on. She withdrew from the assault she conducted, retreating to the guarded pen that held the Donn. Her twelve guards held that position and she replaced them at the pen and placed them around her again. As they were forming their wall, a sharp cramp suddenly stabbed through her. She ignored it as best she could and it soon passed. She called for two women satirists and sent them skirting the field once they understood her plan. Next she called MacRoith and had him make ready to move the Donn south past Gairech.

He said, “Conall the Victorious has arrived and his additional forces are turning the tide of battle. You’re needed on the field.”

“I know this, but my first concern is with the bull. See that he escapes to Cruachan regardless of what unfolds here.” With that, she fitted on her helmet again.

The Warped One heard the singing of satires as he reached the base of the hill. They came from behind him. He looked about, the sunlight playing rainbows on the tips of his hair, but could see no source of the versifying. The hidden women called out, “Your body rots like the apples which skewer famously in your pointy hair. All your friends have fallen—Fergus mac Roich and the many traitors in his cause. Better you should run onto your sword and finish yourself than live with the truth and FerDiad’s ghost.” They sprang up then from behind an outcropping of rock, nude and pink with cold, having discarded their clothing as Maeve had directed. They expected to find him doubled over by then or at least covering his ears. The queen had warned that he might prove more difficult, and that was why they had removed their garments. Intending to strut and display themselves fully before him, the two satirists froze at the sight of him. Their skill with words failed them utterly.

The monster with one eye dangling on his cheek addressed them in a raw, bubbling voice. “Is this how you hounded FerDiad? For you did, far more than I. Well, and I must answer you now as you deserve. Regrettably, I left my sword. Something else will have to speak.” He took two steps, then reached out and smashed their heads together. The skulls cracked like eggs.

He descended into the battle. Weaponless, he picked up abandoned chariots and hurled them at the trios of warriors Maeve and Ailell had assembled. Piles of debris, human, machine and horse, amassed in his wake.

Across the plain he found Fergus mac Roich descending from the last of the three shorn hills.

“You, who swore friendship,” Cú Chulainn burred, “You took on my king and yours and by Macha there’s no honor left. I’ll strip the meat from your bones if you’ve done worse.”

Fergus had never encountered the dark side of Cú Chulainn before, but his brain was so weary of the fight and the burden of releasing years of pent-up anger that the horror barely registered on him. He replied, “I’ve done nothing worse than avenge my son. Then I experienced a thing—maybe what you’re feeling now—and I had to turn my hand to killing hills or else leave Ulster barren.”

“Hills or no, you’ve a pledge with me and I’m calling it in now.”

Fergus nodded, unclasping his belt. He laid Leochain at Cú Chulainn’s contorted feet. “As I swore to do.”

“Honorable man,” the monster growled and turned away.

Fergus picked up his sword. He located his chariot and drove away from the center of battle where hundreds upon hundreds still waged a

fierce effort. Seeing him go, members of the Black Army broke off from the fight and left the field. Lugaid, too, chose to side with Fergus, since he had no quarrel with Ulster. He felt that he had upheld his bargain with Connacht; they had the bull. Enough of Munster had fallen in its capture. On his way out of the thick he digressed to retrieve the trophy of Eogan mac Durthact. Fergus would probably want it when the day was done.

The loss of so many became apparent to Maeve almost immediately. She saw the packs of warriors pursuing the chariot of Fergus mac Roich. He reined in near the foot of the hill of Uisneach and Maeve, with her complement of twelve shield-bearers, skirted the field away from the last sighting of the monster in their midst and went to condemn the deserters for their behavior. As she was driven around the field, the queen felt bloated and flaccid, as if she had just eaten a huge meal rather than led an attack. More cramps flashed in her belly.

In the midst of the Exiles, she had just climbed to the ground when she felt the warmth of blood trickling between her legs. This surprised her—her period was never premature. Almost never. Instead of berating Fergus, she had to order him to take command of her guards and others who had gone with him and form them into a much larger ring, to give her some privacy as well as security.

“You don’t want this,” Fergus warned. “Not now.”

“As if I had a choice. The tides and the moon are pulling today on the descendants of Danu. Now do this—if you still serve me at all.”

Fergus grumbled but marshaled the warriors into place around her, their shields up, their backs to her, giving her the sanctum she required.

While the pain clawed at her again, Maeve undressed and squatted in their midst. She pressed both hands to her belly, which had swollen up as big as if she were pregnant. The flow of blood increased, quickly doubling. The size of herself, the rush of blood left Maeve helplessly terrified. Blood gushed like a waterfall from between her thighs, hard enough to cut channels in the ground. It drained down the hill, becoming a torrent that swept the guards off their feet and rushed on, down to the battlefield.

Maeve could do nothing other than squat there. Her belly remained enormous. The blood covered her feet. She tried to stand but the movement sent pain needling into the base of her spine. Her body seemed to her to be changing, breasts sagging a little, her hard muscles losing their perfect tone. Sweat coated her. The ends of her long white hair turned red.

A shadow fell across her. She looked up and there stood the short, beautiful, dark-haired youth she had avoided for so long.

A wide pink scar divided his chest. Her blood swept around his calves with the same force that had dragged off most of her guards, but he was used to standing in torrents.

He smiled grimly at her and the lights sparkled in his eyes.

6. Cu Chulainn's Decision

Maeve could not move to save herself. No one was left standing near enough to come to her aid fast enough if she called out.

"Leave me, Cú Chulainn," she said with no hint of the fear burning inside her. "I can hardly stand against you while this inexplicable infirmity pours from me."

"Inexplicable? I can explain it if you'd care to hear, Intoxicator. No one body could contain so much blood, as I'm sure you know. Yet one body—your body—produced it, brought it out. See how it pours down to the plain? It's drawn back to the bodies who fell for you, the heroes, so many of whom I killed for you though my heart was in very few of them. Etarcomol. Nad Crantail. FerDiad, most of all. All perished by this hand. All from your unreasoning lust for superiority, and now their blood has mingled, damning you for your tricks and treacheries played on them. All Ulster is going to hear of this, and every time the tale of your invasion is told hereafter, the tellers will always remark on Maeve's Foul Spot: the place where blood ran in rivers."

She looked at him withstanding the blood and refused to feel shame for what had been necessary. "You'll kill me, then."

"I ought to. It would be a celebrated act that no Druid would oppugn."

She sensed a lessening in the torrent, a relaxing of her muscles. The cauldron of her belly began to recede, leaving her skin loose and scarred where it had stretched. She closed her eyes and fought back a sob.

"But I won't kill you," Cú Chulainn told her. "I like better the thought of your perpetual mortification at knowing how we speak of you, to what act you're linked. Queen of Foulness."

Triumphantly, she said, "I won your bull from you."

Cú Chulainn smiled enigmatically. "Did you? And how will you dominate *it*?"

She dropped to her knees as the last of the blood stopped flowing. When she found the strength to look up, the dark castigator, the Hound of Ulster, was gone.



"Her blood, rushing across the plain of Fual Maetha, had ended the battle," Laeg said. "Once she had clothed herself, she mustered her remaining forces and fled for Ath Luain. Ailell remained in the dark for

some time as to what had happened there at the base of Uisneach, what had created the rapids of blood. He did not learn the truth until after they had returned to Cruachan—his people were either afraid or ashamed to tell him. Most likely afraid.

“Along the road of her retreat, Maeve saw Cú Chulainn on the hill-sides. Every time she caught a glimpse of him, he was ahead of her, always silently condemning her with that glitter in his eyes.

“The forces of Conchovor’s army, meanwhile, led by Conall, pursued her in the belief that they were driving her out of the land. They did not know that Cú Chulainn, as Conchovor’s representative champion, had given Maeve her life.

“He saw the Ulster forces closing the distance, took his sword and climbed to the top of a triple peaked hill just as Fergus had done. And like Fergus, he lopped off the peaks of the hills—in such a way as to send them crashing onto the road below, sealing up the pass and segregating the two armies. The day’s battle had ended. Those hills, by the way, Senchan, even in your day are called the Topless Heights of Ath Luain and Meath.

“Maeve *had* won—at least by her reckoning if by no one else’s. Fergus rode up beside her with his army around him. The queen recalled that she hadn’t told him off as she had meant to do before the blood had poured out of her. Now she leaned over the rail and yelled, ‘You let us down today, vigorous man. You allowed us to lose our advantage when we needed it most. You made a ruin of the battle.’ Everyone could hear her denunciations, which was what she had wanted. However, they also all heard Fergus’s reply.

“‘Indeed, I don’t think so, Queen of Foulness!’ he answered. “*Our* sole dishonor in this entire travesty lies in having followed for so long the twin hills of your hindside when we ought to have known at the start what lay between them.”

“He veered off from her then, his Black Army following. As each drew even with Maeve’s chariot, he paused to catch her eye and silently vilipend her before speeding ahead. It’s my belief that it was here that she came to truly despise Cú Chulainn and to become fixed upon the desire to see him dead. He had, by letting her live, forced almost constant derision upon her.”

Senchan nodded, understanding. He stood, a little cramped and cold, as the late afternoon sun lighted the plain where the battle had been fought. Flocks of birds circled it, finally daring to land and feed from the strewn corpses. The ravaged peat had absorbed countless bodies’ worth of blood, leaving only ensanguined puddles here and there and a bloody stench. Senchan wondered if the Morrigu were amongst the carrion flock.

“It’s all over, then,” Senchan said somewhat reluctantly. Then he perked up. “No, wait—what about the bulls?”

Laeg showed his pride that his pupil had reasoned the shape of the tale unaided. “Come and I’ll show you.” He led the way back to the low tent

where Cú Chulainn had lain. He paused at the opening and let Senchan pass him, ducking, then straightening up to find them not inside a tent at all but on the plain of Magh Ai.

“Look there,” Laeg pointed past him. “That’s the army of Eriu returning home with their prize. And here beside us, the one who awaits this moment to the exclusion of all else.”

Senchan hurled himself backward as he found the bull called Finnbennach barely an arm’s length away: They had materialized inside the bull’s pen! Finnbennach’s eyes rolled dementedly in his blood-colored head.

7 Combat of the Bulls

Maeve and Ailell brought their bull home to a cheering throng at Cruachan. The queen praised her husband, proclaiming that it had been his cleverness that defeated Ulster. Her words pleased him, but even so he had begun to make a mental tally of possessions, hers against his, to see if she had in fact won anything at all. The matter took up so much of his concentration that he hardly heard himself tell a herdsman to go pen the Donn.

The weary herdsman unthinkingly obeyed, putting the dark bull of Cuailnge in with Finnbennach. The Donn saw his enemy and went straight for the red bull. He reared up on his hind legs and drove his hooves down, pinning Finnbennach’s horns beneath them.

The crowd cheered Maeve’s brown bull and gathered near the pen to witness a battle. However, the red bull made no attempt to wrestle free and the crowd, grumbling their disenchantment, went back to the festivities. All of them except Fergus mac Roich.

He leaned on the stone wall and studied the two creatures.

“You’re cut of the same cloth as Bricriu the Bitter Tongue in Ulster. I’ve seen a lot of your like this past *noinden*,” he told them. “You don’t like anything, not even each other. Well, I can’t say as I think much of you two either. Your price was too high.” Some of his people called to him and he wandered away to the feast, but later returned with a slice of beef on a long flesh fork. The bulls had not changed position.

“You’re neither of you living up to his reputation. I’d hate to think we clawed through this folly for two withered, weak cows.” He took a section of the beef between his teeth and pulled it from the fork, at the same time strolling around behind the bulls. Close by them, he drew up suddenly and looked hard at the tines of his fork. He pulled the last of the meat off, then took the fork and stabbed the tines into Finnbennach’s flank.

The bull's head jerked up hard, yanking the Donn's leg with it. The Donn's hoof caught over the other's horn and his shinbone twisted, Finnbennach pulled back to free himself and the dark bull's leg snapped at the knee. The Donn bellowed and wrenched himself free, snapping off Finnbennach's horn with a kick that sent it spinning into the sky.

Fergus laughed uproariously. "More like it!" he exclaimed. The Donn rammed Finnbennach's side and the two of them smashed into the stone wall before Fergus could move, throwing him onto his back. He sat up, bleeding where the sharp stones had gashed him, but still laughing. "Maybe you're worth something after all."

The bulls no longer required his goading. They hammered at one another, backing the full width of the pen, pawing and snorting before the burst of speed that launched them into each other, their eyes rolled up white. The ground rumbled from their collision.

The feasters of Cruachan came back out to see the battling bulls. Twilight had set in, leaving very little for them to see. They restacked the dislodged stones of the wall while the two bulls rammed each other. Maeve tried to get them to separate the beasts, but none of her herdsmen would have anything to do with it. She tried to threaten them with tortures of every sort but the herdsmen replied, "Your threat is just fulmination; theirs, now, would be a certainty." Having done with her, they strolled back to their feast, casting votes as to which bull would stand victorious come the dawn.

In the morning, the pen lay empty.

The wall, where they had replaced it, had been shattered, and the one beyond it as well. The alarm was sounded and everyone in Cruachan came out to see what wasn't there.

As the fort was emptied, the cry went up and the whole populace turned to see a dark speck approaching at breakneck speed from the west. More bets were taken, but the crowd soon fell breathlessly quiet.

The speck grew larger, and they saw that it was only one of the bulls—the brown bull from Ulster. What had seemed at a distance to be the second bull turned out to be its carcass, hung on the horns of the Donn. He shook the carcass fiercely, throwing gore into the crowd, many of whom fled to the safety of Cruachan's walls.

Maeve did not hide her triumph. Ailell abided serenely; he had finished a cursory count of their losses. Later, he would let Maeve in on the totals as he had them.

The Donn ran on across Eriu, back the way he had been led. He left parts of Finnbennach strewn along his trail, where he lowered his head to drink or shook it defiantly against all the powers that had cursed him. The body on his horns grew smaller and hollower.

Back upon Muirthemne, he returned to Daire's land, seeing the places where he had grown up. Nothing about it moved him. He ran on, the

tatters of Finnbennach always before him like some deflated spectre. The land of his captivity fell behind, and the Donn headed into the hills of the north. There, finally, on a ridge, the heart of Finnbennach tore free: a black, shiny thing like a stone. The Donn swayed then and fell to his knees. He lowered his head, tried to will himself back onto his feet, but his broken leg would not hold. He stabbed his horns into the ground. The carcass of Finnbennach pressed like a mask against his face. Something deep inside the bull exploded. He threw back his head and gave one last plaintive bellow. Then the Donn dropped forward, his horns furrowing the ridge, and lay down on all that remained of his rival.

EPILOGUE



1. *Tying Things Together*

“And so it ended. Ulster honored both bulls by naming the place where they had died the Ridge of the Bull. Finding the two together supported their belief that they had in fact defeated Cruachan. The bulls symbolized it perfectly. Ulster had lost nowhere near what the rest of the isle had; Cú Chulainn had proven himself the true champion over all the provinces. The bards sang it so; the Druids read the signs.

“Sworn to respond honorably or else become the subject of derision that Maeve was becoming, Ailell made a peace with Ulster, a pact that was to hold for seven years. Peaceful, bountiful years for Ulster. Seven seething, tempestuous years for Maeve.”

Laeg stood beside the Pig stone, the first and last of the circle. Where it had cracked and broken, a shiny black core was revealed, like a nut from its shell. The twilight sky streaked it with color.

Senchan asked, “What ... what about ...” He pursed his lips in frustration.

“I’ll tell you what happened to her,” Laeg answered knowingly. “She was part of Ailell’s truce, the one last time he got to use her. In fact, it was the one time Finnabair used him. She begged to be made part of the prize. Her father considered how unjustly he had used her—her first love, Rochad, had perished in the battle at Ath Fene—and he complied without argument. Emer accepted her into the household and she lived with Emer and Cú Chulainn as the second wife of the house for a time.”

“Wonderful!”

“You did manage to save her, you know. You actually did. You should be proud.” He paused briefly and his silence filled up with regret. “Now the tales are all told, Senchan, the day’s done. I’m finished with you, or very nearly.”

“What about that stone?” Senchan pointed to the one in the center.

“It belongs to another story,” and there was sadness in Laeg’s voice. “Revenge’s Stone.”

Senchan silently repeated the name; then, beginning with the Pig stone, he named each one by its aspect: Dominance; Sovereignty; Honor; Leadership; the Stone of Lovers, that was Dardriu and Naise; Macha’s—the Curse Stone; then the Stone of Combats; the Friend’s Stone; and back to Dominance. A closed ring around Revenge.

“Why can’t I stay and hear about it?” he asked.

“This isn’t the time of its telling. It has a different point to make.”

“But—”

“Enough! It’s not my decision—I’m supervised, too, you know.”

Disgruntled, hurt, Senchan scowled at the stones. He did not want to go home, back to the drudgery, the beatings and beratings that awaited him as surely as the next sun-up. Selden would demand that he account for his whereabouts all day and what was he supposed to say? No one would believe him, however well he recounted.

He forgot his self-pity in seeing the unnatural shadow he was casting. A warm red light had effused the stones. He whirled about.

The side of the hill below the copper screens had vanished. An opening like a cave mouth, but glowing like an ember, had appeared there.

Laeg trudged toward it but paused at the brink, and the charioteer who turned around was the young one who had accompanied Cú Chulainn. “It’s necessary for me to go back inside,” he explained. “After all, I’m long since dead out here. Only in Magh Meld do I still have substance and a future ... but no, that’s no longer true, is it? The *Sídhe* would have me put a *geis* on you, Senchan, just to be certain of your actions henceforth. Me, I don’t believe you need such an impetus, do you? You have already an inkling of what it is you’re to become—those things you’ve seen are burning inside you like the warmth of wine. In every extremity.

“If you return here next Samain eve, I’ll endeavor to meet you and show you the other story that I’m enjoined from telling right now. Remember, next eve of the Samain.” He glanced at the copper screens.

“You worry too much, my boy. They will believe you when you tell them. You can make them believe. They’ll come to call you *Torpeist*, Senchan *Torpeist*, and through you the deeds and words will endure.

“Now I really must leave. There are some *ban-Sídhe* who await me with promises of a ... well, a provocative eternity. I shouldn’t care to be late for that. And neither should you, for your dinner and your first telling. The cauldron will take you back as it brought you.” He walked into

the red light, which swallowed him up. Then, suddenly, he came running out from it again, down to where Senchan stood. He handed Senchan a large stoneware cup covered in *ogham* slashes. "It's a good ale," he said quickly, "to settle your stomach for the journey." He winked, then sprinted back up the hill and into the light. Presently, it dimmed, withdrawing into the hill. As if from a great distance, Laeg's voice came to him: "You're a man of honor, Senchan. Never give that up!"

Then there was no light other than the band of lavender on the horizon and the stars hung in cobalt overhead. Senchan became aware of being cold. He hurried up the hill to the copper screens.

There sat the Dagda, awaiting him in cross-legged relief. And now he could recognize others: Goibniu the blacksmith; Dian Cecht, master of the Leech, of healing; the three terrible Morrighu, though their portrayals were not half so frightening as the reality; Manannan, son of the sea; and there, at the rear, a figure in quilted leather breeches and another figure beside him, one of hideous aspect, both of them balanced above a chariot. Senchan looked up into the stars. "Next eve of the Samain," he whispered.

Could they really think he would forget? Memory had become his art, his craft. To remember was everything.

He climbed into the cauldron. The water was yet warm and steamy.

Down the hill the circle of stones glowed in soft starlight.

"I'm going to *be* your poet," he promised them, then toasted them all with his cup of ale.

The screens swung silently shut.



REMSCELA



INTERLUDE ONE



Dear Lord,

Today our Abbot Martin allowed that native poet, Senchan Torpeist, to set foot within the hallowed walls of our Innismurray, probably for the last time. The old poet surely has no more than weeks to live. Forgive me, Lord, but I wish it were a matter of hours instead.

The Abbot took me aside and informed me that the old man is to inhabit my *clochán*. Abbot Martin says I am to set down any tales the poet wishes to relate to me, as he himself did many years ago with the poet's story of the cattle raid on Ulster. Brother Cilian has taken that satchel on his recent journeying, which precludes my reading it. By now, he's probably in Glendalough. We've heard that, at the monastery there, they have their own manuscript of the so-called Cattle Raid of Cuailnge, which disagrees substantially with Torpeist's rendition. They think Senchan Torpeist is a mad old fool. This is because he doesn't recite the tales as others do (others whom he claims to have taught), but describes it, actually claiming to have lived through the events which, by his own admission, occurred hundreds of years ago. He told me this morning that the hero Laeg mac Rianganabra once took him into the side of a hill and into the realm of timeless youth, a dark place he said, where everything was crimson as if poured in blood. Is it any wonder they all think he's a madman? Cilian will be fortunate to escape with the manuscript intact and without any bruises from being stoned for his troubles. Monasteries have gone to war over lesser things than disagreements in manuscript interpretation.

God forgive me, but I do not wish to be taken from the parchments of Your Holy Word in order to set down these doubtful, wretched fantasies. Forgive me, too, that I hate his presence in my cell, his cackling laugh, hoary chin, and dreadful stench. In a cell that I can nearly reach across, there lies no haven from the odor of Torpeist's desiccated, ill-kempt person. The other cenobites in the scriptorium are already laughing at my

plight. I've seen them behind their hands as they hunch over their candles and their tablets, their manuscripts quilled upon fresh vellum while I scrape palimpsests to transcribe these useless tales breathed from the stale mouth of him who could make fish learn to walk just by immersing himself in their stream, the same discarded vellum I keep to write these my feelings. My work is no more important than that. Nothing I tell You here makes me worthy of Your Love, this I know, but I cannot deny what I feel. There are younger cenobites than I: Brother Kevin, Brother Suibne—even sweet Sister Bertril in the convent outside our walls is more deserving of this fruitless task than I am.

Forgive my pettiness. Lord Give Me Strength to complete this undertaking, which I know is done for You, since Abbot Martin wills it. We begin the first tale today.

I. THE HOUND OF MAC DATHO

1. The Mastew

In the southern province of Leinster lived a renowned minor king named Mac Datho. This man controlled a wide area of land within the province, measuring his moderate wealth by the fifty-four members of his *tuath*: he was a *rí tuaithe*, the king of a single tuath, and though this placed him in the class of rulers, the distinction was the least distinguished form of kingship there was. What gave Mac Datho his reputation—a reputation that set him well above the others of his class—was that he maintained a hostel. This honor he shared with only six other people in all of Eriu.

In those days hostellers opened their doors to every traveler: to the poets; to the aristocracy, from other *rí tuaithe* all the way up to the *rí cóicid*, the rulers of the five provinces; and especially to the satirists, who constantly wandered the roads in search of gossip to weave their clever lampoons around. Such lampoons made the satirists less than welcome guests in most homes, which was the other reason they comprised most of the hostellers' clientele.

Inside the circular wooden hostel, Mac Datho ensured that two cooking fires were maintained at all times. Each fire burned beneath one of the holes in the double-peaked thatchwork roof of the wide building, one fire to each side of the large room. The first of the fires kept boiling a black cauldron of beef. The other, a heated pit of coals, slowly cooked a spitted boar. Dozens of long forks hung along the walls between the two fires, in keeping with the ancient traditions of hosteling. The primary rule of all hostels stated that whatever a guest caught on his fork with his first stab, that was to be his meal; Mac Datho let his hungry travelers take their fork and their chances accordingly but, by keeping the cauldron full and the glazed boar turning on the spit, he ensured their success. This was his duty and he performed it well. However, his greatest joy in life did not lie in hosteling. Mac Datho's joy was his hound, Ailbe.

At the shoulders, Ailbe stood as high as the rim of a chariot wheel. Mac Datho had acquired him from traders across the sea in Alba, where they called such hounds *mastews*. Ailbe guarded the hostel and all the land around it, and everyone in Leinster had seen or heard of him because, although the hosteler was normally quiet and unassuming, when the subject of hounds entered a discussion, he grew loud and boastful, red in the cheeks and swelled in the chest. He knew full well that no animal on the isle could better his Ailbe. Proof of this lay in Mac Datho's other prize possession—an enormous wild boar he kept penned beside the hostel. Ailbe had driven that boar out of the woods and into the yard, then held it at bay while the excited hosteler had frantically fabricated a pen around it.

But the danger in having a thing you're loudly proud of is that others become envious of your good fortune. The danger in being a hosteler while owning such a treasure is that your guests might carry word of it to all the other provinces, where someone might be envious enough to act, someone who needed such a unique symbol of power for her own, and someone who did not concern herself with the cost, whether it was counted in cattle or in lives. The someone was Maeve, the white-haired Queen of Connacht, and she heard the story from a novice satirist one night in the feast hall of the vast twin-ringed fortress called Cruachan.

Seven years earlier, the seductive queen had placed her hopes for supremacy over all of Eriu—including her own husband, Ailell—in the acquiring of the Brown Bull of Ulster. To say that the Ulstermen were less than enthused to part with their infamous bull would have been understating the matter considerably; but Maeve knew of a curse placed on the men of Ulster by their goddess, the horse-woman Macha, that would lay them out for nine days when a major crisis struck. In that way Maeve had eliminated Conchovor and all of his interfering warriors... except for a black-haired, beardless creature called Cú Chulainn, a diminutive hero whose father was no less than the great god Lugh himself. This indestructible ephemeron had slaughtered her amassed armies one by one, besmirched her name, and left her finally with no bull, less warriors than when she had begun the raid, and the unreasonable but ever-present terror that he would one day seek her out and kill her when she least expected it. As a result she kept a ring of warriors around her whenever she went outside the walls of Cruachan and seethed with the desire to breathe vengeance over Ulster province. She had sought for some time for the appropriate prize to flaunt, but she had found nothing so far.

It was a spring night, and a cool breeze danced through the hall, whipping up the fires. Dressed in a tunic of burgundy embellished with woven gold designs, the lovely queen sat amid blankets and a half dozen sleeping terriers and listened to the dwarfish, thick-featured young satirist spin what news he had picked up into the long rhythmic paeon he had composed for

her. She ate little foods—slices of marinated apples, nuts, and cuts of cheese—at the same time as she idly selected interesting tidbits of fact from the satirist’s long-winded performance. He described the hospitality of Leinster as scant compared to her own beneficence, and interjected a brief comment on the horrible, fierce hound that a hosteler had owned, the most terrifying beast he had ever seen tamed.

Without thinking, Maeve replied, “Then you have never seen the Hound of Culann, have you?”

“No,” replied the satirist, “but I tell you there’s no hound fiercer or cleverer than this man’s. It can circle the whole province of Leinster in a day—he told me. And it captures boars—he had one in a pen that was the size of a tumulus. Of course, their cattle,” he added hastily, “are nowhere *near* as fine as yours, and, gracious Maeve, cattle are worth so much more than pigs, as anyone would agree.”

Maeve threw down her apple and sat straight up. She tossed a terrier from her lap, leaned forward and grabbed the unsuspecting satirist by the front of his tunic. Her silky white hair closed around him like a web and he thought he would suffocate. It was as if the shining, sweet-smelling strands were alive.

“Repeat everything you have told me about this hound, then tell me all that you know. Every detail.”

He complied in stuttering terror, filling in details about its jaws, its jutting dome, its height and wiry black hair, the skill with which it brought down prey—everything he could recall. The inclosing silvery strands vanished from around him then, and the queen sent for a messenger named MacRoth. While she awaited his arrival, she took a twisted gold bracelet from her wrist and placed it in the satirist’s hand, curling her fingers over his and staring enigmatically into his eyes. She withdrew only when the messenger arrived.

MacRoth was a short, dark and powerful-looking man. In his presence the satirist had to repeat his descriptions of this hound without embroidery. Some unspoken message passed from Maeve to her messenger once the story had ended, because MacRoth gently lifted the man up and walked him out of the feast hall and the circular fort, across the dark yard and into a large cooking house. There the messenger ordered that the satirist was to have anything he wanted—the largest meal he could eat, and a room in the second circular fort for the night, to be spent in the company of the most skilled *cumal*, the best sexual performer in Cruachan save the queen herself. MacRoth spoke with refinement and no breath of threat, but the satirist understood that these orders were to be carried out to the letter. Then MacRoth left him.

The satirist, knowing a good thing when it hit him in the face, rubbed his hands together, glanced at the loaves of bread and vines of cheese surrounding him, and, smiling broadly, said, “So, what have you got that’s fresh today, hmm?”



The next morning, revived and so satisfied that his stubby knees trembled, the purveyor of satire set off from Cruachan. He had no inkling of why the tale of Ailbe had reaped him so glorious a remuneration, but he figured that what played well in one province should get him a standing ovation in another. Wandering northeast into the hilly lowlands around Lough Boderg, he chose for his next success the province of Ulster. Over the three day journey he polished his act, retelling it every night in the houses of his hosts, all of whom listened courteously out of the fearful respect they had for satirists' power—even young satirists with little awareness of local politics. Of course, he reminded himself, these people were at best lesser nobility, the highest house belonging to a *rí tuath*—a king who oversaw a small group of *tuatha*. Their lack of excitement simply reflected their lack of brains. The king of Ulster now, reputed to be exceedingly generous, would find so elegant a satire worth paying for, and paying for handsomely at that.

Late in the third day, the hill of Emain Macha came into view, with three large houses like huge dolmens or barrows grown out of its side, like the lumpy back of some crouching terror. The people on the ramparts welcomed him warmly and promised him a fine reception from Conchovor. “The king loves nothing as much as biting satire and good fantasy,” the satirist was assured.

He spent the afternoon watching the traffic inside the cochleate halls of the fortress called Craebruad, the “red house” where Conchovor conducted most of his business and threw his feasts. He watched the diverse people come to the center of law in Ulster for judgments; the bands of white and brown-robed Druids come to study with Conchovor's father, Cathbad; the countless servants who hauled in sacks of vegetables and grain. A vast plain surrounded Emain Macha on three sides, and recent rains had soaked the fields. The servants were all muddy, smelly, and sour-tempered. They scowled as if daring him to pronounce a satire at them as they trudged toward the cluster of three cooking houses on top of the walled hill. By contrast, he watched warriors who laughed and played like giant children, who stopped to wrestle or argue or compare weaponry and biceps. Nearby he found the charred remains of another fortress and inquired after the story of how a madness had once seized Conchovor and had driven him to acts that tore his province apart, how an internecine war had set in as a result, and how the original fortress, called Ard Macha, had been burned to the ground. Though he had built this much greater fort afterwards, Conchovor had left the ruins standing to remind him of his folly and his mother, who had perished in the fire. Yes, the satirist thought, Emain Macha was rife with good material, if only material to be used in some other province on some other night.

At dinner, he dispensed with all of the other tales and lampoons he had honed and immediately began aggrandizing Mac Datho and his *mastew*: the dog stood taller than some men and certainly taller than a stunted satirist, smoke steamed from its nostrils because its heart was formed of fire, and it had eyes cast from a *ban-sídhe*'s cloak—all opalescent green and orange that spangled in the night light of a fire. He described how it had brought down horses and devoured warriors whole. Some of the more credulous listeners gaped at him over their dripping food. He hid his smile as he announced that the only hound greater than this Ailbe was Ulster's own dogged Cú Chulainn. The warriors bellowed their agreement and pounded the hilts of their knives on the boards.

King Conchovor rested on cushions at the head of the feast table and smiled indulgently. He said, "This fellow Mac Datho must be a great ogre himself to run such a hound as that."

"No, not really. He's a good hosteler and a generous one with his food. Your first stab always comes up with enough to feed you."

"Really. Then I'd think he would want to rid himself of such a monster."

Here, thought the Satirist, was a golden opportunity to get in a few jabs at Connacht for the Ulstermen's benefit and, hopefully, his own. "I don't think he'd care to do that, and I said as much to your neighbor Maeve the witch-queen, but she's so infernally greedy that she's already making pointless overtures to acquire the dog. Not surprising, since all she seemed to have were little dogs so small that an Ulsterman would squish them underfoot on his way to relieve himself."

That was a sure laugh, but the room remained dead quiet, and tension filled it like smoke. The satirist pursed his lips and glanced warily at the king. Conchovor had set down his cup. The twin points of his graying beard seemed to have pulled his mouth into a deep scowl. He turned to a young man at his side and said, "You will please leave the room, Sencha." The young man got up, an armed escort at his side, and left the hall, but not without a sharp glance back at the teller of tales.

"That's Sencha, the son of Ailell and Maeve, who is a token of Cruachan's pact for peace with us. We foster him, but soon enough he'll be going home and beyond a point I expect no loyalty from him. Now, I've shared a fact with you, and you must share the facts surrounding Ailbe and Maeve with us, else I will donate you to my Druids for a Beltain sacrifice."

The satirist looked around the room but found no friendly faces there. No threat of a satire or a curse would work here—he would be dead before he had finished the first verse. As asked, he stammered out his story, everything he knew about the hound, precisely as he had done for Maeve. He was careful not to use any rhymes or nonce-words that might even vaguely sound like an incantation. They might yet reward him, or at least let him leave alive. He finished by saying, "And when I had told the queen what I just told you, she sent for her personal messenger named MacRoth

and I had to tell him. I heard the next morning someone say that he was going to go down to Leinster to the hosteler, gracious Conchovor, with an offer for the dog. I can't say why all this interest."

"You needn't. I can. She intends to pit her hound against ours."

"You have a hound that can do all those things, too?"

"Of course we have. Cú Chulainn, you idiot."

"Oh, yes—I knew that."

"Any competent satirist would." He got to his feet. "Now, though I must go and pursue this matter, I insist that you finish entertaining my warriors." He strode out of the hall.

The satirist scrutinized the sea of faces, many of them scarred and feral in the firelight, and not one offering the friendliness they had all shown only minutes earlier. This would require a skillful satire, his best piece, and he knew just what to use—it even involved their goddess. "So," he said with a deep breath, "anyone here ever heard the story of the horse goddess and the chariot race?" A knife whizzed past his ear and stuck in a post behind his head. This was going to be a tough audience.

2. A Plethora of Messengers

The last time that MacRoth had made overtures such as these on Maeve's behalf, he had tried to acquire the Brown Bull of Cuailnge in Ulster. That time he had taken a full entourage with him and just when he had the bargain in his hands, his retainers had cocked it up. Because of that single incident, Connacht had invaded Ulster and lost many of its grandest heroes; and because of *that*, MacRoth had gone to Mac Dathó's alone.

The offer for the hound, he saw, left his host in scarcely veiled trepidation. He observed critically how Mac Dathó began to drink cup after cup of wine to steady himself. Obligated by the custom of hostel hospitality to match his host, MacRoth downed the wonderful Estremnidean brew, but he remained so intent upon securing his host's answer that he took no joy in the sweetness, no satisfaction from the bouquet, no notice of when he had surpassed his limit. And with Estremnidean wine (as his queen had once learned while bribing a warrior to battle Cú Chulainn) the drinker passed directly from mildly flushed to utterly stupefied with no intermediate steps. Mac Dathó was in fact deceiving the messenger, and sipped only half of his cup, pouring the remainder into the straw at his side—a great waste but a necessary one. With eyes glazed and mouth slack, MacRoth at last toppled over onto his back. Mac Dathó left him in his stupor for four murky days while he, the host, vacillated between the ex-

tremes of killing himself and fleeing to the shore, climbing into a *currach*, and sailing to some unheard-of part of the world. Every time MacRoith showed signs of regaining consciousness, Mac Datho, with equivocal resolve—the one place he had any—poured more wine down the messenger’s throat.

The offer had been six hundred milk cows and a chariot. Mac Datho already had more cattle in his district than any other single district in Eriu could boast; as for the chariot, it was useless to him—nobody ever attacked a hostel: such stupidity would have called down the most ancient and dire supernatural consequences upon the attacker. The great, grand, glorious offer of Queen Maeve meant nothing. He wrung his hands and continued to fret. But his troubles had barely begun.

When a wanderer from Ulster province arrived, Mac Datho hardly paid the man any mind, leaving him to be tended by Clota, his wife. He noticed that the man was tall and slender, with a very short dark beard going gray and a perpetual look of mild disgruntlement about his round face, as if his bowels were out of order. Mac Datho had no capacity to care for this man’s troubles when weighed against his own and would have ignored him if the man had not taken his stabbed portion of meat and come looking for the hosteler.

“Excuse me,” he said, coming up from behind, “my name’s Fergus, called Fergus the Messenger. I’m a special envoy for Conchovor, king of Ulster and all else that suits him, former messenger to the far-famed Fergus mac Roich.”

“King Conchovor used to be a messenger for Fergus mac Roich?”

“No, you thick—” The Messenger caught himself. He made a wide, agreeable grin, then said, “Ha-ha, right. Now, the king has sent me to visit your proud hostel with an offer to purchase your *mastew*, which he’s heard so much about that it—hello? Good gods, he’s fainted.” He called for help, and Clota came running out of the cooking house next door. Together, she and Fergus revived her husband, who sprang up, clutching his chest, and galloped off into the nearby woods.

Clota turned a diffident smile to Fergus and said, “Won’t you excuse us for *just* a minute. Perhaps you might take another stab at your dinner?”

In a clearing where they sometimes went to be alone, Clota found her husband. He was pounding the bark off a yew tree with his forehead. Angry wrens in a nest up the tree were shrieking at him. At Clota’s approach, he yelled, “Go away from me, I’m cursed,” and sat down against the same tree to begin sprinkling its needles into his receding hair.

“You can’t do this,” Clota continued. “Your Connacht messenger will come around pretty soon and need more wine.”

“As if that mattered now. The queen from Cruachan wants my hound, and refused she turns from bright silver to a black darker than a starless night. Once, a man called Dairé denied her his bull but lost it to her just

the same. In return for refusal he gained a farmland where grass grew red and the animals grazed between corpses.”

“Then quit with the kennings and give her the hound.”

The hosteler patted the lumps rising on his forehead. “It’s a fine conclusion you reach but no longer practicable. Now the worst enemy Maeve has wants my Ailbe, too. That Dairé lived in *his* province and he’ll reward me foully if I spurn him. His messenger carries that word home and two nights later a Druid will be drinking wine from my skull, and *you* will—”

“Enough!” Clota commanded. She sat down on a log beside him. “You can’t split the poor *mastew*... on the other hand, you could give it away twice.”

Mac Datho looked at the ground, then up at his wife. He nodded, hugged her; then, fingering the bumps on his head, he said, “I think I’ll try the oak next.” He hoisted his tunic, took half a step. His wife grabbed onto his cloak and yanked him backwards over the log.

As he lay in the needles, she leaned above him and said, “Listen, give the hound to both of them, but don’t tell the one about the other. Let them come together here and hack at each other over him. Maybe, if we’re lucky, they’ll slaughter themselves to nothing. If not, then give Ailbe to the victor and be glad of it.”

“That’s not very hospitable.”

“Well, of course it isn’t. Do it anyway. Insist they take their fighting outside. So long as you stay inside no harm can befall you. No one would go against Druid law and slaughter anyone at a feast, *and* in a hostel. They’d have to be crazy.”

“You think the queen of Cruachan isn’t crazy?”

“You know what I’m saying.”

He had to admit that her plan was a vast improvement over smashing his head against trees all day. He cupped his hands to her wide face and said affectionately, “You are the wisest counselor in the whole world.”

MacRoth had to be dipped head first in a green pine barrel of cold water to sober him up. They placed him, in his sotted fog, to dry by the cooking fires while Mac Datho explained, “This has been most difficult for me. My *mastew* is my whole world. Still, your queen’s offer is generosity itself. I cannot ignore her, but I would add to the bargain that she and Ailell and an entourage come to my hostel for a feast where I’ll bid my Ailbe farewell.”

Muddle-headed, barely able to remember what he was doing there, MacRoth readily agreed to the conditions of the pact. He selected a date for this, and then let the hosteler walk him outside, point him in the right direction, and give him a shove to send him off. MacRoth shambled along the road for a ways but paused to glance back; he saw that he had not emerged from the feast hall, but from one of the smaller round huts be-

hind the hall. He tried to remember when he had gone there. When any recollection failed to materialize, he shuffled unsteadily around and stumbled on towards what he hoped was Connacht.

Fergus the Messenger, stone cold sober, had reached the end of his patience by the time Mac Datho returned to him. “Did you have a good meal?” asked the hosteler.

“No, I didn’t have a good meal. Nor has it been my experience to be so ill-treated when I come to a hostel.”

“Please, forgive me—I swooned.”

“Swooned?” Fergus screeched. “*Swooned?* You screamed and ran away.”

“I did—but it was a terrifically hard decision for me to give up Ailbe. I raised him, you know, from when he was a tiny pup. He had the hugest feet I’d ever seen on a pup, which is not surprising now when you see him, is it? But I’m wasting your time with my reminiscences. No matter what’s come before—I’ve decided to part with him. I should be honored if your king could journey here for a feast—say three *noinden* after Beltain?”

“Well, yes, all right,” replied Fergus, somewhat mollified by hard facts in his favor. “But, look here, it won’t do for you to go sprinting into the trees when Conchovor greets you.”

“I’ll remember.”

“And make it a big feast. We of Ulster like a good feast almost as much as we like a good fight.”

“Really? I never knew. I’ll try to cater to your inclinations. Now, why don’t you come in and have some food, rest a little before you return home.”

“Yes, all right. And wine—we like good wine. You have wine?”

“Certainly,” Mac Datho replied as he led Fergus over to the spitted boar.

“And those candied apples like they make in the south.”

“I know just what you mean.”

3. The Gathering

The festival of Beltain arrived a week after Fergus went home. As was the custom, Mac Datho oversaw the celebration in his district, leading his *tuath* onto a hillside where they greeted the sun at dawn: “Good day for us if you show your eye, warmth to the animals, good life to the plants.” The appearance of the sun, unblemished by clouds, forecast a successful Beltain. They danced—the men around a SunStone, the women around a May-pole—to ensure their own fertility. They ate and danced and sang throughout the day, playing games, drinking to blissful excess, tumbling, kissing,

wrestling, loving. At night, Mac Datho lit two bonfires and his people drove all of their cattle and sheep between the two, causing all of the errant spirits that had lodged in the beasts since the Samain to vacate the animal hosts and return to the afterworld where they belonged. Now the cattle and sheep were cleansed of evil for the harvest feast of Lughnasad. They would serve as pure sacrifices. The celebration ended with a Druid's prayer to Brennos, their god, to grant these people fecundity, followed by the lighting of a small wicker figure stuffed with letters to the dead, supplications transcribed by the Druids in their secret language. As he walked down the slope, the stick-man burning above him, Mac Datho lurched to a halt and swung about. Above, his people continued to dance, free of care; but he had just suffered a horrible realization—he now had only twenty-seven days left to prepare for the treacherous feast he had promised.

Those days passed too quickly, while Mac Datho gathered necessary supplies from his people to supplement the store of food at the hostel, and made other preparations. This feast would surpass any he had ever thrown, a *rí tuaithe* being in charge of but a small unit of society. The quantity of heroes who would sit together in the hall staggered his imagination. There would have to be an immense pig slaughtered to feed so many champions; he saw sadly that only one pig could accommodate them, and that was the mammoth boar Ailbe had caught.

As the day drew near, Mac Datho tried to look at the sacrifice of his boar philosophically as the dispensing of one treasure in order to keep the other. He asked the black-clothed Druid who performed the slaughter to make a prayer so that the gods would appreciate this forfeiture. The night before the event, despite all of his rationalizing, he could not sleep, and he sat up beside his sleeping hound, watching Ailbe twitch and quiver in a dream of prey pursued. Near dawn, he got up and wandered out to where members of his *tuath* roasted his enormous boar over slow coals, but it pained him to see the beast stitched and hung, so he drifted into the hall, absent of travelers that night. More of his people carried in casks of wine, stacked them in the corner, stirred two cauldrons of thick soup made from vegetables out of three kitchen gardens, piled up loaves and cakes of steaming honey-glazed bread, and added clean straw to the floor around the line of boards that made up the narrow table stretching from the doorway at one end to the dais where the boar would be suspended at the other. How would this event end? He tried to imagine it as he had done since Beltain—warriors calling one another out, both parties being drawn outside to watch and then to fight, the slaughter massing like stormclouds. Slowly, he became aware of a low, distant thunder, but thought it part of his imaginings at first. It grew louder, and he cast aside his bloody dream. He strained to listen. A knot tightened in his bowels. The day of the feast had arrived.

Leaving the hall, he had to step aside for the group who carried on the heavy spit between them the succulent carcass of Ailbe's pig.

They appeared through the trees to the west, cloaks and tunics like splashes of autumnal color in the forest—a small army of chariots, which burst out onto the road. The cheerless, bearded king led the way. Of his silver-haired wife, Mac Datho could see just the hair: she had surrounded herself with a ring of nine tightly packed chariots. The rest of the small, colorful force trailed loosely behind her cluster, like hounds. They drew up directly outside the feast hall, their bright cloaks swirling around them. Dark Ailell stared sullenly down upon Mac Datho. Then his proud brow creased, and he looked away. Mac Datho looked in that direction, too—where distant thunder continued to rumble as though the northeast hills had caught the sound and turned it back. The hosteler sensed that not everyone had been distracted by the sound—someone was staring at him. He looked the Connacht party over and found Maeve through a space in her barrier. Her cold eyes picked his bones. He controlled the overwhelming urge to flee, and called out, “Whoever that is coming, you should all hurry into the hall. My laws will shield you there.”

Ailell glowered at him but said, “Good counsel.” He waved all of his people toward the hall. Mac Datho's servants led the chariots aside.

In the house, members of his *tuath* were placing the last of the foods on the long, raised boards. At the far end others finished cinching a rectangular shield upside down beneath the hanging boar to catch drippings. Mac Datho ushered as many of the Connachtmen as he could to take their places on the far side of the table, but Ailell and most of his warriors watched from the doorway shadows as Clota strode out to greet the approaching chariots, now resplendently in view beyond the low stone walls of Mac Datho's fields. The hosteler busied himself by straining wine into a horde of cups—a messy task that hid his unnatural trembling.

Clota met the chariots from Ulster far enough down the road to keep from being overheard by anyone in the hostel. The fractious Ulster warriors were already grumbling at the sight of the Connacht chariots, twiddling their feathered and streamered weapons. She singled out Conchovor from the transcendent number of bright colors woven into his cloak. He had a young thin face despite the premature gray in his light brown hair and forked beard; his hair, near the ends, was pale blond from the last time he had limed it. “We're very sorry,” she told him, “but an untimely occurrence has brought the king and queen of Connacht here. They insisted on being taken in. We had your feast laid out, but the laws of hospitality ...”

“I understand,” the king answered. “You've done what you must. It's on us to bend in this situation. Can we at least keep them to one side of the hall?”

“My husband tries that even now—but if you mean keep them away from your boar, I’m not sure we can succeed.”

Conchovor stroked his beard and reflected on the problem she had inadvertently pointed up: Who was to be designated champion of the feast? On that subject he could not imagine any of Connacht agreeing with him. He considered his feast party. “It’s a real pity,” he told himself, “that Cú Chulainn and Conall aren’t here or there’d be no question.” Both of those warriors had been living at their homes, away from Emain Macha. If word of this event reached either of them Conchovor doubted it would be in time to help. He sought his champion’s face among his warriors. Laegaire Buadach might do, or Celtchar—about the others he could not say for certain. Then he spotted the cruel, mischievous face of Bricriu, whose skill with wicked words was known by Ailell and Maeve. Conchovor brightened. Maybe they could win the Champion’s Portion after all. If the infamous Bitter Tongue could lash out at the right enemies at the right moments ... but who had Ailell brought with him for Bricriu to reduce?

Following tradition, the king entered the hall last, after his son Cuscraid, called The Stammerer. By then the sides had been clearly drawn. The warriors of Connacht stood in a row along the far side of the feast, fingering their weapons. Maeve, in purple robes, was barely visible at the head of the row; her nine protectors circled her. Conchovor walked behind his people where Clota had ushered them along the nearest side of the feast. He came to his place across from Ailell. The two kings acknowledged one another stiffly. Between them, the boar of contention glistened.

Ailell said, “We’ve a precarious situation here. It’s going to take strength on both sides to maintain order.”

“And you doubt that someone younger than yourself, younger than most of his company, can do that,” Conchovor answered sarcastically. “I’m sorry that I didn’t bring your boy Sencha along with me or our problems would be solved. I could have him held at knife-point through the meal.”

“You and I have an agreement—”

“Which I will hold to here in this hall, since hostility in a hostel carries its own punishment. The fates have brought us here for some reason. Those three women have goaded you and me before. But this time, I say we disregard the women.” He turned to Maeve as he spoke. Her eyes narrowed to slits and color flooded her cheeks. Assuaged, Conchovor addressed his warriors. “I want your weapons kept fully clothed during this meal. Your daggers are for stabbing your food and not your neighbor. Provocation cannot belong to us.” Ailell gave his people the same command, though more plainly—he had no care here for the riddling that Ulstermen enjoyed.

At the end of the hall, gathered with their *tuath*, Mac Datho and Clota exchanged fearful glances. If these two monarchs began to converse civilly, they would inevitably get around to the subject of Ailbe and the hosteler’s plot would be discovered, his life very likely forfeit.

One of his people said, “Look. Who’s that that’s stood up?”

The man had a spiteful demeanor. Mac Datho clutched at his tunic and offered a prayer to Brennos that this might save him.

His tunic a deep blue, Bricriu the Bitter Tongue walked along behind the row of seated Ulstermen, up to the raised platform that held the boar. Casually, he leaned against one of the uprights while he ran one finger slowly through the thick glaze that coated the animal. When he had a wad of glaze on his fingertip, he popped it into his mouth, then made a face of indescribable ecstasy. This mask disappeared beneath another, of furrowed agitation. As if to himself but loudly so as to be heard throughout the hall, Bricriu said, “This boar is simply dripping with sweet juices, and you couple that with its impressive size and, at the very least, you have to treble the honor of the first slice. Now, I must wonder, who among our lowly crowd can say they deserve such a Champion’s Portion? I can’t think of a soul.”

From the ranks of Connachtmen, a woman’s voice called out, “I’ve carried off enough fat *steers* from Ulster, so I guess one pig shouldn’t be much of a burden.” Other Connacht warriors laughed. Even dour Ailell smiled at the jest.

Bricriu, however, remained undaunted. “Maybe. But I’ve carried my share of *pigs* from Connacht. Why, just yesterday as fate would have it, I took one—I think it was your sister.”

The laughter down one side of the board died as whoops and catcalls surged like a tide up the other. Conchovor caught the contagion enough to grin smugly at Maeve.

The offended warrior from Connacht started to get up but a huge fist closed on her arm and dragged her back down. The owner of that fist climbed up like an evil Fomor monster rising out of the sea. He wore a sleeveless tunic, revealing countless scars on his arms and shoulders. None marred his granite-jawed face. His glare hushed the Ulstermen as it swept along their ranks, settling finally on Bricriu. The huge warrior started down the hall toward the boar. Without looking away, he addressed the whole Ulster contingent.

“I’ve carried no steers from your province. I don’t waste my time with trifling infringements. This party I sit with hasn’t known me for very long, that’s a fact. But many of *you* do.” He drew up with the boar between him and Bricriu. “You, Black Tongue, may talk all day if you like, but after I’m finished.” He hefted his dagger. “The Champion’s Portion belongs to me, and I defy anyone in your ranks to gainsay me.”

Bricriu backed off the dais and scuttled in retreat along the feast. His head bobbed as he admitted to himself that he could not stand against this villain.

Clota asked her husband who the warrior was. “He’s Ket mac Magach,” came the answer. “He’s a mercenary—his entire tribe rejected him as too unstable to have around when times were quiet. No one would foster him even.”

“I wish I’d known that while he was outside. I’d have stuck a dagger through his heart before he got out of his chariot.”

“Clota!”

“I would! He’s killed babies, children, as well as warriors. He’s shameless, a monster.” Then she said, “Look,” and pointed to where an Ulster warrior had risen. He had hard ochre eyes and a face as sharp as an axe. His gray hair began far back on his head, giving him the appearance of a Druid. He had curled his beard into two thick strands like Conchovor’s for this feast. “That’s Laegaire Buadach of the Red Hand,” Mac Datho told her. She wondered where he had learned the identities of these warriors.

“I’ll deny you supremacy,” said Laegaire. “I’ve slain hundreds to your one, just from the infamous cattle raid alone. Give me the first slice.”

Ket mac Magach sneered. “Surely great Laegaire hasn’t forgotten the time in Meath that he lost his chariot to me and I took his driver as well? Maybe you’d remember if you looked at your leg under that skirt and found the pink scar where my spear ran aground when I chased you home. Caught you ‘Red-Handed,’ have I, Laegaire?”

The Connachtmen jeered at him. Laegaire hid his face to hide his shame. He sat down quickly, pulling his cloak up high on his shoulders. He looked like a turtle.

It was Maeve’s turn to smile at Conchovor, and she acted with deprecating style. She did not find such verbal warfare as fulfilling as the real thing, but she drank any vengeance upon Ulster as if it were wine, or blood.

A tall man with curly russet hair stood next in Ulster’s defense. He wore a gray doeskin patch over one eye.

“That’s Oengus,” Mac Datho told his wife. “He should defeat Ket.”

“Laegaire’s still your better,” bellowed Oengus, “and so am I.”

“Your partial blindness has made you partially stupid. See the whole picture, Oengus, before I take the second eye like I took the first.” The Connachtmen roared at this. Red with shame, Oengus sat down. Another man was up in an instant.

“Give the choice portion to me, then. You’ve never wounded me in battle.”

Ket replied, “That’s true enough, Muinremor mac Gercin—oh, I know you, and for good reason. Your house suffered an immeasurable loss this past *se’nnight* of two good warriors and a son who was to wear the family torc. If you care to leave your sword here in the hall, I’ll take you out to my chariot and show you their three heads hung from my wicker rails.”

Muinremor collapsed as if speared. His body shook with grief. The Connachtmen did not jeer at him out of respect for his loss, but they hammered their dagger hilts against the boards in a martial tattoo.

At the far end of the row, a young woman took up Ulster’s defense. She stumbled as she stood, and limped a few steps forward to be heard. “I’m

Mend the Sword-Heel,” she yelled in a hot voice, “and your cruelty exceeds any forgiveness.”

“Yes, just as I cannot forgive churlish girls like you who limp forward without thanking me for bestowing them with their so appropriate surname.”

The Connachtmen howled with glee. Mend tried to stand against it, but finally gave in and sank down as the man beside her stood. Before he could even speak, Ket waved the Connachtmen to silence and said derisively, “Celtchar mac Uthidir, I am amazed that you even dare stand. How long has it been since you made love with your wife, Celtchar? How long since you could pee without agony? Must we ask you to pull up your tunic and show us the great scar that divides your balls? Hey, Celtchar?”

This time Connacht threw food. Celtchar seemed not so much to sit as to shrink toward the floor amid the hail of leeks and parsnips.

Beside Conchovor, Cuscraid tried to get up. The king yanked him down by his hair.

“Let me gu-go,” Cuscraid insisted.

“To do what? *I* already know how you came by your scarred throat and nickname. You stand and he’ll call your broken diction smooth—rounded by his blade.”

“But he muh-muh”—he pushed his fingers into his neck—“makes us all f-fools before him.”

“Only we can do that to ourselves, and thanks to Bricriu we’ve had the opportunity.”

Maeve called to him, “It is a royal pity that Cú Chulainn has not come. I would have expected a group this large to bring at least *one* warrior along for protection. Or did he not come because he heard that I would be here? Is this the Hound’s snub of me? Does he fear me still, Conchovor? If not, then where is he?” Her warriors’ derision absorbed the name Cú Chulainn.

“If he had come,” Conchovor said softly to Cuscraid, “then Bricriu would be a hero for stirring this up. Each of us who stands only prolongs the embarrassment. Ket’s probably fought half the world.” He looked over the rest of his party; no one else was getting up. Conchovor saw that this feast—and, somehow, the hound as well—was lost to him.

Ket waited until it was painfully obvious to all that no one else dared challenge him. A sneer bared his yellowed teeth. Contempt spilled from him down upon the Ulstermen like boiling water out of a cauldron. His people began to chant, “Ket, Ket, Ket,” and hammered their daggers into the boards with such force that bowls overturned and the hard wood dented. Maeve gloated at her sworn enemy.

Turning his back upon Ulster, Ket made a great prolonged show of selecting the spot in which to insert his dagger, prodding the juicy carcass, grinning askance to his supporters. He chose the spot, twirled the dagger, raised it to cut. Above the uproar, a voice shouted out, “Stop!”

4. Heading Off Disaster

Ket whirled around, dagger poised, flashing for a kill. Every head swiveled, every eyelid stretched back. Ket turned feral, his sharp teeth like spear points. No one had the right to challenge him now.

At the far end of the feast, a tall man stood, silhouetted in the light from the doorway. He wore a reddish fur draped around him that hung to the straw at his feet. His face, pale and freckled, had sharp, prominent cheeks; even more prominent was his brow, that cast his eyes in deep shadow. His wavy red-blond hair hung to the gold torc at his throat. He strode silently, swiftly to stand behind Mend the Sword-Heel. Lights from the cooking fires now glittered off his deep, sea-blue eyes and revealed them to be crossed. The Connachtmen all touched their weapons, ready to slay him if he made any attempt upon Ket's life—or anyone's life for that matter. Any remotely justifiable reason to kill this fiery intruder would have served. This was Conall Cernach, the Cross-Eyed, the bitterest enemy they had alongside Cú Chulainn. They believed him capable of any atrocity.

One arm emerged from Conall's red fur cloak, the other still hidden. He pointed up at the boar. "Why," he asked his countrymen, "is that sub-human creature up there at the boar while you, his betters, squat down and ignore him?" Even as he asked this, he met each eye in the line, down to Mend, directly below him, and read the prevailing self-rebuke. "Our king eats a putrid pudding tonight despite all that's laid out for him," he murmured to Mend. Loudly, he bellowed, "Ket mac Magach! Rules governing hostels forbid cannibalism—so why are you preparing to cut into a pig?"

Bricriu spluttered in his wine. No one else moved or made a sound.

Ket replied icily, "The Champion's Portion is mine by virtue of the absence of unblemished warriors in Ulster. I'm the best man in the room."

"Possibly, for a moment or two that was the case. An accident—just as a herdsman is the best warrior when he wanders alone amongst his cattle. But now I would say that you are at best *second* best."

"Meaning that you've ascended?" Ket stood defiantly, his muscles bulging; but his voice betrayed resignation, and everyone in the room understood: he had nothing to claim against Conall.

Conall replied, "Not at all. I mean, you've *descended*. Ask your company. When has a day passed since the great *táin* that I've spared a Connachtman his life? You can all count your losses—if by error I've left you any fingers to use. This hot-headed spear-wielder has nothing to compare to it. I've got years of slaughter on him. So I say, Ket climbs down."

Ket looked for guidance to the king and queen; they had only to say the word and he would leap upon Conall and hack him to pieces, the rules

of hostels be damned. Maeve had already discounted Ket—she scanned the rest of her party for a face to defy Conall, but without success. Ailell had already weighed these things. He gestured the warrior down from Mac Datho's pig.

Ket slammed his dagger into its sheath. "You get this boar, all right," he shouted, "but if my brother, Anluan, came through that door right now, you'd have to crawl into a corner, and he'd still find you and squash you! Anluan's deeds shame the whole of Ulster. If he were here, this would be *his* pig, *his* feast. No one can restrict Anluan."

Down the line, the desperate Connacht warriors began to pound and chant, "Anluan." Some said, "That's so!" and others, "If *he* were here, all right."

Conall answered above the din, "What are you all babbling about? Anluan *is* here."

This subdued the warriors. They looked around in dismay, seeking their brother in the shadows.

"No, you misunderstand," Conall told them, reeling in their attention, "Anluan's *right here*." He flung back his red fur and held out the severed head of Anluan. The milky eyes stared at the ceiling, a black tongue parted the lips. "He's mine, my trophy. However, since you've graciously given me this feast, I suppose I can let him sit with you." With a snap, he flung the head the length of the boards. It bounced off a stunned Ket, spraying blood and gore down upon Ailell, and plopped into Maeve's purple lap.

She shoved the head off her thighs and backed away in revulsion. Ulster hooted at her and resurrected the name she had won in her cattle raid, when a horrible river of blood had poured from between her legs: "Queen of Foulness!" they cried, pointing gleefully at the red smear across her thighs.

Conall raced along the boards between adversaries, dancing around the food. He leapt past Conchovor and landed beside the boar, immediately shoved Ket out of the way, turned and, with a quick stroke, cut a huge slice of dripping pork. He jumped down in front of Ailell, dropping to one knee. "Here is my cut—that I've wished to share with you both for so very long." He bit into the pork, grinning like the fiendish Morrigan.

With exaggerated calmness, Ailell wiped the streaks of Anluan's blood from his face. He got to his feet and ordered his party out of the hostel. Then he helped Maeve up. She had lost most of her color and could not look away from the head that lay on its side, seeming to stare at her. Ailell pushed her ahead of him.

The Ulstermen jeered and hurled food at the departing guests. When the last of Connacht had left, they ran to Conall and embraced him. Conchovor shouted his name like a battle cry and it resounded up the walls, escaped through the smoke hole in the roof, filling the clear sky with that name.

Mac Datho and his wife hurried out after the departing Connacht force, pretending abject apology, hiding their delight. The king said nothing. Surrounded by her wall of chariots, Maeve was busy stripping off her blood-drenched tunic only to discover that Anluan's head had stained her belly and thighs. Frantically, she wiped at it, but the blood only smeared. Her driver rolled off with her naked against the rails.

All the chariots rolled off and in celebration Mac Datho released Ailbe. He held out his arms to the immense beast, but Ailbe ran past him in pursuit of Connacht. Mac Datho yelled and dashed after the dog. He could not stop the hound. Ailbe caught up with Ailell's chariot, barking and charging around it, shoulders as high as its wheel. The king of Connacht saw that here lay the source of his humiliation. His sword swept up, flashed once across the sky, and the great, prancing *mastew* crashed down without its head. Ailell dangled that by one ear. He called back, "The Ulstermen may have your pig, Mac Datho. I shall keep the dog." He shook the massive head wildly until his chariot rolled out of sight.

Conchovor, in the doorway, saw all of this and figured out how he had been deceived. The rest of his party still shouted and laughed within. He shook his head at Mac Datho. "A dangerous gambit you've played here, and maybe an offense to us, but I won't ask for an accounting. I think you've lost enough." He went back inside.

Mac Datho left his wife's side and trudged down the road toward the body of his hound. He was still standing beside it, lost for what to do, when the lone chariot appeared and came rolling to a stop nearby. The passenger jumped down and walked up to him. "Are you Mac Datho the hosteler?"

Mac Datho nodded.

The man smiled. "Good. I've been sent by the king of Leinster. He's interested in purchasing your hound...."

INTERLUDE TWO



Dear Lord,

The harvest began today after *prime*. I worked in the fields all morning with Benedict, Kevin, and Suibne. Two of the women from the convent outside our walls, including beautiful Sister Bertril, were working their fields, too. Their harvest won't be as rich as ours, because there are less of them to share the work. The debate continues as to whether or not to let them enter our monastery. The Abbot remains opposed and I stand with him. Events support his position: yesterday was the sisters' day to use the sweathouse for their baths. They are lucky that we built it beyond the walls; we erected it before they had raised their church, and if we had not chosen to use the space in our yard for a kitchen, the bath house might have gone there. There might have been less trouble in the long run had that been the case.

The women had only begun their ablutions when Brother Brian was caught hiding around the side of the sweathouse. He had worked a stone out of the wall in order to watch them inside. This is the third time he has been caught at this particular transgression, which of course does not even begin to cover the times he's been caught practicing Onanism. The presence of the women obsesses him. One evening after *compline*, Lord, he forced me to endure a descriptive recitation of their bodies he had worked up under the guise of traditional versification. The work digressed quickly into an account of what the sisters do with one another under cover of the steam in the bathhouse. He leaned down over me, trapping me in a corner of his *clochán* where I sat on the stone shelf. The heat of his breath was like the heat in the sweathouse, the words carried the weight of dripping eroticism. Of course I denied his words, but my body reacted and I could not keep it from happening, keep the images from rising up to tempt me. I've not told the Abbot, but I've tried to avoid Brian and his poetic licentiousness. The problem is, he is often assigned the same tasks as I, since we arrived at nearly the same time and have similar skills in many areas. And twice since that night I've had nocturnal visions of naked women wreathed in steam.

Then today, with many of the sisters at work nearby, harvesting from their small wheat plot, I saw again one of Brian's succubae but forced it from my mind and hastily increased my labors. I made the hard effort of tilling the stony ground into my penance; that way at least I could benefit the monastery and my brothers. I worked blisters into my hands.

Torpeist watched us idly from the top of the walls. He is not required to do anything when he isn't reciting, a rule that has hung on since his time if that tale about the hostel has any fact in it at all. When we carried in our tools before *nones*, he got down and walked along beside me.

"I saw you watching the women," he told me, and when I hotly denied this, he laughed and shook his head. "This segregation of male and female is a foolish trend, Fergil, and it won't lead to anything good, I can promise you that. Why, look at your friend Brian."

"He's no friend of mine," I insisted.

"And why? Because he has desires in him that are as natural as breezes blowing through trees. You separate the women, make them hide all that's natural about them, and do the same yourself, and both camps invent all sorts of horrendous tales of the other out of the ignorance derived from this attitude. The next thing you know, you'll be dragging the women out and accusing them of all kinds of ludicrous things, maybe even slaughtering a few all in the fabricated notion that what was unseen was evil. You won't be able to get them out of your minds, and you'll deny your part in this and say the women are demons, weaving spells upon you. As if there isn't enough to deal with between men and women when everything is out in the open, bare-assed for the world to witness. Your brother Brian is just one bud on a whole plant of potential problems."

I answered him, saying, "Denial strengthens the soul and raises the character."

Torpeist laughed. "Denial of reality and truth doesn't strengthen anything other than one's own stupidity."

I had no answer, Lord, none. It was as if all my thoughts were whirring around inside my head and I couldn't find one for him. He infuriated me so much that I could hardly consider transcription afterwards. I wanted to stalk off, to get as far from him as possible. Then he grasped my shoulder in his gnarled old hands and said, "You're hardly older than I was when I learned the stories I'm telling you. You've hardly begun to reach out and touch the world and here you are denying more of it than you understand. That's sad, boy. Even if your denial is valid, your reasons for it aren't. And you don't deny real evil, you deny an evil that you yourselves create through the process of that very denial. Why, I wonder, do you bother to set down what I tell you—you cling so tightly to your reality and think it the only one possible. That grand denial has made you all fatuous." He refused to entertain any further discussion on the matter, yelled me back when I tried to argue more. I watched him go off between Brian and Kevin's *clocháns* toward the altar with the five round stones on it, the stones that

we call Curse Stones. We use that altar to unburden ourselves of petty angers; what use can he have for it?

I ask for guidance, Lord. Torpeist, I think, enjoys confusing me, knowing how much I hate being confused. Can he hope to mislead me from Your path? I know that I am right, and I won't give in to his trickery. I won't. God give me Strength.

II. BRICRIU'S FEAST



1. Magic Horses

The story has been related already of the extraordinary birth of Ulster's amazing sentinel, Setanta, who was known to his people as Cú Chulainn—the Hound of Culann; how the god, Lugh, turned Conchovor's sister to a bird and stole her away from Craebread; how the god kept her and her handmaidens hidden with him for a year, till the night when she was to give birth to his son. It might be recalled as well how the warriors of Ulster Province came to be humiliated at that event in Lugh's presence, because the one man among them who knew the true identities of the god and the women did not reveal this. That man, Bricriu, was better known as The Bitter Tongue for his malice. Though he had performed a service of sorts in the feast of Mac Dathó's hostel, in general Bricriu took delight in offending his own neighbors, in embarrassing them, and most of all in setting them at one another's throats; but because on the day of Cú Chulainn's birth he had chosen to offend not just a neighbor but a *god* worshipped by the province, Bricriu had been assigned the protracted retributive task of rebuilding the ancient farmhouse in which, in the midst of a snowstorm, Cú Chulainn had been born into a feast hall to rival every hall in the world.

The Bitter Tongue's task could well be called imposing, but hardly impossible and never unwarranted. Nevertheless, between petty battles, adventures, and the Cattle Raid of Cuailnge, and with the aid of his wife, he managed to make the raising of his vast round hall take decades. Those two malignant creatures set posts and nailed boards and wove wicker but mostly they bickered and procrastinated, tearing down walls they disagreed

over, moving the site altogether and then moving it back, and complaining all the while as if they were fragile dotards. Orders for copper and bronze sheets trickled in to King Conchovor, and he saw that every order was filled without question. Exasperated as he was, he continued to hope for a hall greater than any other in Eriu.

Conchovor, with his graying beard, was not yet thirty-five; small, dark Cú Chulainn had turned twenty-four and had grown a dark beard of his own. In the years since the Hound had won his glory against the army of the four other provinces, his life had been quiet and contemplative. But he had come to find this comparatively sedentary life irritating and even maddening at times. How many rocks lay shattered from the practice stroke of his sling, how many trees felled and birds tamed, hounds raised from pups or salmon caught bare-handed cannot be estimated. However, the people in the fortress complex on the hill above Emain Macha saw less and less of him as he withdrew inside his skills.

The morning that Conchovor decided to open Bricriu's house with a feast, Cú Chulainn went out fishing at Slieve Fuad. As a boy he had trained on the mystical isle of Emain Ablach, under the guidance of a fierce warrior, Domnall Mildemail. She had taught him, among other things, how to ride on any current. The manner of his fishing on Slieve Fuad was to race down the mountain stream and snatch the fish until he skimmed dizzily into one of the deep pools that derived from the stream.

He began at the very top, where the clouds rolled in and misted the peak, and where the beginnings of the stream were etched into the rock. Cú Chulainn skated down, and soon the narrow trickle had become a gushing stream. He glided along its snaking turns into the first pool on Slieve Fuad, one as full and wide as a small lake. It had a name—Glas-linn: the Gray Pool. He dove into its depths, his strange, flickering eyes casting through the clear cold water for a glimmer of sunlight on trout's scales. He chased the fish lazily, driving them to where the stream continued down the mountainside, never once coming up for breath. Then he turned to circle the depths for more fish and came face to face with a horse.

It is easy to understand his surprise in finding a *live* horse at the bottom of a lake—a dead one might have been odd but not impossible, since his people sometimes passed in death into Magh Meld through a lake or an ocean current. Their chariots can still be found there upon occasion, abandoned at the point where those ancient warriors crossed over. But this was not a dead horse. This horse blew air bubbles and kicked backward off the bottom in its amazement to see Cú Chulainn. Mud spewed up between them, but Cú Chulainn paddled his way through it and grabbed hold of the horse's mane to let the beast carry him along like a floating spirit above its back.

The water grew shallower and the horse and rider soon emerged into the daylight. The horse bolted across the landscape, leaping rocks and crags across the height, ascending to where Cú Chulainn had first joined

the stream. The horse bucked and tossed him but he pressed his knees deep into her flanks and hugged against her neck.

“Don’t fight me,” he whispered to her, “there’s no point in it. If not today, then tomorrow I’ll dive down and bridle you. I’d have to break your spirit and that would break my heart.”

The horse became calm. She twisted her head to look him in the eye, to read the honesty in him. Then she shook her mane and began to eat the scrub grass on the hillside. Cú Chulainn jumped down and looked her over. He ran his hands along her flanks as he circled her.

She was a huge mare, as powerful as any stallion he had ever seen. Her gray long-haired coat shone like a sheet of silver from the water running off it. “You’re no mortal mare,” Cú Chulainn mused. “Only the goddess of horses herself could have fashioned you. You’re the Gray Mare of Macha, then.” The horse nickered. He put his hand to her nose and she breathed warm, moist air into his palm. “Why don’t you come along and meet my charioteer? You two should know each other.” He descended past the wide pond before glancing back to see her following at a discreet distance, like a demure lover.

A larger lake lay at the base of the mountain, its surface unblemished, perfectly reflecting the sky. But as Cú Chulainn and his new companion strode past it, the waters began to churn and froth, and a tall black stallion emerged out of the depths to stand defiantly in their path.

Cú Chulainn called to the stallion, “I’m already tired from wrestling this gray, but I’ll wear you down if you insist on confrontation.” The horse stood still. Its tail flicked. “Two horses from two lakes, that’s too much coincidence for one morning. Since I never see your kind any other time, I assume you must be a set—the Gray of Macha and the Black Sanglain, if you don’t mind my naming you from this place.” He edged toward the horse as he spoke. “You know, at my birth there were two foals born that same night. And though my uncle Conchovor took them along to the fort for me, they disappeared that night.” The Black Sanglain raised its head and snorted at him. “Then there were the twins that Macha bore in her race against my uncle,” he continued evenly. “She whisked them away and none have seen them since. You could be those children of the horse goddess grown to adulthood and this final form—in Magh Mell time is timeless, after all. There’s a riddle for the Druids to unravel; my great-uncle, Cathbad, will pull the rest of his hair out over that one. So what are you?”

He reached the black stallion and cupped its cheeks, then brushed his hand down its neck, pushing water back past its withers, much as he had done with the mare. The stallion laid its muzzle on his shoulder.

“And so you are of a pair, aren’t you?” he said and found the Gray nuzzling the other side of his head. He thought: I wonder what this good fortune entails?

On foot he walked along, with a horse on either side of him, back across the rolling grassy hills toward the plain of Emain Macha where his charioteer and his wife awaited his return. They were expecting trout.

2. Bricriu's First Treachery

At Emain Macha, Cú Chulainn found the fortress in a turmoil. He led his two horses to a pale, thin man on the plain below it. Laeg mac Riangabra, his charioteer, smiled slyly when Cú Chulainn asked what the excitement was about.

"Foul-mouthed Bricriu has finally completed his feast hall and Conchovor's right now assembling the party to go and put it to the proper test. Naturally, that must include you and me. But whose horses do you have there?" Cú Chulainn explained how he had come by the two animals, and Laeg cried, "Remarkable!" at the end of it. "I'd like to harness them right now and see how they run the length of Emain Macha. But I suppose I'll have to wait till this questionably momentous celebration has passed—not to mention the fierce headache it'll probably leave me with."

"Try drinking less. Anyhow, Emer will want to see these two." Laeg agreed and led man and beasts up the hill, through the three earthen ramparts that ringed its base. Emer happened outside Craebrud just as they arrived.

She was short like her husband but where he was black as a raven Emer was auburn red, the great fan of her hair shot through with sunset streaks, held tightly by a thin, twisted gold torc at her brow. Her ears were slightly pointed, creating for her an elfin look that only encouraged the mischievous glint in her eyes and the promise of a smile forever shaping her lips. The two horses went right to Emer and circled her. She stroked and spoke to each, grinning all the while. "Where did you find these two? They're not your common stock, and they certainly aren't fish." He repeated his story of the adventures in the lakes on Slieve Fuad. At the end, Emer replied, "I'll tend to them for you and come to the feast later with the other women, but you had better go in and let Conchovor know you're back. He's nearly ready to leave."

With the horses in her charge, Cú Chulainn and Laeg entered the fortress. Craebrud, the "red house", had walls of hammered copper interspersed with elaborately carved panels of polished red cedar to give it its name. The interior had a maze-like quality to it with corridors in concentric rings, each one leading to a circle of rooms with only one passage leading to the next girdling corridor. At the heart of this lay a wide round feast hall where Conchovor held meetings with his advisors and celebra-

tions—where he had listened recently to a novice satirist describe the fierce hound of Mac Datho. The two men found him there, and the rest of the feast party had already assembled. This included Ailell's son, Sencha; Conall Cernach, called Conall the Cross-eyed ever since the magic blood from a severed head had splattered his face and deformed it; Cuscraid the Stammerer; severe Laegaire Buadach, known also as The Battle Winner; Celtchar mac Uthidir and his wife, Brig Brethach; the hero Blai Briuga, who was Brig's secret lover and who pretended not to notice her there; and the vicious, simpering Bricriu himself. Also present were Laeg's two brothers, Sedlang and Id, chariot drivers for Laegaire and Conall respectively. All three brothers had freckled faces and all had thin, rosy physiques. Seeing one another, they ran together and embraced—a wild, cheering festival of three. It had been a long time between visits.

“Well, then, time we were off,” Bricriu announced. “My wife will have our food hot and juicy.”

The large body of warriors set off shortly from Emain Macha. Because the three brothers saw one another so rarely—Cú Chulainn and Laegaire lived well apart across Ulster, and Conall dwelled on his own island off the coast—they went together to the feast and let the warriors drive alone, separately. The three warriors were thus less proficient than usual in matters of ratiocination. For Bricriu things could not have gone better. He began by taking his chariot up beside Cú Chulainn's Sickle Chariot. The dark Hound of Ulster eyed Bricriu warily and said nothing.

“You'll find I've more than made up for any embarrassment caused at your birth. I never meant to offend your father, you know. That wasn't my intention.”

Cú Chulainn could hardly believe his ears: Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue was actually offering an apology for his duplicity.

“The hall is huge,” Bricriu went on, “with a raised seat for Conchovor, and one for the champion of the feast. I hope the others will agree with me that the champion ought to be you.” He whipped his team faster then, pulling ahead of Cú Chulainn. He veered off shortly, as if embarrassed by the hero's nearness. Soon, Laegaire Buadach drew up even with him. Bricriu waved to Laegaire. “A good feast is coming, I promise you that, but it's a shame that The Bloody Hand has to take a lesser place at so important a feast than smaller warriors with less honor won in shorter years. You should have the Champion's Portion were it up to me.”

“Too bad it isn't,” Laegaire snarled back. He saw the trap being set for him and cut his path away. However, the ride to Bricriu's was long enough that his mind worked on that gambit and, without his driver, had no means of expressing the turmoil within.

By then, Bricriu had driven for a while beside Conall Cernach, too. Conall's crystal blue eyes cut like daggers at Bricriu, and his mistrust had such power that he flatly ignored Bricriu until he noticed what the Bitter Tongue was saying about him—that he ought to have the Champion's

Portion. Conall, living so far from his warrior-brothers, rarely went to feasts and even more rarely played the champion there. Bricriu's clever words tied him up in knots of conflicting emotions; his belief that he was *fir fer*, a true and just man, wrestled with the pride in his skills as a fighter, skills that did not receive proper recognition often enough. In this way, Bricriu opened wounds in all three warriors, knowing well that all men want people to recognize their worth, even if they have no worth at all.



The feast hall stood on a broad field strewn with white flowers. The curving walls towered more than a storey in height, and from where they approached, the warriors could see an opening high up in the wall that revealed a loft of the sort called a *grianan*. The thatched roof did not hang so low there, to let the sunlight spill in when there was sunlight. A building with a *grianan* was extremely rare everywhere in Eriu—the most famous being the *grianan* of Queen Maeve in Connacht—and the warriors exchanged awe-struck glances as they arrived.

Bricriu's wife greeted him and his guests. She shared his conniving temperament as well as his intentions for the feast, and she took him aside and asked if all was prepared. Bricriu nodded, sweeping back his stringy hair. "I'll have these warriors at each other's throats and later I'll prod and goad their wives till their breasts swell and beat one against the other and the gentle mother's milk within froths to blood."

"That's my wicked love," she replied.

The three warriors he had wheedled at arrived separately, and they could not look each other in the eye because of what they were thinking. Their drivers failed to see this, being too much involved in carefree reminiscing. Last to arrive was Conchovor, who showed up with an entourage of eight swordsmen. The eight had scars on their cheeks; two had no ears. Bricriu recognized none of Conchovor's guests. "Who are these outsiders?" he asked Conchovor.

The king flipped his bright green robe over his shoulder, wrapping it properly around his tunic. He seemed not to have heard the question and stood with a wry smile on his lips, idly polishing his thumb ring against his forefinger. Softly, he said, "These men, Bricriu, are guests at my invitation. They're special warriors, carefully selected for one very important trait."

"And what is that?" asked Bricriu, fuming to cover his fright.

"They're deaf, every one of them. You can work your acid tongue all you like, rail at them, promise them the moon, but you won't have the slightest effect upon them. When we sit down to our feast, they're to see that you sit at yours some place else."

"You don't trust me."

"*Nobody* trusts you."

"All right," Bricriu answered, pretending defeat. "At least let me show you how resplendently I've arranged things. Perhaps you'll change your mind then."

"I shouldn't make plans on that contingency if I were you, but by all means lead on."

The interior of the house lived up to Bricriu's claim. The boards gleamed. The balcony wall, inlaid with cracked gems of every sort, flashed at them as they entered. The floor had been smoothed and overlaid with more polished wood. Clean straw lay on top of this, the feast on top of the straw. Small ankle-high seats designated the places for the guests. Two crescent rows of these seats enclosed the long, raised board on which food was laid out. Bowls of nuts, huge loaves of bread beside enameled cups of honey; piles of fresh apples and cheese; dishes of raspberries; rowans and cherries; and, everywhere, huge slabs of meat—herb-seasoned charcoaled pork, boiled beef, and one whole honey-basted pig in the center of it all. The curved walls seemed to bow outward from the richness of the feast. At the far end of the hall, short wooden posts wrapped in sheets of bronze supported the loft with its carbunched panels.

"You'll stay up there," Conchovor told Bricriu, "with your wife. That way, without interfering, you can see that all goes well."

"All right. But what do you think of it?"

"You've built a beautiful hall and all of Ulster will know of it. There's none finer anywhere."

"Yes, I know," Bricriu replied conceitedly. "You'll find nothing of that crumbling farmhouse that used to stand here—even the stable's gone. I put my cooking house where it used to be, right where we found your sister and her child. That all turned out pretty well, didn't it?"

"No thanks to you, however. How simple-minded do you think I am, Bricriu?" He nodded to the deaf guards. They came forward and escorted The Bitter Tongue and his wife up the ladder to their balcony. At the top, ahead of the others, Bricriu leaned over the sparkling rail and called down, "Oh, and Conchovor, the Champion's Portion is the shoulder in my house, and it goes to the best man in Ulster!"

"Shut up!" shouted Conchovor. He gestured sharply to the guards. Eight daggers suddenly circled Bricriu's throat. The Bitter Tongue raised his hands in a gesture of capitulation. He withdrew from the rail and sat down beside his wife on the woven mats she had laid out for their private feast. The pile of food between them mirrored the grand feast below in miniature. His wife leaned to him and whispered, "Someday you must tell me how you knew we would be put up here."

Below, Conchovor took his seat in the center of the two curved rows of cushions. The other warriors present began to pick their places around him, but some of them held back. Sedlang, the charioteer for Laegaire, went forward and stood before Conchovor. "The shoulder should go to

Laegaire of the Red Hand, who's got the keenest eye of everyone here. He's the best man in Ulster."

"Very funny," said his brother, Id, who shoved him aside. "When you ask anyone here, they'll tell you that Conall Cernach's got the finest collection of heads in the district."

Conchovor tugged at his nose. "Well? What of it? Is he planning to add mine to it?"

Laeg mac Rianganabra jumped over two seated warriors and pushed his brother aside. "This is preposterous—to even debate such a thing when the Hound of Ulster's present; who defended us from—begging Sencha's pardon—Connacht's evil monarchs."

"So what?" bickered Sedlang.

"What's he done lately?" demanded Id.

Laeg observed them scornfully. "Here I was, so gladdened to see you both again and now it's just like when we were children. You little puppies, always ganging up on your younger brother."

"You aren't the youngest—I am," Sedlang yelled. "You see how sneaky my brother is?" he told Conchovor. "That's why Id and I always went against him, because he was so sneaky."

"Thank you eternally for enlightening me on your childhood woes. I'm sure we all think it's pertinent." The warriors chuckled at the brothers. "However, it doesn't answer the question of who's to have the Champion's Portion."

Cú Chulainn said, "For all it's worth, Bricriu wanted me to have it."

"What a lie—he offered it to me," objected Laegaire, his yellow eyes flashing like suns.

Conall said softly, "He gave me that honor." The three warriors eyed each other suspiciously. Conall grabbed Cú Chulainn and threw him against the wall. It was a wrestler's move—a false combat—but it was done in anger. Cú Chulainn dove low and, supporting his body on his arms, swung his legs into Conall's ankles. Conall fell backwards into some of the seated warriors. They launched him back onto his feet and began to urge on the combatants. Laegaire, meanwhile, grabbed Cú Chulainn by the hair and yanked him to his feet. Conall crashed into powerful Laegaire and they both fell atop Cú Chulainn.

"You're not helping," Laegaire muttered at Conall.

"Who said I cared to?" he replied as he rolled off. The others started clapping out a beat to excite them. Conall got up just as Cú Chulainn caught Laegaire with both feet, lifted him up and hurled him through the air. Conall dropped flat and Laegaire sailed over him, over the seated men, but not over the feast. The Red Hand crashed down into a large bowl full of raspberries. Purple juice sprayed out from under him like an ocean wave. Standing in the midst of the combat, the three charioteers took most of it. Seeds, skins and stain dripped from their arms, their faces, and their tunics.

Conchovor, virtually unblemished, leaned around their legs and said, "Thank you for shielding me, charioteers. And now, if we could stop the match while there's still some food to eat? You three—you six—aren't going to settle this thing short of murder."

"B-but who *ge-g-g-wins* the sh-shoulder?" asked Cuscraid.

"I'll leave it to our guest. What should I do, Sencha?"

The boy thought hard, his dark face reflecting something of his father's sternness. "If it can't be decided, you should split the shoulder up between all twelve of us."

"A good idea. We'll do that, if our host doesn't mind that none of his 'Champions' have their way." No reply came from the loft. The guards gestured down to him, and he assumed that Bricriu was refusing to say anything, which he took as a satisfactory answer. The three warriors and their stained charioteers took their places at the front. Cuscraid, beside Laegaire, said, "You look like a P-P-Pict!" Laegaire glowered, but then looked at himself and began to laugh, as everyone around him did. They might have found less reason for amusement had they known that Bricriu's silence was due to his absence. At the moment when Laegaire had hit the raspberries, Bricriu had slipped out of the wide loft window and even now was putting his second outrage into effect.

3. The Battle For Beauty

While the feasters carved the pig and tore the bread and filled their cups many times over, Bricriu hastened back to Emain Macha. He first sought out Fedelm, called Fedelm of the Fresh Heart, who was married to Laegaire Buadach. He found her inside Craebruad, weaving on an ash loom. Two notched uprights braced the three horizontal branches of the loom, and yellow wool yarn hung from the top of these, wrapped around the lower two and, in gathered strands, was weighted at the bottom by six rocks. As she wove a bright orange thread through the vertical strands, Fedelm stood with her back to the door. She had lime-washed hair the color of wheat braided to the center of her back, and the sun had tanned her skin a rich golden brown. She turned at the scuffle of Bricriu's approach. Her brows creased when she saw him.

"Aren't you throwing a feast today?" she asked. "I thought it had begun by now."

"Oh, it has, make no mistake. But I noticed that none of the women warriors of Ulster attended and thought this a shame."

"I will come," said Fedelm, "but I wanted to work on this tunic while I had light."

“Certainly... but, you see, what I haven’t told you is that this feast hall... well, you know it’s built on a magical site.”

“I really hadn’t paid any heed—”

“That’s just it! You see, the first woman to cross the threshold of that feast hall will become regarded as the most beautiful in Eriu.”

Fedelm paused in her work. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. The most beautiful. Lugh, you know, stole Deichtire away to that place the time he wanted to sire Cú Chulainn, who was born there, and you know how *he* turned out.”

“He’s very beautiful, that’s true.”

“Well, there it is.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Still, you come when your work’s done. A woman as lovely as you needn’t worry over an extra glow of color in her cheek or flame to her hair or shine on her lips. No, no—such vanity’s of no matter to you, and that’s how it ought to be.” He gestured her back to her work, then quickly left the room.

He continued through the fortress at a leisurely pace, but his thoughts careered, his eyes flicked in every direction, scanning faces for the two others he sought. He encountered Lendabair, wife to Conall Cernach, in a room near the center. She was applying ruam to her cheeks, a red crescent on each side of her face. She had dark hair and an outwardly hard appearance from the life she and Conall led on their island near the coast, but she gave Bricriu an easy smile and her voice was rich and warm. “I’m preparing for your feast.”

“Oh, that’s good, that’s important. The sooner you’re off, the better,” and then he told her the same fabrication he had handed Fedelm. Afterwards, he left her in rapt contemplation and went in search of his last victim, Emer. He failed to find her anywhere in the fortress. Anxiously, he asked people in the halls if they had seen her, fearful that he would find her too late or not at all. Could she have set off for his feast already? If he missed her, the mischief would be for nothing.

Finally, a slave who was weaving grass mats informed him that Emer was with some horses on the plain below. Bricriu scuttled frantically through the cramped halls, shoving people aside. He raced out and down the hill, leaping over casks, around wagons, through the midst of a gang of screaming children who pursued him briefly. Outside the walls, he scanned the plain, squinting toward each of the huts that were used as stables. He saw the red flash of her hair in the sunlight and set off toward her.

Emer closed the poles across the pen containing the Gray and the Black. She sensed the approach of Bricriu, but was still surprised when she identified him. “What are you doing here, Foul Mouth?”

“Really. Such ingratitude when I’ve come all this way to tell you to hurry along to my feast. I have to get back, myself, so listen now. You know that your husband was born on that site.”

“Of course.”

“Well, Lugh’s magic still hangs upon the place and I thought you ought to know that the first woman to cross the threshold of the hall will become the most beautiful in all of Ulster, maybe all Eriu.”

Emer looked up at him doubtfully. “I’m to trust you on this subject? You of all people? Besides which, by your tale’s logic, your wife already has this prize.”

“And wait till you see how she’s changed! But the magic—the magic’s still there.”

Emer shook her head. “I know a riddle when I hear one, and you’re not offering enough clues.”

“No? Consider, then, how the same magic that made your husband could draw the two of you closer if you had it in you, too.”

“I have it in me frequently, and we couldn’t be closer than that without ending up back to back,” she replied archly.

Bricriu smiled in resignation and held up his hands. “See? How could I ever think to out-riddle you? Of course when making *love* you’re part of his magic. Of course. But think of it—perpetual beauty, and a bond with Cú Chulainn through Lugh Lamfada. You just think on it, that’s all I’m suggesting. Now, I really must hurry back before I miss all the fun,” in which rare instance Bricriu spoke the absolute truth.

A shower chased him from Emain Macha, soaking his path and his vehicle, but he laughed and spat away the rain.

The way to Bricriu’s house was not very well defined. The place had first been discovered by Conchovor and his warriors in pursuit of a flock of white birds that turned out to be a transformed Deichtire and her wedding maidens. No direct route had ever been established after that, either, because nobody went out of their way to go and visit Bricriu. When Fedelm, Lendabair and Emer set off individually for the feast, they did not follow the same path and did not encounter one another until they were just three ridges from the hall and could see the smoke from the cooking house rising up into a steely sky.

Emer and Lendabair met at the crest of the ridge. “How did you come here?” Lendabair asked. “I didn’t see you.”

“I went across the foothills of the Fews, then up to here.”

“And I stayed to the lowlands north of you. You’ve come much further. Why don’t you rest a bit, Emer. I’ll tell them you’re coming.”

“I think I shall walk along with you,” Emer countered, “for the company, of course.”

“Of course,” agreed Lendabair.

They were about to depart when someone called from the valley behind them. The skirt of her tunic flying, Fedelm came hurrying up to the top of the ridge. “What a surprise,” she said. “I didn’t expect to find anyone else going to the feast at just this time.”

“Nor I,” the other two women replied in unison.

“Surprising coincidence. Shall we go along together?”

“Naturally,” Lendabair said dryly.

“I hope the door’s very wide,” was Emer’s cryptic remark.

The three women set off, side by side, pretending to eye the chimneys of smoke but really watching each other. Over the first ridge they remained abreast, no one gaining over the others. Then, as they went down the hillside, Fedelm picked up her pace and gained briefly. The other two pulled up beside her; they glared at each other, then Lendabair edged in front of her companions. Emer and Fedelm quickened their pace and caught Conall’s dark wife at the top of the next ridge. Now only one rise separated the women from the house of Bricriu, and for a second they glimpsed the splendid hall before the ridge eclipsed it.

As if a signal had been given, the three wives broke into a full, unhindered race. Their feet tore the sod from the ground. They leaped boulders, sprang over the tiny stream at the base of the ridge and bounded up the hill. They held their skirts up high to their waists. Their legs pumped hard, six swift kicking blurs. The ground shook beneath them as if a full-laden four-wheeled chariot, and not three women, cut the ground toward Bricriu’s.

In the hall, the beer began to slosh in the cups. Hazelnuts rattled in the bowls and a container of leeks began to inch across the table. The rumble of the racers grew by the moment.

“We’re under attack! It must be an army,” cried Bricriu from his balcony.

Sencha jumped up first. Perhaps he thought his father might have invaded Ulster a second time, with the intention of rescuing him. For an instant, as he stared beyond the doorway, nothing appeared to explain this strange tremor. Then Sencha saw the three figures shoot over the distant rise—three bright, skimming creatures that cut the distance every second. “Look,” he cried. Others had already gathered around him in the doorway, but now everyone present pressed forward.

The three husbands stared, mouths agape.

“Lendabair.”

“Fedelm.”

“Emer?” They looked at one another and shrugged, dumbfounded.

On his balcony, at his window, Bricriu cackled and jumped up and down. Conchovor caught sight of this and said, “Bar the door.” The three husbands turned to him, and Bricriu leaned over the jewel-studded balcony, barely able to contain his excitement. “Bar it,” the king reiterated, “before they burst upon us. Hurry.” His son, Cuscraid, and Brig Brethach shut the narrow door, then lifted an oak post and braced it against the door.

The stampede surged closer. Water splashed out of the cooking pots—dangerous, scalding water. Beer poured down the boards. Blai Bruga, getting up, lost his balance for an instant but regained it before he sprawled

across the table. He gave Brig an uneasy glance and chose to settle back down.

The thunder ended abruptly to be replaced by equally thunderous hammering on the door. "Let us in!" the women cried. "Let me in first, though," they each added in turn.

"What is going on here?" demanded Conchovor.

"What? We'll tell you what. It's the magic of the threshold." "Lugh's magic." "Only one of us can possess the gift."

Conchovor pulled at the forked ends of his beard. "And so you raced—who won?"

"I did," said Emer.

"You reached the door first, but you're not in," argued the other two. They began to shout their arguments.

Conchovor took his silver cooking fork and rapped it against one of the bronze pillars. The harsh clang made everyone wince. The women fell silent. "Now," he said, "if there's magic to be gotten here—" he glanced up at Bricriu "—which I very much doubt, then there must be a contest to select the victor."

"Don't give them swords!" cried Laegaire. "They'll shred the landscape and slaughter each other."

"Of course, of course. I'm not suggesting that at all. I propose a contest of words. Let each of you give me just reason why you should be selected over the others. Fedelm may begin, I think."

An uncomfortable silence reigned, the feasters unsure of what they were about to hear, or what they wanted to hear. Then Fedelm said, "My mother equaled my father in every talent, and certainly had more shape to her. She was noble, courageous, as fierce as any warrior anywhere. I have her courage, her nobility and her shape; and my husband Laegaire's crimson hand has applied its skills at every boundary in Ulster to hold back invaders." She said no more and those inside heard her walk away.

"Lendabair, are you able to counter this?" Conchovor asked.

"Easily. Fedelm praises herself through her family. Well, shape is fine and I have mine, too, but if there's anything runs in my veins it's sense. I have the sense to see rightly any problem's solution. Conall can confirm this. He's defended every ford in Ulster, and his goodness has always tempered his pride. More than that needs no mention because, as the son of Amargin, his traits are as well known as the color of the sky." Her footsteps moved away from the door.

"Emer," Conchovor called.

"Who here can name anyone that can equal the kindness I've shown all, even enemies? All of us are beautiful and there's no point in wading deeper where those streams meet. I've only the love and joy I bring with me to offer as my skills. You all know well that if I were a light woman, there would be no man in there whom I did not possess."

Celtchar glowered surreptitiously at his own wife.

“That is not me, however,” Emer said. “I have weight, substance, and my devotion to Cú Chulainn binds me to him over all others. As for my Hound, his feats are too well known to need recounting. You have only to ask Sencha why he’s feasting with you and the deeds of Cú Chulainn will be passed around with the meat.”

They heard her walk away. Conchovor frowned. “I can’t decide this. I need a *brithem* Druid—Morann. The attributes run too close together. Maybe I should give them swords after all.” He threw up his hands. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I do,” said Conall and he wedged his dagger in between two planks in the wall and began prying them loose.

“No, you don’t,” Laegaire shouted, and he stabbed his sword between two others on the opposite side of the door. “I’ll make a hole first.”

Bricriu yelled down, “Stop this. My house, my beautiful house, you’re ruining it!” He tried to climb over the rail, but his guards dragged him back.

Laegaire ripped one board out of the wall. A horizontal swatch of light cut a beam across the room.

Cú Chulainn’s chin jutted out as he watched them, until the bone looked like it would tear through the taut skin. He strode around the long, low table to the rear of the curved hall. His eyes narrowed grimly as he studied that wall. When he found the point that he sought, he backed up against the wood and crouched down. His fingers dug into the space between floor and wall, down into hard-packed dirt.

The whole house groaned and squealed; wood ground against wood. Light bathed the feasters as they turned toward the source of the noise to find the hero Cú Chulainn holding up that part of the wall, tipping the entire building. At first he could only lift it a few inches, but with a sharp jerk he brought it up to his waist. Beams fell from the ceiling. Brass on the pillars folded or popped at the joints. Bricriu cried out and a few of those in attendance glimpsed him as he slid across his balcony, scrabbling in vain for a handhold, and flipped out of his wide window. His deaf guards clung to the railing and impassively watched him disappear. Below, Emer came running to the rear of the house. She dropped down and rolled beneath the wall, then got to her feet beside her husband. Seeing her safely inside, he simply let go of the wall. It crashed down, crushing part of the floor as it sank. Bricriu’s wife, at the window where her husband had fallen, lost her balance and spilled out after him.

The brace at the front door bounced out of its slot, but Cuscraid caught it. The door swung back, and bright daylight split the hall. It fell upon Emer and Cú Chulainn. His short arms were knotted with twists of muscle, which revealed that he had come very close to being overtaken by the Warp Spasm, to becoming a monster in their midst.

“Fiends!” came a shout from outside. The group turned again, this time to see two filthy, mud and dung-covered figures propped against each

other just beyond the door. “Villains!” the taller of the figures squealed, and from the sound of his voice alone the warriors realized all at once that he was Bricriu.

Cuscraid began to laugh, then the berry-stained drivers, and finally the whole hall—laughing at the stinking scarecrows that Bricriu and his wife had become.

“What did you do,” asked Conall, “land in your dog pit?”

“This is a very fine hall. I don’t think I can let you in,” said Laegaire. He noticed more women from Emain Macha on the distant ridge, coming to the feast.

The eight deaf guards climbed down from the tilted balcony to see what had captured everyone’s attention. When they looked out upon Bricriu, they added their laughter to everyone else’s, their voices high and uneven. Amongst themselves, they gestured and ‘spoke’ with their hands, and that was more than Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue could stand.

He pushed through the narrow door, shoving Fedelm and Lendabair out of the way. The crowd drew back from his foulness. He climbed up onto the table, dripping turds into the fruit. “Look at it! Ruined! There’ll be no feasting in my poor house again until you despoilers have repaired the damage you’ve done.”

“It’s greed caused it,” Cú Chulainn said wearily. “Greed and envy over this magic of Lugh’s.”

“There isn’t any magic—I invented it!” he bellowed before he could stop himself.

“I can see that just by looking at your wife,” said Emer.

“And so your tongue lives up to its name again,” Conchovor said. “The damage is yours, then, not ours—get off our food!” Bricriu jumped from the table, flinging off more dirt and offal. Conchovor, using his long meat fork, prodded the Bitter Tongue back out beside his wife. “We may repair this hall, but if so, it will be because we prefer to eat in clean surroundings and not because we feel responsible for its sad state.” As he finished speaking, he heard the house groan again. Cú Chulainn crouched at the rear of the hall. The Hero Light glowed around his head, causing his hair to twist into spikes. Sparks danced at the tips. He growled low in his throat, then suddenly yanked the wall up into the air again. Delicately this time, he lowered it to the ground. He said, “There, it’s done,” his voice become raw, bubbling like a vat. His arms rippled under the Spasm’s effect. Slowly, the glow faded from his uncurling hair and he sank down from the effort of containing the monster within.

Amargin’s wife, Findchoem, appeared at the door, and with her, Devorgill, who was married to Lugaid, the king of Munster. They gave the filthy figures of their hosts a wide berth on entering the hall. Soon enough, they heard the events of the feast related and began the argument of the champion anew, but Sencha charged the group with his jaw set.

“Shut up, the lot of you. The word-battle’s done, the point decided, and all you’re capable of is goading the three into murder over nothing.”

“But Cú Chulainn’s plainly Ulster’s champion,” Emer argued. “It isn’t fair that you humiliate him after all he’s done for you.”

“All right,” said Conall, “if he does surpass us all, then have him get up and do some better deed.”

Emer turned to her husband, knelt and took his hand. The skin burned from the fire of anger that had worn him out—he was like a great, glowing cinder.

“No,” he told her. “I won’t do any more. Today I’ve fought and colared two horses of impossible beauty, and this argument’s pointless, futile. I stood off all Eriu while the rest of you cringed from Macha’s Curse. That may have been the greatest time of my life; if so, then nothing after that matters, anyway. A trick for Conall’s wounded pride would shame us both.” Emer started to speak, but he said again, “No, I won’t do it.” He stared morosely at the ground. His dejection hurt Emer far more than his words. His face seemed empty, as if great age had settled over him, robbing him of his quick mind and his strength. The sight scared Emer, the sudden change in a man who could have no secrets from her.

4. The Lover’s Quarrel

The feast began again slowly after that; but drinking and eating in the best company rekindles spirits, and the revelry returned, charged by new arrivals who brought with them fresh humor. The celebration lasted for three days.

On that last day of feasting, Conchovor sent to Craebruad for his own fidchell board, one crafted by Druids, inlaid with ivory. They called the board Cendchaem, which meant “smooth head,” and the king often wondered if the board had some supernatural properties of divining. While it was being delivered—the Druid Cathbad brought it—Conchovor coerced his nephew into playing against him. The board was set up on a squat log. Cú Chulainn sat cross-legged before it, but his thoughts could not hold onto the contest and his moves took a long time. Conchovor endured this apparent bleakness, joking with him as if they were both in high spirits, as they had been many times before while playing.

Blai Briuga sat to the side, intently watching their play—at least, so he pretended. That position allowed him to be beside Brig, his mistress, and to reach under her tunic and fondle her thigh, unnoticed. Both of them believed Celtchar had drunk himself unconscious and would never know. But from where he lay on a mat against one of the crumpled pillars, Celtchar looked on through slitted eyes. His thoughts climbed from displeasure to resentment and finally to murder. So slowly that no one could see any

purpose in it, he crawled his hand across the mat till it touched the butt of his spear. With two fingers, he drew the spear towards himself, walking his hand toward the tip an inch at a time.

The crowd gathered at the table, in front of him, and for a time the fidchell game disappeared entirely from view. Then, with the dusky light of the late afternoon sun pouring in through the open door, bathing Blai Briuga in its rays, one group of the feasters moved away from the table. Celtchar snatched up the spear and shot it through that opening.

Blai Briuga suddenly arched his chest. His hands went out as if to grab at the playing board. Brig stared in mute horror at the spear projecting from his back. She could not yet fathom how or why. Blai Briuga made crackling noises in his throat. His mouth, stretched wide, shot out drops of blood, which spattered on the playing board. Then he simply slumped forward, the spear rising like a dolmen stone behind him.

The drops of blood had halted the game between uncle and nephew. They saw their comrade go limp. Hardly anyone else in the room had noticed his death as yet, Celtchar had been so swift. Some of them saw Celtchar get up and cross the room. He radiated death, and those near his passing stopped their conversations and followed him with their gazes—to find Blai Briuga dead. The din in the feast hall fell away all at once.

“Find me a Druid,” Conchovor hissed, but his father, Cathbad, was already pushing through the crowd. The bearded priest took stock of the look Celtchar threw down upon his wife and of the shame that it cast upon her.

“Just cause, provocation because of your wound,” Cathbad said. “Perhaps, perhaps. But not just in place and time. Your bad blood blocked your awareness of where you are, Celtchar. You’ve violated the honor of the hall, and of hospitality in our province. It can’t go unpunished.” He went around the body in search of a sign for the appropriate penalty. Then he saw the drops of blood that had alerted the king to the crime. The drops lay upon Cú Chulainn’s pieces, on his side of the board. The Druid grimaced at this ominous occurrence. His mind raced for a way to erase it.

“Cú Chulainn,” he said, “you must assign him his fate. The blood’s on your side... and against your honor goes the offense thereby.”

Cú Chulainn got up. “I’ll have to think on it. My mind’s as weary as my body. Give me time.”

The Druid nodded.

No one ate or drank while the Hound left them and wandered outside in the dusk. He had strong ties to this particular spot. His life had begun here, and that made his decision no easier.

No one spoke to Celtchar or Brig; they all knew that he would suffer and that she was the cause. But most of them found it easy to imagine themselves caught in the same snare of deceit and reprisal; they could see themselves awaiting judgment, for the men could all have been him, and the women could easily have been her.

When Cú Chulainn entered the hall again, he seemed smaller than ever. The light of his beauty did not shine now. He went between Celtchar and Brig. “You must endure three quests,” he proclaimed. “Rid us of three scourges. First, destroy Conganches mac Dedad, who belongs to no *tuath* and steals and kills and eats our people, whom no spear or sword can harm. Next, eliminate his daughter, Niam, so that his line ends. And last, slay his infernal hound that drinks the blood of our dead. Only then will honor return to you.”

Celtchar bowed his head to show that he accepted judgment. Then he wrenched free his spear from the corpse. Blai Briuga fell over into Brig’s lap. His half-lidded eyes stared up at her as if in rapture from a kiss.

Celtchar left them and went off alone. Brig began to tremble. On the balcony the stinking foul face of Bricriu was split into a wide, cruel grin. He didn’t mind at all that his feast had come to an end.

INTERLUDE THREE



Torpeist claims this is all that is said about Bricriu. He may have rebuilt his balcony or not, no one knows. No trace of the astonishing feast hall remains any more, says Torpeist. It was all of wood, long gone. “I really don’t care about so evil a man,” I told him.

“Of course not,” he said, “but that isn’t the point of the tale. The point is what Cú Chulainn has begun to think of himself. The point is the fear that grows sometime in every heart, the fear that we may have performed our life’s work early and now have nothing to look toward but a bleak horizon without any hills or streams, nothing but a steady, gradual slope down to the valley of death. Comes a time,” he said, “when you’ll look back, Fergil, and wonder if you’ve done your best work and lost the magic to do it again.”

That bothered me greatly, Lord. He said it so plainly, as if it were a certainty, without any bragging. This look came over him as if he were staring at that very wretched day unfolding in front of him. He is an old man and not a believer, Lord. His knowledge comes from the old ways, the dark ways, and they terrify me. I must do penance for having listened to what might well be knowledge gained through arcane practices.

Before he left, I did ask Torpeist about the hero, Celtchar—what happened to him and his wife after this wretched feast. The old Poet answered as I now set down:

Celtchar had three things to do. First he set about wooing Niam. Her name means “Heaven.” He convinced her to lie with her father in order to discover the fiend’s weakness while he was sexually excited and confused. Niam, who was as beautiful as the night sky, did couple with her father. She must have found this repulsive—Conganches had scaly, hard skin full of seeping cracks, and pink eyes like a rabbit, and his fingers were thistled, stinging. But Niam was strong. She asked him about his secret, at the same time keeping him at the point where he was about to ejaculate and

had no defense against her casuistry. He told her everything in his lust to be satisfied.

The next day, she went to her lover and gave him the secret, and from the knowledge of it, Celtchar devised a simple plan. He had Niam tell Conganches that an Ulsterman had taken shelter in the forest—a true statement, since the Ulsterman was Celtchar himself. Conganches' face turned molten red, and yellow fluid spilled from the rents in his skin. He beat on the walls of his house, then charged out with a spear that he thrust ahead as he ran, hot to kill any Ulster intruders. In the woods he smelled a fire and followed the scent, just as Celtchar had known he would. Celtchar had a spancel hoop hidden in the brush, one that he could cinch by tugging on a rope. The rope ran up over a tree branch and down to where Celtchar hid. When Conganches stepped in, Celtchar yanked the rope with all his might. The spancel hoop spun up Conganches' body, constricted as it slid over him, and finally caught tightly at his elbows and around his chest. Then Celtchar hauled for all the world to pull the huge ogre off his feet. He raced around the tree to secure Conganches even tighter, like a spider binding a fly. The fiend kicked and struggled and spewed his threats, mostly promises of maiming and torture. He still thought himself invincible. Celtchar went to the fire, took a pair of tongs, and drew from the flames a long red-hot nail. Seeing that glowing spike, Conganches stopped struggling. He realized that the warrior had discovered his single infirmity. As Celtchar picked up a mallet, Conganches began to spit new curses, this time at his daughter. Niam would be damned, he promised, Niam would wilt like crushed grass under the weight of his curse. Ignoring the venomous ravings, Celtchar bent down and methodically hammered the first red nail through the sole of Conganches' left foot. The curses turned to howls with each strike of the mallet. Blood hissed and smoked as it ran down the shaft of the nail.

When Celtchar stood, he found Conganches staring at him. The fiend's head trembled on stiff, swollen neck muscles. His teeth creaked, grinding together. "For every one of my countrymen you've slain and devoured," Celtchar told him, "I'm going to drive one nail into your feet, until there's not enough sole exposed to touch with my littlest finger." Conganches fought his bonds again as Celtchar returned to the fire. He tore his leathery hide against the rope and the sapling hoop, jabbing himself full of splinters. He cried out for his blood-drinking hound to rescue him, but Niam had chained the dark beast and it could not come. In the end, Celtchar pounded twenty-seven nails into Conganches before the ghoulish creature expired.

The second part of the quest, Celtchar could not perform: he could not take Niam's life. She had not simply helped him; she had sacrificed greatly of her own honor to help him. He thought about this and recalled that Cú Chulainn had only said "eliminate" her, so he chose to interpret this freely. If he sent her away from Eriu, Celtchar reasoned, then she

would be “eliminated” from troubling Ulster again. And, when he had settled matters with his wicked wife, he would sail after her. He told her this and they lay together to seal their bond. This would seem to indicate that Celtchar’s “wound” existed more in his mind than in his body; the wound Ket had given him could not be the cause of his trouble. Some other matter had driven his wife away from him, but that matter is not known. Celtchar left Niam sleeping and set off to perform the third portion of his task.

The blood-drinking hound of Conganches had two huge fangs that curved beneath its black rubbery muzzle. Its eyes were steely and hateful. It smelled Celtchar, knowing the smell to be that of an Ulsterman. It might even have understood what he had performed thus far and what he intended. The dog tugged frantically at its chain to get free and suck the life from him. He gave the monster a wide berth and took Conganches’ long spear—the one used to slay so many of his countrymen—and approached the frothing beast. It snarled and snapped at him. With both hands he gripped the spear and drove it down through the dog’s back. The monstrous hound twisted and suddenly its back legs collapsed. It tried in vain to bite the spear, but Celtchar drew it out, then pierced the dog through the throat. He worked the spear around until he managed to stab into the dog’s brain. The animal went slack, and its tongue protruded between its yellow fangs. Celtchar prodded it to ensure that it was dead.

He unlatched the iron collar and hoisted the huge corpse up into the air above him. It hung from the spear point like a windless banner. He marched proudly back to show his prize to Niam.

She came out of her father’s house at his call, but upon seeing him she ran toward him, gesturing frantically, yelling in obvious terror. Celtchar could not understand this. She was gesturing at the dog. He looked up, expecting to see the animal somehow re-animated, but it hung as before, dead, its blood trickling down the spear shaft, over his hands, proof of his work. The first drop off his knuckles splattered on his forehead, just above his eyes. Furious pain followed almost instantly. Poison in the blood burned through skin and bone and right to his brain. He spun in a frantic circle, waving the dog around, sprinkling himself with more of its blood. The poison fire burned more fiercely every second, dozens of drops worming into his brain, until Celtchar went suddenly stiff and the spear dropped from his hands.

By the time Niam reached him, he had petrified like wood. She laid him on the ground and cried over him. He had rescued her from her father, he had loved her, and he would have taken her to another, better life. Now nothing remained of her future at all. Her father had succeeded in crushing her spirit, just as he had sworn to do.

She had promised Celtchar to leave Eriu, and she kept that promise, but first she sent word of his death to Emain Macha, where they feasted in

his honor on the meat of hounds—all except Cú Chulainn, whose *geis* forbade him to eat the flesh of a dog without the direst of consequences.

That is what happened to Celtchar, according to Torpeist. He claims to have seen the petrified corpse himself, up in the north. I asked how it could still be there when Bricriu's famous hall can't be located anywhere, and he gave me that quizzical look and said, "Boy, I didn't say I saw it *recently*." Of course, I had forgotten his preposterous claim to have lived twice—once during the time of these tales, and now. Who can believe this? That he's seven, perhaps eight hundred years old? I pointed this out. He said, "No, Fergil, don't be obtuse. I was there while in this lifetime. I'm no more holy than—well, than you are." At that particular blasphemy, I threw down my stylus and walked out on him. I was so angry I could not speak, leaving him alone in my *lochán*. I went to St. Molaise's house and prayed in the oratory for a long time. Later, it was my time to maintain the fire in the church, and I tended it in silence until *compline*. It came to me during this period of meditation that I should have more patience with the man, if only because I cannot go to the Abbot and say that I will not work with Senchan Torpeist. It is my duty to the monastery. The requests of the Abbot are the tests of you, Lord. If this a baptism, I will endure it. And so, *Or dó Senchan*: A prayer for the Poet. But God grant, please, that the next tales be less absurd.

III.

THE QUEST FOR THE SONS OF DOEL DERMAIT



1. The Fear Dearg's Revenge

Two bronze and copper chariots skimmed across the snowy landscape of southern Connacht, heading northwest for the coast. In one of these, the King of Munster, Lugaid Allchomaig mac Nois, who had recently become High King of Eriu, drove alone, his red hair streaming behind him like wings. In the chariot that raced him for the first glimpse of the sea, stood Laeg mac Rianganabra and Cú Chulainn, the Hound. Like two men made of snow, in white cloaks and furs, they stood side by side between the rails of their chariot, their teeth bared in hot excitement.

Lugaid snapped the rein and barked at his team, but the two impressive steeds leading Cú Chulainn's chariot were not about to give any ground, and the best he could manage was to hang beside his Ulster friends.

The race had begun just this side of the Sinann, a feat of sheer joy, of pleasure in being alive. Cú Chulainn and Laeg had come to Munster to help celebrate Lugaid's ascension to supreme kingship. This hallowed event had occurred at Uisneach, where the Druids met once each year for the *oenach*: to hear grievances undecided within the provinces, to judge with finality. And, in years such as this one, to endure a group *tarbfeis*, a Bull Dream, brought on by the drinking of a magical bull's blood. The Dream guided them to select a king from among the provinces whose word was to be final, terminating all appeals, protestations, and grievances. Upon hearing of Lugaid's good fortune, Laeg had come up with the idea of a celebration to take Cú Chulainn out of Ulster and away from his doubts about his paramount skills. What he needed, Laeg believed, was action.

On the journey to Munster they had spoken of many cheerful things, but the shadow over Cú Chulainn had not lifted entirely. At one point,

after a long pause, he had leaned up near Laeg in the chariot car and asked, “Laeg, do you know the tale of Baile’s Strand? How it got its name?” Laeg did not, though he had lived awhile in Cú Chulainn’s fortress at Dun Dealgún above that strand. “Then let me tell you of it,” the Hound said, and he wedged in beside Laeg, sharing the cold wind with the charioteer, sharing his cup of warm wine, too.

“Baile was a man, a warrior of the *tuath* of Rudraige. They had not much land, but their people were potential heirs to Ulster. They hoped that Baile would be king one day. They called him Baile the Honey-Mouthed—much like Ailell’s byname, yes? Gives you an idea of how well loved he was. But of everyone, the daughter of the king of Leinster, a girl named Aillinn, loved him the most.

“As part of their courtship, the two lovers arranged a secret meeting, a rendezvous—Ulster and Leinster being not then on the best of terms. They set a time and selected a place—the spit of land below Dun Dealgún. But Baile couldn’t wait, he had so much love for Aillinn, and he arrived there early, with an accompanying party that set up tents and caught fish for the coming feast.

“While they were waiting, from over the hill above them, a wild old man appeared. He raced like the wind, zig-zagging from tree to stone to bush in gusts of speed. Baile sent a messenger to intercept the old man, but before he had taken ten steps the old man zipped right up beside him. ‘Who are you?’ the messenger asked, ‘and why do you rush so?’

“The old man, who was as red as blood, even his eyes, trembled fiercely—like you are from the cold, Laeg; have some of this drink. The old man said, ‘It’s grief that drives me to frenzy. Grief over the terrible thing I’ve seen.’ The messenger insisted he elaborate. ‘A girl of Leinster was on her way north to meet her lover when some young men of Leinster set upon her. They preferred that she marry within her province, and one of *them* in particular. They intended to force matrimony upon her. The girl struggled but they gripped her tightly, dragging her back with them, making sport of it. For her it was the same as if they assaulted her. She went mad from their cruelty and her heart broke and she died there at their hands.’ The messenger grabbed the old man. ‘Tell me her name, what was her name?’ he cried. The old red man wheezed and replied, ‘Aillinn, daughter of King Lugaid.’

“The messenger turned away from the terrible news but the old man spoke some more. ‘A Druid arrived at the scene, thinking he was to oversee a marriage. When he learned the truth, for the young men couldn’t hide their shame, he proclaimed that she and her lover were never meant to meet on this side of the grave. Only in death would they be happy, and then forever.’ ‘Is this true?’ the messenger demanded. He received no reply and, turning, he found that the old man had gone.

“When he returned to Baile, the messenger had no alternative but to share this awful story. Baile grew more agitated with every word leading

to the inevitable climax. His face paled as white as the face in the moon. When the messenger finally named Aillinn, Baile gasped and clutched at his chest—or so goes one account. The other says that he stuck a dagger into his heart. The result was the same, that his heart burst and he died.”

They rolled on across the icy landscape. “And that’s it?” asked the incredulous charioteer.

“Oh, no. You see, the old man was the *Fear Dearg*, the Red Man of evil. In some unknown way one of the families had offended him, and he had taken the first part of a cruel vengeance. Aillinn in fact had come to no harm whatsoever. She had not even left her father’s fortress. However, as she was about to go, the *Fear Dearg* appeared to her in her *grianan*. Surprised, she demanded to know who he was. ‘A man with no good news for you,’ he said. ‘I’ve been to a strand in the north and seen a *tuath* raising a stone there, above the palisade. They chiseled on it in Ogham the words “*Baile, son of Buan, who might one day have been king, but who was not to meet his love in this life.*” Aillinn stared at him as if he had spoken in some foreign tongue. The *Fear Dearg*, his revenge complete, withdrew.

“The news of Baile’s death reached the fortress by natural means, and the king went to tell his daughter. He entered his daughter’s sunroom and found her sleeping in the light—or so he thought at first. Sadly, he went to waken her to tell her that her lover had perished. And at his touch, she tipped into his arms, dead from the clutch of her grief.

“This is still not the end of it, however. Aillinn was buried in Leinster and an apple tree grew from her tomb. Baile’s grave is not obvious to you or me, but the tale says that a yew tree grew from it, and—”

“There’s one yew tree down there above the sand!” Laeg exclaimed. “Right smack where the path to the strand descends. The entire palisade could be his tomb.”

“Perhaps. It bears his name, doesn’t it? I often wonder at the truth of that old tale when I’m sitting on the hill and staring down upon the sea.”

They had driven on, warmer for having things other than the cold to distract them; but the hot wine had helped especially.

Now, as they madly raced, they needed no wine to heat their bodies: they burned with the heat of the competition. Hills whipped past, the air stung cheeks and dragged tears from eyes. Even so hindered, Laeg did not slow the gallop. Lugaid cursed them laughingly.

The burial hill of Tetach appeared ahead to the right. Low and bleak, it recalled for Laeg the strange gray hills called the Burren to the north of here, as eerie and haunted a place of unnatural geography as could exist. Tetach had numerous megaliths upon its hump, and a scatter of small tumuli. And this afternoon it had as well a living figure in orange that stepped out from one shadowy stone tomb and then began a rapid descent towards them.

2. The Geis of Eocho Rond

The figure climbing down the hill was a woman with blonde hair wrapped into a cone atop her head. Laeg by then had slackened his hold on the rein, but Cú Chulainn did not press on for victory and neither did Lugaid. The two teams slowed to a trot as they and the woman neared an intersection. Finally, side by side, the chariots halted. The young woman came to a stop between them. Remarkably tall, she had large, sky-gray eyes and round cheeks, a full mouth. The cold had reddened her nose. A gold torc at her throat bespoke royalty. Her bracelets and rings, of gold and silver, had been skillfully worked. Calculatingly, she studied both chariots.

“Which of you is Cú Chulainn?” she asked.

“How would you know that any of us is?” asked Lugaid.

“Because,” she replied, “these carts don’t come from this province, and who else would be so audacious as to travel this deeply into Maeve’s land.”

Lugaid grinned and tugged at his mutton-chop whiskers. “The High King of Eriu would, but never mind—that’s him, over there.”

The woman circled around the back and climbed into Cú Chulainn’s chariot. She embraced and kissed him, though she had to bend down.

“Damn it,” said Lugaid. “You get elected High King and they still go for the redoubted hackers.”

“Who are you?” Laeg insisted on knowing. He trusted nothing that came out of cemeteries.

The slender woman leaned toward him. “I’m named Finnchoem, the daughter of Eocho Rond.”

Laeg shook his head to say that he had never heard the name.

“He’s king of Hy Maine, a territory this side of Cruachan.”

“I know your land,” said Lugaid, “though not your father.”

“That isn’t important. I’ve hidden in Tétach’s shadows for a day from my captors—nine men in chariots who kidnapped me from the woods of Hy Maine. They were *ecland*, but I don’t know where they wandered in from. Protect me, and carry me home, and my father’s reward will be great.”

“This Hy Maine’s alarmingly close to Maeve and Ailell’s fortress, isn’t it,” Laeg warned.

Lugaid laughed. “But what will they do with the High King of Eriu at hand? I’ve power to have Maeve plucked and set adrift in a *currach* for the sea dragons to eat if I choose. If she defied the law.”

“We’ll take you,” Cú Chulainn assured her. “However, it’s already toward dusk. We’ll go on, camp—where, Lugaid?”

“I should think Lough Rea will accommodate, but there’s a whole string of lakes and, I should think, *crannogs* between us and there. Would that be so?” he asked Finnchoem.

“It is.”

“There you are,” Lugaid said as if he had performed a great feat.

They saw the glow of fire across the lowland that runs between the two lakes, Cooley and Cutra. Not the fire of a settlement, but someone camped in the wild. At Finnchoem’s tense insistence, they approached it with care.

The trees behind the fire seemed like brown monsters looming over it. Cú Chulainn from the chariot counted the figures mingling around the warmth: nine of them.

“*Ecland*, do you think?” he asked Lugaid.

“It would seem so—I can’t imagine two groups of nine mercenaries scattered about in Connacht, in this territory. What’s the plan, then?” The Hound shrugged off his heavy fur cape.

Laeg said, “Why not enter their camp peacefully? With Finnchoem beside Lugaid in his chariot. One glance at her should express their involvement. Then we’ll make no errors and have the advantage. Can you drive, girl?”

“Not as well as you.”

“You won’t have to—just so you can work a team if need be.”

Taking his meaning, Finnchoem climbed across into Lugaid’s chariot. He drew his sword, kept it at his side. He made it plain how he would pass the rein to her. The other chariot rolled ahead. From behind it, Lugaid could see that Cú Chulainn held the Gai Bulga against the rail where he leaned on a second, upright spear.

The nine warriors stopped still and stared keenly at the chariots, at Laeg and Cú Chulainn, who watched them just as carefully—watched as the nine took in Lugaid and Finnchoem. A couple of the warriors licked their lips and shifted their glance nervously to their comrades, to see what should be done. Most angled their faces away from the light to avoid being recognized. One actually walked back from the fire. Cú Chulainn watched the ones in shadow slide their hands surreptitiously toward weapons.

In a flash, one turned, spear out to kill Lugaid or the girl. Cú Chulainn’s long spear snapped him off his feet and into another man. The Hound leapt over the Black Sanglain. Ahead of him, the short Gai Bulga snicked back and forth, and men fell. He snatched a spear from one he killed, flung it through the heads of two more. His actions took mere moments, and the battle ended before it could begin. Lugaid stood ready, his sword up to protect Finnchoem; but none of the enemy had reached his car—not one had made it past the Hound.

He took his trophies in solemn silence and retrieved his long spear. The others climbed down less hastily while he set to work tying the heads by their hair to his chariot rails.

As he tucked his sword away, Lugaid looked the camp over. “At least they had the decency to cook our dinner for us. What have we got?”

Laeg peered into the small black pot. "Rabbit."

"Good."

"You think so? They seem to have left the fur on."

In the morning, having slept huddled around the *ecland* warriors' fire, they drove on toward snowy Hy Maine. They had not gone far before a party of warriors in black chariots approached from the north. In the lead was a tall blond man on horseback. His hair, gathered into thick chains, spilled down over the horse's flanks.

Excitedly, Finnchoem said, "My father." She waved both hands. The chariots and horseman doubled their speed. Sunlight gleamed on their weapons, and Laeg remarked, "They're not out for badger. They're decked out for war."

"With us," Cú Chulainn added.

As if to erase all doubt, Eocho Rond leaned back on his mount and threw a spear at Cú Chulainn. From such a distance, his aim was remarkable. The spear made a great arc and dropped straight into the back of the chariot. But Cú Chulainn's powers were at least the equal of Eocho Rond's, and he stepped out of its path at the last possible moment and snatched it as casually as if this had been the king's intent in throwing it; the tip never touched the boards. Eocho Rond gesticulated angrily, swung his horse around and stole another spear from the nearest passing chariot. He kicked his heels in and charged them. His daughter waved frantically, but the king ignored her gestures, or else mistook them.

"An Érenn bull, this fellow," Lugaid said, "he's gravid with the hankering to kill us before we have our say."

"We'll see," replied Cú Chulainn at the same moment as he flung the stolen spear. Finnchoem cried out, sure that it would impale her father, but the spear had not been aimed at him. It cut through the breast of his horse, poking out through the ribs and tripping up the beast. Head twisted in pain, the horse crashed on. Eocho Rond, flung off his perch, smashed to the ground in a sparkling burst of snow.

Lugaid drew up near the spot, and Finnchoem jumped down and ran to her father. The black chariots drew up; the passengers eyed one another uncertainly. Some among them may have recognized Lugaid.

Cú Chulainn walked to where Eocho Rond lay unconscious. Snow powdered the king's features but it was turning red under his hairline. "He's struck his head in the fall. He'll need a Druid's care." On her knees, the girl stared reproachfully at him. Cú Chulainn denied the accusation, but he turned to the black chariots. "Where's the nearest fortress that can care for him?"

"Cruachan," came the reply.

"What luck," remarked Laeg, and Lugaid burst out laughing. "This'll surely be the consummate test of my authority," he said.

Finnchoem rode with her people, and the truth of her fate was soon revealed. They told her she had no right to blame the Ulidians for her father's injuries, but they all eyed Cú Chulainn apprehensively now that he had been identified. They had heard stories from veterans of the bull raid about the seemingly innocent, beautiful child that could turn into a petrified monster.

Word of the black chariots' approach brought Ailell outside the walls of his double fortress. He waited, a regal presence in black tunic and red robes, dark and severe. Even so, his surprise as he identified Laeg and Cú Chulainn cracked his indurate pose. Lugaid intervened to speak for everyone.

"There's been an unfortunate incident, Ailell. This dim-witted blond brawler mistook us for *ecland* and without the slightest provocation he attacked us. Survival made it necessary to interrupt his work, but the bastard's been hurt as a result."

Ailell sent a runner to get a Druid. "You'll stay?" he asked, observing protocol.

Lugaid smiled. "All things considered, that would be pretty stupid, wouldn't it?"

Ailell said nothing but was glad of the refusal.

Eochu Rond awoke suddenly. He lifted his head, spied Cú Chulainn beside his daughter and, before she could explain his delusion to him, her father cursed Cú Chulainn: "May you never find comfort in sitting or lying down till you discover what took the three sons of Doel Dermait out of their country."

"Just a moment, now," objected Laeg, leaning over the king, but the effort of pronouncing this bitter *geis* had caused Eochu Rond to faint dead away.

"Your father's a fairly pig-headed fool, isn't he?" Cú Chulainn observed. Finnchoem marched from his side. Under his breath, the Hound added, "And I think it runs in the family." He wondered who had been responsible for the *ecland* stealing her away.

A Druid and four attendants came through the crowd. The priest studied the unconscious man for a moment, then had the attendants take him away.

Cú Chulainn got back in his chariot. "I think we've dallied on Magh Ai long enough. Another minute and we'll have Maeve and her cingulum at our throats."

"She wouldn't dare," proclaimed Lugaid. Ailell stared at him as if he were out of his mind. "All right, maybe she would. We'll be going then, rather than stir up your life further."

"Lugaid." Ailell bowed, gestured a cursory farewell to the other two.

They tore off across the plain. The king of Cruachan watched until they had been reduced to specks far out on the plain. He turned to leave and found a ring of twelve shields chugging out from the fortress.

“Now comes the sticky part,” he muttered to himself as he went to meet his wife.

3. The Free Ride from Alba

They forded the Sinann below Lough Bofin, then drove on through the bog-ridden region south of Lough Erne—a territory that Lugaid knew how to navigate. They camped to the east of the lake. The night was crisp and clear, the sort of night that charges the blood and makes a warrior feel that he has infinite power; but Cú Chulainn found the wet ground there uncomfortable and could not sleep. In the mist of the following morning, he caviled about dampness and cold. Fortunately both of his companions had slept well enough to tolerate his complaints.

At Emain Macha, they feasted with Conchovor to relate the adventure of Finnchoem and her bellicose father. Cú Chulainn spent the time moving from one place to another around the feast table, finding nowhere that suited him for long. Conchovor watched him curiously, and at one point Cú Chulainn glared back and complained, “You ought to change the straw in here—it’s full of nasty vermin!” Finally, he brushed the layer of straw aside and squatted on the hard ground. As cold as it was, the hard dirt felt like fire underneath him. He growled and stomped and spent the rest of the feast on his feet, striding restlessly back and forth.

Laeg glanced worriedly at Lugaid, who voiced their concern to the king. “It looks like that idiot’s curse took—he didn’t sleep worth a damn last night, either.”

“I’ll dispatch a messenger to Connacht tonight,” said Conchovor, “We’ll have Eocho Rond here in pieces if necessary, but—”

“You don’t seriously believe that Maeve will let him come here once she hears what’s happened?” Cú Chulainn argued. “If she thought I could be driven mad by this, she’d have had the whole of Hy Maine level that curse.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know—I’ll go home. Emer . . . maybe she’ll have an answer to this riddle.”

He paced up and down Baile’s Strand till he had worn a path in the perfect beach. Emer had been able to offer nothing by way of a remedy. Nowhere—not even his favorite spot beneath the yew tree—offered him the slightest comfort. Dark rings had formed around his tired eyes, and exhaustion had become second-nature, like a burdensome shield lugged upon his back.

Thus when Cú Chulainn first saw the striped sail of a *currach* approaching off the sea, he blinked and wiped at his bleary eyes and continued to doubt his senses though the boat remained in view. It came slipping fast toward the strand, undeterred by the eddies that he knew existed out there. Shortly, Laeg and Lugaid came charging down the palisade onto the beach, Laeg calling, "Can you see who it is, Cucuc? I've brought your spear and shield."

Cú Chulainn accepted the Gai Bulga. He waded ankle-deep into the icy green surf. "You there, you're approaching Ulster!" he called. "I'm her champion here, the defender you have to answer to. Before you set foot on my shore, I must know your names."

A figure stood while he spoke, shifting against the rocking of the boat. Cú Chulainn could not make out details other than many swatches of red and yellow in the figure's cloak, a suggestion of high rank. "I ask you for my life, for safe passage," came the reply. "I'm the son of the king of Alba. I've come with my people to visit Conchovor."

"In that case," Cú Chulainn replied, backing out of the water, "you've chosen a safe harbor."

When the boat reached the shallows, he and his friends helped the Albans drag it onto the beach. A large *currach*, it was laden with many packages and kegs, an amphora full of wine and a bushel of green apples. "Conchovor will be glad to see you," said Lugaid. "He likes these." He picked one of the apples as the basket passed him by, and marveled at its existence in the midst of winter. He polished it against his red whiskers.

"Why are you down here?" asked the prince.

"I cannot sleep," replied Cú Chulainn.

"I shouldn't wonder—it's midday."

"No," explained Laeg, "he hasn't slept for days on end. A minor king in Connacht laid a *geis* on him in the form of a riddle, and he'll have no peace or comfort until it's solved."

"A terrible predicament," the prince sympathized. "Tell me the riddle, perhaps I can help." Cú Chulainn repeated it to him, and the young man nodded in deep contemplation. Finally, he said, "I don't have your answer, but I can tell you that it doesn't lie in Eriu."

"Then you know where it does?"

"Come here," and he went back to his boat. He leaned over the side and picked up a smooth round stone that fit in his palm; lines of Ogham markings circled the edge. The three gathered around him saw that the stone had a niche carved for it in the bottom of the boat. "This stone will take you where you want to go. All we have to do is ask it, in Ogham." He leaned down again to take a chalk marker out of the boat, then scratched a message in the stone. "There." Giving it to Cú Chulainn, he added, "You will please take my boat for your journey—it and the stone are in harmony."

Cú Chulainn embraced him. “Your arrival on our shore is a wonderful occurrence. Might I borrow your chalk?” He took it and scratched a series of lines along the blade of the Gai Bulga. “In return for your kindness, I offer you my spear for your journey to Emain Macha.” He gave the Gai Bulga to the young man. “It will speak for you to the king and give you my place—the champion’s place—at the feast.”

“You give me too much honor.”

Lugaid replied, “Listen, if your help puts him to sleep so that the rest of us don’t have to listen to his bickering all night, I’ll give you my spear, too.”

The prince laughed. Cú Chulainn ran up the hill, past the prince’s entourage, leaping the kegs, to Dun Dealgun to tell Emer of his going. She hugged him, as glad as Lugaid that he had found a cure. She made him wait there till she had bound up a parcel of bread and meat for the journey. The Hound wrapped himself in heavy furs and selected another spear while he lingered.

The prince helped them shove the boat off from shore. Lugaid set up the sail while Laeg paddled the prow out to sea. Then Cú Chulainn replaced the round stone in its niche. “A good voyage to you,” called the prince. Even as he spoke, the *currach* with its uneasy passengers shot off across the swirling sea as if the sail had filled with wind. They had no idea where they were going.

4. *Immram to Magic Isles*

Through the entire night they sailed, pressed together against the cold, watching their breaths drift up like spirits on Samain Eve to dissipate amongst the stars. They chewed on the meat Emer had provided, and speculated on their possible destination. Lugaid guessed they would land in Alba, but the Ulidians were not so sure. Even in the boat, Cú Chulainn could find no comfort, and he spent most of the time standing against the mast or hunched down on the balls of his feet, which was how he finally nodded off.

In the morning their perseverance was rewarded by a vision of an island they had never heard of. A high silver wall bordered it, and all they could see were dark treetops above it and the distant, hazy outline of mountains. The wall gleamed with the sea’s sparkling reflection, and showed them upon it, a smudge rising and falling, growing larger by the minute. Lugaid hopped out in the foamy shallows and dragged the *currach* onto a pebbled beach while Cú Chulainn and Laeg dismantled the sail.

They took their weapons and the magical stone with them, climbed over a jagged strip of rocks to the wall. “How does one get in?” wondered

Laeg. "From the sea I didn't notice an opening anywhere. Perhaps we should sail around to the other side and look for one."

Cú Chulainn, tucking the stone into the satchel with the food, replied, "Then wouldn't the stone have *taken* us to the other side in the first place?" He moved up against the wall, drawn by what looked like a dark cloud forming in the mercurous reflection. The cloud gelled into a face right above his own, and he glanced back to find no face in reality behind him. The one in the mirror became distinct: became long and gray in color, its eyes as pale as the skin; it wore a headpiece of silver and bone, a silver torc round the throat. The thin mouth smiled with a vagueness that said it had lost all reason for joy. Cú Chulainn glanced aside to find Laeg and Lugaid staring in according wonder at the face.

Then the floating face spoke, its voice soft and mellifluous. Each word caused the surface of the wall to ripple around the face. "How are you come here?"

Cú Chulainn took out the stone and held it up. "This brought us, in search of Doel Dermait's three sons."

"That's good news." A bony, elongated hand reached out of the wall, disturbing the surface as if extending out of a pool. Amethyst rings sparkled on thumb and third finger. "Come in, all." The long index finger crooked. The three adventurers steeled themselves and then followed the finger as it receded. The wall transformed to air, to smoke or dream, and they passed through it onto a wide, flat grassy plain.

To the face was added the figure. He was tall and nearly as lean as bone, wrapped in layers of deep violet robes, belted by a girdle of jewels, black boots that extended beneath the silver-threaded hem of his tunic. Feathers were stitched into pleats across the tunic at his chest. "I am the king. This is my land, and my house, in which you are all welcome."

Far behind him, they saw the house. Huge and round, with white-bronze pillars circling it like stones in a magic ring. A second figure came out of the house. She stood almost as tall as the man. Her face was as gray as ash, and her robes black as night. "Welcome," she said, echoing her husband's greeting. "I've sent out word of your arrival."

"My queen," the king said. "Not many people visit nowadays— she'll wish to make a spectacle of you."

"But Doel Dermait—"

"Yes, Setanta, that will be told you in good time." To Cú Chulainn's surprise at hearing his name called, the king replied, "I know all your names. They passed to me as you passed through the wall. No strangers ever come to this place—or haven't in a long time. Now, if you'll join us?" The king strode off toward his house. The three recognized this as their last opportunity to turn back, but they had hardly come closer to solving the riddle, and all three took off after the king.

The interior of the house defied their concepts of space. It contained one hundred and fifty beds, each in a brightly partitioned area, each area

containing either a game board for *buanbach* or a board for *fidchell*, and each including a golden harp hung above the bed. The queen led them to another room in the impossibly vast house. Three women there had a fire going and as the travelers looked on, the women took huge tongs and removed from the flames three iron bars, which they carried gingerly across the room to three wide cauldrons. They immersed the bars, sending up great hissing clouds of steam. “Your baths are nearly ready,” remarked the queen. “I leave you in competent hands.” She stepped out. They could hear her footsteps fade as the three women approached and began to undress them.

“Do you think it’s possible we died during the night?” asked Lugaid.

As they soaked in their respective vats, luxuriating in a room thick with steam, Laeg, Lugaid and Cú Chulainn heard distant trumpeting. The water had made them so lazy that they hardly gave this any thought—the noise was not like the din of carynxes, the blast of war that they knew well. This trumpeting sounded more like a happy greeting.

The house echoed with whispery voices growing louder. The three attendants became excited and scurried to the doorway to look out. “What is going on?” asked Cú Chulainn.

“Guests,” one of the women replied. Before he could ask her to elaborate, a stream of people came pouring into the room. They soon crammed every space, apparently oblivious of the steam or of the fact that the three men were naked in their baths. All were like the king and queen, all tall and gray, and melancholy even in the obvious pleasure they took from the new arrivals.

The king shoved his way through the multitude, up to the tubs. “Enough now. Let them dress properly and come to the feast. Out now, all of you. Please, this is not proper.” The people backed away; disinclined but obedient to their king, they filed out. Soon only the king and the trio of attendants remained. “I apologize for them. It’s extremely rare that we have outsiders visit.”

Cú Chulainn brushed the matter away. “Where are the three sons of Doel Dermait?” he asked pointedly.

The matter would not be stalled off any further. “They’re not here,” the king admitted. “They’re on another island south of ours. Their sister lives there—or more correctly, she has taken up residence in the vain hope of retrieving them. We have, all of us, friends on that island.”

“What manner of people are you?”

The king stiffened with pride. “We’re called the Rudraige.”

“But that’s incredible!” He shot a glance at Laeg. “I live on Baile’s Strand.”

“Baile . . . I have not heard that name in centuries.” He looked more distant than ever, and perplexed, as if he could not quite recall the specif-

ics of the recollection.

“Why do you all have friends on this other isle? Why does Doel Dermait’s daughter live there?”

“I would rather she told you, so as not to spoil this evening for my people.” He withdrew a few steps. “When you’ve dressed, your feast will be ready.”

After he had gone, Cú Chulainn floated over against Lugaid’s cauldron and whispered, “What do you make of this?”

“These are the saddest damned people I’ve ever seen.”

“The only other time I saw faces like this,” said Laeg, “was on the expatriates of Ulster—the ones who trickled back in after the *táin*. Something’s swallowed up most of this *tuath*’s lives.”

“Yes, but what do you make of the way they perceive us?”

“Well,” Lugaid said in some embarrassment, “I fear they’ve taken us for saviors.”

Cú Chulainn mulled this over. “In that case, I’d like to know what it is we’re to save them from.”

“That would be nice,” Laeg agreed.

The Hound tried to learn this at the feast but no one would tell him; everyone he asked side-stepped the question and brought up other matters. When he approached the king with it again, the gray monarch reiterated that everything would be made known tomorrow. The three men finally gave up and steeped themselves in the celebration.

At dawn, the king awoke them and led them out of the wall, down to their craft. “Let me have your guiding rock and chalk,” he said. Cú Chulainn gave him these. The king knelt at the water’s edge and washed away the previous markings, then scratched new ones around the stone. “Now it will take you where you must go. The journey’s brief, the other isle not far from here.” He handed back the stone, then turned abruptly and climbed back up through the wall.

“This is as strange as if I were still sleeping,” observed Laeg.

“Isn’t it?” Lugaid agreed. Nevertheless, he climbed in first and raised the sail while the other two shoved off. As soon as the stone was placed in its receptacle, the *currach* spun around and glided out to sea.

As the king had promised, their destination was nearby. The new isle had odd hills that were grown more with thick rushes than with trees. They came near the eastern shore when a wind suddenly raised a wave in front of them and tossed them out to sea again. They did not know what to think—had it been coincidence, happenstance? A second time their boat sped in toward that bay. They had nearly landed when a hard wind gusted from nowhere and threw them back again, this time drenching them with stinging salt spray.

“This is beginning to annoy me,” Cú Chulainn grumbled loudly. The boat doggedly steered itself toward the shore again. “You on the island,”

he yelled, “turn off your machine of wind if you know what’s good for you!”

In the middle of the nearest furze-covered hill, an enormous eye slowly fluttered open and focused on them. Another eye below it blinked wide. Then a deep cavern yawned across the hillside—one lined with two vertical rows of teeth. The hill began to change shape then: it rolled so that the eyes rotated to a horizontal plane, at which point the entire hill disengaged from the rest of the ground. What they had taken for a landscape proved to be the body of a giant, as long in his reclining position as the bay, all they could see of the island from there. His head had been resting against a standing stone and the boat had aimed directly for that. His skin was the color of the earth. The giant rubbed sleep from his eyes and smacked his lips, then said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to blow you off course, but I was asleep and didn’t know you were approaching. My name’s Condla, this is my island. You’re Setanta, Laeg and Lugaid. Please come to land. My wife expects you.”

“She’ll answer my questions?”

“Oh yes,” the giant guaranteed.

“Is she going to be as tiny as you?” asked Lugaid.

The giant laughed deeply and the whole island rocked. The small currach bucked in a backlash of waves. Gripping the side to keep from being tossed out, Cú Chulainn leaned back to Lugaid and sternly said, “Don’t do that again.”

5. The Valley of Echu Glas

The daughter of Doel Dermait wore the sunset sky—flowing layers of blue, red, yellow and orange adorned her; necklaces of shells and polished beads, all of them gifts from her husband because she was so beautiful and he more composed of island than of human properties. For all of her beauty—which was, as Condla contended, significant—she could not hide her sadness that matched the other gray people of Rudraige.

Cú Chulainn dispensed with relating the obnoxious riddle and came straight to the point: what was its solution?

“I will show you,” she replied, “because your coming was foretold, and their healing will be by you.”

“Healing?” asked Laeg to Lugaid, who shrugged—he had no idea.

The woman led them through a heavy forest. Crisp, dead leaves crunched underfoot though the trees here were green and as full of life as if it were summer. Her trail, circuitous, took them away from all hints of the sea. They emerged on the other side of the trees to find themselves confronted by another wall. Made of piled stones the size and shape of skulls, it obtruded its unwholesomeness upon them.

“My brothers are kept beyond this wall. It’s guarded by a man, Cairpre Cundail. He will lead you to their captor provided that you can satisfy his battle-urge. It’s no small hunger, either.” She stepped away, back toward the forest.

“Their captor turned your husband into that bizarre giant, too,” guessed Lugaid.

“Why, no. He’s always been a giant,” she said patiently, as if explaining something obvious to a child.

Lugaid’s clever smile crumpled. “Oh,” he said, then lowered his gaze to study his feet. The woman said her farewell and retreated into the gloom of the trees.

“What do we do now?” asked Laeg, while trying his best not to smirk at Lugaid’s embarrassment.

Cú Chulainn replied, “Follow this wall I imagine, until something challenges us.” He craned his head to stare at the black, eroded mountains beyond the stones. “This is unfriendly terrain,” he said, then set off on the path beside the wall. It stood not much higher than they did, and they could have scaled it with ease, but none of them considered this.

After a while the wall dipped down across water. At the edge two women were cutting reeds, but they stopped as the warriors approached. “What place is this?” asked Cú Chulainn. He wished to know if he had reached Cairpre Cundail’s territory.

The women sneered at him. “Here we’ve seven princes with seven queens each,” the nearest one told him, “and our queens have seven kings under their feet, at their mercy for their amusement. And when thieves such as you come here, they don’t ever leave again.”

Cú Chulainn did not care to be called a thief. He set down his spear, then slapped the woman so hard that she sailed out into the middle of the river. “You’ll be very lucky if I don’t *thieve* your head when I go.”

The second woman waded out to her friend and both made hastily for the opposite bank. They vanished in the woods there.

“What impertinent hags,” objected Lugaid. “What sort of answer was that to a simple enough question?”

“An impertinent one,” answered Laeg. “But also a riddle, I suspect.”

“As if we hadn’t had enough of those already.”

“Let’s cross,” Cú Chulainn ordered. They followed in after him, the water numbingly cold. On the other side, they did not go far before a large man jumped out of the woods and blocked their progress. He had red hair, black shiny eyes and a broad mustache. “You struck one of my servants.”

“If she’d been armed, I would’ve cut off her head.”

The man drew a sword. “I am armed.”

“Then I’ll have your head delivered to her.” They crashed together like two bulls, their blades slashing in windmill strokes—every thrust parried, every deception interrupted. They battered each other with their

shields and threatened to knock down the wall. Lugaid and Laeg leaned back against it and did not interfere. They expected the fight to end quickly.

Late in the afternoon, the two men still struggled. Neither had struck the other more than harmless glancing blows, but by then neither had the energy left to raise his weapons. Cairpre Cundail threw down his sword and shield and sank down beside them. “Enough, Hound,” he wheezed. “You stand with me . . . that’s what I need . . . to complete my endeavor. Now—now I know you’re strong enough to tackle Echu Glas.”

“And who is he?” Cú Chulainn sheathed his sword, went and stood between his two companions.

“My enemy and yours. He raised this wall. He forbids trespass. He has the sons of Doel Dermait, whom he stole from their father—just like he has stolen a hundred others. He owns their spirits and no one’s ever escaped to tell what he does with them.”

“What a cheery sound this has,” Lugaid commented. “What is this Echu Glas, a Fomorian?”

“I can’t really say,” Cairpre replied. “It’s not as if he discusses matters with me. But in fairness you should know that no one who has entered his realm with me has ever returned.”

“Neither, then,” concluded Laeg, “were we the first three prophesied to ‘heal’ the boys. Am I correct?”

Cairpre looked chagrined. “I can’t blame you for saying no.”

“Saying no?” Lugaid screeched. “Do you think the like of your Echu Glas can compare with the Hound of Culann when he can’t sit down?”

“Or the High King from Munster when he blathers?” added Laeg.

“Or Laeg mac Riangabra,” said Cú Chulainn, “any time at all.”

Laeg got up and turned to the befuddled Cairpre Cundail. “In other words, how do we proceed past this heap of rock?”

“We climb.”

“Now, why didn’t I figure that?” asked Lugaid, and Laeg bantered, “Because we didn’t have another three weeks to wait for your answer.” Then, as they had done with all obstacles so far, they calmly set about scaling the wall.

Eerie winds whistled along the valley through a hundred fissures and crannies, resulting in shrill atonal echoes—antiphonies from every side. The terrene wail mimicked the nature of the place, that they knew already to be perverse and evil. They descended, teeth on edge, thoughts shattered by the valley’s unholy choirs.

In the basin—an alluvial fan that dwindled into a tight passage between the worn mountains—the keen of nature diminished. Echoing from out of that pass, a loud, irritated voice called, “Cairpre! Come again with your miserable recruits? More fertilizer!”

Cairpre was about to reply but Cú Chulainn cut him off. “Three fertilizers, Echu Glas, come to fertilize this barren land with *you*.”

There followed a long pause. Then Echu Glas, flustered, called out, “I know that voice—you’re the angry man of Muirthemne, aren’t you? Grown a beard finally, have you?”

“Just for you I have. But you mustn’t forget my friends, Echu Glas. There’s an angry Ulidian here and an angry king from Munster.”

He received no reply this time. Cairpre said, “We’ll have to go into his valley, through that ravine.”

“It’s too narrow for more than one at a time,” said Cú Chulainn. “Let me go in and face him first.” He handed his sword to Laeg and took the spear that Laeg carried. “We’ll meet on the other side,” he joked, then crept into the pass. The others followed close on his heel. His shoulders scraped either side, and the walls soon joined overhead in a natural arch, the ravine become a tunnel. He wondered if his joke might not have carried more weight than he thought—this was not unlike some descriptions of passage into Magh Mell. He rounded a bend and found himself at the tunnel’s mouth. Beyond it he could see an amazing lushness: a sloping hillside covered with grass and trees and patches of flowers. He fingered the edge of the spear and stepped out from the shadows.

A sword sliced the air, straight for his head. Instinct grabbed control, and Cú Chulainn threw himself forward around his spear, bouncing up on one foot, spinning about, at the ready. Straddling the rocks above the narrow opening, Echu Glas huffed in vexation. He jumped down at Cú Chulainn. His wide blade slit the air again but slashed into dirt—Cú Chulainn had flipped himself backwards, down the slope and out of reach.

Where the victims had all been gray, Echu Glas was as blue as cornflowers. In contrast his green eyes appeared to glow. A loose tunic covered most of him, but his feet were strange, split like hooves between the second and third toes. His hair, auburn, sprang up from his head in wiry clumps. He had the snout and tusks of a boar, but this looked to Cú Chulainn like a mask to make him most horrible. The blue of his skin, too, might have been a dye.

“A man who has to hide in false appearances is himself false,” Cú Chulainn announced. “He’ll dissemble every day.”

“What will that matter to you? You’ll be ground to paste by tomorrow.”

The other three had emerged from the tunnel by this time. The landscape amazed Lugaid and Laeg. They stared down the hillside, past a round house to a calm bay.

“I should help him,” Cairpre said.

“Wait. He’d never forgive you if you interfered. He performs his feats without assistance.”

“The laws of the *fír fer*,” explained Lugaid. “One man decides for each side.”

“That rule has cost me dozens already,” Cairpre complained.

“Yes, but does that mean you throw out rules altogether or train better warriors?”

Their positions established, they resigned themselves to watching. The combat had descended meanwhile, pitting the two against each other near the house. Cú Chulainn jumped over Echu’s blade and slapped the spearshaft across his face. A second slap, on the nose, dislodged the false mask and tusks, but revealed sharp and yellowed fangs.

“Such teeth you have,” jibed Cú Chulainn. “What sort of flesh do you eat?”

“Yours this evening,” and Echu batted away the spear. He wiped blood from under his wounded nose. For a moment he seemed to lose track of what he was doing, but suddenly he bounded down on Cú Chulainn, sword thrust ahead to spit the Hound. Cú Chulainn somersaulted backwards out of its path, spun around and landed in the water. His feet slipped on slick rocks and he fell. With a cry of delight, Echu Glas sped through the water, spraying a wake to either side like a skimming boat, to that spot. He stabbed his sword down fiercely, then again, over and over, building to a frenzy. Cairpre groaned. Laeg held his breath and Lugaid winced.

Echu dredged up a white cloak around the tip of his blade. He flung it off and began to stab all around the spot. The water had clouded darkly with silt and he could not tell if he had killed the Hound. Then he stopped and waited for the body or some part of it to float up, or a bubbling swirl of blood to show him where it lay. The surface became smooth. Echu’s green eyes shifted nervously as he turned cautiously in a circle. Suddenly, on his right, Cú Chulainn sprang like a flying fish. With a yell, Echu struck, but the Hound kicked the blue wrist aside. At the same time he folded his elbow, pulling his spear back toward himself, trapping Echu in its arc. Echu sucked in his breath and arched his spine as he stretched back, but even so the tip slit across his chest; he scrambled away, stumbling to shore; then, certain that Cú Chulainn pursued him, he swung his sword savagely around his back.

But Cú Chulainn had anticipated him and instead of following had performed a Salmon Leap up over Echu.

Even as he discovered the Hound gone from the shallows, the blue warrior heard feet slap the ground behind him. He knew he was too late but tried in vain to wrench his sword around. The blade rang against the upthrust ferrule of Cú Chulainn’s spear. Reversing momentum, Cú Chulainn shoved the spear’s edge through Echu’s neck and spine and throat, and the head lifted like an azure bird into the crisp, clean air.

The body sprawled on the shore. Suddenly, the blue flesh shivered as in the throes of death, and a surge of blood shot out of the neck hard enough to carve a rut through the dirt. The body began to deflate as if all its contents were blood.

The lush hillside started to shake. Stones skittered and slid down. In front of Laeg and the others, the ground burst open as two torn, bony, and rotting hands emerged, clutched the wet clumps of earth, and dragged up the rest of a body. The corpse crawled into the daylight, blinking like a salamander. It espied the frothing, bloody pool collecting below and began immediately to slither down. Not far away a second and third and a fourth emerged—all of them ruins. Some had been peeled until they were nearly skeletons, eviscerated nightmares—a hillside of crawling death. Others came shambling out of the house. Over the hill above, a legion of cruelly used corpses spilled down. Most had been gnawed, their flesh torn away in the pronged jaws of Echu Glas. Cairpre recognized many of the ill-treated bodies but his terror in witnessing their re-animation kept him from running to them or calling out their names.

The victims descended upon Cú Chulainn. He watched, his spear dripping, ready to kill the whole legion of the dead if necessary. Were they bodies boiled back to life in some dark cauldron? Echu's corse army?

They paid him no heed. They crawled instead to the broad pool of blood that Echu's deflated husk had filled. Each corpse immersed itself in the blood, and before his eyes each crawled out whole, the flesh regrown, the infected wounds sealed up, the gaunt faces restored.

The three others descended the hill in the wake of the mass of slithering dead. Cú Chulainn traded looks of amazement with them. In the pool, a woman rose to her feet, laughing as her hands cupped her breasts and rubbed down her belly and legs, rediscovering her own body made whole. Cairpre began to laugh along with her, then others among the restored warriors whom Echu Glas had tortured and devoured.

Coated, bathed from head to foot in red as if painted for a battle, the victims of that valley embraced Cú Chulainn and the others. Some began to cry when they came to Cairpre Cundail, their friend, but their tears were of joy at their salvation. Cú Chulainn by this time looked like one of them, their blood so coated him. He remembered his reason for being there and interrupted the celebration. "Are any of you the sons of Doel Dermait?"

Three of the naked men looked at him and said, "Yes."

"Your sister and her husband are waiting to see you again. But first tell me what brought you out of your land?"

"The creature that you killed," one of them replied gaily.

"Then the riddle's answered, my obligations to all concerned fulfilled." Happily, he added, "The *geis* on me will be lifted."

And to prove it, he slept in the bottom of the boat all the way home.

IV. THE MISADVENTURE OF CONNLA

1. The Outing

After the debacle of Bricriu's feast, the Ulster king and his warriors had returned to Emain Macha, downcast in spirits, divided in loyalties, their friendships strained. Conchovor could do nothing for this at first. He had duties of kingship to attend to: the first of these was judicial.

A *tuath* of eight brothers from the south had three wives in common between them and four of the brothers were vying for control of one son. The matter had already come to blows with the result that one brother lay dead and another wounded. The remaining two had consequently pushed the dispute further—to the matter of who actually owned the various parcels of their land.

Conchovor and two *brithemain*—both severe in their black robes—listened to the parties gripe and accuse one another of numerous irrelevant treacheries. This complaining in itself took the better part of a day to sort out. It then remained for the king to uncover who had originally paid the woman's *coibche*, her bride price, since to him went the child. In fact, the dead man had paid her price. That meant that the woman owed no allegiance to any one of the other eight brothers. She also had sole rights to the child as its mother, to one third of the land and one third of the cattle, since all of the property could be established as having been given to the women in their *coibches*. The offended woman came forward, thanking the judges, but proclaiming at the same time that she wished to consent to the offer of one of the surviving brothers to unite in a *ben urnadna*, a year-long contract marriage. This Conchovor granted after some discussion with the two judges. As to the family, since they had murdered their own brother, they received no compensation for his death; also, they must return home and divide their property into thirds, then erect stone walls to delineate the portions. The cattle were to be separated in like manner and put to graze in the three parcels of land. If they could not keep from warring amongst themselves, Conchovor assured them that he would confiscate their land and, since all property was theoretically owned by all of Ulster, give it to someone more deserving of it. They

could of course dispute this at Uisneach, when the Druids gathered there next Beltain, but by then someone else would be working their land. There his judgment ended.

The family thought that was an end to it and turned to leave, but the Druids called to them. The two judges had further judgments to pass. “The man who killed his brother,” began the taller of the duo, “you are now responsible for his soul. It is for you to see that your brother reaches Magh Mell. You must single-handedly erect a cromlech and fill it with those things which belonged to your brother. And you must tend this tomb until the Samain feast, when his spirit will be released from the tomb.” He deferred to the other black judge for the remainder of the ruling.

“Since I note that it is to the murderer himself that the widow has gone with her *ben urnadna*, I must presume that she has played some devious role in the event. Therefore, I add the judgment that, once property has been settled, she must pay a third of her cattle to her sisters as a price of face if she wishes to maintain her innocence. Otherwise, her sisters may call upon any Druid to lay a pernicious *aircetal* curse upon her, and she shall die from the shame that will boil up in her.”

This judgment ended. The deathly silent family was led away and the judges turned to a matter of theft, and so on for the days to follow until the docket of cases lay empty. Then a very weary Conchovor stepped down as the high judge of Ulster.

The second duty that came his way was the entertainment of the prince of Alba and his entourage. As Cú Chulainn had promised, the presentation of the Gai Bulga earned the prince both the champion’s place beside Conchovor and the champion’s portion at feast. In this way also, without having to make a controversial proclamation, Conchovor sent a message to the various bickering factions as to which among them he considered the best warrior.

The prince described what he knew of the quest that Cú Chulainn, Laeg, and Lugaid had undertaken; and all of Emain Macha fretted over the outcome. In the meantime, the minor king of Hy Maine and his daughter arrived there. Eocho Rond was both humble and solicitous to correct whatever damage his irresponsible *geis* had wrought. Conchovor welcomed him with little enthusiasm, but Eocho Rond had expected nothing less. However, the King of Ulster bore some secret admiration for Eocho—that he had braved the province of the warriors to set matters right.

The following day, Cú Chulainn and Laeg returned, accompanied by Emer and her servants. They brought with them a wagonload of gifts that Cairpre Cundail and the children of Doel Dermait had given to Ulster in thanks. The prince of Alba happily accepted the return of his steering stone in exchange for the Gai Bulga and the champion’s place. Eocho Rond made peace with Cú Chulainn, who was taking such delight in his triumph that he could not have held a grudge. Over the next two days of feasting, the travelers from Hy Maine and Alba took their separate leave,

and Conchovor, once he had sobered up, announced that he wished to go to Traig Esi, where he had a house by the sea.

He assembled a group to go with him, culled mostly from the feasters: the poet Condere mac Echach, stammering Cuscraid, Amargin and Findchoem, Laeg mac Rianganabra, Emer, Cú Chulainn, and Conall Cernach. These last two had forgiven each other's petty behavior at Bricriu's; in absentia, Laegaire had been forgiven, too. Cú Chulainn's mood bore no trace of the deeper concerns that had arisen during the contest for championship—he was the embodiment of cheer, and even proposed that “Ulster could do with three champions.”

The group set off the morning after Alba had gone, seven chariots of gleaming copper, bronze and wicker, across the practice fields and on over the hills to the eastern coast of Ulster.

For their holiday they had mild sunny weather and spent their afternoons on the strand, basking lazily while watching the gulls hover and wheel and dive for catches. The overlapping avian cries sounded like an army of squeaky axles. For birds and men alike, the fishing there was good.

On the fourth morning, the gulls began to squawk madly at something. Conchovor sat up, shielding his eyes against a horizon of glare. Far out on the water, he saw a shining *currach* of hammered bronze beneath an unfurled sail. He called to the others, some of whom were already looking, drawn as he had been by the circling sirens.

The boat drew nearer, close enough to show them the single pilot—a small boy with long, limed brown hair. He stood in the boat. As the gulls wheeled overhead, he shot his sling at them, striking one so that it dropped into the *currach*. After each shot, he laid down the sling and picked up the gull, putting it close by his mouth as if whispering to it. Then, miraculously, he flung the bird skyward and it flapped away, apparently no worse for the experience. This went on until he had brought down and released over a dozen of them. Shortly, he cupped his hands to his face and gave a low, eerie cry. Those on the strand thought it the cry of a loon; but the gulls he had released swung down on the call and circled the bronze boat as it sailed out of sight past the headland. Through it all, the boy appeared unaware of his breathless audience on the shore.

“He'll put in at the harbor over the hill,” Conchovor declared. “Condere, go and introduce yourself and invite him to share our feast.”

The bald poet hiked up his tunic and kicked off through the grass to the top of the hill. The talk was all of the boy, but hardly had they spoken when Condere reappeared alone. He struggled down the slope, obviously bewildered.

“Where's the boy?” the king asked. “Was I wrong as to where he would put in?”

“Oh, he's there, at the beach, yes indeed. But he refuses to relate his name to me. I told him what kingdom this was, and that our law forbids

any landing from one who won't give his name. I told him he would be thought an enemy."

"What did he say to that?"

"He said he could land wherever he pleased."

Conall burst out with rare laughter. "Another small warrior for Ulster," he joked and prodded Cú Chulainn in the ribs.

"I'll bet he's stolen that boat and sailed away from home," Conchovor mused. "Of course he doesn't know our customs. Conall, perhaps you could explain them to him. Take your shield and sword to show that you're a fine warrior he can respect. No offense to you, Condere, of course."

The poet shrugged.

Still chuckling, Conall strode off. The rest chattered about the boy and his boldness, gleaning what they could from Condere, which was mostly about the child's appearance.

"Short for his age, I think, though he might merely be precocious. A shock of light brown hair all whorled into horns thrusting back from his head as if wrapped in a hard breeze. Very pale and smooth his skin is, with sharp muscles. His tunic's off his shoulders, hanging limply from his belt, though I expect you could see that at his passing by."

"Did he smile?" Emer asked pointedly.

"No, now that you mention it, not a hint. Very severe. Very lofty." As he said this, the group was alerted to a scraping sound behind them, and they turned to behold an amazing sight. Making his way down the hillside with great difficulty, Conall Cernach had been tied to his shield. It dragged in the dirt in back of his heels. Before anyone could move, he lost his footing and plunged headfirst onto his back, spun around and slid down the hill on his shield. Like a squinting, cross-eyed turtle he lay at their feet, his legs pumping furiously at the air, his hands tied at his waist.

While they untied him, Conall tried to laugh off his predicament. His face, nevertheless, was red with shame. "The boy's fast," he explained, "caught me laughing, thinking of everything but fighting. I waded out to him, offered a hand to him. I asked his name—I'd explained Ulster's law. What he did was to grab me and flip me over into his boat. I lay on my face against green bronze. He stood on my shield I think, pulled me back by my hair and spun a rope around me—and here I am. Me, who can wallop the best that Connacht offers. I ought to sail home in disgrace. He has my sword."

"Nonsense," said Conchovor.

"He told me to send along someone better equipped."

On those words, Cú Chulainn ran to his chariot and got his skimming spear, the Gai Bulga. He raced back excitedly, eager to act. Emer blocked his way. "You must stop. I can feel that this has hidden sides to it, a terrible convergence of thunderheads."

Cú Chulainn knew his wife had riddling powers of prescience. More than once she had used them to keep him from harm, to forewarn him of

treacheries; but now he said, “Nonsense. I won’t have this child making fools of us all, the best of our province.”

“You sound like Maeve,” she told him.

At that, his good humor fell away and he grew too furious to speak. He hurled himself around her, vanished over the crest. She went to Conchovor. “You have to stop him.” She clutched his wrist, and he shuddered in a momentary frisson of ominous foreboding as if she had, for an instant, passed her augural power to him. He stared into Conall’s eyes, into Laeg’s, then he bolted up the hill. The others hurried to catch up.

2. Revelation in the Waves

“You cannot come here without giving your name,” Cú Chulainn told the child. The boy stood with one foot planted on the bow of the boat, Cú Chulainn hip-deep in the water below. In reply the boy said nothing but swung Conall’s sword so quickly that Cú Chulainn could not avoid it completely. The blade chopped his hair like a scythe, laying it flat across the top of his head.

Casting aside his spear, Cú Chulainn flung himself into the boat; he tackled the boy, carrying him over the far side and into the sea. The foaming waves on the dark sea hid them from view. Then a body shot up into the air, a trick the Ulster audience had seen performed many times—only this time it was Cú Chulainn tossed up. He crashed down in the boat, which rang like a gong, but he got up quickly. First he saw the amazement in the faces on the strand, then the arrogant stance of the boy below, and he threw himself out of the boat at the child. They vanished in the rough sea again, and again Cú Chulainn came shooting up at the pinnacle of a spout. The sail caught him, and the mast snapped, and the whole affair crashed into the *currach*.

The sail bucked and swelled as the trapped warrior fought his way out. When he emerged, the Warp Spasm had begun to alter him. His muscles bubbled under his skin, which grew dark, suffused with blood. His fingers twitched, knotting. A rainbow light appeared over his head and what was left of his hair danced in the colorful crackling field. His beautiful face became monstrous—the brow protruded to seal one eye shut. His mouth became a cavern, the jaw a knobby crag. He jumped into the sea and the water boiled up around him. The gnarled hands clutched the boy’s throat, dragged him under the waves. A whirlpool spun for an instant where they sank. The audience waited, not knowing quite where to look for a re-appearance.

The boat rose up as if on a swell. It spun into the air and crashed down in the water on its side, tipping out the broken mast and the sail. Impos-

sible as it seemed, the boy had again thrown off Cú Chulainn. He rode the monster's dark, carbuncled back, forced the misshapen head down and under the waves. The huge warped arms clawed fruitlessly at the boy, who only bent Cú Chulainn over further to avoid those knotted fingers.

Minutes passed and the boy did not let him draw a breath. The audience began to fret that Cú Chulainn might actually die at the hands of a child; but, by the laws of combat, they could not interfere.

Two bulbous feet rose from the depths behind the boy like two humps of a sea monster. They slammed suddenly into his back. The boy flew from his perch, skidded across the water and against some rocks. The monster shook himself, now less of a monster than before: the time underwater had sapped some of his energy. He did not jump on the boy this time. Instead, he threw himself backwards to where the Gai Bulga floated. His hand glided over the shaft, curled lovingly around the butt, and slapped it hard. The short spear shot across the waves, bouncing, skimming faster than any fish. Emer screamed. The boy tried to back away, but the rocks trapped him and the deadly barbs of the spear slit his belly as they passed. The sea burst red around him as if he had strayed into a colony of algae. His hands pressed against his belly to hold the wound together. In a voice no longer bold, he cried "Scathach! Why didn't you teach me about that?"

Cú Chulainn's triumph crumbled to dust. The hissing light of the Warp Spasm flickered and died. He swam for the child, urgent strokes across the cold sea. Scathach had been *his* teacher on the Isle of Women—that this child knew her swept him up in a lancing premonition of doom. He reached the boy, picked him up carefully. He studied the grim features, rose red irises and smooth face, the pale skin and tight muscles; on the bloody hand closing the wound, he saw a familiar gold ring, one given to him originally by his mother, Deichtire, but which he had passed on to Aife before he left Emain Ablach, her isle. She had promised him then, all those years ago, that if she bore him a son, she would place that ring on the boy's hand and send him out to seek his father. That boy would have their combined skills and be the greatest warrior in the world. The years had all but erased this memory, many battles had buried it. Cú Chulainn stared into the wide dark eyes and said, "Connla."

The boy mustered a smile. "Father," he answered.

Cú Chulainn could feel his heart fragmenting inside his chest. He waded in from the ocean, and must have climbed the bank because he found himself face to face with Conchovor. "This—this is my son, Connla, from Emain Ablach," he said.

"Noble warrior," Conchovor replied.

Connla tried to smile again and made a small salute to the king. "I might have won you the world had it not been for the rocks on this coast."

"You joke like your father," Conchovor said, but sullenly.

Cú Chulainn carried the boy to Conall, who was weeping for his loss. "This man," he told his son, "is the finest warrior in Ulster."

“Not today,” said Conall. “Today it was this lad.”

Connla saluted him also, but could not speak. His lips had grown dark. He shivered in his father’s arms. Cú Chulainn went to every member of the party, to Laeg, to Cuscraid and Condere, and at last to Emer. “Connla, this is my wife.” The boy did not move. “She’s called Emer the Riddler, and—”

She touched his hand. “He’s dead, Cucuc.”

Her husband said nothing. He moved on past her in a dreamy sort of stroll, down the slope and out beyond the chariots. Emer could neither follow him nor share his burden. Her time with Cú Chulainn had produced no children. She saw him distantly and thought forlornly that she would never see him any other way again.

Conall came up, held her shoulders and turned her to him so that she might hide herself while she cried.

INTERLUDE FOUR



Dear Lord,

I did not sleep last night. The power in Torpeist's last tale seems to have crawled into my soul while I wrote it down, and a sense of looming tragedy follows me now like my own shadow or some ancient ghost. At the end of the telling, his voice kept cracking and he looked more withered than I've ever seen him. I set down my stylus and said, "Why do you hurt so much from this old story?"

The old poet's gaze shifted from the distance of a recitation and came to rest upon me as if I'd just entered the scriptorium. "He saluted me, too," he explained, "that's why. He knew I was there beside Laeg, an observer, not even his own kind, not even 'there' for the others. But he saluted me. Connla's heart was big enough for all of us.

"I followed along and watched Cú Chulainn build a cromlech over the body. I heard the ritual, shared the grief no one else could share. For all that, I could do nothing to help him. Out of time—I couldn't touch him. He sat there, sliding toward madness, and all I could do was watch the ground crumble away beneath his feet. I did then the only thing I knew to do in that situation."

"What was that?" I asked him.

"I ran away, I fled—from him, from the tales. Back to the ring of stones where Laeg brought me through time."

I had heard him mention these twice since his arrival and both times scoffed at him. Lord, I did not scoff then. It was as if those stones stood right outside. I believe if I had gotten up from the table and stepped out, I would have found them arranged in the yard beside St. Molaise's oratory. If the old man is mad, then I fear so must I be, because I've begun to doubt my doubts.

I put away my writing tools and was about to stick the parchment in its hanging satchel when the silver work on our *cumtach* flashed at me, and I stopped. For a moment I had an overwhelming desire to take the redeemed

leaves of his story, open the lid of the *cumtach*, and put them inside. I stared at the words inscribed in the oak: "Prayer and blessing of Brother Martin on all of Innishmurray for whom this shrine was built." Only sacred writings can go inside that box—the *kerlowe* of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is in there now, the manuscript from the Bishop of Seville that describes the seven liberal arts—but I actually in that moment considered Torpeist's words as sacred as any of these. Oh, God, I banished this desire the instant I realized what I was saying. I stuffed those pages in the satchel and ran from the scriptorium. I ran to the Abbot—he who built the *cumtach*, no less!—and confessed everything that had happened and what I had felt and why. He considered me curiously, without anger or the reprobation that I had half-expected. As if he were seeking something in me. Almost sadly he told me that I must circle the island tomorrow and do penance at our holy stone shrines.

I fail to comprehend this leniency. I do not understand Torpeist. God, I do not understand myself.

V. FAND

1. A History of Birds

In the life of Cú Chulainn birds had played a significant part. They had heralded his birth, when the god Lugh turned his mother into a bird and flew away with her; birds had led Conchobor and his warriors to her the night Setanta was born; birds had been the form taken by the sons of Eís Enchenn, whom Cú Chulainn had defeated on Emain Ablach during his training.

Once, not long after the infamous cattle raid, Lugaid mac Nois, king of Munster, came to Muirthemne Plain to visit Cú Chulainn and Emer, and birds had involved themselves in that. Lugaid drank and sang with his hosts and with Laeg mac Riangan and a lovely *cumal* who was his lover. Lugaid, a single man amidst these two couples, fell into a depression that grew under the influence of drink. He longed for the deep devotion he found between Emer and Cú Chulainn. They listened to his sadness but could do nothing for him except share his loneliness.

The next day he and Laeg and Cú Chulainn went out hunting. The afternoon was warm, the hunters still somewhat clumsy from the previous night's inebriety. When two birds passed low overhead, Lugaid gave a shout and pointed at them, then began to run after them, tripping and stumbling through the gorse that covered the hillside. Laughing, Cú Chulainn loaded his sling and pursued the two birds, quickly outdistancing Lugaid. He threw his stone true from the top of the hill, and one of the birds dropped from the sky. Laeg, supporting Lugaid, caught up, and the three men went down the hill together; but as they reached the bottom, the uninjured bird swooped down beside the other. That bird transformed before their eyes into a woman with dark red hair and pale skin. She wore the collar of a bondsmaid, and she stood in their path to keep them from the other bird. Because of its wound, it changed more slowly than she, into another woman. This woman's hair was as red as a sunset and her skin golden like bronze.

"This is Devorgill, my mistress," explained the bondsmaid. "You've killed her, I fear."

The three warriors sobered at the thought of what they might have done. They had harmed a Sidhe woman. Aghast at their own folly, they approached, tossing aside their spears and slings. Cú Chulainn stepped around the Sidhe *cumal* and knelt beside Devorgill. Gently, he drew down her cloak to find that the stone had lodged beneath her breast. He bent down, placing his mouth against the wound, then began to suck at it until he had drawn the stone out. With the fairy woman's blood on his lips, he lifted his head and spat away the slingstone. Lugaid tore a strip from his cloak and gave it to Cú Chulainn, who tied it around her torso to protect the wound. He bound her ribs tightly, then sat back on his heels to wait and see if his ministrations would save her. She soon recovered consciousness and, upon seeing his smooth face, made a weak effort to smile.

"You've drunk my blood," she told him. "Now you're tied to me. You're a lovely one to be tied to."

Cú Chulainn blushed and wiped his lips. "I couldn't have you die by my hand."

With his help, Devorgill sat up. She saw the other two men staring at her but did not feign embarrassment. "This bandage, it's yours?" she asked Lugaid, and he nodded. She turned back to Cú Chulainn. "Yours is so beautiful a face, I could easily love it. Only ... now we're brother and sister by blood—now you're more than mortal." He refrained from telling her that he had already been more than mortal. She sank back and fell asleep.

Her *cumal* smoothed her hair and looked down upon her forlornly. The three men thought to leave but the bondsmaid said, "She's fiercely lonely, my Devorgill, and she would so gladly seek one such as you, sir, for her own. Are you ...?"

Cú Chulainn shook his head. "I am married already to the best woman in Ulster. It cannot possibly be. But perhaps my good friend Lugaid, whose colors she wears so close to her heart, would care to contemplate such a matter with her."

Lugaid turned beet red.

"You don't want her?" asked the slave.

"Of course he does," answered Laeg, "or at least the chance to find out if he does. When next he locates his tongue, I'm sure he'll say so himself. He's a very great fellow, too—king of a whole province."

When Devorgill awoke, she found Lugaid mac Nois at her side. He carried her to his chariot and took her to Cú Chulainn's house, where the others had gone while she slept. Emer had a place made up for her from soft rushes, furs, and pillows, and she stayed there two days, with Lugaid waiting on her in place of her slave. Cú Chulainn and Laeg recounted stories of Lugaid's triumphs, and a few stories of his more embarrassing moments as a foster-child in Ulster. Emer related the tale of how Lugaid

had almost married her. In bed, later, Emer reflected upon how so fierce and blustery a warrior as Lugaid could become so docile and tender. This was, of course, one of the many reasons why Emer loved Cú Chulainn, though he probably did not realize it.

When the two days were up, Devorgill and her bondsmaid climbed aboard Lugaid's chariot and went with him to Munster. She became that province's queen before the month was up, and they remained together every day after that, confiding everything, seeking advice on every problem, and losing themselves in each other's eyes. Devorgill aged alongside him; she had traded her immortality to be with Lugaid and she never regretted the choice.

The next time birds entered the life of the Hound of Ulster was shortly after the murder of Connla; it was an event that began as a hopeful attempt to raise his spirits, but it took quite a different, and devastating, turn.

2. The Women of Ulster

On a promontory near his stone stronghold at Dun Dealgun, Cú Chulainn spent his days in solitude after killing his son. Both Emer and Laeg attempted conversation with him, but these remained virtual monologues. Conchovor sent messengers to Muirthemne, and Emer told them dolefully that nothing had changed, that her husband remained downcast and listless, mired in his sorrow. The king resolved to find a cure for his nephew's melancholy.

An early, crisp spring had arrived and with it huge flocks of birds returning to the warming clime. One evening Conchovor overheard some of the women of Emain Macha saying how much they would like a beautiful bird for a pet, and a thought occurred to him that if anyone could grant them their wishes, it was Cú Chulainn. He knew that he could not go to that fort in Conaille and ask this because the young warrior would doubt his sincerity in the matter, thinking it to be the ploy that in fact it was; instead Conchovor sought out Levarcham the Satirist.

She had returned to Ulster after many years spent in the other provinces. Even so, she avoided the king, having played no small part in the war that, years ago, had split Ulster in half. However, the king knew little of her complicity. He had long ago taken the burden of guilt upon his own shoulders.

Levarcham was an old, bent-backed creature, far more wicked in appearance than in truth. She loved many of the things about Ulster and the hilltop fortress above Emain Macha despite the satiric verses she had invented about the province. One of the things she loved most was Cú Chulainn, and Conchovor counted on that.

As he hoped, knowing full well of the Hound's misfortune, she accepted the assignment. He saw her provided for with bread and honey mead, and she set off that afternoon, hobbling across the quiet playing field toward Midlauchair Road, which would take her south into Cú Chulainn's domain.

When she arrived at his round house, Levarcham could see sheep grazing on the slope where Cú Chulainn had first met Finnabair, as well as a single figure that sat off alone above them. Emer came out from the house grinning. She embraced the Satirist and made Levarcham welcome there. This was the main reason why the Satirist cared so deeply for Emer and her husband. In most houses, a satirist gained admittance and a niggardly meal simply because the inhabitants lived in fear of the power of her vitriolic wit; but satires had no lingering effect upon Cú Chulainn, and Emer could weave a riddle around any jibes, so the presence of a satirist in the house held no terror for either of them and they treated her as few others did: as a friend.

Emer spoke with her, saying, "He stays up there through light and darkness, dry and wet, his mind so hermetic that his body doesn't notice discomfort. His eyes are like two pine casks with all the wine drunk, and his drained soul stares out across the curving plain below, where once the armies of Cruachan camped. He thinks at once of flowering and fading, and survives in the past—retreats because he can't see any way to go forward." Upon hearing this, Levarcham wasted no time, but trudged awkwardly up the hill to where the small figure in the white, hooded robe sat beside a leafless tree. She sat with him. He did not acknowledge her. She told him that she thought he should do something, that he needed to perform some deed to rekindle his energy. She explained how she had overheard the women of Emain Macha wishing for birds, and that he was the perfect candidate to fulfill those wishes.

Cú Chulainn scanned the desolate plain and said, "I don't perform tricks on the practice field at Emain Macha anymore. That was another Hound, a much younger one, whose life was free of care and whose deeds had yet to be born. Let the birds fly free."

"But Cucuc," Levarcham pleaded, "the women of Craebrud are also plainly in love with you. They don't know it was another Hound who did great deeds—they think it was you. They ask for the birds as much to receive them from your hands as to have the birds in theirs. If you fail to comply, you'll hurt them deeply who have never thought badly of you."

"Well ..." He huffed. "I suppose I can't do that. No, I wouldn't wish to hurt them, when they've been so good to me. Let's go and see what Laeg says to all this. I'll do whatever he instructs."

The charioteer's reply was to harness the two magical steeds Cú Chulainn had captured. He brought the chariot around to the front of the house and stood proudly between its rails.

Cú Chulainn turned back to Levarcham. "They do love me?"

“Every one of them without exception.”

He seemed satisfied by her reassurance and climbed pensively aboard the chariot.

When Laeg had driven them down out of sight, Emer took Levarcham by the arm. “Dearest old word-witch, you must tell me now what program you’re participating in. No, don’t try to protest any innocence, not to me. Unravel the thing or you can sing for your supper somewhere else tonight.” She pushed her fists up under her chin and stared determinedly at the Satirist, who saw that Conchovor’s plan must embrace a new conspirator.

On the field of Emain Macha, the women of the fortress gathered at Conchovor’s request. They leaned or sat upon a low stone wall that divided the chariot racing course from the practice field. Many of their children played out on the field, but most of these were toddlers, the eldest of the batch being seven years old. Before the *táin bo Cuailnge*, many hundreds of children of all ages had played and drilled on that field; that skilled mass of children had been called the Boy Troop, and they had all perished during that infamous cattle raid when the adults could not stand against the enemy. For years the practice field had been a silent, ghostly reminder of overwhelming loss. Only in the past few years had children returned, breathing life into the field with their giggling and shouts of excitement. The mothers of Emain Macha often sat on the wall, watching; however, today, their group included all the women of the fort.

They chattered busily about Conchovor—how he had insisted they wear clean tunics, lots of jewelry, and their bright *brata*, the wool cloaks of many colors they wound around themselves. None of them understood his urgency, but, then, none of them had been present when the exhausted messenger sent by Levarcham had arrived.

After a time, a rumbling like thunder thrown off by heat lightning became audible above their conversation. It drew their attention out past the playing children to the hills beyond the plain. A wide chariot came into view. It dipped from sight, then came jouncing up again and rolled down onto the plain. The children stopped their playing and gathered together in a group. They saw a car of copper and bronze pulled by two huge horses: a proud black stallion and a powerful gray mare.

“Cú Chulainn!” exclaimed one of the older children. The women muttered the name excitedly and stood from the wall. They all knew of his misfortune, and his appearance here surprised them.

Laeg drove the chariot onto the racing course and paraded up to where the women stood, the horses trotting haughtily. Cú Chulainn jumped down as the chariot came to rest. He wore his white cloak with the gold spirals on the back. They saw the design plainly as he turned back to the car to

pick up the immense wicker cage that filled most of the space between the rails. White birds fluttered and cooed inside the cage.

“What’s this, Cú Chulainn?” asked one of the women. “Why are we all here?”

“Here on Eriu or here today, the answer’s the same,” he said wryly, “to receive joy into your lives.”

“Have you brought us joy?”

“Most certainly.” He opened the cage and took out a white dove, handed it to the woman who had spoken. “Here is joy for you.” He took out another. “And who else wishes this joy?” Another woman came forward. The dove stepped from Cú Chulainn’s hand into the woman’s cupped palms, making no attempt to fly off. “I’ve bewitched them with secret words from Emain Ablach. For each of you.”

The two women with doves bent down and kissed him. Cú Chulainn blushed and lowered his gaze, but he quickly removed another dove from the cage and gave it away, and did not flinch when rewarded for that. The women had found joy, as much from seeing him happy as from the birds. Soon the children surrounded them, and the plain lived with laughter and cooing; and in its center stood a young warrior who had slaughtered hundreds but who could as easily then have been one of those children, smiling shyly as if at some special secret.

Conchovor strode down from the fortress. He drew up beside Laeg to watch the festivity, leaned upon the chariot rail. “I think I can send word to Emer that her husband’s definitely on the mend.”

Laeg’s blue eyes sparkled waggishly, but he refrained from answering. Conchovor tripped off to send out a new messenger. At the same time as he passed through the lowest of the three fortifications, Cú Chulainn emerged from the crowd of women, his face smudged with *ruam* from the press of their cheeks and lips. He was frowning. “What can possibly be the matter?” asked Laeg.

“I’m short one bird. What am I to do?” He glanced skyward as if in hope of finding one overhead.

“Let’s hurry off and catch her one,” Laeg suggested.

Cú Chulainn set down the empty cage. “It will have to be special, to make up for the oversight. It’s Niamh who has no gift, and so dear a friend to Emer mustn’t be slighted.” He got up in the back of the chariot and gestured to blonde Niamh. “We’ll bring you back the finest bird in Ulster,” he called to her, then added puckishly, “so you’d better have your nest ready for us!” Niamh laughed and the women cheered him off as Laeg snapped the reins and raced the chariot back down the course.



3. At Swim, Two Birds

They drove southeast into the region called Cuib, seeing many birds but none to satisfy Cú Chulainn. Either the doves were too small or they were not white enough. Then, as Laeg steered the chariot through a ford, Cú Chulainn called out and pointed at two birds cutting straight across the sky in front of them. These birds had feathers of white and gold, the white so pure that it pained the eye, the gold shiny as Niamh's braids. Between the two birds stretched a long silver chain. Laeg eyed his friend in wonderment. "Can that be your father?" Cú Chulainn could not answer. He knew the tale of how his father had stolen his mother from Emain Macha by transforming himself and young Deichtire into birds, linked by a chain. The scene he beheld could have been a vision of his life unfolding, and this churned up his emotions, amidst which lay the disquieting speculation that Lugh Lamfada, his supernatural father, was about to create another hero. As he watched, not sure whether to raise a joyous cry or to scream in fury, the two birds swooped low across a cluster of shepherds' huts. Every person near the huts abruptly tumbled over. The animals in their pens wobbled on their forelegs and sank down to sleep as the shadow of the chain flowed over them. Softly then, a sweet song reached the chariot, a bird song as delicate as if its four notes were being trilled by two girls. "That isn't my father," Cú Chulainn said suddenly. "He would play a harp, never sing." His voice was full of anger, and Laeg looked at him in dismay, uncomprehending of the ire the two birds had raised in the warrior. "I'll have those two birds and no others. Let's be off, Laeg, now."

The horses charged at the gallop. The chariot rolled near the huts, and they could see the farmers' graceless, beamish faces. Even the sheep seemed happily entranced. Laeg called over his shoulder, "The song did this."

"Or else the shadow of the chain, because we two heard it and we're still standing, aren't we?"

"Unless we're dreaming, too. It's a subtle magic, whatever it is, and that worries me. You know, those two are obviously a set, not to be split up, when you need only one of them."

"I'll have them both," Cú Chulainn insisted.

Laeg's misgivings increased the longer the chase continued. The birds never slowed down and never sped up and were always just a hill away, just out of spear-shot. Everywhere they passed habitation, the people had fallen into that same pleasant sleep and, though the song periodically floated back to them on the wind, neither Laeg nor Cú Chulainn fell victim to it. Worse for Laeg, his friend's inflexible determination seemed to increase with every hill they crossed. Foam bathed the horses and the sun crossed

the sky. They crossed through Focherd and Conaille, districts in which great combats of the *táin* had been fought. That they were passing places of former slaughter vexed Laeg all the more and he tried subtly to slow the team and lose the birds; but the birds slowed when he slowed, refusing to escape. On and on, further south they went, until the wide channel of the Boyne River came into view across the hazy, glaucous landscape.

The birds turned then, to circle over the water. Their song rang as clearly as tinkling bells tied in the braids of a woman's hair.

Cú Chulainn rashly cast his sling. The stone sailed wide of the mark, frustrating him. He took a long throwing spear from where it lay strapped against one rail, jumped out as if into the thick of battle, and ran to the river. At the bank, he hurled the spear with all of his might. It shot straight through the wing of one of the birds and spun on across the sky as if the bird had been a phantom. But the bird twisted in the air and dropped toward the water, pulling its mate behind it by the silver chain. Sunlight flashed off the bright links, blinding Cú Chulainn. He squinted behind his hand to see the two birds spiral down into the river, vanishing beneath it.

Cú Chulainn put his hand to his head. Suddenly, he felt dizzy, sleepy. He tried to turn back to Laeg but sank down in a stupor. His head lolled and he could not find the strength to raise it. The clouds overhead seemed to rush across the sky, as if he were besotted and his eyes rolling. He could not look at this, but squeezed his eyes closed, and in a moment fell asleep.

Laeg ran up, yelling, "Oh, you simpleton, you pig-headed fool, Cucuc. I warned you—I knew there was something wrong about all this." He kicked Cú Chulainn. "Wake up!" When this elicited no response, Laeg sank down and slapped him across the face. It was like striking clay: the skin had gone plastic and lifeless. Laeg lifted him, shook him, called him names and belittled his deeds, but Cú Chulainn did not stir. Nothing was going to awaken him.

Two women rose up as on invisible wings out of the glassy smooth waters of the Boyne. In this dream the river had turned indigo and the olive-green of the landscape had tripled in its intensity, a brightness that pierced like a cacophony. Cú Chulainn sat up in his dream to greet the women. They were, he thought, of a beauty not of this world. The one nearest him had hair like a waterfall, almost as colorless as water. She smiled knowingly to him, as did the other now that he looked at her. Their smiles invited him lewdly, aroused him, causing him to anticipate a lingering dream of rich pleasures in their arms.

As the two women reached the shore, they floated on over the bank to surround Cú Chulainn. Still grinning lasciviously, they produced two solid yew staffs out of thin air. He looked on helplessly, uncomprehending. The two women began to beat him. The pain staggered him, the blows cut like knives. He tried to fend them off, but everywhere the staffs struck, his

muscles lost all vitality. Before he could stand, the women beat his legs and feet, his arms and head, his genitals and his eyes. He writhed until his whole body suffered from the inflicted paralysis. Blindly trapped in utter torpor, he could only endure the inconceivable pain, never knowing from one instant to the next where it would strike. It might have lasted an eternity for all he knew.

When his senses returned, the women had disappeared. The bright colors of the world had also faded to normal, but a roaring like that of a waterfall continued to plague his hearing. He discovered Laeg sitting beside him.

Laeg gripped his arm. "Cucuc, are you all right?" The words were discernible but muffled by the roaring in his head. He tried to reply but found his mouth slack. It took all of his will to slur, "Had a dream."

"Here, stand up, I'll help you." Laeg tugged at him, but Cú Chulainn could not stand. His feet dragged in the dirt; his knees would not bend. "By Lugh your father, what's happened to you?"

"Take me ... Emain Macha. Emain Macha now."

"Yes, all right, all right. I'll get the chariot. Don't move," Laeg ordered.

He would have laughed if he could have.

Laeg ran hysterically for the chariot and drove it beside the river. He dragged Cú Chulainn up onto the boards and folded him into the back of the car. He recalled the time the Bodb had struck down Cú Chulainn during the cattle raid, leaving him in a not dissimilar state. A dream, he wondered, what dream could it be? Might the evil Morrighu have played some horrible trick upon him again? Laeg could not guess, and he cast his thoughts ahead to Cathbad and the other Druids learned in the arts of dream and enchantment. He could only hope they would have the answer, the cure.

4. Dream Therapy

Laeg did not want Emer to learn of Cú Chulainn's infirmity, believing as he did that the lethargy would be arrested naturally and his friend returned to his former immeasurable strength. All of the women gathered on the field saw them return, but the king and his *brithemain* enjoined them from breathing a word of it outside the fortress. Nevertheless, within days, Emer knew, and the fault lay with no one.

So closely bound to her husband, Emer had begun to waste away. Her eyes became ringed with darkness as if she had not slept, and she could not make them open all the way. Her grip weakened. She could neither weave nor grind grain in her quern stone. Her normally light gait became a stricken shuffle. She reasoned that something terrible had happened to

Cú Chulainn, and that she must find him before this dissipation drained the last of her energy. She harnessed a team to her chariot—which took her half the day—and, with the reins wrapped around her forearm, drove north to Emain Macha. She could not stand, but knelt behind the horses, glad that they knew the road and needed little coaxing. She could hardly raise her head. Arriving at the fortress, she had to be lifted from the car and carried up the hill.

Emer was brought into Craebruad, through the spiral maze to a room one remove from Conchovor's own at the building's heart. When they saw Emer, the king, Cathbad, and Laeg's already haggard faces became grimmer. Cathbad administered to her, prodded the muscles in her arms, thumbed up her heavy eyelids. Her hair had turned stiff and brittle. He took a forked willow wand and held it over her. The wand tugged at his hands, drawn by the spell at work. "What can this be that cuts him so low and has the power to drain her through him?" Cathbad pondered aloud.

"What can you do for him?" Emer asked.

"Nothing," the Druid replied glumly. "Potions I've had made, powders ground from the most sacred herbs, effect no cure. I covered him in a layer of mistletoe." He lifted the blanket to show her the curled leaves and waxy golden berries. In that instant, the forked wand pulled free from under his arm and appeared to leap the distance to Cú Chulainn before Cathbad snatched it up. "Emer, I've used every curative known or supposed in *Druidecht*, and nothing has the least efficacy. You, I might be able to aid."

"Please," she answered. Cathbad went out.

She reached up to Laeg and he lifted her, took her over to sit beside her husband. His cheeks had fallen in like those on an entombed corpse. His thin beard had turned gray. Under their closed lids, his eyes rolled, and occasionally some muscle in his frame would twitch.

Cathbad returned with a wooden bowl brimming with a dark red liquid. "Drink it all," he instructed her.

She obeyed him, expecting some hideous concoction; but it tasted sweetly of honey and fruits she knew—hips and sloes. When she had finished, she felt somewhat restored and gestured to her husband. "Cathbad, why do his eyes roll so?"

"Ah. He is entangled in an unceasing dream. Nothing we do here so much as draws him away from the phantasms, whatever they might be. Frankly, I'm stumped."

"I would never have known," Laeg muttered to Conchovor.

"I wonder what you're dreaming at, my love," Emer said, and brushed her hand across his ashen brow.

"That," replied Cathbad softly, "would be good to know."

He lay in a ruby chamber, the room where his dreams began, out of which they emanated. It had become his home. Somewhere beyond it he could hear a rhythmic, susurrant sea. A man came walking into the red light, a strange man with a pudgy body even smaller than Cú Chulainn's, but with a head three times his size. The man's gait was from side to side, his shoulders rising and falling with each step. Intuitively, Cú Chulainn recognized him as a *grogach*—a Sídh wizard. The *grogach* drew up by his feet and stared down at him diabolically, the enormous lidless eyes in the potato of a head seeming to cut into his marrow.

"Let me have your sandals," the *grogach* purred.

"They're yours," whispered Cu Chulainn. He could not stand anyway.

The great, round, fuzzy head rotated on its scrawny chicken's neck like a top balancing on its spindle. The lips gleamed. The creature pulled loose the sandals, then laced them onto his own bony legs. He paused to admire the new apparel proudly. "You can be cured," the *grogach* said. "There's one has the power to restore you, Hound. She is called Fand. She is the wife of pelagic Manannán. You must seek her out, but watch that you don't succumb."

"To what?"

The *grogach* shrugged indefinitely, turned and clomped happily out of the room, lifting his feet like a giant stomping across a landscape.

Cú Chulainn did not lie alone five minutes—or so it seemed to him—before another visitor entered his dream place. This time it was a woman, all in white that seemed to shoot rays of light through the room, turning the red walls pink. She came up beside him and knelt there, placed her hand on his pale, fevered brow. He knew the touch somehow. He saw that her tunic had been woven from threads of silver. As he gazed up into her face, he discovered that her eyes, also, were white as silver.

"Are you blind?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "I see *more* clearly than most. My name is Liban. I'm come from Magh Mell, where I live on my husband's isle. Fand is my sister, Little Hound. Her husband, the sea god, has neglected her for some years now, cast her aside and concerned himself solely with himself. All of the sea reflects him. He sees himself everywhere, and my sister is barely a ghost behind his reflections.

"My husband's isle is under attack—there's war in Magh Mell. Your formidable powers would surely aid us, perhaps save us. If you come fight for me, then I'll pass you to Fand and you can become whole again. Only she can remove the malicious spell of the *Leanhaun Sídh* that has beaten you with enervation, because she is such a one herself."

"To dismiss you, I think, would be to invite death."

"He has been invited already. You had no say in it."

"I prefer to meet death on my feet," was his agreement to her terms. "But I would like to return to my world first, to see my wife. Can you give me that?"

“Yes, but briefly. I ask you to remember how you love her.”

“I do,” he replied, puzzlement in his voice.

“More than battle?”

“I must.”

“That we’ll discover, inevitably.” Liban stood with fluid grace and departed from his dream.

The room began to spin around him, a red whirl like that in a Druid’s *tarbfeis*, a blood-dream of the future. He closed his eyes and gripped the blanket tightly to ward off a desire to become ill. The spinning cut past his eyelids and into his head, dragging him with it, shooting up like a water spout. It threw him before it, into a tunnel of darkness. For a time he knew nothing.

When he opened his eyes, the room had not changed. A deep red darkness painted the walls in shadow. He was lying on his back and tried to sit up, found that he still could not move. He groaned, soul-sick. From the shadows around him, a figure raised itself. Firelight caught the features: Emer.

“He’s awake. Laeg, he’s awake!”

The room burst into activity. Someone kicked the coals over and threw on another block of peat. Flames blossomed to light the room. Behind Emer, Conchovor and Cathbad appeared, two towering shadows.

“Welcome back, nephew,” the king said, smiling.

“Thank you, uncle, but I can’t get up. I’m paralyzed still.”

Cathbad pushed the others out of his way and moved in to make his examination. He thumped on Cú Chulainn’s arms, his chest and legs, worked the joints. “There is nothing wrong,” he proclaimed finally. “Setanta, you should be able to get up.”

“Still—”

“You can’t get up,” Laeg finished jeeringly. “And why not, Cucuc? Are you so puny?”

“Laeg.” How the cruel comment stung him.

“But he’s right,” Emer argued. “Can you be so frail that a ‘nothing’ lays you out? If this were Macha’s Curse, you would defy its weight. Here you are, a feeble insect, frozen in your ‘nothing’ of amber. What do we do now, show you off like a piece of jewelry— ‘come see the great defender of Ulster as he finally appeared?’”

“Emer,” he said, nearly in tears, “and it’s for you I came back.”

She went to the foot of his bed. “Well, here I am—come get me.”

His face twisted in anger. He jerked himself up and lunged at her. He sprawled halfway there, his chin striking the straw mat, and lay staring at her feet.

“Weakling,” she called down at him. “Crawling bug.”

He growled and grabbed at her slender ankle. The shod foot of Conchovor stepped on his wrist. “Enough. Can you stand now?” The king grabbed hold of him. Emer came around the other side and helped lift him. While they held him up, he tested his legs like someone returned from a protracted sea voyage. Unsteadily, he took a few steps without support and sensed the strength flooding back through him—nowhere near his former might, but enough that he could move and not tremble. He hung his head and muttered, “Forgive me, Emer.”

From behind she put her hands on his shoulders and pressed up against him. “It’s all right. Anger was what you needed to fuel you. Laeg and I stirred your ashes. Now you’re up.”

He turned around. “I have to go—to meet with the woman in my dream.”

“What woman—the one who cursed you?”

“A *Leanbaun Sídh*e did this to me. No, the one who restores me is the one I have to go to. I made a promise to her, to go to Magh Mell and—”

“Dear one, *no*,” Emer interjected. A deep shiver crawled up her spine.

“I have no choice. This cure is only temporary, so that I could come back to you. If I don’t fulfill my bargain, I’ll be on my back again before the day’s over. On my word I have to go.”

“You mean *we* have to go,” Laeg chimed in.

Cú Chulainn hugged Emer to him, then left her, walking out of Craebruad with Conchovor and Laeg.

“What is happening?” Emer asked Cathbad, who had lingered behind.

The Druid rubbed his shaved forehead. “Complicated. It’s not a good sign when one gets invited to the afterlife before one’s time. In his dreaming he struck a bargain. It could be that to defeat the death laid upon him he must pass through death’s realm. Very delicate, tricky proposition that.” He brooded a moment longer, then became aware of her worry and gathered her small hands into his large, scarred ones. “Remember, though, that he bargained to come back to *you*. He’ll do so again.”

He will, she agreed silently, and she fastened her hope to that.

5. Into the Pleasant Plain

As they were climbing into the chariot, Cú Chulainn nudged Laeg aside and said, “Let me have the reins.”

“Where is it we’re going?”

“To meet this woman, Liban.”

“Yes, but where?”

Cú Chulainn closed his eyes. “I can see it. When we get there, I’ll know. I’ll tell you.”

“I dislike travel when I don’t know where I’m bound.” Laeg grabbed onto the rail for support as the chariot lurched forward.

He thought he knew every plot of land in Ulster but soon found himself being taken across alien plains. The hills became gray things barren of grass and trees except for some prostrate junipers, though where those crooked trunks found a place to anchor, he could not guess. The place called the Burren resembled this land, but the Burren lay on the coast of Connacht far to the west, near where they had raced with Lugaid. At the base of one of the larger gray humps, they veered onto a road, which led them up a tortuous course. Soon he could look down at the smaller hills. They reminded him of enormous barrow graves—graves made for a giant race, for the Fomoiri perhaps.

The top came into view, and a cairn like a nipple upon it. A woman stood beside the corbelled stones. Her tunic might have been snow. Her hair flashed like a spun gold torc around her brow. A chill ran down Laeg’s spine as they came nearer and he saw her pearl-like eyes.

Once stopped, Cú Chulainn got down stiffly; Laeg could tell that he was losing his temporary immunity to the arcane affliction. “Liban,” he said by way of greeting.

“I sense that you hesitate to trust me even now.”

“I do. Because I think you might be a *Leanbaun Sídh*, too. You and your sister might even be the two who beat me.”

“How can I prove otherwise?”

The Hound considered for a moment, then said, “Take my charioteer into your realm, show him what you’ve told me. His safe return will satisfy me on the matter.”

“Um—could I speak with you briefly?” Laeg said. “Lady, excuse us for a moment.” Whispering close by his friend’s ear, he said, “If you can’t trust her, how am *I* supposed to?”

“Your life is secure. It’s me they’re after. If she lies, I’ll come get you.”

“If she lies, you’ll be prostrate like one of those junipers down there and I’ll be trapped in the afterworld and nobody the wiser.”

“What choice have we?” Cú Chulainn winced and clutched at the rim of one wheel to hold himself up.

Laeg looked him over and sighed. “We have no other choice, of course. It’s one of the things that excites me the least about this venture. Here, now, sit and conserve your strength till I get back.” He walked over to Liban. “I’m Laeg mac Rianganabra and I have grave misgivings about you.”

“I am pleased to meet you, too.” She reached toward him. “You must take my hand. Once we enter the tomb, we’ll be in the otherworld. Do not let go of my hand there no matter what you see or think or feel. Do you understand?”

“We *could* go chained at the wrist if that would eliminate dangers.” He grimaced at the prospect ahead, then when she failed to answer he nodded that he was ready. With one last glance back at Cú Chulainn, he followed Liban into the cairn.



The sky was black although a fiery sun burned above, throwing sharp shadows across the land. In its sweep, the terrain might have been Eriu; but the grass shimmered as if coated with ice, and the trees were as silver as the woman's eyes ... only now as he glanced at her, Laeg saw that her eyes had become a radiant blue. He did not have long to marvel at this remarkable change. Liban led him directly in view of a house that took his breath away. It must have been three stories high and seemingly cut from one single, polished cylinder of stone. The doorway lay beyond the arches of a dozen shining fountains. Laeg watched each arch pass overhead, Liban drawing him along a pebbled path and through the wide doorway.

Inside, the walls shimmered like sunlight against the sea at dawn. Liban would not stop to let him bask in the light. She pulled him close beside her and held their arms pressed tightly together. They strode along like two monarchs. Laeg thought of Maeve and Ailell. Ahead, a strangely formed archway—one that had not been corbelled like the archways he knew—opened onto a corridor. Women clustered to either side of the path, and as he looked upon each of them, she bowed her head in shy greeting to him, a gesture of such innocence that his throat tightened from anxiousness. He felt compelled to go to one but could not have selected any one of them over another. The hall wound on and at every turn more women waited to greet him. Their voices rolled over him like waves of soft harp songs. "*For the sake of her you travel with,*" he heard them say, "*we welcome you.*"

"Who are they?" he asked.

"The legions of the *Leanbaun Sídh*. Somewhere among them are the two who struck down Cú Chulainn."

"If you let me go, I'd determine which two and cut them into stew meat."

"Oh, Laeg, if I released you in fact, all hundred and fifty of them would fall upon you and drink your life away. The only way through this gathering and this gateway is with a woman to protect you."

"It's not the way I'm accustomed to, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt." Her warning had shaken off the mesmeric draw of the women. "Where are all the dead warriors? The brave ones who I've known?"

"In another place, another region across the sea. Magh Mell has many parts. You may see some whom you know in the battle when it comes."

The corridor appeared to end ahead, opening on a vista of orange furze and more silver trees.

"Where are we going now?" he asked.

"To see Fand."

Laeg wondered how he would get through that winding tunnel of women if he had to escape; or how, for that matter, Cú Chulainn would get through to come after him.

With the greatest of effort, Cú Chulainn raised his head at the sound of footsteps approaching. Laeg was coming toward him from the opening in the cairn. Liban stood at the entrance, patient, radiant. Laeg looked a little harried.

“What did you forget?” Cú Chulainn asked.

“Excuse me?” said Laeg.

“Why are you coming back? I thought you were going to Magh Mell.”

“Is one of us going crazy? I just *did* visit Magh Mell.”

“But you’ve been gone scant seconds,” Cú Chulainn insisted.

“For you, scant seconds. For me, countless embrangled hours.” He glanced over his shoulder at Liban and muttered under his breath, “Time certainly flies when you’re having Fand.”

“What did you discover?”

“What?” Laeg reeled out of his reverie. “Discovered? Well, it’s a place so beautiful—the women, too—that a man might sacrifice a kingship to dwell there.”

“What, kill himself?”

“Even that is possible.” He gestured back at the cairn. “What she said is true. Her husband, Labraid, is king of an island there, which is under attack by forces commanded by Eochaid Juil, who claims the isle for himself by the questionable right of having ruled there once centuries ago. He’s enlisted the help of a Fomorian fiend named Senach the Unearthly, who can alter his shape at will and is utterly evil as his appellation would imply. I fear that Liban’s defense is no match for these two and their demonic force from *Breasail*. He has the whole dark of the sea slithering up against him. Fomoiri eels.”

“Just hearing you tell it makes me yearn for the energy to use the Gai Bulga again.”

“Then let me help you up and we’ll go there now.” He put his friend’s arm around his neck and drew him to his feet. “Come on,” he urged.

Cú Chulainn groaned at the effort but staggered along. They had covered half the distance when he said, “What can you tell me of Fand? She’s the one who’ll cure me, according to her sister.”

“I saw her,” Laeg replied.

“Very well for you, but I didn’t.”

“That’s just the thing. I can’t recall it. A few minutes ago I was saying her name—now the memory has left me. Almost as if she is too marvelous to exist in our world ... even in thought.”

They had reached the cairn. Liban supported Cú Chulainn on the side opposite Laeg, who said, “I can’t tell him about Fand.”

“Why can’t he remember her?” He grabbed the edge of the doorway and would not be drawn inside the tomb.

“He can’t recall her because his mind can’t grasp her fully. She transcends mortal comprehension.”

“This is a trick.”

“No.”

“I don’t ... my brain is so jumbled. Even my thoughts erode.” He clutched weakly at the charioteer’s arm. “You must think for me, Laeg.”

“Will you come this far and hesitate?” Liban asked pointedly.

“Laeg?”

“What choice is there, Little Hound? Refusal ... refusal makes death a certain thing.”

Cú Chulainn’s eyes throbbed and he could wring no further thoughts from his brain. “Go on, then. Let me walk in death.” He let go of the doorway, and the two from Magh Mell carried him into the land beyond life.

6. Solace

The burden of pain did not cross with him into Magh Mell, as if in Death no pain could exist. He strode the glassy ground, and scanned the impossibly black sky with sharp eyes eager for battle. How good it felt to be able to grip his spear, to stretch his legs as far as he could when he walked. Laeg and Liban had to race to keep up with him as he crossed beneath the fountains and entered the twisting corridors to her isle. The *Leanbaun Síðbe* came out to see him. He remembered that two such had caused his plight; but though he boldly stared into each set of strange blue eyes, he found none that looked back with obvious guilt. The line of women tapered off. He saw an exit ahead and was making for that when Liban said, “Wait.”

He and Laeg both reacted with surprise. “The *isle*,” Laeg insisted.

“You and I go there directly. Cú Chulainn leaves us and travels down the left-hand corridor here. Fand waits for him at the end, with a special welcome that’s his alone.”

Laeg became agitated by her revelation. “You tell me this is a place without lies, then how is it I still can’t recall her, can’t warn him of the danger?”

“There is no danger for a *fír fer*,” Liban replied elusively.

“A ‘true man’—then I’ll fear nothing so long as the sea doesn’t cover the land. Laeg, I’ll see you soon.”

“Cucuc. . .” He stopped himself from further argument. His friend’s renewed strength had made him bold, cocky and, to Laeg’s mind, foolhardy. No argument would work. “I’ll wait for you with Labraid.”

Cú Chulainn turned his back on them and walked alone down the corridor. Jessamine, sweet and pungent, burst like a rain shower upon him. A silky crimson curtain hung at the end. He drew it back without hesitation and entered her domain.

The room, as large as Craebruad with its many rooms, was strung with threads like silver cobwebs overhead. Beyond them, the ceiling was lost in the smoke that Cú Chulainn suspected to be the source of jessamine. Steps led down to the floor, which looked freshly covered with clay. So far he saw no one else in the room, but he sensed someone watching him. He crossed beneath the strands. They caught the flash from his spear, flickered like lightning. Peripherally he saw movement, dropped into a crouch and spun on his heel with the Gai Bulga ready to stab. He saw that he was about to stab his own reflection and rose out of the fighting stance to observe himself full-length. Unlike most mirrors, this one hardly distorted his image; but strangest of all was that it revealed the rainbow glow over his head that the Druids called “The Hero Light.” This perplexed him, because the Hero Light never appeared unless he was about to be grotesquely transformed by the Warp Spasm. He studied his physique in the mirror, expecting to see a sudden swelling under the skin, a leg twisting, his hair curling up into spikes. None of these things occurred, and the rainbow remained.

Then, through the thick smoke behind him, she appeared. He continued to watch in the mirror. Her hair might have been the sun, her skin pink marble. Her blue eyes shone as Liban’s and the women’s had, only much darker, nearly ultramarine. She wore no tunic but a deep violet *brat* folded and draped to reveal glimpses of her—the curve of one breast, the smooth line of her hip and the soft hair upon her thigh. He could hardly swallow from the glorious reflection and feared of trading the image for the reality of Fand. How could anyone, even a god, have cast aside this goddess?

She had a wide, full mouth. “When my husband cast me aside,” she said, “I retreated from my world, coming to my sister. She told me I should look in the mortal world for something to concern me, though it was entertainment to take my thoughts from Manannán that she meant. Many of the women in Magh Mell have taken lovers from your world—it’s an ancient tradition,” she said. “I came here to dwell among my sisters.” He considered vaguely that this generally did not benefit those lovers, but said nothing, unable to find his voice. “I sought a warrior, and it mattered little to me then, you must understand. I had wrapped myself in melancholy—a great web of it. Then I saw you. A battle, a long battle, in which you fought alone against a multitude. I watched you and I forgot that I was wallowing in loneliness. You were not what Liban meant me to find—

you were much, much more. The web—you can see for yourself what happened to it.”

“Fand ... what does that name mean?”

“It’s Manannán’s word for a tear which flashes upon the eye before it falls.” She reached toward him.

“I don’t know that I can move.”

“Then I shall come to you.” She began to spin, as if in a set dance, slowly to him. Seemingly hooked somewhere in the smoke, the *brat* unrolled from her, and when she crossed between him and the mirror she was naked, alabaster white, alabaster smooth. Her nipples and her lips were incarnadine. “I have loved you for these seven years without touching your life, without a hint of how I felt, and you would not have known of it if the curse hadn’t been laid upon you.”

“You can remove it.”

“I have done so already.”

“Thank you. What now?”

“Now I would make love with you.” She cupped his face in her dry, cool hands as if to drink from him. His spear, the barbed Gai Bulga, clattered on the floor.

In Labraid’s house Laeg was made welcome. He admitted to his hosts that he had never tasted pork more sweetly glazed or drunk apple wine of such piquancy. The cups and platters, all of hammered gold and bronze, depicted creatures from some foreign mythos: sphynxes, lions, and other beasts of imagined beauty. Nevertheless, in spite of the splendor, he remained agitated. Labraid—his red beard woven strangely into two woolly columns bound by gold thread—insisted that the women could mean Cú Chulainn no harm with a battle approaching that might devastate their realm without the famous Hound of Culann to fight it; but his glib assurances failed to settle Laeg’s nerves either.

When that same Ulidian warrior finally appeared, Laeg leapt up and ran through the house to greet him. Cú Chulainn stood beside Fand, and Laeg stopped short. A moment of uncomfortable silence passed where Cú Chulainn seemed to have to search for recollection of Laeg before breaking into his usual warm smile and opening his arms to embrace.

“You are all right?” Laeg asked.

“Of course—shouldn’t I be?”

“Well, I had doubts ...” He glanced sidelong at Fand. He remembered his session with her upon seeing her again: memory of a woman lost in an obsession.

“You always have doubts.”

“True enough, but there’s usually a valid reason.”

Cú Chulainn chuckled. “Not this time. Now, where’s this king whose isle needs me?”

Laeg led them through the wide, airy house—more like a fortress, with all of its chambers—and into the room where Labraid sat upon a stool, surrounded by food and wine. “You must be beside me,” Labraid insisted, “because you’re to be my champion on the field.”

Cú Chulainn replied, “I’ll gladly comply, but afterwards. If you don’t mind, I’d like to fight first. Then I’ll consider that I’ve earned the honor and the meal.”

Labraid pursed his lips thoughtfully. “To battle, then,” he said and started to get up, but Cú Chulainn said, “No, I’ll go alone to do this work. I’m not one who joins in with the others, as my charioteer can attest. Simply show me where the enemy waits and I’ll do the rest.”

“I’ll come with you,” Laeg said.

“What will you drive? We haven’t a chariot here. This is to be done on foot, with stealth, and it’s always easier for one person to be quiet than for two.”

“This way, then,” Labraid directed. They went out. The king’s calls sailed back into the room—calls to muster.

Left alone with the women, Laeg hunched down over his mug of wine, ill-at-ease. Fand sat beside Liban at the other end of the dishes laid out. “You still have misgivings,” she said. Laeg glanced up, unsure as to who she asked this of. Both women were looking at him, and he had to reply.

“I do. Yes, he’s not harmed, not in a battle-wound sense of it. But the look in your eyes matches what was in his when he looked at me from the doorway: moon-struck. You’ve dazzled him without a potion or anything so conspicuous, but with your beauty, which admittedly could bewitch all the men of Ulster. You’re like Derdriu was—too much beauty for the eye to take in at one time.”

“Yet you can sit here and take me in, unaffected.”

“Hardly. I can look at you for seconds at a time, no longer than that. I imagine you even counted on my being overwhelmed. It’s my misgivings—my fears for him who you’ve enticed—that keep me from sinking under your spell again, though I have absolutely no doubt you could numb me again from there without effort if you found the need.”

Fand lowered her head. “You paint me in colors of pure evil.”

“You’re *Leanhaun Sídhe* and we’re your natural prey—what else did you expect? Absolute trust?”

“No,” she said. “But you make the mistake ... of not considering that he might have bewitched me, too, just as terribly and as certainly. What makes you think that only women cast spells?” Her voice trembled. Laeg considered that if this was a deception it was extraordinarily clever. And was it so unlikely, after all, that this fantastical creature, rejected and withdrawn, might fall in love with that warrior who played the heartstrings of all Ulster’s women like a divine harpist evoking a *gentraige*? Here was a new perspective he had never seen. He began to suspect that this situation might be more inextricably dangerous than he had previously supposed.

“Lady,” he said to Fand; but the weak dam broke before she could reply, and she burst into tears. Laeg went back to staring into his wine; the reflection wore a worrisome frown.

7. Decisive Battles

Once Labraid had left him, Cú Chulainn stripped down, then went scurrying across the silvery landscape. The crystalline grass waved at his passing. He came to places where the “Dark of the Sea” had swarmed, leaving behind ruins of stone and wide gaps where the grass did not glisten, drenched as it was in slime and black blood. The legendary Fomoiri were giants, and he expected to confront creatures as tall as the trees. He did not realize that in the afterworld all size might be relative and giants be made of all men.

When he first came upon the naked man washing in a secluded pool across the isle, he assumed he had come upon a survivor of the destruction heaped around them. The man’s back was to him.

A moment later, however, with Cú Chulainn creeping through a bank of rushes, a distant clash echoed, erupting through the sky like a frightened flock of birds. The bather hesitated in his washing, then turned from the shadows to face him.

From the shoulders down, Eochaid Juil had the form of a hairy man; from the neck up he was all goat: a long, whiskered snout; twisted, gnarly horns; round orange eyes with maleficent slit pupils. Unlike simple goats, Eochaid Juil wore a torc as thick as his neck and had regal rings fitted on his horns as on fingers. His fiery eyes fastened on the naked warrior in the reeds. His split muzzle drew back from his jagged, yellowed teeth and he toyed with one nostril as if it tickled him.

“What callow, sneaking killer might you be?” he brayed. “Come out and face me the way a real warrior would, providing you have the slightest inkling how a real warrior would act.”

Cú Chulainn emerged from the rushes. “What would *you* know of real warriors, nanny?”

Eochaid snarled. “Contempt, well, how bold. Throw your pretty point, bearded child. I’ll steal it and send it back to you with a better purpose. Come. Come.”

“I’ve never yet refused that kind of invitation,” Cú Chulainn replied and dropped the Gai Bulga onto the surface of the pool. He jumped out of the water with no more effort than taking a step, gripped the spear’s feruled butt between his toes and gave a snapping kick that shot the spear across the pond like lightning across a stormy sky.

Eochaid Juil barely had time to reach out before the spear sliced through his hand; the barbs hooked his palm and slammed it as in a salute against his chest. The spearhead penetrated to his spine.

“Well, well,” Cú Chulainn echoed the Fomorian’s derisive tone. “I see you’ve caught my point after all. Be good enough to send it back now with your aforementioned purpose. Why do you hesitate? What’s the matter? Did I get your goat?” Snickering at his own joke, he waded out to recover the spear himself.

Eochaid Juil’s body rippled suddenly as if it had turned to water. It reshaped before his eyes and changed into Connla. Cú Chulainn thought it was his own guilt becoming corporeal and he swung his head away, covering his eyes. The fear played too strongly upon him and he finally took his hands away. His dead son stood there still, pierced through. Then Connla came toward him, reached out his free hand as in supplication. Blood dribbled over his lip.

Cú Chulainn screamed in agony. He tried to back away and found that he could not move. This was not simple guilt, this had become something far more sinister—the water seemed to have frozen around him. “Stop!” he pleaded. The Fomorian phantom stumbled nearer.

Cú Chulainn strained back his head, his eyes wide in frenzy. Connla pushed up against him, the ferrule icy on his belly. Connla’s breath stank like rotting flesh. His lips drew back in an evil grin and he hissed his words. “Look at me, father, look at your handiwork. Poor semi-mortal, deceived fool. Did they think I wouldn’t find a weak spot in you? And yours so near the surface.” The child’s face grimaced in a sudden spasm of pain; the vision fell apart and the goat reassembled. Cú Chulainn, blubbering madly, began to shiver, then to vibrate. The goat’s head tilted back in malicious mimicking delight. The warrior’s hands knotted, his arms began to swell. Veins ballooned across his chest and his face distorted, one eye popping out, the other retreating. The brow unfolded over it, making him squint.

Eochaid Juil now tried to back away, but he had expended too much energy on his cruel illusion. The monster of the Warp Spasm became complete before him, grabbed onto his muzzle with knotted fingers of steel and in one sudden motion ripped the front of Eochaid’s face away. The Fomorian collapsed in the pool, his agony beyond description, his unending shriek inhuman. The hulking figure bent down, the fingers took hold of him again and picked him up in order to wring him apart. Bones cracked, popped, burst through, and the blood surged like seaspray.

Cú Chulainn the monster retrieved his spear, then lumbered off to find the battle. What remained in the pool might have been table scraps from a feast.

The army of Fomorians poured across the land, black-leather-clad figures in lofty, conical helmets. Seaweed garlanded them like tattered capes.

Their bestial eyes glowered at the approaching cauldron-revived force under Labraid's command; the acrid stench off them withered the crystalline grass. Neither his side nor that of the Fomorian beasts was prepared for the twisted monster that clumped into view against the black sky, spattered in blood, one huge eye bulging from its cheek.

The thing snarled, growled, raised his short spear high. He scanned the faces, seeing Connla under every helmet, until he spotted Senach the Unearthly. That huge head was too hideous to carry the ghost of Connla upon it. Senach's yellow eyes narrowed. The pupils were like black specks. He scraped a finger down one of his snaggle-teeth as he debated the appearance of this beast. Perhaps it was Eochaid Juil in a disguise of transformation to terrorize the natives. Yes, he decided, that must be it. With a last flick of his nail against his tooth, he turned his back on Cú Chulainn.

The enemy had rejected him, and the heat of Cú Chulainn's fury scorched his already crazed brain. He began to run, a shambling gait due to the one foot that had twisted around backwards below the knee. The mass of Fomoiri saw their leader disregard the monster. They tried to emulate him, but the creature did not veer off toward Labraid—it came right for them. They broke formation to face the hulking, swollen thing. Prepared as they were to meet him, their efforts failed utterly. Cú Chulainn, impervious to their weaponry, crashed into the heart of them. The cutting edge of his spear spun ahead of him, splitting a dozen heads. His other hand, hard as a tree root, snapped the tips from their swords before he snapped their necks. He tore them apart while bellowing to the sky, seeing Connla in every face. Senach the Unearthly leaped onto his back and bashed at him with a shield. Cú Chulainn flung off his rider, snatched away the shield as Senach fell. The Unearthly got quickly to his feet. Cú Chulainn shoved the shield against Senach's ghoulish face, then crushed the bronze in half like a clam shell around that head. Strings of blood shot up from the top.

The Fomoiri legions had been decimated. The survivors fled for their lives, pursued by Labraid's stalking force. But the Warp Spasm creature still saw his son's face everywhere and he began to slaughter them as they ran past. Labraid bellowed at him but this had no effect.

Laeg grabbed the king. "He'll tear us all apart. Retreat, draw him toward your house, but slowly, I'll need some time to prepare."

"You can stop him?"

"You had best hope so, because there's no one else who can." So saying, he retreated from the field.

Labraid signaled his warriors, retrieving those who had not already scattered in the face of the monster. Angrily, it shambled after them.

At Labraid's house Laeg ordered the warriors to bring out three large vats. He had everyone in the house including Liban and Fand to form a brigade stretching from house to stream. All the containers he could find were handed out, filled from the stream and passed along to the vats. While

they were doing this, Laeg stole the helmets off three of the re-animated Connacht warriors and hung one on each vat so that Cú Chulainn would have to climb into the vat to discover that no one wore the helmet. The vats had been filled and the helmets hung as the last of the warriors returned. The monster scraped along not far behind.

“This will work?” asked Liban.

Laeg replied, “It did once—but he was a *boy* then. Just do as I’ve instructed and have the Sidhe women ready for my signal.”

The twisted monster reached the first vat and swiped at the helmet as he crawled over the lip. Steam shot out of it the instant he touched the water—a huge cloud that hid him. The sides cracked and sprang apart, a great explosion of snapping boards that threw off pegs and splinters like darts. The steam cleared and there was the monster, its knotted fingers shredding the first helmet.

Laeg glanced at Fand and Liban. It was Liban who showed horror; Fand had witnessed the war with Connacht and knew already what he could become.

In the second vat, the water began to boil when Cú Chulainn tumbled into it. He bobbed up, roaring, and snatched the helmet from its perch to snap the horns off it before tearing the cap apart. When he crawled out, some of the water remained, only some of the boards had sprung apart, and the water steamed passively. His skin had turned bright red and blisters had bubbled up. However, the protruding eye had crept back up his cheek, and his feet both pointed forward. He lurched the few yards to the third vat and virtually fell in. They could hear him gasping. His hands swung up at the helmet until he knocked it off.

“Send them out now!” Laeg ordered. Liban stepped back inside the house and suddenly one hundred and fifty naked *Leanbaun Sidhe* came running out across the shimmering grass. All of them chanted the praises of the Hound of Culann. They approached the vat with fearful reluctance, but surrounded it as instructed, to find the pale dark-haired warrior they knew floating within, the dented helmet in his grasp. He stared up at the sky with abject despair in his eyes. Laeg came up and leaned over him, whispered his name, but received no response. Cú Chulainn looked through him—at what, he could hardly guess.

“This well exceeds the Warp Spasm’s effects,” Laeg told his hosts. “Some other property has taken hold of his soul. If we were in Ulster, I’d seek out Cathbad, but—”

“Let me take care of him,” Fand interposed. “Please.”

Laeg very nearly refused her, but saw that there were no alternatives at hand. He stepped aside, and watched distrustfully while the naked women lifted his friend’s body from the vat and carried it away. Laeg could not help but think that he was watching a funeral procession. Labraid tried to reassure him, and Laeg only half-listened, knowing the remorse his host felt, unable to work up enough compassion to deny it. “There doesn’t

seem to be a cure for his troubles,” he said, “that hasn’t a curse of its own to add.”

8. Emer’s Jealousy

Cú Chulainn stayed a month with Fand. Laeg remained in the house of Labraid without seeing his friend, encumbered by an oppressive sense of futility and dissociation from everything around him. Some of the Sidhe women came to Labraid’s house for the honor of lying with him. They kept him informed on the Hound’s situation. For weeks he remained oblivious of where he was or what had happened, and this news added further weight to Laeg’s dejection. Fand, they claimed, wept for him almost perpetually.

At the point where Laeg had relinquished any hope of ever leaving Magh Mell, the descriptions changed. Now Cú Chulainn took stock of his surroundings, replied when spoken to if only in fragments. Laeg listened to the reports, hardly daring to hope that Cú Chulainn might recover. The women, for their part, attempted to keep Laeg occupied, to keep him as free as possible from worry. They tried to keep him drunk, to which he succumbed easily. When they left, he would continue drinking, which they had not intended. He far exceeded the limit that brought joy, drinking on to where he could not think at all, believing himself safe in oblivion from concern and doubt.

One afternoon, as he lay beside a Sidhe woman, stupefied with wine, he saw Cú Chulainn enter the room. Certain this must be a phantom conjured from the rich liquor, Laeg continued to lie on his side, watching. The “phantom” handed the woman her linen tunic, then helped her up and escorted her from the room. Alone, he came and sat beside Laeg. He leaned over and peered at him eye to eye.

“You look dreadful. Your eyes are full of blood.”

“You ought to see them from *my* view.”

“Hmm. And your skin’s terribly ashen.”

“I’ve always been pale—even my mother said so.” He decided to sit up, but found the task beyond his ability. “Could you give me a lift?” he asked. Cú Chulainn grabbed his arm and pulled him upright. Laeg sighed, leaning back against a linen screen. “Besides,” he continued, “the cause of my decline is as plain as this mug—or at least its irreducible contents.”

“A cup that refills itself, eh?”

“I shall ignore that as I wish to make a point here. Which is, my misery is potent drink, and yours is a hidden decline, Setanta. My eyes might glow like Belenos’ at sunset, but your eyes are two black pools, the depths immeasurable. There used to be coruscating lights in the pools that danced

to show how much you could laugh. Those lights are gone. Fand ... Fand is a witch.”

“Then I am bewitched,” Cú Chulainn replied.

“Don’t you even wonder how Emer is enduring?”

“Emer ...” He pronounced her name like it was a word culled from his childhood.

“Your wife, who by now is desperate over our fate. We’ve been gone I don’t know how long—your recovery with Fand has devoured a month by itself.”

“What?” Cú Chulainn got to his feet. “It’s only been days, a few days.”

Laeg pushed his head against the screen, squeezed shut his eyes. “Oh, Cucuc, this is *Magh Mell*. Time is a treacherous, mutable illusion here. Think of what you’re saying, then think how many stories you were brought up on about the warriors who spent a night at a feast inside a *síd*, only to emerge the following morning to discover that their friends were all long dead, their children and wives a memory. And you—dearest Macha, you can’t even *remember* your wife.”

The Hound chewed at his knuckles. “Fand fills my head. She’s in every thought.”

“We have to leave this island. They’ve kept us apart under a pretense of good intentions—perhaps it’s even honest, but in another month you’ll be her slave completely and I’ll probably have drunk and diddled myself to death. A fine pair of legendary figures we are.” He reached out. “Here, help me stand.” He opened his eyes, and the room was empty. Blearily, he wondered how he could have dreamed such a thing. He glanced down at his arm and saw the red impression where Cú Chulainn had pulled him upright. Determined, Laeg tried to stand on his own, but his bones had been watered down by all the wine poured through him, and he fell on his face amongst the furs, into a thick, dreamless, drunkard’s sleep.

Cú Chulainn returned to Fand’s chamber. With every stride closer, his resolution fortified—he must get away from here or Magh Mell would soon own him. Laeg was right. Yet, when he called her and she faced him, all he could see was her face, the deep blue eyes brimming over with flashing tears because she had read his mind, and his voice caught. He wanted to beat at his head to drive her out, and at the same time he wanted to fill the world with her so that he would see her everywhere he looked. How was he going to live in Ulster without her? How was he going to live anywhere? He thought about the vows of marriage, ever changing, the Druid laws proclaiming that no marriage contract could be permanent and fixed when no one knew what the future held. Then, with alarming vividness, he saw Emer in her father’s garden, her hands cupped and offering him water in which to wash his hands—a symbol of her desire to marry him. He remembered how the water had splashed onto their feet, heard her voice answer when he joked that the bowl was too full. “*Too much isn’t possible, even when it’s overfull.*”

Now he was overfull, with Fand, and it *was* too much.

“When will you go?” Fand asked.

“Now. This hour.”

“Then ... at least will you lie with me once more?”

He could not think of a way to refuse her. She took his hands and kissed them as she led him to her bed. He shivered as though the Warp Spasm were about to take control of him.

As they made love, she asked breathlessly, “How can this happen to us? How will we live apart?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know. Why are you in my mind?”

“Because you’re in mine!” she cried, tears running from her eyes back into her hair. He buried his face against her, and their passion, wrenched from such desolation, quickly swept them past words.

Afterwards, he could not bear to remain there long. Yet, the more clothing he put on, the more he burned to remove it, as if it itched and irritated his skin. He wanted to dive into her arms again, kiss her breasts, smell her perfume and breathe her breath. He tried to leave and found that he could not take the first step up the stairs. Twisted beyond rationality, he swung about, not daring to look into her eyes across the chamber, and said in a rush of words, “There’s a place in Ulster called Baile’s Strand, near my stronghold at Dun Dealgun. It’s a place where the doorway between our worlds is thin. Come there in a—in three days. I’ll meet you.” The words released him. He bolted up and out. Jessamine smoke swirled after him.

Laeg he practically had to carry through the corridor of women. Liban led them, at her husband’s insistence. She knew that her sister loved the hero and guessed from the anguish on his face how much he loved her. Liban lamented the part she had played in this. If she could have kept him in Magh Mell, she would have, out of love for her sister. But a bargain had been made, and Labraid would see it carried out; her duty to him outweighed all other choices. The *Leanbaun Sídh*e bid the two men—the small, lovely one and the blissfully drunken one—farewell. When next they journeyed to Magh Mell, it would be in death.

They came out on the bleak gray hilltop. A harsh wind buffeted them as if trying to drive them back into the cairn. The chariot team looked so well tended that Cú Chulainn wondered if he had in fact passed a month in there. Had Laeg said that merely to spur him? He turned to ask Liban, but she was not on the hillside. The cairn no longer offered a doorway in its side. Laeg was squinting bemusedly at the daylight. He stirred himself enough to say, “Seems we’ve traded roles for our departure.”

Cú Chulainn hoisted him into the chariot and propped him against one of the copper sidescreens. “It looks that way, but I couldn’t have cured *my* problem with a simple belch.”

“Ho, very funny.” He fell over when the horses took off.

By the time they returned to Emain Macha, Laeg had been bounced in the direction of sobriety, but he had gained a throbbing headache in the bargain, a royal hangover that hammered hard at his better judgment and caused him to reveal to Emer the name of Fand and that fact that she was a *Leanbaun Sídh*.

Even had Laeg said nothing, Emer would have sensed the dramatic change in her husband. Seated cross-legged on the feast hall floor, he described for Conchovor and Cathbad the adventures that had befallen him in Magh Mell; he said nothing of the vision of Connla that had plagued him for fear that it would reappear in the words.

“At week’s end,” Conchovor said, “we’ll throw a feast for you two and you can tell all the warriors about it. What a thing this will be—a feast in honor of two peerless heroes who have now polished their reputations even more by venturing into the afterworld and returning unscathed. What a triumph!”

Cú Chulainn blushed suddenly and excused himself from their company. Emer got up after him.

Conchovor said, “What’s wrong with him?”

She answered, “The same spell as before—only its shape has changed.” She hurried after her husband.

“Well, there’s more in this than *I* can tell,” admitted Cathbad. “What this needs is elucidation, which we’re not going to get from those two.”

“Something’s in the works. How can it be, when they’ve only been back these few hours? I know what,” the king said. “Laeg will have the information, we’ll ask him.”

“A good idea that, and we’ll put it to the test—just as soon as he emerges from my hangover cure.”

“Well, when will that be?”

A bit sheepishly, the Druid replied, “Possibly as early as tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow!”

“Yes, it’s very well known how much more potent are the liquors of Magh Mell—potent enough to keep men prisoners of their own thoughts, potent enough to disguise the passage of time, potent enough—”

“—to make Druids babble an encomium to them.”

Cathbad arched one eyebrow at his son, but “Tomorrow,” was all he said.

It took in fact until the afternoon of the third day for Laeg to stir himself. By then Emer at least had discerned the complete hold Fand had upon her husband. In his sleep both nights, he muttered and twitched and called out to the woman. Emer listened intently to his ravings; she sat up and carefully coaxed more words from him until she heard of his meeting with the enchantress at Baile’s Strand. Unable to sleep once she had heard, Emer sat and plotted to destroy the spell and the sorceress who spun it. A meeting with a woman would not have been reason of itself for jealous

rage. However, never before in the time they had been together, had he kept anything from Emer.

That second day, while Laeg slept on, Emer gathered together fifty of the women from Emain Macha to accompany her to the strand. Only her friend, Niamh, refused. They would lie near the strand in wait and, when Cú Chulainn met with the Sidhe woman, they would surround the two. Then Emer would enter the circle and kill the woman. If that engendered some penalty of its own, she would somehow deal with that, too. In the night, she took a set of his small throwing darts—the deadly stingers called the *del chbliss*—and worked a spell of her own upon them. She would pit magic against magic. The *del chbliss* would now kill a Sidhe. Emer stared out at the sky shot with stars, attuning her bare spirit to the night gods that prowled, the gods most inclined to assist her in this. There would be no turning back.

9. The God's Cloak

Laeg's mind had cleared, his headache been erased. In its place was the more excruciating awareness of what he had revealed to Emer. Conchovor, in demanding further elucidation on the return from Magh Mell, provoked a fearful certainty in the charioteer that Emer would act against Fand. Conchovor announced in frustration, "I've fretted for nearly three days because of the dose that Cathbad gave you."

Now Laeg became aware of another memory that had been enclosed in apple wine—of Cú Chulainn telling him on the way back to Emain Macha of his planned assignation with Fand. "Three days," the warrior had said.

With no time to waste, he scrambled up and through the fortress, hoping as he pulled on his quilted leather trousers. He harnessed the Sickie Chariot team as fast as he could, with Conchovor calling out, demanding an explanation. The sun hung low in the afternoon sky, and he knew he had little time to head off disaster.

At the same time as Laeg spoke to Conchovor, in Magh Mell Labraid was receiving an unexpected visitation. Sitting before him in his house, a contrite Sea God confessed unwarrantable neglect of Fand. Manannán had allowed himself to be enticed by the *merrow*—like any male, mortal or god. His wife had simply drifted away, like a flower cresting the tide. Each morning saw him awake with the intention of returning to her, but each night saw him still entwined in the inviting arms of those mermaid temptresses. Now—his skin like gold, his beard the blue that is the last color to remain at depth in the sea, his ears rippled like two shells—Manannán

listened to Labraid and Liban describe how Fand had taken up with Cú Chulainn. The god's fish eyes looked away from them. "This shouldn't surprise me," he told them. "No one waits forever who has a soul worth having. She loves a hero, you say? I fear I've strayed too far and too long for any reconciliation. I had love. I wanted glorification. There was no love in it, just the *merrow* feeding off me, and now there's no love to be had. I think I shouldn't stay on your isle now—I wouldn't be good company. The sea is where I belong."

Liban had heard enough to realize that the god meant what he said about her sister. For that reason, she now told him where Fand had gone and why. "I don't say you can have her back, Manannán. I wouldn't promise you that she'll even look at you. What you might win back, I can't say—there's likely nothing for you. ... But that strand in the mortal realm is where she will be if you care enough to find her."

A gray sea sprayed Baile's Strand with its salty shower, the waves rising and falling on a stiff wind ridden by screaming gulls. Lavender twilight had barely set in.

Laeg leaned on the chariot rail, flanked by two upright spears that tapped against it. He had the reins wrapped around his wrist, but the horses knew they would be there for a while.

The first to arrive after him was Emer with her retinue of fifty. Emer carried a small satchel that was familiar to Laeg, that he had thought to be housed in the compartment directly below him. When had she removed those darts? While he slept of course. He condemned the apple wine of Magh Mell.

"Laeg." He heard his voice called from behind and turned to see Fand approaching. He could not fathom where she had come from, unless directly out of the surf. She was barefoot and her bright red skirts were dark around the ankle from the water ... but not the rest of her. She climbed up in front of the wheel on that side. The wind off the sea blew her long hair at him. "Why are you here? Where's Cú Chulainn?"

"You have to get away. Go back by what means you came, and quickly." He glanced over his shoulder. Emer and her entourage had navigated the grassy slopes down, and they marched straight for him like he was a beacon.

"Who are they?" Fand asked.

"That's Emer in the lead. The rest are women of Emain Macha taking her cause to heart, here to bury you. I've no inkling of what's kept Cú Chulainn."

As if to answer him, a short, dark-haired figure leaped from under the yew tree above, sailing in a tight somersaulting ball over the women, landing right in front of Emer. At his full height he stood no taller than his wife. "What's this you're doing?" he demanded to know. "What's ... my

darts in that bag.” He took in the chariot and its two occupants. “I see now. You’d kill her with my weapons, disgrace us both.”

She stared him down, refusing to say anything.

“Why now? When Finnabair came to us after the great *táin*, you weren’t jealous. I know your secret self better than anyone and there was no jealousy for her inside you. None for Aife or Scathach’s daughter.”

“Of course not. And Finnabair—I chose her staying. It was up to me to make her your *adaltrach*, and you know it. You were open and honest about all three of those women, whatever their pertinence to you. But here on the tip is a Sidhe sorceress around your life and now you lie to me and hide parts of yourself. No meeting was mentioned to me. I was told hardly a word about her at all, certainly never a word to suggest how much you love her. The blush before me says I’m right. You bleed with shame on your cheeks because you know that you’ve behaved designingly.”

“No, I won’t be found guilty in this. There’s nothing in our marriage contract saying I can’t have my time with her.”

Emer shook her head. “This is not my Cú Chulainn. This is someone else’s voice. If you are ruled by the goddess, then go to her.” She threw the bag of darts at his feet. “I have no weapon against this. For you everything red is beautiful, everything new judged more fair; everything lofty is more lovely, the commonalities are bitter. Everything you don’t have you desire, and what you have is accordingly devalued—till you have everything there is, and all of it worthless.”

“Emer—”

“That’s my last riddle if you go,” she interjected. “I’m sorry that I’m no longer pleasing to you as once I was ...” She could not continue. Her body threw off a great tremor and she walked back among the other women.

Cú Chulainn did not go after her though he desperately wished to. Nor could he make himself turn and go to Fand. He was like a wild horse roped tight from two directions, incapable of escaping, even of struggling.

Beside Laeg, Fand murmured, “I can’t take him.” Laeg stared into her eyes, that glowed like two small moons. “Their bond is so strong,” she continued, “I could see it between them just now, like the chain that links the birds of the Sidhe, only much more enduring. Sooner or later, if he came with me, she would surface in his mind again. He would wonder what became of her and this would gnaw at him. I would lose him, I can see I would lose him.”

Laeg, who had never trusted her completely, replied, “He will still love you, though. Either way, he’ll be plagued by one of you.”

“That’s so, but that may be the only choice to make—which purgatory. Who’s going to make it? He can’t and she wouldn’t. If I don’t, he’ll split apart and neither of us will have him.”

Laeg appreciated finally that she did love Cú Chulainn. He might have confessed as much, if the sea had not risen up behind her and poured suddenly over the chariot. Laeg grabbed onto the rail, the sea surging,

spinning around him. In the midst of it he saw a face with huge black fish's eyes and ears like shells. The face came near; it seemed to speak, a voice deep and booming like waves against rocks. "*Can you forgive me? Will you return?*" it asked. Then he heard Fand's voice reply.

"*I will, because you have no queen without me while he has had his all along. Manannán, my lord.*"

"*I won't ask for more than that now,*" the ocean replied as it started to rush back out from the strand. In its inexorable retreat it pulled Laeg over the rail and into the sand, where Emer found him spluttering in a standing pool.

"What happened to you?" she asked. She sounded detached, enervated. "Where is the Sidhe woman?"

"Gone," he said, getting up from the broad puddle. "Back to her husband, god of—didn't you see the wave that drowned me and the chariot?"

Her listless expression became only slightly confused. "There was no wave that I saw."

Laeg dug seaweed from his matted hair. "Then how do you explain this? You think I wove it in for decorative effect?" Emer smiled mildly and shook her head. Laeg realized suddenly how pale and dazed she was. Softly, he asked, "Where's Cú Chulainn gone?"

"Gone."

"Yes, gone. Where?"

"He deserted the strand. I turned my back ... oh, Laeg, this is so tangled. No one, nothing, gives him peace, or me now. First Connla, then this."

"I'm afraid it began even earlier—possibly with Bricriu. Cucuc's self-esteem has been shrinking for a long time. The bickering of Ulster's heroes evinced how readily his unmatched deeds became displaced, reduced in stature."

"And the woman? Fand?"

"She loves him, I saw that here. But she won't come back, because she sees that your love is right." He pressed her to him while she cried. "No, the sea god's wrapped his watery cloak around her—and soaked me in the bargain." She laughed a little at his self-mocking tone. He inhaled the scent from her auburn hair. *Yes, he thought, you are tied to each other the way she said. The silver chain. I doubt even death could keep you and Cucuc apart.*

They stood pressed together for a long time in silence. Then Laeg said, "Let's go back to Cathbad. Maybe now he can help us. Now at least the problem's in our world and not in theirs."



10. Nepenthe

“What you ask is undeniably possible,” said Cathbad, “but it can have far-reaching side-effects. You must, for instance, mix the herbs to attain the proper amount of forgetfulness, and it’s very nearly impossible to guarantee the right things will be forgotten, very nearly impossible.”

“But can you do it?” Emer pleaded.

“Most assuredly I can. Setanta will never regain his wits otherwise, I’m certain of that. I only want you to understand fully the repercussions. Sooner or later you will mention some subject, even obliquely, and he will have no idea what it is you speak of, and won’t either—no matter how much you direct him to recall it. Memory is both illusive and elusive.”

“What does *that* mean?” Laeg asked, weary of the Druid’s epigrammatic discourse.

“It means, oh ye of little patience, that I haven’t the faintest idea why this potion works. It just does.”

“I’ve suspected as much regarding your order for years.”

“Oh, have you?”

“Yes, I have. The reason Druids guard their pot of knowledge so closely is because they don’t want the warrior class to find out there isn’t anything in the cauldron.”

“Well, then,” Cathbad said. From somewhere in his robe he produced a tightly gathered tuft of dry grass, which he now put to his lips as if to eat. Instead, he spoke a few hushed words into it, then flung it at Laeg. The grass hit him in the face and spilled down the front of his tunic. Suddenly his head began to throb like it would crack open. He doubled over and clutched at his hair.

“A bitch’s brood—what did you do to me?”

“I gave you back your hangover. When you learn to appreciate my secret knowledge, I may be convinced to remove it again.” Cathbad started away.

“I *do* appreciate it. You’ve know idea how much!” Laeg protested.

“Ah, you recant too easily, too quickly. Knowledge is never attained without pain and effort. I’ve given you the pain, now put some effort into it and we’ll see. Later.” He and Emer departed the chamber.

“Don’t you leave me like this.” He tried to stand upright: the room seemed to tilt. “Damn you, Druid, and your whole order—I’ve trained horses smarter than the lot of you!” He winced in anguish. “Macha’s milky mountains, this *hurts!*”



In the weeks following his confrontation with Emer and his loss of Fand, Cú Chulainn wandered alone across Muirthemne, across fords where he had fought an army, heading south, coming at last to the forest of Fid Duin. The forest had a wide swath cut through its middle, grown up with grass and brush and, here and there, spindly young ash trees. Seven years earlier, the armies of Connacht had diverted through here to trick him; they had cut this “road” through the forest. None of that mattered to Cú Chulainn at present. He saw the woods as an ideal place for his voluntary exile.

The ash trees of Fid Duin grew straighter than most; their branches forked well above his head and intertwined with the other trees, creating a criss-crossing canopy heavy with black buds. He tramped along the wide path until he came to another, a path leading off to his right. Mildly curious, he took it, but it quickly came to a stop, leading nowhere; undaunted, Cú Chulainn continued on, entering the thick of the forest. He lost himself in the endless rows of tree trunks. The ground beneath his feet was golden from the previous season’s leaves and winged seeds. Soon he came to a slope that led down to a small stream. A few yards down the stream, one huge ash—a grandfather to the trees around it—rose out of the bank, its roots snaked into the streambed itself. This tree had a wide cavity in its base and Cú Chulainn crawled inside, where it was dark and warm. He had no doubt that this place was enchanted, but that made no difference to him. He curled up and let his worries and thoughts spin in any direction they wanted to go, conjuring images randomly in the dimness. Occasionally he whimpered; once he cried out a shriek so full of pain that animals across the forest froze up, sure that one of their own had perished. He saw visions bathed in the sanguine colors of the next world, saw a cemetery of dolmens and heard his father’s voice, the voice of the god Lugh Lamfada, rushing past, saying, “It is for this time that I made you.” The directionless string of thoughts and images led him eventually from awareness of himself. Night and day ran together like dyes. Soft rains poured down, hissing against the tree bole, stirring up the rich smell of earth. Cú Chulainn experienced himself as part of the earth, as an old log, struck down and slowly rotting away, his peeling flesh replenishing the soil. He knew himself to be dead and wondered why he had not reached Magh Mell. He must be suffering a punishment for his crimes upon those who loved him. How could there be any release into the red world for him? His thoughts spiraled away.

Light flickered. Cú Chulainn returned to himself. He eased his head back as lightning spat overhead—inside the tree bole. Then a clap of thunder exploded around him and he dove out of the tree and went rolling down the bank.

Dazed and disoriented, he lay on his back. Nine cowed faces appeared overhead in a circle around him. All the faces looked identical and vaguely familiar; all were very grim. Were these to be his judges? Were those robes

black? One of the judges bent closer and swept a carved wand across him. He found himself charged suddenly with the desire to return home. He tried to sit up, but lacked the strength. All Cú Chulainn could do was turn himself over. He rolled against one of the tree roots. After a moment's rest, he began dragging himself along the root, back toward the tree, and used the trunk as a surface to inch himself up until he was on his feet. He took an unsteady step away from the tree. Unfortunately, the ground behind him was a slope and he tottered over, his arms spinning for balance. He dropped like a stone and crashed on his back beside the stream. How long had he been inside the tree that he had forgotten how to stand? With effort, he pulled himself up over the water to take a drink. He saw his face.

The reflection was of a filthy, scraggly creature. The once-smooth cheeks had sunk in, the heavy-lidded eyes had become ringed by shadows of remorse. He remembered why he had come here and his hands began to shake, stirring up the cold water and shattering the face. He flipped over and leaned up. There were no Druids anywhere about.

As quickly as he could, he got to his feet and made his way up the slope. Nowhere was there a sign of a robe, and the only sounds were of bare branches clacking in the wind. Had there been any Druids at all? If not, then he had gone mad. He stumbled back through the forest, intuitively certain of his direction. As he reached the wide path, he saw something move out of view where that path linked up to the main one ahead. His legs loosening up, he shambled, then ran, after the phantom.

Across Muirthemne, he pursued fleeting glimpses of the robed figures. They stood always on the next hillside, always gone when he reached it. He wheezed and coughed, gnawed at by hunger and thirst but not daring to stop for fear of losing all sign of the elusive Druids.

He walked on through the night and the following day, and darkness had settled in again by the time he reached Emain Macha. The ghostly, dark-robed figures shuffled through the ramparts. He put on a final burst of speed and charged after them, racing past silent, shadowy guards, up the hill, where no one seemed to be gathered this cold night, and into the fortress. The curving hallway echoed with footfalls, always just ahead.

Hobbling, exhausted, he stumbled through the doorway into Conchovor's room. The king sat on the thick furs of his bed, looking as if he had expected this interruption. A peat fire burned behind him, its smoke rising in a ribbon through the hole in the roof. Cathbad stood over the flames, his wand waving like a snake through the blue tips. Sensing someone else in the room, Cú Chulainn turned to find Emer a few feet behind him. He drew back from her, stricken by her presence, and collapsed on the furs beside Conchovor. "Why couldn't you all let me die? The Druids, *brithemain*, found me in the woods. They judged me unfit to live because of my crimes. Why did you make me come back here?"

"What crimes, Setanta?" Cathbad asked, drawing closer.

“Death—I killed my own son. I betrayed my wife’s love by lying to her, by falling in love with a *Sidbe* woman and forgetting her, by all the things I’ve done to myself that strip away my honor.”

“Those deeds must perish.”

“Yes,” Cú Chulainn rasped. “Why did you—” he began to choke and cough then, his throat rough, parched after weeks of starvation. Cathbad offered him a cup and he took it, drinking in small sips. His fingers lost the cup after a moment, but Cathbad snatched it as it fell. The Hound’s head lolled. The Druid’s face loomed in his vision.

“Those deeds must perish,” Cathbad repeated.

Cú Chulainn saw the room tilt and roll and he thought he must be performing his Salmon Leap, somersaulting across the expanse. Conchovor eased him back onto the bed then got up and went beside Cathbad.

Emer stood over her husband, tears running freely on her cheeks. “He’s a corpse—like one of those resurrected in the Dagda’s cauldron.”

“He will recover,” Cathbad reassured her. “But the *Leanbaun Sídbe* will always have manipulative power over him. They’re a peculiar weakness of his, probably of the ‘god’ in him.” He did not wish to linger on this sore point and quickly changed the subject. “I was beginning to doubt I would find him. Fid Duin has its own ancient magic. He was clever in going there, he did really wish to die, I fear. But trees are my art, the barrier was penetrated, and now—” he glanced at the sleeping Hound “—Setanta will be all right, but I worry for you, Emer. Your riddles protected you not at all. These events have been a dagger to your heart. I fear that, now you are so sorely wounded, you’ll never be able to draw that dagger out completely.”

She shook with a sob and nodded sharply that this was so.

Conchovor went to her, clasping her shoulder. “Here, now, Emer, with time all wounds heal. Don’t listen to my father. Don’t let him crush your spirit this way. Here, have some of my wine, dear niece. When he wakes, we’ll have cause to celebrate.”

Emer took the proffered cup and drank.

“Sweet wine,” Conchovor continued. “A few sips and you can throw off your troubled jealousies. He couldn’t help himself— Cathbad has said so—and you know that deep inside. You mustn’t hurt for him, you mustn’t.”

“I mustn’t,” she replied, slurring the words. Conchovor took the cup back, passing it immediately to Cathbad, then caught Emer as she pitched forward. He lifted her onto the furs beside her husband.

“Will that work?” he asked Cathbad.

“No one could have done it better, you misdirected her right into the heart of her anguish. You are a skillful administrant, my son.”

“Will you answer me one thing, then? When mother ... when Nessa died, why didn’t you give me such a potion?”

“Conchovor, you must know that already. There are memories should be laid to rest and others which, though they sting terribly, are lessons to

be remembered always. Ulster bears fruit because of what you've learned from your mistakes. Kings mustn't forget."

"I know that," Conchovor answered.

"I know you know."

"But 'it is better to believe than to know,' as your order says," the king reminded him.

"Maybe that is so," the Druid replied, "but knowledge *goes* further."

INTERLUDE FIVE

Part One



Dear Lord,

It is now just after *sext*, and I have an hour to myself for contemplation. Surely speaking with you is the best contemplation there can be, and even Abbot Martin could not deny my choice of method.

Yesterday I left the walls behind and made my circuit of penance around our island. Somehow, everyone from both ours and the women's camp must have known, because they all stopped to watch me walk down by the natural jetty of rock where the first sacred stone is erected. As big as a doorway, it loomed above me as I knelt. You know already of what my prayers consist and of why I do make penance. When I had counted my knots, I set off along the path that winds around the perimeter. The path leads near the women's church, and they looked on as I passed, most of them gathered outside their *damliaig*. I could see Bertril amongst them. Her red hair outshone the rest. Like a halo it is, and she has the makings of a saint. She came over to the island in the same boat as I did, and we spoke ... not since then, of course.

At the second tablet—one of the ones believed carved and set in place by St. Molaise himself—I repeated my prayer, genuflecting, then began the “Miserere Mei Deus” when I was interrupted by the unwarranted appearance of Senchan Torpeist's face from behind the tablet. He acted not the least surprised to find me there, nor did he respond at all to the anger which was surely written on my face. He said, “Don't mind me, I'm just looking at the designs carved in the stone. They aren't anything like we would have put on one of our standing stones. You have all these strange knots and curlicues, though you have stolen a fair amount of method from the ‘pagan’ stones. Anyhow, I'll leave you be—just finish up your prayer, then we can go on.” He withdrew behind the stone again.

I lowered my head and finished the Miserere, and added a Pater Noster by way of apology for my ill temper. Furious thoughts burst upon me all

the while I was praying: here I had been so sympathetic to his tales, his vision. His response was to plague me thus, tripping me up like a dog at my feet. That was just what he was, too—an old, lumbering brute of a hound, too brainless to know that he would shortly be put down. And when I thought of it, saw him as that dog, I no longer had it in me to be angry. The poor old poet, a leftover from another time and way of life; suddenly, I shared his plight, his helplessness here among us.

Shortly I got up. He had sat down on the other side, his legs out before him, crooked, his hands curled in his lap. I thought he had gone to sleep, but he tilted his head to give me a glance and said, “Truly, Fergil, I did not intend to come between you and your god. The designs carved here are very lovely and my excitement spilled out of the cup I keep it in.”

I nodded, still hurting on his account. “I have to go on to the next stone. The circuit has to be completed by *vespers*.”

“A fear of the dark?” he asked, getting up.

“No, I’m on kitchen duty tonight,” I explained. “Are you coming with me?”

“It was my intention,” he said. But as I looked into his eyes, I saw there a hint of fear, I’m certain of it. And I knew this fear, too: of being rejected, denied. It would have pained Torpeist should I have rejected his companionship. He is an old man, Lord, and he does not want to be alone, to die alone. How cold and black the heart that could refuse that much kindness. I patted his shoulder, doing my best to ignore the goatish smell that hangs on him like an old cassock.

“It’s a long hike to the next tablet, but you’re most welcome—provided you can keep silent while I do penance.”

“Is it common for you to do penance?” he asked.

“As the word implies, it is done as compensation for some other deed.”

“What was it that you did, if I may ask?” Surely, I thought, there was no way he could have known the cause, and he had asked it innocently enough. I could not reply to him, however, without confusing the matter and myself and probably old Torpeist. I replied simply, “Penance is also done for things that are only thought. Thoughts are like deeds sometimes.”

“With the *Sidhe* you generally can’t tell the one from the other. I can understand your rule.” We walked on in silence for a while after that. Then Torpeist spoke up again. “Fergil, you’ve been assigned to me, to work with me, but I know nothing about you, whereas you know a great deal about me, at least the rumors. How have you come to be here, in so bleak a place when the world has cashels that offer warmth and churches with less hardship to endure?”

“I could ask the same of you.”

“Certainly, and I would answer that I have to come here if I’m to get my tales written down before I die.” He smiled thoughtfully at some-

thing, then dismissed it and said, "I won't let you off without an answer, and I'd have one of you. If you don't mind." That hint of fear re-emerged.

I began to talk about my family. I told him that my father was the leader of the settlement at Moel Hiraddug across the sea in Wales. He had seen a little of my land, supposedly during one of his visits into prehistory, and I described the lush and eerie beauty of the dark mountains and thick forests; deep, wide valleys and great heights that his Eriu has no equal for. I told him of my family, how my older brother had died while storming the fortress in the Battle of Wall Hills, but my sister and other brother still live. "I was to be the next head of the fort after his death. That had been my father's wish. Soon after that battle a flock of monks had come through and stayed at our home. They were quietly converting as many people as would listen to their faith of the One God, crossing the breadth of North Wales and leaving a shining trail in their wake. My father feared them, or at least feared the upheaval in the order of things that was bound to follow."

"You weren't afraid of them?"

"Well, I can't say they didn't disturb me. But I was young enough not to be fearful of change in life. I had been fostered out, come back, the second son, the lesser son, only to have my brother killed; I knew change well. So I spoke with them, on many subjects, being an innocent to philosophy or theology of any sort. They told me about their Lord's Son, stories of his teachings, his travels and his death. They were of the order of Pelagius, who had been branded a heretic in the city of Rome, which was the center of their religion. I could not fathom how they could embrace the religion and advocate the arguments of one who ostensibly opposed the religion. One of the monks explained to me that Pelagius himself had never opposed the Church. The Church had simply ruled against him. Pelagius argued that there could be no such thing as original sin because sin was a thing of the mind, of the individual's will, and not of nature. It did not float about freely in the world, and to suggest it did was to lay the blame of sin upon God Himself. Man has the means to choose his fate, according to Pelagius. He would say, 'If I ought to, then I can.'

"They left us after a few days, the monks did, but I continued to think about that philosophy. I wondered what it was that I ought to do. I saw this, coming here, as a way of finding out."

"You abandoned your family," Torpeist said.

"That's what is called among us 'White Martyrdom'."

"Which leads me to assume there are other colors, too?"

"Two others. Green is the life of the hermit and we do partake of that in our way. The other is Red. Red requires the sacrifice of one's life in the name of the one true faith. That would derive from battle or from what we call geilt, which is the Holy Madness. I've never seen anyone possessed of geilt, but I know it exists. God sometimes bestows it on those who cannot live in our world. Even the severity of our existence here fails to

satisfy their need for sacrifice or forgiveness, and they must choose the Red Martyrdom.”

“What do the colors mean?” he asked.

“They have no meaning so far as I know.”

“Then there is a difference with the world I know. Your red would be blood to Conchovor’s people, your green the green of nature. This order of yours is not unlike the Druids that I met. You look upon the world with a greater expectation from it than a warrior has. You push belief, faith, upon the flock you keep, but you yourselves seek for answers and knowledge. Your Pelagius could have been comfortable as a Druid with his philosophy. Still, if you embrace his teachings, then why this barren isle? You still haven’t answered me that.”

I had to think for a while, because I had never assembled an answer to this question. I knew the answer well enough but not in words—in spirit. “The embracing of the Lord offers great beauty, great joy. But to attain divine illumination, one has to have known hardship and pain. What is the meaning of joy without sorrow? How can one be happy unless one has a sadder state to compare it with?”

“You toil to know the ache of your muscles?”

“That; and to be free of all concerns that might interfere, we come to this place where the weather is harsh, the land not good, and where we must be brothers in order to survive. There is no friendship like that which includes a sharing with God as well.”

“Yet, when your friend Brian transgresses the bounds of ... good taste, he infuriates you.”

“Because he has this part of him that he can’t overcome, this need to commit sin.”

“This need to be with a woman, you mean.”

“Yes,” I agreed, and saw my way out of the argument, “but that is one of the things we abandoned along with our families when we chose this path to walk.”

Torpeist nodded solemnly. “Then this boy just doesn’t live in harmony with your order. Sort of the way Pelagius did not get along with your Church in Rome, I suppose.”

He was being arch, which indicated that he did not understand anything about us. We remained alien to him. I should not have been surprised, I suppose, that this man who claimed to have travelled back to the time of his Cú Chulainn could not grasp the precepts of the religion that had replaced his impossible warrior-gods. We have no such creatures, do we, Lord? Ours is the path of reason and faith, bound tightly, where his Druids kept reason for themselves and doled out the faith alone. But Christians would not do this, would they, Lord? We are wiser, better. I would never condemn outright something just because it was different. At least, I don’t think I would. I must think about this, I don’t want to be wrong about so important a matter.

We reached the next tablet and Torpeist said, “Even the objects of your veneration are like those of the Druids. Only difference is, yours look like doorways and theirs like upright penises.” I was outraged. He laughed at me again, I was certain of it, but I fought down my anger and got on my knees to do my penance. Old dog or no, I thought, he could not be forgiven beyond a point for his transgressions.

He wandered off while I prayed—to avoid being tainted by it, I thought. When I stood, he shuffled back to me. “Even some of your saints are nothing more than the old gods refashioned in pious raiment,” he said immediately, as if no time had passed between his comments.

Angrily, I turned on him and shouted, “Does that make them false idols?”

He seemed genuinely surprised at me. “Why, no, Fergil. At least, not to me, because I venerated them in their ancient shapes as well. I was merely observing that deities are malleable things that can quite easily be shaped to the needs of the church, or the individual.”

“Your deities, yes. But God is immutable.”

“As you like. I wasn’t, in any case, suggesting that your order has misused this power.”

“But you think that others have.”

“Yes, quite frankly, I do.”

If I asked him, I was sure he would tell me who precisely he believed to have misused it, but I did not ask, I did not want to know. “I must go on now,” I said. “The next stone will take us well across the island.”

He fell in beside me as I set off. “Then let me add a short tale to the ones you’ve compiled already. It’s brief enough that I can give it to you now and you can add it to the collection later. I’ll trust your memory that far.”

“Thank you,” I coldly replied.

“Really, boy, it wasn’t a slight. But you’ve not been trained in recitative arts, so I don’t expect you to know the secrets of mnemonics. This tale is about Conchovor. He had a wife at the time the other tales took place, a woman named Mugain. She died not long after Cú Chulainn’s misadventure in Magh Mell. She fell from a chariot, which was not unlike the way Derdriu had committed suicide all those years before, and the incident resurrected those black memories in King Conchovor. The tale will also reveal to you what I meant when I said I knew of some people who misused the power to shape.”

I had not even considered that he might have been referring to someone in one of his tales again, and I flushed with shame. But then I had to dismiss this from my mind because he started talking and I didn’t want to miss the beginning of the next tale.

VI. THE BATTLE OF ROSNAREE

1. Brides and Bards

She came from a very fine family in Munster, their wealth and reputation attested to by none other than Lugaid mac Nois. Her name was Luain.

Fergus the Messenger went to her family on Conchovor's behalf and made the arrangements for her journey to Ulster, for the wedding feast guests that her family wanted present, and for payment of the stipulated *coibche*. If they had asked for the moon, the Ulster advisors would have seen that it floated down out of the sky for them; but Luain's family was as honorable as the king of Munster had said, and they asked only for the herd of cattle that represented the most basic "right of purchase." This was Luain's first marriage, so the entire *coibche* went to her father. Fergus, aware that he had been given free rein to haggle on the price, promised Luain's father a herd full of heifers, as a heifer was the universal unit of value, the *sét*. In this way each party to the bargain was satisfied by the other's performance. Fergus set off for home with the good news that Conchovor had a new wife.

The king of Ulster had grieved over Mugain for more than six months. Like many men he did not notice how important she was to him until he had lost her; he did not remember the things undone, the small matters glossed over but not settled—until now when they could not be settled. No guilt digs deeper than that from a harsh word said in a heated moment that quickly, unjustly becomes the final moment. Such was Conchovor's anguish, of which no one else was cognizant, not even Cathbad. The news that Fergus the Messenger would bring home was good, but it would mean more to the king's advisors than to the king.

Fergus had to travel through a large part of Munster on his way back to Ulster. One vast area he crossed belonged to a rich man, Aithirne, a *rí tuath*. The Messenger stayed in that minor king's round stone house one night. Aithirne had twin sons who had both become bards of fair renown in Munster. They were called Cuimgedach and Abhartach, and they came to the dinner, too. Aithirne asked his guest about the cause of his journey

into Munster, and Fergus, unable to imagine a reason to keep the struck bargain a secret, told all. Neither he nor his host knew that the twin poets had both sought the hand of Luain and both been rejected. The young men sat in tightlipped collusion while Fergus described the Munster woman.

Then Abhartach stood. "Your pardon, Messenger."

"Of course," said Fergus. "What would you have?"

"Sir, my brother and I would like to come to Ulster for this wedding feast you're throwing. We're well-known for our verses here, and we could write some for your king if he'd let us. More than that, since Luain is of Munster, we'd be representing our province."

"True." Fergus spluttered at the beer froth on his mustache. Luain's family had given him their list of guests and these boys were not on it; however, neither were there any other poets of Munster. "What do you think?" he asked Aithirne.

"Me, I should be honored of course. And they don't deceive you, I can tell you that, they spin good verse. I taught them very well."

"Right, well, that's it then." He gathered himself up, tossing the edge of his cloak back over his shoulder and out of his food as he stood. "They—you—have a *noinden* to fashion your extolling verses and haul your arses to Emain Macha, so decreed this rainy night by me, who is all of Ulster here at this feast at this time the end." With another flourish, he sat down. "That should do it," he said. "I don't get to do much proclaiming—but this ought to be a pleasant surprise."

Cuimgedach leaned against his brother. "Pleasant for you and me. Luain isn't going to have time to smile." They shared the same features, and they shared the same mind.

As always, when Conchovor threw a feast, the celebration burst the confines of Craebruad and spilled out down the hill. In such a crowd, the twin pests had no trouble taking Luain aside as if to congratulate her. They had made their speeches, performing their craft to the amusement of all, their speeches praising Conchovor in all of his aspects, as though he and not Lugh were the god of the province. As they led her along, they nodded or laughed with many of the people, two fine men in good spirits. However, once they had gotten her away from Conchovor, they began to make rude suggestions: she should come away from the feast with them both, to the woods north of the hill. A tryst was what they had in mind, a sexual adventure like none Luain had ever been offered, they were quite sure. After tonight the chance might never come again.

Luain could not believe their audacity. She pulled away from them, cut back through the crowd and to her husband's side. The poet brothers took their cups to make an exaggerated toast at the new queen, then edged out

of sight. As the hours dragged on, Luain banished them from her mind. She hoped that, in their disgrace, they had headed off for home.

It was Conchovor's nature to be the last of his guests to retire, but not so his queen. Luain hugged him, kissed him, then wished him a good night. The king watched her go with only mild regret. Although Luain's beauty and gentleness had already made an impression upon him, he had not finished wrestling with his guilt over Mugain. A deeper affection would take time.

It took Luain half an hour to reach the central room through the crowd. Every celebrant wanted to speak with her, to touch her for the luck they expected she would bring to their province. Back down the table, her father turned to the guest seated beside him and said, "That's my daughter there, yes. Married the king this evening, she did." The guest, Fergus the Messenger, shook his head at the imbecility of blind drunks.

When she finally reached her new quarters—the room decorated in her honor with dozens of enormous tapestries—Luain collapsed on the bed. Utterly exhausted, she had to work to take off her cloak, her tunic and jewelry. Finally she lay back, and something pricked her shoulder—mistletoe, which she now noticed had been strewn across the furs. She began wearily to gather it up. That was when she heard the scrape of a footstep from behind the linen tapestry at the foot of the bed. Naked, still clasping the crackling mistletoe against her belly, she got up and drew back the bright curtain. Cuimgedach and Abhartach stood revealed. With vulpine delight, their eyes travelled her body.

"You are both great idiots, greater than I'd ever imagined, if you think you can have me here in the very heart of the fortress. How will you ever get through the crowd?" Her voice trembled with defiance, anger coming hard, alien to her.

"Is that what you think?" Abhartach asked, feigning injury. "Not at all. We've come to recite some of our best verses to you, practiced for this very affair. Verses along the lines of an *aér*."

"The question is," his brother said, "which type of *aér* is right for you. Perhaps you could help us decide. Should you get a nice, solid *aishés*, just a harmless declaration, or should it be more like an *ail*? But why be insulting, after all? And then of course there's my favorite—the *aircetal*, the incantation. Did you know, did we ever tell you, that Abhartach and I are trained in the art of the *glam dicin*?" He giggled from drunken courage. Suddenly, he grabbed her arm and pulled her closer, causing her gathered mistletoe to scatter around her feet. "Here, what do you think of this:

"She is no treasure
 In substance or in spirit.
 The first one is sticks and mutton fat,
 The other pricks like hawthorn.

What do you think, heh? Heh?"

“I think,” Luain said, “that I’ve found the will to feast some more.” She jerked free from his loose grasp, at the same time tearing down the tapestry. It buried Cuimgedach. Luain ran to the furs of the bed, snatched up her tunic, but Abhartach blocked her retreat. “Try this one then,” he said cruelly, then raced through the words before she could escape.

“The king of Ulster
Who raped his mother
Now weds a beastly bovine—a cow
With dry and infecund udders.”

“Make her hear the other one,” Cuimgedach called as he dragged himself out of the tapestry. Luain tried to dodge around Abhartach, but he jumped in her path, caught her by the throat and shoved her back until she tripped on the bed furs and fell to the ground. He knelt over her and pinned her there by her throat, then took time to gloat. She tore at his wrist, ripping the skin off the back of his hand, but he would not let go. Relishing each syllable now, he did as his brother asked and recited the third verse they had concocted for her.

“Luain of the lily flesh
But wrinkled from too much water
Applied to hide the smell
She bears from eating midden heaps.”

Luain struggled fiercely, tears welling in her eyes. Cuimgedach crawled over. His breath burned her ear as his brother’s verses scorched her soul. “We practiced,” he whispered, “all the way here, perfecting the words. *Glam dicin*, you know, is a sacred art because of its power. One has to get the phrases just right. If you’d like some more, we’ve got one or two, but not finished, so I can’t as guarantee their efficacy.” His teeth nibbled at her earlobe. She would have screamed if she could have drawn breath. “One describes how your breasts sag way low, and the other your—” Luain kned her captor between the legs then, causing Abhartach to choke and release her. She pushed him aside into his brother and fled, her tunic still pressed against her.

Cuimgedach laughed stupidly at his brother’s pain. He called after her, “Don’t want to hear any more? But it’s the best part, oh *cunning* Luain!” While he laughed, his twin threw up on him.

2. Turnabout

Even as she sought an escape through the crowded halls of Craebrud, Luain feared that the magic of the poet’s verses had begun to work on her. She thought her skin was loosening from her bones, turning to rolls of fat, her breasts drooping, withering.

The same people saw her, and most of them had enough sense left to see the panic and shame on her face and the dishevelment of her tunic, which she held in place with one hand. Word reached Conchovor on a tide of people, and the message became confused and garbled. Uncertain of what was going on, he left the feast alone and went to his chamber, where he found Luain's sandals. The room smelled as if someone had been ill, and he found that spot, too, beside a sprinkle of mistletoe. The fresh straw on the floor had been kicked around and one tapestry torn from its hooks. For a moment he wondered if Maeve had found some way to secretly enter his fort and steal away his bride. This seemed utterly impossible, and the king pushed back through the halls in search of the truth.

When the story of his wife's flight finally came out, he had the whole fortress searched. No one found a trace of her. The whole incident, beyond his understanding, left him feeling as if he were acting some sluggish dream. In the hope that more of her habits might be known by them, he sent for the two Munster bards. His messenger returned shortly to inform him that they had departed. According to an onlooker, one of the brothers had appeared to be ill, although which could not be surmised since the two were identical in appearance. A further search revealed that Luain had taken her chariot and departed. Her family, still gathered in the feasthall of Craebruad, did not know what to make of this. They apologized profusely, promising to return her to Ulster as soon as they learned what had transpired. Hastily, almost fearfully it seemed to Conchovor, they packed up and left. Of course, they were afraid, he reminded himself. They feared that the province of Battle might descend upon the province of Music, and put silent the singing.

Conchovor insisted that the feast continue, but he did not return to it.

When three days passed without word, the king sent a nervous Fergus the Messenger into Munster again. Before he had even reached her father's house, Fergus learned something of what had happened.

The poet twins had returned home at a far more leisurely pace than their victim's, wandering from one settlement to the next and entertaining each *tuath* with the verses they had composed about Luain. On the way they made up new ones, and drifted out of Munster, into Connacht, where they knew attacks on Ulster always found a remunerative reception. Wherever Fergus the Messenger stopped, he discovered the vicious quatrains. The simple-minded farmers did not truly mean harm in what they repeated, nor could they appreciate that they were uttering magic verse that had the effect of an incantation. Fergus did all he could to make them stop, but he could not keep the verses from being taken up again once he moved on south.

In her home, Luain's screams shook the walls and drove her family out. The cumulative effect of the charm had been to inflame her skin with a fiery uredo. Welts appeared in wide swaths as if she had been whipped;

cracking scales crippled her hands and feet. In a hideous parody of lactation, her breasts began to leak blood. The hair between her thighs became matted with infection. By the time Fergus arrived, he could barely enter the house because of the egestive stench that had taken hold there. He could barely believe she was the same fair bride he had appraised for his king. The family was nowhere to be found. Fergus made himself sit beside the mortified girl. "There's no one else around, and I want you to tell me what has happened, what all this means." Her lips cracked, Luain mutely shook her head to say she would not answer. Fergus denied her this defense. "Look, it was on *my* recommendation that you got picked in the first place, and it is *my* head that comes off should this go badly in the end, so I will know from you at the very least why I'm going to have to cart my wife off from Emain Macha in the dead of night. Can you understand that?"

Luain understood well enough. "All right," she said, and Fergus had to cover his nose to block the intensified stench, "but my shame won't end so simply. Not while their verses continue." As if to prove this, she stiffened suddenly and sucked a painful breath through her teeth: somewhere, someone had recited one of the deadly quatrains.

"How and why do these satires exist? I heard some of them on my way here, and I know that no farmers invented them. It had to be Aithirne's twins—that I can figure—but I don't know why."

Reluctantly, Luain told him of her history with those two, how they had tried to compromise her honor for years, ever since she had first rejected them. They were identical; in refusing one she had refused both and earned a double ration of malice. Fergus listened attentively, but he had already begun to quake from the knowledge that he was solely responsible for their invitation to the feast. This he did not tell Luain. He could not have borne her reaction to his confession, especially because he was certain she would forgive him. When she stopped talking, he reassured her that he would find some way to remove the satiric curse.

He found her family all living in the cramped confines of their cookhouse. They would not meet his gaze, believing that their daughter's condition was somehow their disgrace. Fergus chastised them before he went on his way.

Conchovor did not rebuke the Messenger. He listened gloomily to the recitation, his fist propped between the two forks of his beard. When all of Luain's tale had been told, he asked, "How do you suggest we deal with these maggots?"

There it was—the king offering him one chance to make amends for his part in the incident. "Yes, well, I've thought about this very seriously on my way back," Fergus proclaimed truthfully. "Here's what I concluded: Druids. Out-compose the bastards."

The simplicity of it dazzled Conchovor. "Quick, get Cathbad in here," he said.

In the house of Aithirne, the three men were eating a supper of rye bread and hard curd-cheese. For entertainment, the two brothers threw out an occasional verse, sometimes a complete quatrain, all composed around the Clann Umoir, who had recently been given a seaboard territory to rule in Connacht. Rumors of all sorts about the matter pervaded the province. Much of the speculation had it that the Clann Umoir were a *tuath* of the Fir Bolg, an ancient and magical race likened to lesser gods by some. Cuimgedach and Abhartach worked from this supposition. They did not intend to take the finished work into Connacht. As for Luain, she had already been discarded, the revenge long since exacted. In the light of the cooking fire they ate and rhymed and drank.

Quite abruptly, their father interrupted one verse. “Boys,” he said softly, and that word conveyed both awe and misgiving. His sons found him staring across the house, and they turned from their wordplay—turned toward a doorway filled with figures dressed in brown robes. At the head of this group stood the Ulster Druid they knew as Cathbad.

The brothers set down their meals and got to their feet. Cuimgedach toyed with the silver ring in his ear. Abhartach addressed the visitors. “This is a great surprise, to have ... twelve Druids come here. Won’t you sit? We’ll have food prepared, some cheese and beer if ... ” Cathbad waved him to silence.

“Two bards, trained in their art by those of my class—by the *filid* of Eriu—stand here accused of using that art to practice a vile calumny upon a woman of this province.”

“You can’t do that—you’re not *brithemain*,” Abhartach asserted.

“What do you mean, calumny?” asked Cuimgedach.

“This I think you know well enough already. The northern half of your province has honed the lie for you. As for the color of our robes, we are your peers, which gives us the authority to rule, to judge you. It’s now for you to plead your case, if such a thing is possible. Where is the just cause for your use of the *glam dicin*?”

“Just cause? She rejected us both, she—”

“Shut up, Cuimgedach!”

“What is going on? What’s this all about?” Aithirne asked them all.

“Your sons, while guests of Ulster province, did use their talents to unmake the king’s new bride—at which they have succeeded well, for the girl, Luain, has died this past night, transmuted from a fair young woman into a seedless, wrinkled husk. Crippled by the acerbic and unwarrantable versification of these two!”

Aithirne grabbed the flesh of his cheek. “What have you done?”

“Nothing, it’s all a ridiculous fabrication,” Abhartach said. “Why, what use did we have for the silly girl? We were invited to attend the feast to deliver some sharp verses, a duty we dispatched. Then we departed for

home. Simple as that.” Unknown to him as he bluffed, his brother sank down on his knees in the straw.

“Stop it!” Aithirne bellowed at his son. “You shame this house more with every syllable. You’ve dishonored yourselves, disgraceful—” He burst into tears before he could finish. His sons, of whom he had been so proud scant minutes before, had been revealed as monsters without conscience.

Spearheading the *filid* jury, Cathbad closed the distance to the accused bards while he spoke in a steady, measured cadence into a handful of grass. The other eleven brown Druids chanted behind him.

“An *aircetal* to these heinous poets
whose art is artifice and guile,
gulling luckless girl and loveless king
Your Fate becomes our burden.

“We taught you and we say
that your arrogant, bloated egos
should fit your form.
Inside shall come out.

“You swell, haughty men
from the manna we placed within
In leaving you it leavens you
till you bubble and burst like stirabout *gru*.”

Face to face with Cuimgedach, Cathbad flung the charred grass at him. It dashed against him and rained down upon his kneeling brother. To the father, the Druid said, “We share your sorrow, Aithirne, but cannot change what must occur.” Then he turned, and the jury filed out.

Aithirne soon followed them. The screams drove him from his house, and he could no longer bear to see the horrible eructing pustules that wormed to the surface of his sons’ bodies like hatching subcutaneous larvae.

The curse, though, had taken root in him as well, and he died before the day was out. At his passing, the house, as though the Druid’s *aircetal* had bored into its foundations, groaned and collapsed around the dead sons. It then sank into the ground as if into a bog.

3. Spleen I

Luain had died of shame from the solecistic *glam dicin*. Conchovor’s gloom returned and he became more dour than ever.

Poets from both Leinster and Ulster complained loudly about Aithirne’s death, as though Conchovor had some means of resurrecting the poet.

Further, they felt they should have been consulted before the *brithemain*—even *filid* taking on the duties of judges—acted against three of their order; Cathbad answered for the king that he, who embodied all three aspects of *Druidecht*, had in effect chosen for them. Nevertheless, the Ulster poets travelled to Leinster and gave Aithirne a great burial, building his cairn where his house had stood. The poet-warrior Amergin recited at the grave.

Conchovor soon fell ill. He could not sleep and nothing that he ate stayed in him for long. Believing the symptoms to result from deep-seated guilt, Cathbad considered mixing a potion of forgetfulness for him, as had worked for Cú Chulainn and Emer; but Cathbad was the king's father, and the son knew his father's mind fairly well. He noticed Cathbad studying him contemplatively and climbed out of his weary depression enough to say, "I can see what you're planning for me—it's the same look you had for Cú Chulainn—and I'd advise you to forget it."

"You are the one who needs some forgetting. This is not something that requires remembering."

"Maybe. Luain was kind and gentle and those twin poets used her cruelly—maybe I grieve some for that loss. But I barely knew her and my grief would be the same for any one of my people that died unjustly. And contrary to Amergin and his kind, there was nothing unjust about the way you reimbursed her assassins."

"They know that, ultimately. Otherwise they would have devised like verses about you, about me. No, they are simply hard-put to admit that some in their midst might be less than honorable men. You, my boy, are exposing too much of your spleen," commented his father.

"No, I don't think so."

Cathbad looked him in the eyes and grimly guessed, "It's Maeve again, isn't it?" Conchovor's shifting away verified the Druid's suspicion. "This is utterly foolish, your persistence in the matter of revenge. Conall's done the work of an entire army by his head game at Mac Datho's. I know that lofty lady too well to think she isn't still in knots over the incident. Further provocation only violates our treaty, and all too soon you send their son back to them. Then there'll be nothing to keep them from applying slaughter as an answer to any irritation. She'll be a dog with our province as her fleas."

"Yes, all right—I know everything you say. I've thought of all the proper rebuttals, so spare me a recitation of the list. Despite what you argue, the *táin bó Cuailnge* wasn't a proper battle so far as I'm concerned because no royalty on either side perished. Warriors, yes, children, yes, but no kings and queens. And even the warriors Connacht sent out were not kings on the field because every event contained some violation against the winner, who was *always* Cú Chulainn."

"We've been brooding again, haven't we?"

“Don’t lord superiority over me. If I’m wrong, then show me where they *didn’t* defy traditions of combat.” Cathbad had nothing to say, as Conchovor had expected. “Somewhere—show me, will you, man of knowledge?—*somewhere*, my spleen’s got to be vented, this boiling stew bursts the sides of the cauldron that holds it.” He turned at his father. “See, I can roll out the metaphors, too, great Druid teacher, with few peers. That’s no solution, nor is any abstraction of your arcane wisdom. My belly’s seething. There’s so much acid in me, I’ll never eat a meal again.”

The Druid gestured resignedly. “Then—I don’t know—go kill somebody else who’s annoyed you. Take it out on a fitting surrogate.” He shook his head at Conchovor’s blood-lust, the foolhardy needs of a warrior that Cathbad had laid to rest in himself during his quest for knowledge ... even though he had a warrior’s urge to strangle his son right then.

Conchovor considered the proposition. He ran through a mental list of names of people he considered enemies, seeking one that might at least raise the heat of his blood while serving to annoy Maeve. He arrived soon enough at the choice: Cairbre Naifer. This warrior-king had aided neither side during the great *táin*, but Conchovor had long since concluded that Cairbre Naifer—who was, by marriage, a son of Ulster—must be a Connacht sympathizer. Two years after that raid, Cairbre had arranged an entrapment for the sons of an Ulster border king named Umor. They had been traveling with their servants along the border between Ulster and Connacht when a party of warriors led—so the surviving servants claimed—by Cairbre Naifer had appeared. Relentlessly, these warriors had driven Umor’s young sons over the border into Connacht, where they were overwhelmed and slaughtered by warriors who had been, it seemed, awaiting their arrival; they had been callow youths, the oldest fourteen. Half of Ulster had clamored for Cairbre Naifer’s head then, and Conchovor did wonder why he had tolerated the crime for this long. In truth, at the time the evidence had not been sufficient to satisfy *brithemain*. Conchovor decided that he would force Cairbre Naifer to take a stand, to admit or deny his complicity. And then to be judged for his crime, in his own kingdom, at Temhair Mide. If he survived the stand against Ulster. Conchovor was nothing if not certain of himself. He would give the warrior a chance, a very slim chance.

Conchovor outlined the plan to his father. “I’ll bring with me warriors who didn’t participate in the *táin*, a plain enough statement. I’ll bring with me the old men who live off alone, the few youths who are ready enough with a spear, and Baire of the Scigger Islands.”

When Cathbad heard this, he argued, “That’s all fine. But take some others just to be safe. Take Conall. Take Cú Chulainn—the Hound needs desperately to run at the front of battle again. You are talking about confronting the King of Leinster after all.”

In short order a messenger left Emain Macha with a declaration to deliver to Cairbre Naifer’s fortress, Rosnaree. A small armed party fol-

lowed close on the messenger's heels, including Conchovor, Sencha—as a potential hostage, the aged warrior Nithach, Cuscraid the Stammerer armed with his new sword, Coscrach, and four *brithemain* led by old Morann, for judgment on Temhair Mide if it was needed. The king hoped it would not be.

At Dun Dealgun, Conall Cernach arrived by boat and learned of the battle. Cú Chulainn met him on Baile's Strand and assuming that Conall must have come for a fight, revealed everything about it. In truth Conall had simply come for a visit but now he would join in. He stayed at the block fortress one night, during which he asked the Hound to accompany him into battle. Cú Chulainn hugged Emer and said, "No, I did my part and quit that battle. Only Conchovor's fighting it still. He and Maeve."

Conall, who knew nothing of the potion that Cathbad had given him, did not understand this passive refusal. Early the next morning, he prepared to leave, and Laeg caught him alone. "What is wrong with him?" Conall asked.

Laeg sketchily explained the journey to Magh Mell that he and Cú Chulainn had undertaken, and what had resulted from it. "I think he will come, finally," Laeg said. "His training will work on him until he can think of nothing else. Give him time."

From his chariot, Conall replied, "If he takes much time, there won't be a battle to attend." Then he set off.

By the time of his arrival, Conchovor's group had expected to have received a reply to their messenger's recitation. They had camped at Cuanglas, the green harbor on the Boyne; but the longer they waited, the less they could endure it. The man did not come and did not come, and finally even the Druids became restive. Conchovor sent out one spy, who returned with the alarming news that Leinster had made a camp along the Boyne to welcome them. They would have to get through it to reach Rosnaree. The spy had not thought to count their number or determine their identities. It was his first battle.

Conchovor selected a second warrior called Feic and sent him out for more specific information. Feic had never been tried on a battlefield either. He saw this task as an opportunity to gain glory for himself before the Ulster champions arrived. Instead of performing his duties, he chose to swim across the Boyne, intending to slay Cairbre Naifer single-handedly and return with his head.

On the Leinster side, Feic was spotted halfway across. A dozen warriors ran to the banks of the river, began to shout and jeer at him. Terror seized Feic and he tried to turn around. In his panic, he strayed into deeper water. The tenacious current of the Boyne snatched him and dragged him under to drown.

By now others had arrived at Ulster's camp: Laegaire, and old Dáire mac Fiachna, chewing his beard, demanding revenge for the theft of his bull. It became obvious that neither the messenger nor Feic would be

returning. Conchovor put on his leather armor and strapped his sword, Ochain, over it. He and his warriors moved off across the height of Slieve Breagh; in their descent, they looked like a glittering flood breaking over the side.

Across the river, the cry went up. The Leinster army included such famed warriors as the Galeoin, who had been sent by Maeve and Ailell, a sign of their support, and who swarmed to the river bank to meet their enemy.

The Ulster warriors forded the river, but even before they reached the other shore, the Leinster force fell upon them and the battle began. They crashed together, and the water surged like storm-tossed surf. Blades flashed, caromed; bodies began to fill the river like logs; blood swirled on the currents while men of both sides joined Feic's corpse on the cold journey south. On the north shore, the four Ulster Druids commended the warriors' souls to Eochaid Ollathair, the All-Father.

Some of the youngest from Ulster swam for their lives to escape the melee. Before they reached the northern shore, Conall arrived and saw them break away. He drew his sword as he waded in, and he harangued them: "Cowards might crawl out on this side. No warriors—not one—before the matter in Leinster is finished!" The youths weighed possible survival in battle against certain death from Conall. They turned around. Steel-eyed, Conall followed them through the cold currents.

The Leinster side drew back briefly, regrouping to determine how they had fared. Conall used the time to scan the bodies clogging the river; most of the Ulster dead were the very young or the very old. He climbed the banks behind the rest, watching the dead float away as if the river led to Magh Mell.

Conchovor's army shivered in their brief respite. Because of the deep river, they had no chariots, no supplies, food and furs; it seemed unlikely they would find warmth again until the fight ended. From the dead around them, some stole robes and tunics, shedding their own wet clothing in some cases to don that of the enemy. Conall shook his head at the grim scene. Behind him, someone called, "Wait!" He turned around, and there came Cú Chulainn, dancing with his spear and shield, his white cloak.

The Hound practically skated over the water. From Leinster's group, the Galeoin spotted him and skirted around Ulster's dripping warriors to a rise overlooking the bank where Cú Chulainn stood. They called down to him, "Look at that, the mangy mutt of Ulster's shaking himself off. He'll kill us with fleas and ticks if we let that continue." One of them flung his spear. Cú Chulainn battered it aside with his shield.

"You escaped me once upon a time because of your speed. Don't think that it can happen twice!" And he charged up the rise. Conall called him back: "It's a trap or a trick. You're needed here for the attack!" but his words had no effect. Already in turmoil about the validity of this assault, Cú Chulainn had needed little fuel to ignite him, and the Galeoin had

supplied more than enough. They shared with him the gift of speed, and as fast as he ran he could not catch them. They diverted him from the crush of the battle as Ulster clashed again with Leinster. Frustrated, Conall had to enter the fray without him.

Conchovor could see Cairbre but could not get through the wall of intervening warriors to reach the Leinster king. Beside Conchovor, Laegaire hacked away, frenzied, dropping one warrior after another in his tracks, kicking the corpses aside in his push for Cairbre. From the left, he heard a cry and glanced over: Conall Cernach screamed with the rage of battle, his arm swung so fast that his blade remained a blur. The tide of battle had begun to change. Both Conchovor and Cairbre Naifer looked for the Galeoin, but they were not to be found. This bothered Conchovor, and he drew up to look around, expecting to find himself hemmed in by that illustrious tribe. Neither king suspected the truth.

Leinster's forces toppled before Ulster's renewed assault. Cairbre cursed Maeve and Ailell for sending warriors who ran away, for sending him so few. He did not think to blame himself for not amassing a greater force to combat the province of warriors. Such a battle should have lasted for days, but he had not had enough time to prepare. Now Ulster would never offer him single combat at which he might triumph; they would not offer him a trial at Temhair Mide, where the lack of proof of his crimes against the northern province would have won him freedom. He had never expected a suicidal, frenzied attack from the north—he thought they had long since forgotten his transgressions. The nature of Conchovor's spleen had eluded him. He had prepared for the wrong things and now death and dishonor loomed foremost in his thoughts; most of all he wanted to save his son, Erk, from the inevitable eradication that must follow his downfall. Damning Connacht's meager aid again, he turned to withdraw from the thinning lines of defense only to find his Galeoin troop pounding in from behind him, and beyond them, a single figure in white, the Hound of Culann.

4. Swift Retribution

Most of those gathered by the Boyne had not seen Cú Chulainn since the Druid's potion had done its work months earlier. He and Emer had been driven off to Muirthemne while they slept. Few of those present at Rosnaree had expected him to participate at all.

Cairbre Naifer had heard the stories about the Hound's depression after murdering his son, of his apparent descent into the Many-Colored Land and of his subsequent madness. Cairbre thought that through an

insane Hound of Culann he might find a way to turn the tide of battle and to win more glory for himself than he had ever imagined.

The Galeoin had almost reached him. He turned back and shouted over the din, "Stop this slaughter! I demand application of the *fír fer*, the rights of a warrior to single combat!"

His son, Erk, stared at him dumbly. Cairbre called the young man to him. "You stand off away from me. If I win, we'll rejoice, but if I should lose in this contest, you must escape—get to Ailell's house. Nowhere in Leinster will be safe for you until peace is made with Ulster and that won't happen soon enough to keep you alive here. Do you understand?" The boy's brows knit but he nodded that he would obey. "Good. Then pray that the gods sit in the south and look north." He shoved his way through the battle, which had slowed but not stopped. He sought the Ulster Druids. Like it or not, they must rule with him if he demanded his rights. He hastened to find them. This must be done at the right moment in order to ensnare Cú Chulainn in the plan.

They had come across the river by then, the four *brithemain*. In their black robes, they were easy to see. Cairbre shouted his demand again. Morann waved his hands about to gain silence. Cairbre smiled—there, he had the Druids' attention and no one in the Ulster army could touch him.

"I've lost too many of my people," he proclaimed, "and this battle could continue for days. Neither of us has any desire for that. Let me be my people's defender against this Ulidian slander. Pick your champion."

Directly behind him, Cú Chulainn said, "Me. I'm champion of Ulster."

Immediately Conchovor had a dilemma. With him were Laegaire and Conall, both of whom could challenge that fact. He waited, saying nothing, but neither of them objected. Both men were watching Cú Chulainn carefully, wondering about his mental state—had Cathbad's elixir done its work or not?

The Hound returned their furtive looks amiably, apparently insulated from the air of unease and obviously eager for a fight. Conchovor remained in some doubt himself of his nephew's equilibrium though Cú Chulainn had visited Muirthemne twice since the potion was drunk.

"Let me confront the scoundrel, uncle," asked the Hound. He came to the front of the group where Cairbre stood. They looked each other over haughtily. Little lights danced in Cú Chulainn's eyes—the chase had exhilarated him. Cairbre took the expression for a sign of madness. He shoved his red hair out of his face, showing himself to the best possible advantage.

"It is decided," Morann said. "The conflict reduces to two. At dawn here at the river." Cairbre nearly laughed out loud.

Cú Chulainn stood on the bank of the Boyne and stared across at the misty, gray encampment of Leinster. No one had come forward out of the

mist yet and the time had arrived. Behind him, other warriors watched, wondering as he did if Cairbre Naifer might be coward enough to slink off in the night.

Unwilling to wait longer on the bank, Cú Chulainn waded in till the swirling waters covered his ankles. Silence remained the answer from the other side. Then suddenly a figure loomed out of the chilly fog. Dressed all in leather armor, it paused for a moment on the opposite bank. The figure held an axe with a hooked edge, and a round black shield with bronze umbos. They could not see enough of him to identify him absolutely; however, a moment later when he spoke, they knew he was Cairbre. "I'll make no pretense now. I've been sworn to the queen of Sovereignty since my brother and my first-born were killed in the battle over your Derdriu. Your messenger asked politely enough, so I'll tell you—I didn't come to the great battle with Connacht because I would have had no choice but to slay you, Conchovor, and I'd too much honor to commit that crime even as I hold you responsible in your mad lust for that girl."

"You've no honor at all," called Conchovor in reply, "when instead of confronting me with valid grief, you turned to our enemy."

But Cairbre refused to be found at fault. "Enough talking—I finished with that when I took your emissary's head at Rosnaree." He clambered down the bank to a clay shoal that had been pounded into existence by the previous day's crossing.

Cú Chulainn pulled his tunic over his head and threw it back onto the shore. He waded into deeper water, naked, hefting a spear and sword. Light coruscated in his dark eyes like sunlight on the river; the chill of the water seemed to have no effect on him as he sank past his waist.

Cairbre entered the river. As Cú Chulainn came near, he whipped the air with his axe, driving the Hound away from the shallows, where he might find footing.

Cairbre lunged into the water, the axe spinning. The Hound flipped back, diving under the surface. The axe split the surface, missing him by inches. Cairbre gripped his shield tighter and watched the surface for the Hound's re-emergence. The dark waters lapped and nothing moved. All too well, Cairbre knew how the Hound attacked, and he anticipated the next move. Suddenly Cú Chulainn leaped, twisting, out of the water. He whipped his spear below him as he ascended, and Cairbre slammed his shield up to deflect the point. Cú Chulainn's jump carried him in a spin above Cairbre. The axe cleaved the air, but the flashing sword blocked it. Cú Chulainn landed on the shoal and now it was Cairbre out in the cold currents of the Boyne.

Unlike the leather-bound warrior, however, Cú Chulainn generously sprang up the bank and waited for his opponent on land. Cairbre crawled out, his armor leaking streams. He reached the top of the bank; still on his knees, he took a sudden swipe at the Hound's feet. Cú Chulainn stuck his sword into the ground and the axe chipped against it. Cairbre rolled to his

feet, anticipating the spear to follow. It skidded off his shield and into the dirt. Cairbre dropped his axe, letting it swing from the thong around his wrist. He grabbed the spear and flung it underhand. Cú Chulainn ducked and snatched the shaft from its flight. In that instant, Cairbre dove in low, the axe slicing through the air ahead of him. Cú Chulainn jumped up above it and tried to cut Cairbre's head off as he slid underneath. The Leinster king managed to get his shield up. The sword chopped into the wood and became wedged there. Both men were pulled off-balance and tumbled, neither willing to release their weapons. The shield gave way first, snapping, flinging off a chunk of polished wood. Cairbre tossed it aside and took the axe in both hands. He studied the Hound; if the warrior was in fact insane, he had shown no evidence of it thus far. Cairbre began to worry.

Cú Chulainn charged at him and Cairbre barely escaped by slamming the double-bladed axe across the sword and spear both as they jabbed for his throat. He swung the axe around again but Cú Chulainn flipped himself back beneath it. Then Cairbre drove down on him with the axe. Cú Chulainn waited until the last possible second, then threw himself aside. Beneath him was a rock. The axe chopped against the rock and the blade shattered like ice.

"Another weapon!" he cried.

Cú Chulainn suddenly found himself confronted by nine warriors. He bellowed angrily at them and struck at them to get out of his way. "There's nothing in rules of fair play about this," he snarled. The nine tried to wound him. They cut him off from Ulster's sight. On the other side of the river, enraged warriors howled. Cú Chulainn jumped up and flung his spear, and three of the nine met for the last time along its length. The path to Cairbre had been opened, but the Leinster king had acquired new weapons—a new shield and a sword.

Cú Chulainn frowned and shook his head. "I've bent over backward for you for the last time, Cairbre Naifer. You've taken advantage of my sense of fair play."

"I've just begun," Cairbre replied. He turned, exposing the hand strapped to his shield; that hand carried darts. He snapped his wrist and one shot like a hornet at the Hound. Cú Chulainn chopped it aside. A second one already sped at him and he barely nicked it with his blade. The dart gashed his shoulder. With an angry roar, he ran straight at Cairbre. Then, at the last moment, he leaped up over the Leinster king, faster than Cairbre could take aim. The leap carried him off the bank. He called out, "The Gai Bulga!" and Conchovor, ready with the infamous spear, chucked it out so that Cú Chulainn, dropping toward the river, caught it.

Not wanting to lose his advantage, Cairbre scrambled down the bank, sliding into the shallows. He jumped forward in an ungainly dive, stretching his sword arm to reach the Hound, but Cú Chulainn swam out of range and vanished under the surface. Cairbre gathered his wits and

splashed back onto the shoal. He waited there, dripping, certain that he had somehow misjudged the Hound, that the tales had been exaggeration or fabrication altogether. This was the Hound of legend, the one who had defeated Connacht.

Cú Chulainn jumped up right in front of Cairbre. The Leinster king stumbled back in surprise. His eyes locked on the shining, dripping barbs. If he could just stay clear of them, he might yet have a chance. Cú Chulainn saw his terror of the spear and began to play on it. He tossed the Gai Bulga from hand to hand as he closed in on Cairbre. The spear tip wove the air in a mesmerizing dance as if it were alive. Then, like a snake, it snapped forward to strike. Cairbre slapped his shield up. But the snake had jumped in mid-strike to the right hand, and already thrust past the edge of the shield. Cairbre whined and tried to swing the shield around. Cú Chulainn's arm curled up out of the way and the Hound struck down over the lip as the shield whipped past. He yanked back and Cairbre screamed. The deadly barbs shredded behind his shoulder, tore away part of his leather padding. Cú Chulainn jumped and slashed the Gai Bulga straight across Cairbre's throat. With his left hand he grabbed the unkempt tangle of red hair and tore the head free. He yipped and shook the gory trophy at the Leinster force. The Galeoin closed cautiously upon him.

The son of Ailell ordered Leinster, "Stop!" On the bank behind Cú Chulainn, Sencha climbed up, wielding the thin branch from an oak tree, a symbol of knowledge, and of peace. He interceded between the Hound and the warriors. "I like it no less than you, but this was a fair fight and the outcome decided everything. The Ulstermen have not crossed the river, knowing that it would only start the battle again, and start it dishonorably, what with their own Druids on hand. So the duty falls to me. You'll all stop now, otherwise Connacht will be your enemy, too, and if that happened there would shortly be no Leinster." The warriors, even the fractious Galeoin, lowered their weapons. The Galeoin grumbled at having passed up another chance to kill the Hound.

Conchovor delightedly accepted the trophy of Cairbre's head. For the skill shown, he gave Cú Chulainn Cairbre's remaining black shield, which Cú Chulainn named Dubán. The pride with which he accepted it—saying "Emer will be as much pleased as I am"—convinced the doubters who remained that he had become himself again.

"How is Emer?" asked Cuscraid.

"Riddled with enigmas as always. Forever tying me up for her amusement," he added, grinning.

"Well, then," Cuscraid stammered. "That's good."

Cú Chulainn went with them back to Emain Macha for an unusual celebratory feast—one that loudly sounded a warning: to live in Ulster or marry into Ulster was to *be* of Ulster. No mixed allegiances would be tolerated, especially loyalty to Connacht.

As the celebration unfolded, in that maligned neighboring province young Erk, late of Rosnaree, was describing to Maeve and Ailell the questions put forth by the messenger and the sure death conferred upon his father by the warrior Cú Chulainn.

Maeve could hardly believe this. Sencha had been sending secret reports back to them that indicated Cú Chulainn had gone insane while tangling with demon Fomoiri in the red realm of Int Ildathach.

To this, Erk replied adamantly, "I didn't see any madness in him, not a breath of anything less than supreme skill and an appetite for battle."

"Supreme skill!" Maeve snarled. She threw down the terrier that had been sleeping in her lap, then got up and stormed out, the pup yipping in fright ahead of her.

Ailell drank his wine and reckoned how much longer his treaty with Ulster could continue after this. Generously, he gave it a week.

INTERLUDE FIVE

Part Two



Torpeist ended his new tale as we came in sight of the next stone for my penance. I wished to hear more on the consequences, and quickly asked, “Was he right, your Ailell?”

“Not *my* Ailell, I assure you. Yes, he was right—the treaty had crumbled. Actually it had worn away, eroded in many areas, this last one being very minor in comparison with the incident at Mac Datho’s. Ultimately, what came about occurred because Maeve blamed Cú Chulainn for the loss of the Brown Bull in the *táin*. Quite irrationally, too, I might add. The two bulls—Ailell’s and her stolen one—had been penned together at Cruachan, and had destroyed one another out of the unremitting hatred they bore one another. Nothing rewarding has ever come from that kind of ungoverned evil, no matter whose system of belief we’re speaking of. I came to think that in a way their hate bled into the world, like seeds on the wind blown to fertile ground. Maeve and Cú Chulainn were like those two bulls—she the red one that refused to be led by anyone; he the dark and brooding bull of Ulster. Their rancor towards each other transcended legitimacy.” He glanced up from his reverie. “Ah, but I’m keeping you from your new prayer, and I must shut up before I interfere further—we must get you back by vespers.”

He was grinning, practically smirking or so it seemed, so I answered coldly, “That’s right, we must.” His smile went flat. I had neither resorted to anger nor played along, and he had nowhere to go with his amusement. That was the moment when I understood at last how to deal with Senchan Torpeist’s jaundiced observations.

This played in the back of my mind while I rushed through my penance. When I got up again, I told him, “You think that because you’ve seen so much of this world that you know all the ins and outs of people. Nothing left to surprise you, is there? You poke fun at our order because

you think we're fools, observing our rituals and conversing with a God you know nothing about and care nothing about."

He shook his head. "Not because you're fools," he replied, "but because many of you are arrogant enough to assume that you know precisely what your god's will is even though by your own admission there are countless factions like your Pelagian one, all at odds with one another, some even resorting to bloodshed to sort things out. Because you think to tie the world up in the tidy ribbon of your faith—which you do, not through reason, but by rejecting anything that does not correspond tidily within it. That sort of pomposity deserves nothing but scathing abuse."

Here again I did not resort to anger; I did not even rise to the bait. I considered what he had said before concerning Pelagius, of the dichotomy of upholding his views and the edicts of Rome as if balancing each, one hand against the other. And I thought: *Who does truly know You, Lord? Who as intimately as he pretends? Which of us can say we've seen the light itself?* Perhaps only those possessed by *geilt*. Perhaps in their madness they know You not at all. It seemed to me that Pelagius's attack stemmed from reason, from his contemplation of that which is ordained sacrosanct. I asked myself, *Is it presumable that Faith without Reason is empty, meaningless and, worse, false?*

I returned to the stone again, knelt, and repeated my penance. This time I attended to what I was saying, to what meaning the entreaties held. Your forgiveness if my thoughts blaspheme. As yet I cannot tell if that is so. The hardest questions are those for which no answer is found.

After that, we continued across the isle together but in isolation, each shrouded in his own thoughts. I could not have expressed mine to him in any case. At the next two sites I prayed in silence and Torpeist kept his distance. Then, as we moved on, he spoke up abruptly. "You realize," he said, "that these doorway slabs you've got stuck in the ground aren't the only holy stones your order possesses."

I stopped, stared at him in dismay. "What can you possibly be talking about now?"

He said nothing, just shifted back and forth from one foot to the other; no doubt he did this because his hips ached, but it made him look like a small child with a secret he was proud of.

Suddenly, I saw what he meant. "The Cursing Stones."

He said, "Them and no others."

I should have known they would have some meaning for him. The five spherical stones were remnants of an earlier period, so the legend went, here before the monastery was erected. Molaise had found them gathered on one of these stone slabs and had felt the holiness of them, which was why he had selected this site for our home. The crosses inscribed on them were ostensibly his work, too, although not even the Abbot took that seriously. But they were supposed to be able to absorb the evil in one's thoughts and desires, and many of us had gone to that altar to speak to the stones of

anger or troubled thoughts. I'd seen Brian there dozens of times, walking backwards around the altar, chanting and counting the knots in his belt. Obviously the ritual had produced no effect in him, as he continued to sneak to the steamhouse to steal a glance at the women. I had used the stones once, but I saw no magic in them.

"The stones do nothing," I said. "They're useless."

"As Cursing Stones, yes, they're only symbolic. It was you monks who engraved your crosses on them. The more ancient use for those nine stones is something else again."

"Your senility is showing. There are only five stones on the altar. For nine, you'd have to pile them up."

"There are only five there now. I know of four more . . . without crosses on them."

"Where?"

"Why should that matter to you, Fergil? You don't believe they have any power, anyway."

In defiance, I replied, "That's right, I don't." I left him and continued on to the last site on my journey. The swollen sun floated upon the water. I could see the long silhouettes of our *currachs*—the brothers out fishing for our supper. As I walked on I could nearly taste the savory white flesh of their catch, and I thought that, for all the hardship of our life here, we had our gifts, and we earned them. We appreciated what we had that much more because we had worked for it. Soon enough, I would be a fisherman, too. After I had finished my time in the scriptorium . . . after old Torpeist died. This realization acted strangely upon me. I discovered that I did not wish to see him dead. Glancing back, I watched him climb a flower-strewn hummock. He walked crookedly, his hip obviously inflamed. In that moment I tried to memorize the way he looked—the ragged beard, the deep lines in his face, and even the mischief in his eyes. Then I looked out to sea again. The image of him hung in my mind, overlying the bright red strip of sparkling water, the sun at its end. He came up beside me and studied the same view, or at least pretended to.

"Are you going to tell me about those stones?" I asked.

"Eventually. It is a great truth abides in this, and truths cannot be told, they can only be revealed. Later. I'll show you, later." Then he pushed on, leaving me there, my thoughts a massive conflict. Now, however, Lord, I seem to be getting used to it. I wonder if that can be seen as spiritual growth.

VII. THE GATHERING OF ENEMIES



1. Spleen II

Maeve might have gone on grumbling and complaining eternally without action except for a number of events that, together, made action the only possible alternative. The first of these came as a result of Conchovor's edict against consorting with Connacht.

A rich Ulster farmer named Gerg of Rath Ini had for some while been arranging a marriage for his daughter, Ferb. He had any number of suitors from whom to select a satisfactory husband, but Gerg was solicitous of his daughter's wishes, preferring to let her choose her own man—a rare thing in a royal match, for love frequently fails to satisfy politics. The man that Ferb fancied was none other than Maine Mórgor, one of the seven Maine's born to Maeve many years before. He had his father's swarthyness and his mother's white hair and guile. He also maintained that he loved Ferb.

Apprised of Conchovor's unbridled hatred toward Connacht, Gerg would have favored any other choice, but he shared none of the king's contempt. Although he lived in the south and not far from the where Connacht had marched on their incursion for the Brown Bull, he had experienced none of the raids perpetrated by both sides, the almost incessant minor skirmishes, murders and pilferage. Perhaps it was his daughter's affection for Maine that excluded and protected him.

Gerg had missed his daughter while she was fostered out. The reunion between doting father and fourteen-year-old stranger had occurred less than a month earlier. So little time had passed that his pent-up love and joy still overflowed his sense of reason and protocol. This ultimately made him disregard the king's wishes and arrange a quiet feast, to celebrate a *banais rígi*—a fertility rite of royal union that his and many other Ulster *tuatha* practiced. When he thought about what he was doing, Gerg rea-

soned that this wouldn't be seen as divided loyalty, since he remained dedicated to Ulster. Nevertheless, he wisely invited only a few poets, and just one harpist, and for all of his caution, the event very nearly went unnoticed at Emain Macha; and had it not been for the groom, it would have.

Maine Mórgor may have realized the delicacy of the situation; he might even have intended to enter Ulster quietly when first he accepted the wedding invitation. But Connacht had its own version of Bricriu the Bitter Tongue in a warrior named Donall Dearg, and Donall Dearg had much to say on the subject of Maine's marriage.

The modest wedding party at first consisted of a dozen chariots and wagons, and a small herd of cattle, which was the bride's price. Donall strolled out to look the assemblage over. "This is such a fine embarkation that I am impressed. And so *many* people, such a *huge* crowd going to celebrate the wedding of so fine and upstanding a man as you, Maine Mórgor. What a pity they won't be enjoying as exalted a return."

"And why should that be the case?" asked Maine.

"Why, because so impoverished a showing will beggar all desire for celebration; because you dare not stay a single night in Ulster—which we all understand is to avoid a confrontation with Conchovor—perfectly reasonable of course, but it will take its toll on the spirit of the event, when the groom has to flee before midnight like a frog-prince with time running out."

"You think I wouldn't dare to spend the night in Ulster?" Maine belted.

"No, of course not, that's not it at all," Donall protested falsely. "It's the chary thing to do. I'm sure you'd dare just about anything."

"You're damned right I would. How many people think I wouldn't stay? How much talk is there going on behind my back, eh?"

"None, oh certainly very little."

"Well, I'll show the lot of you how Maine Mórgor celebrates his wedding." He turned on his heel and marched back inside Cruachan. His shouts shook the walls: demands for more of everything, more wagons, more gifts and attendants; then angry assurances of what he would do in Ulster, the cause for which was unknown to all those who were even then obeying.

The shape of the final group that set out for Maine's wedding bordered on pomposity: one hundred and fifty people in half that many chariots, all of them, both warriors and drivers, dressed in clean white tunics with wide purple stripes down each side. On their backs they wore shields of varnished wood with gold trim, lightweight ornamental discs to sparkle in the sun. The horses wore jingling collars of bells, and the spears that stood in rows were encrusted with precious stones of every color. Maine had seven greyhounds running behind his chariot, linked to it by silver chains, which in turn supported a string of tiny golden apples. At the head of the procession walked three Druids, also wearing the white tunics with purple

trim, and they had bands of silver circling their shaved heads. The leader of the Druids was named Olgaeth, and he had great misgivings about this endeavor.

The wedding party set out for Rath Ini, and it did not take long for word of their coming to outdistance them.

At that time messages always travelled verbally. The messenger class could pass messages a thousand times over enormous distances and never change so much as a word; for them, words held the same magic as for *filid*. At the other end of the scale was the farming class. These people lived in benighted awe of words and, when forced to resort to their use, were as likely to invent new words as to remember the old ones. By the time the scurrying farmers carried their message to Conchovor, the overblown wedding party had inflated into the combined armies of all the remaining provinces of Eriu with the Fomoiri thrown in for good measure. Maeve, claimed the distortion, rode bare-breasted in the lead.

The message came in the night, and Conchovor drowsily, half-drunkly heard it delivered. Even half-asleep as he was, some coldly sane part of him knew the unlikelihood of the events as described—especially of Maeve storming through Ulster unprotected by her twelve defenders. He thanked the messenger, guaranteed him that the matter would be dealt with, and went back to bed. Tomorrow, he thought, would be soon enough to disprove the improbable tale and to deal with whatever iota of substance it contained.

Far fewer Ulidians than invited actually attended the wedding feast that Gerg threw for his daughter. Barely a handful of his neighbors concurred with his interpretation of the king's decree. Perhaps thirty people showed up for the *banais rígi*—thirty, who eyed the sizable Connacht party with something less than enthusiasm.

They had just been seated before their meal when a sudden blast of cold wind howled down from the heights of Iraid Cuillen, slammed against the house and shook it off its foundations. The stacks of decorative shields fell with a crash. Scythes and weapons jumped off their pegs on the walls. Clay pots skipped from shelves and shattered.

The Druid Olgaeth had been waiting for such a sign. He hurried to the doorway and peered out into the night. "I think this promises trouble for the people gathered here tonight. That's the wind that blows ahead of the storm, that warns you to seek shelter. It's the wind before the war. Its shriek is that of the spear point against the shield, the mourners over the dead, the—"

"That's enough!" shouted Maine. "I don't want to hear any more of your festering prattle. You've been itching all day for anything that you could turn into an omen."

Olgaeth returned gloomily to his place. "If you listened to me," he muttered, "you'd leave here right now, take your bride and go."

"Well, I'm not listening to you, and she isn't my bride yet, so stuff it."

Uneasy himself, Gerg nevertheless supported his son-in-law. "There aren't any warriors at Emain Macha right now," he said. "They all went home after the debacle at Rosnaree, I know it for a fact. If anyone did show up to cause trouble, I would stand with you and so would my two sons, my people, my friends. Let's not be alarmed now ... on the other hand perhaps we could get started with the ceremony?"

2. The Siege

Conchovor had slept fitfully after the news of the invaders reached him, even though he all but rejected it. Sometime near dawn, he had experienced a vivid dream in which a blonde woman in a green cloak appeared to him. She spoke softly, saying, "Remember the Brown Bull, which was taken from you once. Your laziness makes you doubt what you hear and forget what you know—that Connacht would destroy you. A son of Maeve and Ailell has entered the land, bringing with him only a hundred and fifty. They stay at Rath Ini, and tonight a wedding feast will keep them occupied there."

Upon awaking, Conchovor knew that Macha had come to visit him. He called for Cathbad and told him of the dream, and Cathbad, much as he disliked the news, had to admit that it demanded attention, action. "But you have to act quickly to reach Rath Ini by tonight, and there's hardly anyone about that you can rely on in a skirmish. The queen from Estremnidea possibly, and those she's brought with her."

"I'll take who I can. If Cathrach Catuchenn and her outlaws want to help, that would be fine. There's Buri of the Rough Word, and Facen. Forais Fingalach, she'd love a battle like this. So would Fabric Fiacail and Niall, now that he has his weapons. I'll find me a hundred and fifty. They may not be the best, but we'll have surprise on our side."

"I'll send my son with you. It's time in Imrinn's training that he acted as judge in such an occasion."

Thus the plans were made and the troops hastily assembled. By late evening they reached Iraird Cuillen and looked down on Rath Ini. Over the fortress they found a black storm-cloud. Lightning flashed within it, lighting it red and green, but making no thunder. Imrinn told Conchovor and Brod, his driver, "That's a powerful sign, warning of opposition."

"That's good enough for me." He led his warriors down the hill.



The bride and groom, at the head of the feast, undressed ceremoniously in view of the gathering. Two Ulster Druids set up two braziers a few feet apart, then sprinkled sea-salt over the ground between the fires until it looked as if it had snowed inside the room. From opposite corners, the naked bride and groom walked toward the center point between the braziers. They reached the point at the same time. The sharp crystals hurt their soles, and they shifted, digging their feet under the salt. Face to face, they pressed together tightly. The two Druids came forward again and heaped mistletoe upon them. Then two streamers were tied to Ferb and Maine, and the Druids walked a circle around the two, raising and lowering the lengths of cloth they held until the two had become a bound pillar. The fires blazed, banishing all evil souls that might be on hand, ready to take up residence in the woman's belly should she conceive this night. The wrappings turned the two lovers into a maypole, a phallic unity, promoting that conception. One of the Druids chanted solemnly as he circled the "pole" and waved a wand of mountain ash over their heads, down their backs to their buttocks.

While this transpired, one of the servants went to a full cauldron where the wine was kept warm and filled his pitcher from it. He was about to leave, but lost his footing. The heavy pitcher dropped into the wine, and a wave of it splashed over the lip of the cauldron and drenched the fire. The flames hissed wickedly and all attention turned to the cauldron, and the streams of dark wine running across the floor like blood. Olgaeth gnashed his teeth at the sight of it; he could smell doom in the air, but he could not convince anyone of it, least of all Maine.

Fecundity assured, the presiding Druid tucked away his ash wand and withdrew. Maine and Ferb, now married, still could not move. The crowd jumped up, shouting, yelling. From their midst, a figure wearing a skin and stylized horse's head came forward to lead the procession. The apparition of the horse goddess bobbed and danced around; it spent a moment charging the Connachtmen, who backed off timorously. Their goddess was not Macha, and the ritual of marriage they endured bore little resemblance to this spectacle. Nevertheless, when the "goddess" resumed her dance around the bride and groom, the warriors joined in with the crowd to lift and carry the two over their heads. Still shouting and cheering, the revelers took their captives outside.

In the darkness, the approaching chariots from Emain Macha clanked and rattled across the valley. The celebration stopped. Olgaeth cried, "Look!" and pointed at the sky, at the unnatural cloud overhead. He did not have to say that they should have heeded him. Maine Mórgor made out Conchovor in the lead. "Traacherous dogs!" he cried. "I'm tricked—

help me, they mean to take me captive!" Whether this was true or not became immediately academic. The nearest Connacht warriors cut through the streamers, and the wedding party retreated inside the house. Maine quickly dressed, while his party gathered up their weapons. "This is for display," said one man of his shield.

"We can ward off a battle," Gerg promised. "Let me go and talk with him before this gets out of hand." Then, with his two sons beside him, he went outside.

In those few minutes the strange black cloud had dropped down around the fortress, thickening the night. Coming outside the walls, Gerg and his sons appeared to the surrounding Ulster force like armed monsters. The warriors fell upon the three of them before Gerg could say a word. Only one, called Cobthach, managed to kill his attackers and escape. He shouted the alarm while the greedy warriors cut the heads from their victims. "They'll all come now," Conchovor yelled. "Tear down this wall before they can use it as defense." The Ulstermen held their shields over their heads and began ripping the woven wattles apart.

Maine and Cobthach led the houseful of troops to fight. They bombarded the Ulstermen with their jeweled spears, all of which rained down harmlessly on the roof of shields while the Ulstermen continued to hack and shred the outer wall. Maine stole the spear from Gerg's corpse and gave that of his brother-in-law to the nearest warriors. They charged the barrier where it had been torn open and stuck their spears into the Ulstermen who tried to wriggle through. Maine faced the Estremnideans and cut down every one of them that came at him. He tried for their queen, but the Ulsterman, Facen, jumped in to take him. Their skirmish lasted only a moment. Of all Maeve's sons, Maine Mórgor was the most skillful, and he cored Facen with Gerg's spear and pinned him to a post. Then he stole Facen's weapons and confronted Fabric Fiacail with them. The two had great power in their blows, and if Maine had been using one of the varnished shields brought for show, he would have fallen. But Facen's weapons held up against Fabric's assault. Maine drove him back to the pale on which Facen hung. He made a sudden exaggerated thrust. Fabric jumped aside and smashed himself in the face with the spear shaft embedded in Facen. Maine struck then, chopping into Fabric's neck from behind.

All this while, the warriors of Ulster made progress through the paling. The Connacht shields snapped under their attack and those warriors who survived the onslaught were forced little by little back into the house. Maine and Cobthach saw that unless they retreated with the others, momentarily they would be consumed. Desperately, wildly, they cut their way through, barely escaped inside. Bodies of their own men blocked the doorway from easy access by the Ulidians, and the fury of the battle dwindled for a time.



In Cruachan, Maeve was sleeping peacefully, unaware of the dire situation her son faced. Abruptly, her pleasant dreams swirled away, and she found herself staring at a blonde woman in green. “Great Queen, even now your son is dying, set upon by Conchovor and his cruel warriors. They’ll leave nothing of him if you don’t hurry to save him.” The woman started to recede, but Maeve called, “Wait, you. What manner of proph-
tess are you? There is no goddess of your like here, and I think you mean to stir up trouble.”

The woman grew in size before her, and the green cloak sprouted black feathers. The pale face distorted to that of a rotting corpse, with worms sliding through holes below the shining sockets. “Trouble I will send you,” she hissed, “but I haven’t lied. Nemain doesn’t have to lie to make men lie with her.” Blackness consumed her, and Maeve, with a start, sat up. Her lurch into consciousness awoke Ailell beside her and he muttered sleepily, “What is wrong?”

“I’ve seen the Nemain in my dream, and she says that Maine Mórgor’s dying.”

His wife had experienced many nightmares since the *táin*, and Ailell had come to dismissing them out of hand. He knew that Maeve bore deep scars from her failure to defeat both Ulster and him, and his own triumph had granted him eternal patience with her. “My dear, Maine’s only dying symbolically for you by taking another woman than you. We’ve had this discussion before, and you admitted it then.”

“No, this is different.” She got up and put on her tunic and *brat*. “I have to find out.”

“That’s probably wise. Why not send Fiannamail, the wine steward’s son. He’s a good friend to Maine and can be trusted absolutely.”

“Yes,” she said and hurried off through the dark fort.

Ailell watched her sadly. He loved Maeve, a fact which he had long ago accepted as the only explanation for the things he tolerated from her. Her obsession with her sons he considered a much safer concern than her obsession with destroying Cú Chulainn. There were days when the Hound of Ulster seemed not to exist at all, and other days when she would rail on about him and no kind words could calm her, as if he had become a disease that had taken root deep inside her body. Ailell preferred that she worry over her son; but that meant that Maine Mórgor had better be all right. Otherwise, the loud-mouthed lout, Donall Dearg, had better look for a very deep hole, and even then Ailell would see it filled up on top of him.



In the thick black fog, Conchovor grumbled at the delay of clearing all the bodies from the doorway into Rath Ini. For every few they dragged aside, a spear from the darkened interior of the house shot out and, often as not, added an Ulsterman to the pile. He wished that he had his best warriors with him. Cú Chulainn could have performed the same feat that he had at Bricriu's and simply lifted one whole side of the house into the air.

Then the last few bodies were removed from the entrance into the house and the battle took shape again. The Ulster warriors rushed inside, the first few meeting swift deaths from a solid wall of Connachtmen. The Estremnideans again assailed the front ranks with berserk fury, their actions unhesitatingly suicidal. Buri swept in, singling out Maine, hoping to triumph by taking the head of the opposition's leader. But Maine had ideas of his own where his head should be, and he blocked Buri with a sword, simultaneously using the sharp edge of Gerg's shield to slash Buri from head to waist. As if this were a signal, the Connacht force rallied and poured back outside. The battle spread through the fog into pockets of skirmish. Conchovor hacked right and left. Peripherally, he caught movement and swung about, face to face with Maine Mórgor. "Deceitful king," Maine said. "We had a peaceful wedding here. You might have honored it."

"I might have if every omen hadn't pointed to war and your host come forward with his blades ready instead of inviting us to take part as guests."

"More lies. He went out to do that very thing."

"You forget, I saw him. The only thing he invited was death."

At that, they struck each other. Both blows crashed against shields, but hard enough to drop both men to their knees. They quickly scrambled up again, and their clashing swords shrieked with sparks. Maine stepped into denser fog for an instant and Conchovor leaped in after him. Maine's sword chopped down at him, and he thrust up his shield to block it only to find that Maine had grabbed a spear with his shield hand. Clumsily, because of the shield strapped on his forearm, Maine chucked the spear at the king of Ulster. It pierced Conchovor's side and spun him around.

Maine threw aside his shield and came in for the killing blow. At that instant, Brod, Conchovor's driver, jumped in between them. Brod had a sword, and he hacked blindly at Maine, with such fury that Maine had to turn aside. He grabbed Facen's shield again and began to batter Brod's every effort, wearing the frenzied warrior down quickly. Maine lunged out from behind his own shield and cut through Brod's shoulder to the breastbone. The charioteer stumbled about, blind with pain, and vanished in the fog.

Maine turned back to Conchovor, but the king no longer crouched there. The bloodied spear remained, as if Conchovor had been a ghost. The hackles rose on Maine's neck—a premonition of doom that slowly turned him about, as if in a ritual dance, to behold his executioner. Conchovor's sword, the ritual tool, severed Maine's head in one swift

motion, so cleanly that the head remained in place for a moment afterward. The look of confusion bled away with his life; he closed his eyes as if sleepy, doubled forward, and the head toppled free. Maine's blood sprayed out like a congealment of the black fog. Conchovor bent down to retrieve the head. He groaned at the pain this caused him, and clutched the wound in his side. He left the trophy for someone else to collect and painfully dragged himself back from the thick of the fray, outside the tattered walls. Arms seized him from behind, and he struggled to break free until he heard Imrinn's voice calming him. He let the Druid lead him to his chariot. Others from the Ulster force crawled out of the dense darkness—Cathrach Catuchenn, Forais Fingalach, displaying as many wounds as captured heads. Perhaps half of the original force survived, but only a portion of them had escaped the eerie fog by the time Imrinn drove Conchovor away.

By the time Fiannamail arrived, there were few living warriors left. At first he thought the house had been burned, because of the black cloud that had settled there. He waded through it and found Ferb in the yard, weeping upon her husband's corpse. She glanced up at him, anticipating death, but defying it with her glance. Fiannamail sank down beside her. "He was my good friend."

"They killed him, for no reason but that he loved me," she answered. Fiannamail tried to argue her from this belief but he effected no change. She told him that Maine had wounded Conchovor, that the king had driven off not long before. Filled with purpose, Fiannamail commandeered an abandoned chariot and set off to finish the job Maine had begun.

Upon reaching Iraid Cuillen, he looked back at Rath Ini. He saw the top of the storm cloud from there, and his mouth fell open. The cloud was becoming three spouts, its substance coagulating, transmogrifying into three animate shapes—three enormous black birds. The Morrighu had created this horror; had, it seemed, aided Ulster against Connacht. More angry than ever, he whipped his team across the height. At the other side, he spied retreating chariots below and swooped down at them, ready with a spear.

His defiant scream carried like a cry of angry wrens, and some of those who heard held up—in the rearmost chariot, Niall of the Fair Hair, the son of Conchovor's who had taken his first trophy in this battle. Niall looked much like his father, enough so that Fiannamail couldn't tell the difference. He urged his horses faster, concentrating on the figure who awaited him patiently. So consumed in his rage was he that he never considered the dozens of other chariots around him, or the weapons they bore, their spears, over a dozen of which released his blood long before he ever got to throw his own at Niall.

As Fiannamail perished, Donall Dearg arrived at the house of Gerg. He found both Ferb and Nuagal, Gerg's wife, in the yard, both lamenting their losses. Donall had come out to satisfy himself that no harm had befallen Maine or, if it had, to make good an escape before Maeve came

hunting him. His blood chilled at the sight of the two women and their two corpses, and he took his leave of them as though he intended to race bravely into the fight. Instead, he turned his chariot south and headed for Munster, where sanctuary might be found.

He had traveled a few miles when he found to his horror two chariots closing with him—one to each side. Frantically, Donall Dearn snatched up a spear and charged on. He crouched low to offer less of a target. The chariot on his left arrived first, and he glanced over, ascertaining that it was an Ulster chariot and an Ulster duo within. They were doing the same, making certain of their prey in the dark. Donall seized the moment. He shot his spear over the rail as the chariot came close enough to get a good look at him. The warrior caught it full in the chest and was tossed back over the rail. The chariot bounced up as it traversed the body; then it steered away. Donall grabbed a second spear, quickly switched the hands holding rein and weapon.

On his right, the second chariot had gained ground, and with that one there could be no surprise. He would have to be cleverer still. The other chariot ran parallel to him, the grim warrior brandishing a spear. Watching from the corner of his eye, Donall waited until the man lifted the spear to throw it. Then he jerked the reins hard, turning the chariot aside briefly, but as quickly pulled the other way—across the enemy's path. The other driver had started to follow him. The switch-back maneuver caught him completely unprepared. His chariot careered out of the way, tossing the warrior off-balance, and Donall threw his shot and hastily veered away. His weapon caught the warrior in the shoulder, knocking him against the rail and then down. Donall glanced back. He laughed and reached for another spear. He hefted it, twisted the reins, and skidded around for the kill. He never expected the Ulster warrior to have enough strength to get back on his feet and fling his own spear. Donall drove right into the oncoming point. It snatched him off his feet, and he watched his own chariot slip out from under him, before he turned and crashed to the ground, snapping the spear shaft, pushing it all the way through him.

He was the last of the errant Connacht warriors to arrive. Nevertheless, his appearance and that of Fiannamail caused two of Conchovor's sons—Niall of the Fair Head and Feradach, who had slain Donall—to return to Rath Ini. Niall suspected that more warriors might be pouring into the province; for Feradach, it was the closest place to bind up his shoulder.

Niall arrived first, only to find that the girl, Ferb, had taken her own life. She lay sprawled across her husband's body as if shielding him; the fort would become known after that day as Duma Ferb: Ferb's Mound. Niall covered her with his cloak. The wife of Gerg had died of grief. He found her nearby and covered her also. It seemed that he had been wrong; no one else had shown up here. Nevertheless, he had come this far and would search the house and grounds.

The interior lay in darkness, but he managed to stir the ashes beneath the cauldron of wine. He drank some while he wandered through the house. No one stirred. No life remained. It looked as if some great natural catastrophe had occurred there—as if the earth had erupted beneath it and thrown the contents wildly about. Niall took another drink of wine, then departed the house for good.

Upon exiting, he started for his chariot but found his driver missing. Niall called his name and heard an answer from behind the house. He tramped around it, annoyed at the driver for deserting his post, and strode into a trap. Before he could react, four spears pinned him to the side of the house. Through his pain, he saw warriors in dark cloaks, and in their midst the woman with silver hair. She came toward him, her sword drawn. He knew what she wanted, and he could hardly dissuade her. In vain, he opened his mouth to plead to the Druids behind her, but Maeve never gave him the opportunity to speak.

Feradach recognized the unattended chariot outside Duma Ferb as his brother's. Excitedly, he climbed down with his driver's assistance. They started toward the house, but Feradach said, "Wait, go get our new trophy to show him." His driver muttered, but went back for the head. Then they moved on. "Niall!" called Feradach. "What're you doing, drinking yourself silly on their celebration wine? Save some for me you bloated—" They stepped inside and found a room full of Connachtmen. At the pot stood Maeve. She stared at him with red eyes, which slowly sank to the head he carried.

"What do you have there?" she asked.

Feradach replied, "Oh, it's nothing." He unwound himself from his driver's support and meanwhile weighed his chances. He decided that he didn't have any.

"No, hold it up for me to see. Ah, so, that is where Donall Dearg has gone, is it? Not only have you killed my son, but you have removed the heart from my vengeance." She came around the cauldron. "What do you suppose I should do with you?"

Feradach could not find an answer.

"I think I shall let you stew with your comrade." She gestured to the cauldron and he looked at it for the first time. Niall's head floated there. One hand draped over the side.

"My brother."

"Is he? Then all the more reason for you to share his company."

Feradach dropped the head of Donall Dearg as the Connacht warriors closed in on him.

Prostrate in his chariot, Conchovor looked back upon his surviving force. He had seen no sign of his sons and presumed them lost. There would have to be more, many more sons after this, enough to surround

Emain Macha. He dreamed of them, hundreds of them, row upon row of his children. When that vision faded, he lay back, wondering about the cloud that had veiled the true occasion from both parties of the fight, scattering them so that more died on both sides. What had it been? A mist of the Morrighu? The Fates toying with their two favorite armies again? Hardly a surprise if it was.

Hereafter, he would need the like of Laegaire, Conall, and Cú Chulainn. Where had they been this night? he wondered. Somewhere, no doubt idling in the arms of their beloved wives, unaware of the calamitous turn that events had taken. At least he hoped so, he hoped that the Daughters of Ernmas had not taken a toll elsewhere. He must have showed his concern as pain, because Imrinn leaned down and passed something over his eyes, and Conchovor was asleep.

3. Return of the Morrighu

On Mount Oriel, Cú Chulainn slept in post-coital bliss, much as his uncle imagined him. Emer lay wrapped around him, her breath warm against his neck. The mountain lay in a preternatural silence, as if every living thing for hundreds of miles had frozen between moments. It was a stillness to which his ears had long ago become accustomed. When the shriek came, it detonated the silence. Cú Chulainn snapped awake so hard that he rose into the air, tossing Emer aside.

He jumped up, grabbed his sword and the shield, Dubán. Emer snatched a spear and followed him out. She remembered that she had been dreaming, but she could not recall the substance of it at all—the scream had wiped out all of it.

The moon revealed a strange sight to them: a woman driving a chariot along the ridge toward their house. The car came slowly, flowing along, more like a boat gliding on water than a chariot across uneven ground. The horse that pulled it had just one leg in the middle of its body, which remained erect though the sound of hoofbeats was clearly audible. When the chariot drew nearer, they were astonished to see that the yoke passed through the horse's body, protruding from its forehead.

The woman at the helm wore a crimson cloak that glowed as if hot. Shortly, a man appeared out of the darkness behind her. He walked along with a large, forked hazel staff, wearing the dull tunic and trousers of a herdsman. A heifer moved sluggishly along ahead of him. Neither the woman nor the herdsman seemed to notice the house or the two naked people they had awakened.

Cú Chulainn blocked their path. "No cattle leave my home without my permission." He gestured with his sword at the huge man, whom he

could see clearly now was deformed by an idiot's face. "What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing," the woman replied shrilly. "He's *Uar-gaeth-sceo-Luachair-sceo*. He always looks like that."

"No doubt having to remember his name addled his wits."

"Cucuc?" Emer called.

"It's all right," he replied, "I believe I know this woman already."

"Do you?" the huge man asked suddenly. His voice boomed like an avalanche of rocks and echoed back from the higher hills. "You've met *Faebor beg-beoil cuimdiuir folt sceub-gairit sceo Uath?*"

"I think I've heard enough foolishness for one night," Cú Chulainn said. He leapt up past the horse, placing a foot on either rail of the chariot and holding his sword a hair's breadth above the red-headed woman.

"Don't think you can use your soft weapon on me," the woman said, pointedly ignoring the sword.

"I won't use it till it's hard, I promise you. And now, your true name if you'd be good enough."

"Put away your sword. I might be a female satirist, a friend of hoary Levarcham's, who has won this cow fairly for my clever rejoinders."

"Then let's hear some of your words instead of that strung name. My wife is Ulster's champion riddler and she will judge your skill."

"Move off where your manhood doesn't divide the moon and I'll recite."

Cú Chulainn stepped across so that both feet were on one rail, right above the wheel. The woman began her chant.

"Dancer of death
wades the streams of life
but offers none to
wayward warriors who loudly challenge.

"His day is coming.
Only stone will support him
when time comes to an end.
Titanic rock to shore the titan.

"Beware of the dog,
King of one path to the red land.
Watch what you eat
and avoid imitations."

"You won a cow for that?" he asked.

"You don't appreciate good verse," she objected.

He gripped his sword tighter. "Tell me, enchantress, are you Badb, Nemain, or Morrigan?" He caught a flicker of movement at his rear and spun about as the herdsman's staff swung to break his knees. Cú Chulainn

stepped out from the rail onto the staff, letting it take him along for an instant. In that instant he cut across the herdsman's throat. The head tipped back, hung balanced for a moment, and then fell. By the time it hit the ground, it had turned to stone. The torso, too, had petrified.

Cú Chulainn landed on the ground, twisting on one foot to deal with the woman in the chariot—but the chariot and horse had vanished. Emer pointed up, directing him, “There.” He craned his neck to one side and spied a huge black bird with red eyes on the branch above him. Lowering his sword, he turned all the way around to watch the bird. “Weary of your disguise? The Daughter of Buan suits you I think—only because it hides your hideous nature.”

The crow squawked and hissed.

“What do you want here?” he asked. “You can't hurt me—you've tried too often and failed.”

“I can do *great* harm to you,” the bird protested.

“From there you might spatter me if you call that great harm.”

“I guard your deathbed, Little Hound. I had to fight my sisters for that right, and I'm keeping it ready for you. The next time we visit, that's where it will be.”

“Unless,” he suggested, “I send you to yours first.” He made a great swift leap into the tree. The crow, caught off-guard, shrieked again, this time in real panic, and flapped to escape. Cú Chulainn managed to shave her tail feathers. She rose against the dark sky, which hid her—all but the eyes. They traced her path like shooting stars.

Emer went to him when he jumped down and hugged him to her. “She foretells your death.”

“Yes, but it's not the first time. And I walked away from her then. I defeated every threat she posed. If she gets in my way again, I'll kill her this time.”

“Is it possible to do that?”

Cú Chulainn smiled determinedly. “We'll find that out, won't we?” But as he let his wife lead him back inside, he was wondering what event might be on the horizon to have provoked this warning.

4. Fortress on the Cliff

News of Maine's death darkened Cruachan. Ailell reacted as if injured to the fact. In fact he thought that if it had not been this son, it would have been another; in all honesty, he had expected the death to be Sencha's because it came upon the hour of Sencha's seventeenth birthday. He could only hope now that the Ulstermen lived up to the bargain and sent Sencha home alive. He suspected that they would, for warriors were too con-

scious of their own honor to disregard a pact between kings, and Ulster was the Province of the Warrior as his was Province of the Druid.

Ailell did not know where Maeve had gone upon her return, but he began counting warriors that he could depend upon. Now, despite all the trouble he had been, Fergus mac Roich would have been a welcome addition. But Fergus and his Black Army of Exiles had moved on after the fiasco of the *táin bó Cuailnge*. Apparently, Fergus fought no more; certainly never again for Maeve. Ailell speculated on what she would do next.

Fresh from burying her son, the queen had gone to visit the Clann Umoir on their island settlement just off the coast. Their fortress lay on the edge of a cliff, unassailable from the sea. Many walls protected this strange fortress. One of them was of jagged rocks that would break a horse's legs or catch and snap the spokes of a chariot wheel. Rows of other stone ramparts made the approach extremely difficult and dangerous. The sea, far below, added its own warning in the steady boom of the surf, a sound like that of a hundred warriors hammering their shields as they marched into battle. The fortress itself was a vast semi-circle of stone with the roof at the height of the surrounding rampart, its dozen holes being the entrances to various chambers. Beneath this forbidding structure, the Clann Umoir and their king, Aenghus, dwelled in subterranean adyta, not unlike a vast tumulus to Maeve's way of perceiving it.

Even she, an invited guest, had difficulty traversing the defenses. Contrarily, between each wall the grasses were colored with wild thyme and bright scarlet pimpernel, the floral beauty all the more conspicuous for the austerity that surrounded it. A few of the Clann Umoir stood on the ramparts, reticent, watchful. She wondered about these severe, nut-brown people who had owned her country once; who had been the ones to divide Ireland into its five provinces and to imbue each with its attribute; who had subsequently been driven out long before her time. As a child she had listened to the tales of warfare between them and the Tuatha de Danann, and she had known them as gods. Yet now she walked among them and knew them as mortals, with even less power than she because they had no home. They were dispossessed, doomed, cursed, reduced to this suspicious, close-mouthed settlement that Maeve had allowed them. All that remained of their past glory was the arcane knowledge they retained, their special magic that not even her Druids understood. She had given them this isle and the ones around it—of no use to her—because of that magic.

As she climbed the encircling rampart, Aenghus appeared on the roof to greet her. He had slick, blue-black hair, fierce hawk's eyes. His tunic was thickly woven wool, the strands of a hundred colors, sleeves that flared at the wrists. The tunic hung to mid-thigh, and checkered trousers showed beneath that, but only for a few inches. The wide leather strips that formed his shoes wound all the way to his knees. Maeve wondered how he ever took them off. Maybe he never did.

“Gracious queen,” he said, “second only to Taitiu, greatest of all queens.”

“You flatter me,” Maeve lied. Their goddess had been reduced to a cemetery where Ulster buried its dead and she did not appreciate the comparison.

“You’ve come to see the three?” he asked.

“Yes—and to take them if they are ready.”

Aenghus offered her his hand to help her descend into his chambers. The small steps were hard to locate when one did not know where to look. When she was down, he followed after her.

By her standards, the chamber was cramped, offering those of average height—which she exceeded—enough space to stand, and barely the room for a dozen people even then. Her *grianan* alone contained more space. On the other hand, when did Aenghus have any guests to entertain? He poured wine from a small pine keg into wooden cups and passed her one balanced on two fingers. The wine had been a gift from her. In the far wall, a narrow window opened over the cliff. The view of the ocean two hundred feet below drew her as it had done on her previous visits. She stared down at patterns formed of waves, white lines crossing steadily by, all seemingly unrelated to the rhythmic crash of surf.

“What sorts of students have they been?”

“Better than you anticipated, I suspect. They took to the spells as if magic were food to them.”

“Of course they did. I made them want it before I brought them here.”

Aenghus came beside the window. “Made them want it? How could you know we were coming?”

She almost told him the truth—that she had been preparing her three wards for any means of retribution, for Druidic training. But this man believed her to be nearly divine and she should not disappoint him. “I know a great deal that is not seen.” She pushed away from the window. “Fetch them for me if you would.”

Their father’s name was Calatin, and he had been a warrior in the army that invaded Ulster. In enemy territory, he had faced a whirling windmill demon called Cú Chulainn—a fool’s gambit, since the windmill had already slain more than a dozen warriors. While those around him fled for their lives, Calatin stood his ground ... until the windmill sheared his legs away. Maeve had not had time to consider his loss then—he was one among dozens vivisected—and she would not have done in any case. Who was Calatin after all?

Upon returning home, having lost the prize bull and the position of authority over her husband that she sought, Maeve learned that Calatin’s widow had given birth to some strange children: “thoroughly unwhole-

some,” MacRoth depicted them. He hardly did them justice. The wife of Calatin did not long survive the birth, and Maeve took it upon herself to have the trio looked after. Hideously deformed, they were assumed to be idiots at first, but this proved to be far from the case. Maeve gave them their names: Morrigan, Badb, and Nemain. A trilogy of terror. She expected the true daughters of Ernmas would find the tribute amusing. Maeve saw to their upbringing in order to implant a hatred for Cú Chulainn that exceeded her own. No day passed that they did not hear his name: how he had slain their father at the precise moment of their birth, which had tainted their excretion into the world, turning them into monsters. Never mind that they had been born days later—these were impressionable babes who knew no better. From their various nurses, Maeve learned that they exhibited occult powers when together. One bondsmaid had been driven from the fortress, pursued by weird, invisible fiends. The trio’s power ebbed and flowed, however. Inconsistent, lacking control. Maeve would nurture it, and so made preparations to have them begin training in *Druidecht*.

However, in synchronistic concord, the ancient Clann Umoir chose that moment to petition for a place to live. Maeve had exceeded their request, offering them the islands off her coast. When she offered them a piece of the coastline, too, they adamantly refused, explaining that they would not set foot on Eriu again. To see their former home, to see that piece of proffered coastline, that was enough. The recompense she required was that they train the three girls in their way of animal powers, in a knowledge all but lost except, in fragments, to the Druids. Aenghus had accepted immediately—before he had the opportunity to see his charges.

Now Maeve awaited them as Aenghus had once done in this very chamber, and sipped her wine from a simple wooden cup. Her hands trembled from the excitement of being so close to her goal.

The three daughters of Calatin entered the room silently. Maeve became aware of their presence when a vague, sweet scent came to her—that of cranesbill. She turned around and could not repress a start. The three—some stood inches away. They had garlanded themselves with the blood-red flowers, which looked like wide, uneven gashes across their dark cloaks.

Though only seven years old, they looked as ancient as the whole race of the Fir Bolg. Creases marred their small faces, more like puckers so that it seemed they had extra vertical mouths to make up for what they lacked in vision. Each blotchy, purplish, withered face contained a single round eye—too big for the face enclosing it. And when they glanced, the three eyes moved in unison, as if all three heads were controlled by a single shared will. Their hair was wispy, barely short of bald altogether. And though they smiled at Maeve, there was nothing friendly in their toothy mouths. Aenghus had them wearing clothing of Fir Bolg design—the heavy yarn and wide sleeves, but dark to hide their queer physiques, the humps and warps and disproportions. The sleeves hung somewhat too long on their arms and they had worked their fingers through the mesh, which

gave their hands the appearance of crusted talons. Ogling Maeve, they murmured to one another in a wet, bubbly speech. *Thoroughly unwholesome*, MacRoth had said. She could think of nothing to add to that, but sipped some wine while she found steadiness for her voice. "Well, here we are at last," she said. "You have all grown since your arrival here. My, I cannot tell you apart."

"I am fertile death, Ernmas' best," said the left one.

"Morrigan, dear," the queen acknowledged.

"I'm the terror that drives men to madness," said the right one.

"Nemain, of course. So you must be Badb."

"Fear of birth, inverted death, that's mine to wear," the girl answered proudly.

"You have all come very far with the Fir Bolg I think."

"Oh, yes—" "—good queen—" "—we have." Maeve would learn that they always divided their tasks, even speaking. "Since you come now—" "—we wondered—" "—does this mean it's time?"

"Yes, it does."

"We get—" "—to kill—" "—the Hound." The prospect put excitement in their small voices. Badb drooled a little, and Morrigan wiped the spittle away for her.

"Tell me, my dears, will the arts you learned here suffice?"

The three traded a glance. They joined hands and their eyes rolled back.

Maeve found herself naked in a pit of ash. The soft gray flakes could not bear her up and she began to sink, the ash crawling like gray insects up her thighs, her belly. She grabbed for something solid, to pull her way out, but the pit had no substance to offer and her hands dug for nothing. The dry dust choked her, the pit sucked up her breasts, then her neck and finally, while she screamed for help, the cold flakes funneled down her throat.

She had dropped her wooden cup and held onto the fuzzy tunics of the three girls. They surrounded her, a giggling wall. Behind them, Aenghus came crashing in, "My queen, what is it, are you—" He drew up, taking stock of the situation. "Ah, a demonstration." He came and helped Maeve to her feet. "We taught them, wouldn't you say?" But Maeve was not seeing him, because her hands were covered with the grayness of ash. To disprove the illusion, she wiped them on his tunic. The ash formed her handprints against his chest.

"Yes," she said at last, "you taught them."

"They know as much of unseen things as—as you do." He admonished her lightly with this, merely reaffirming that he had knowledge of things that she might never discover.

"Very good," she praised them all. "Now it is time for you to make your good-byes here and come with me to Cruachan."

"We travel with you?"

“No. We go separately. I have another to seek out still who will help us in our endeavor. He has almost as much reason as you to hunt the Hound.”

“Almost,” harmonized the three.

5. The Tale of the Dog King

As Cathbad had told Emer, Cú Chulainn had a weakness for the women of Magh Mell, the *Leanbaun Sídbe*. He no longer recalled his journey into that red realm or his meeting with Fand, but the women remembered him. Their ranks had included Edain the Poetess, whose perfect verses had lured as many warriors as had her beauty; and the woman Blanad, wife of Cú Roi the Dog King. Blanad had been seduced by Cú Chulainn’s deeds against the Fir Bolg. She knew that he was a warrior of unparalleled skills. Her own husband, who guarded one of the natural entrances into the underworld, could not come close. Blanad understood nothing of why Fand had returned to the sea, or of how Cú Chulainn had thrown off her yoke, but the fact that he had only enticed Blanad further. She could not imagine a man capable of defying her sisterhood.

Cú Roi’s house lay in the center of a copse and was a *dun* called Finglas—earthen walls packed tightly around the house, turning it into a mound. The only light of day that Blanad saw in the house came when the sun hung directly overhead, between the branches of the tall sessile oaks, its beams flooding through the cooking hole. Otherwise she lived in a dimness tainted by the distant wailing from the underworld, colored by its deep blue light.

Her husband spent most of his time on the other side of that stone-linted entrance. The underworld’s cobalt glow burned in his huge, hound’s eyes, stained his whiskered muzzle as it did the walls of his dark house. On occasion she would pass into the other realm with him, but more often he shared it solely with his poet, Feirceirtner.

She had borne Cú Roi one child, a son they had named Lugaid after the king of Munster. The king had taken the boy to be fostered among royalty, a great honor; but with that act had gone the last meaning in Blanad’s life the last diversion. With all provisions maintained by the Sidhe in return for Cú Roi’s vigilance, Blanad neither had to grind corn nor butcher meat. She might gladly have taken on these duties but the choice was not hers to make. She had the forest of Finglas to wander in, but always alone, for she hated Feirceirtner and would not be with him any time. Otherwise, Blanad had no one but her sisters, most of whom dwelled in the houses of Magh Mell.

Among them she had witnessed the battle with the Fir Bolg on Labraid’s isle. She had helped carry the transformed body of Cú Chulainn into Fand’s

misty chamber. In him she had seen perfection. From him she would seek a means of escape.

Soon after Fand had set him free, Blanad went into Magh Mell and, with the help of the other *Leanhaun Sídhe*, she fashioned a spell for the Hound of Culann that could be cast upon him from that great distance. It enticed him to Munster. He thought he went to visit Lugaid mac Nois for the Beltain feast. On the eve of May Day, the door to death opened, and Cú Roi the guardian, like the spirits he guarded, could leave his post and journey out among the living. Knowing this, the living mended their fences, replaced fallen stones in their walls, and beat new earth into the boundaries around their forts so that no inadvertent egress was offered the spirits. Only on the eves of Beltain and—half a year later—Samain could the events Blanad desired unfold.

To Cú Chulainn, the place called Finglas looked like a dense grove of trees divided by a stream. The shadows from the tall, erect sessile oaks hid the earthen mound that was Cú Roi's house.

While the Hound stood beside the stream, Blanad emerged from the forest. He did not recognize her because that memory had been buried; but seeing her pulled some bits of sunken remembrance free and, like bubbles of submerged air, they ascended and burst upon the surface: a vision of Fand wrapped in webs, another of the hundred faces of the *Leanhaun Sídhe* lining the dark corridor into Magh Mell. He saw her face there and this flash of memory blended with sweet arousal that had come from Fand. He mistakenly thought that he must love Blanad.

She enforced this by wading the stream and then wrapping her body around his. Her hands delved inside his tunic; he did not attempt to stop her but inhaled her red hair's scent and closed his lips over hers. After a while he pushed her back so that he could look upon her disingenuous face. "I thought I was on my way to meet Lugaid, but now I know where that notion came from. You drew me here."

"I did," she admitted, as if this embrace, this revelation, were the whole scheme. "Because I've seen you before and I wanted you."

"That's a wish easily enough accommodated if that's all you want."

"My husband . . . is Cú Roi."

Normally this announcement would have stopped him, if only momentarily, but the Sidhe magic tying him up made Cú Chulainn disregard propriety. Blanad had said this to test her spell and was satisfied with its strength when he answered, "You'll trade one dog for another is all."

"He guards the way to the afterlife, but it's Beltain soon and he's leaving with other men to gather new stones to enclose the *dun*. You can come to me then."

"When?"

“Stay hidden here among the trees. Watch the stream. When you see it turn white, you can enter the house. I’ll be waiting for you with all my charms unveiled.” Her fingertips traced his lips as she departed.

Cú Chulainn, for all the power of Blanað’s spell, did not much care for the arrangement. And the longer he waited, the more certain he became of some treachery being played out here. He had once, in his youth, bested Cú Roi and, while he could know nothing of the true relationship between the Dog King and Blanað, he had limitless examples to make him suspect a bettered warrior of hungering for revenge. Finally, his suspicions sent him back to his chariot for his shield and a spear. The stream still had not turned white, so he leaned back and waited some more.

When had this woman seen him fight as she claimed? he wondered. Had it been the time he brought down her husband? But they were children then. The questions continued to gnaw at him. As the sky grew darker and the stream flowed, clear, the woods became populated with fantasy opponents. Somewhere in its depths he heard yowls and crashes, and he came on his guard. Dark wispy shapes fluttered past overhead. He stepped back against the nearest tree, hidden, and stared in awe as the spirits of the dead took to the skies on phantom horses, in vaporous chariots. Beltain Eve had come, but here, so close to the doorway between worlds, it was as if this were Samain instead. Here in Finglas the dead were loose upon the earth. Here, beside the Hound of Culann, a chalky cloud came rolling like an approaching storm through the dark stream. The blanched waters flowed past him. Disbelieving his own eyes, Cú Chulainn knelt and cupped the white water to his lips. Milk! He drank more, then nearly laughed aloud at Blanað’s cleverness. She had poured milk into the stream to signal him. Delighted, he got up and ran through the trees until he came to the wide, walled mound. Distantly, he heard the low wails of the spirits.

The opened doorway was on the far side. He circled, then unhesitatingly passed into Cú Roi’s domain. In a half-dozen strides he reached a dead end. Turning back, he came face to face with Cú Roi.

“You!” snarled the Dog King. In his surprise he reached instinctively for his sword. Already fearful of a trap, Cú Chulainn took this as a gesture of attack, and he stuck his spear into Cú Roi.

The great Sidhe sentinel rose up on his toes. His agate eyes grew saucer-wide, his furry muzzle flapped but no words came.

Cú Chulainn pulled free his spear and swung about, expecting a clash of warriors. When he had come full-circle, he found Blanað there beside her husband’s body. She wore a look of intense pleasure, as if she and the Hound had just finished making love. He could not understand it, and he read a further entrapment in the unbecoming look. Grabbing her wrist, he dragged her after him, back out of the *dun*. From the darkness behind them, a figure emerged—a tall figure wearing a poet’s brown robes. Feirceirtner dropped to one knee beside the body. His tears spilled onto

the doubled-up corpse. Then he rose, and set out after the assassin and his lover's wife.

Cú Chulainn tossed Blanad in his chariot and drove hard away from Finglas. Every moment he expected an attack from the men Blanad had told him would be helping Cú Roi in building his new fort. As there had been no such men, no one came now. Nevertheless, he drove the chariot up onto the headland called Cian Beara, where he could put the sea at his back. Instinct formed his actions; his mind considered, observed. But even the instincts seemed to be someone else's—he could not remember having ever acted this way. What was he doing here? How had he come to slay Cú Roi, toward whom he had never held any grudge? This enchantress—she had brought him here. She had bewitched him, deceived him more than he had guessed. Yet, how had a stranger gained such control over him? Even the Badb had never been able to manipulate him so fully. He had many questions to ask her, and when he had finished defending himself against Cú Roi's people, he would make her answer truthfully if he had to dismember her.

On the cliff, he waited for the attack to follow. Soon a single chariot appeared in pursuit, with but a single occupant. Cú Chulainn feared that it would be a resurrected Cú Roi on this day when life and death kissed, but the driver turned out to be a tall, gaunt man with eyes red from sorrow. His brown robes suggested that he was a Druid poet—hardly the sort of attack Cú Chulainn had expected. But as the poet got down, Blanad moved off from Cú Chulainn to near the edge of the cliff, putting him between her and the poet.

The man came forward unarmed. "I'm Feirceirtner, and you are the Hound of Culann. Your deeds in Magh Mell are well known."

As he could recall no deeds performed in Magh Mell, Cú Chulainn had to assume that Feirceirtner spoke poetically.

"My deeds are known among the dead? That doesn't surprise me, since I've populated that land like a farmer sowing seed. Now, what is it you'd have of me?"

"Nothing just yet. I wish first to address the lady you protect."

"I protect nobody, Feirceirtner, and I think I have been deceived by this woman into performing some unconscionable crime."

"So, it's like that."

"Yes, and I should like to know what game's being played out here."

"No game. In games, you're allowed to take back your moves." He stepped forward. "Will you let me pass?"

"I've no quarrel with poets."

"I had heard you said that of chariot drivers."

The Hound laughed at this allusion to an old rule of his from the *táin*. "Well, with poets, that rule still holds true."

"That's good to know," Feirceirtner said. He walked past the chariot. Cú Chulainn looked back but the twilight valley to Finglas remained empty

of pursuit. Overhead the stars had appeared and all the freed spirits fled back inside.

“Cú Chulainn!” Blanad cried. He turned on his heel—and was just in time to see Feirceirtner grab her by the throat and drag her with himself over the edge of the cliff.

Cú Chulainn raced to the edge, but he could do nothing. The body of Blanad had caught halfway down, impaled on an outcropping. The poet lay far below, crumpled on the wet beach.

Immobilized by the events, he stood there for some unknown period of time. Then a group of six figures rose up out of the waves—six glowing women who floated to where the poet lay. They lifted his corpse and for a moment looked up at the Hound. The body of Blanad came loose from the outcropping and floated into the air, no longer a body, but a brightly colored bird the size of a falcon. The bird wheeled and swooped down into the glen of Finglas. He watched it go and when he turned back all that remained of the group below was a depression in the sand where the poet had lain.

“You must have written fine verses to Manannán,” he muttered. He understood very little of how he had been tricked, only that she had wished her husband dead more than anything else. Perhaps she had intended for him to die instead; but her apparent joy at the sight of her husband’s body did not support this.

Cú Chulainn sat on the point of the headland, staring out on the sea long after the light had gone and the sea become an unseen susurrus. In the end he had more questions and no new answers, and no one left to ask. Mistakenly, he assumed the matter had been inscrutably resolved. He knew nothing of the son named Lugaid.

6. The Culmination of Plans

The son of Cú Roi completed Maeve’s plan. Just as her messenger, MacRoith, knew the true story of what had occurred at Finglas, she knew that the son would be hers; the truth merely a tool for her to wield.

The son had his father’s eyes but his features were otherwise those of a mortal. Though only a matter of weeks separated young Lugaid from his parents’ death, those eyes had long since conquered mourning by the time Maeve finally recruited him. She did not have to work very hard.

From her vine-enshrouded *grianan*, Maeve looked out upon the three hideous sisters where they played on the grassy field. As she looked on, each of them performed a feat of magic, changing shape into some other, equally monstrous form. Maeve had no doubts this time that she would

succeed in her plans. This time she would be carrying nothing out of Ulster—she would be leaving something behind. Turning away from the window, she found her husband standing amidst the breeze-blown veils that hung from the beams.

“You’ll be pleased to hear that Erc has returned from Leinster with a small army. He informs MacRoth that Lugaid mac Blanad is only a few hours behind him with a force of *fiana* from Munster. All the warriors collected are those who despise Cú Chulainn. Most are people who lost someone they cared for during the *táin*, who’ve been nursing a grudge for seven years, just like you.”

“Are you attempting to dissuade me, Ailell?”

He laughed softly. “I don’t have that much breath to waste. No, you’ll take your army into Ulster, fight your fight, lose another hundred fools, and crawl back home with your life if you’re lucky. I needn’t be a Druid performing *tarbfeis* to peer into this venture.”

Her head tilted up as she stared coldly into his dark face. “You will not be coming.”

“That’s right, I won’t. Sencha is returned. Ulster has maintained as much of a peace as we have.”

“What of your own son—what of Maine?”

“If I take Sencha’s word for it, Maine and his attendants brought about their own deaths by attacking Conchovor, who had merely gone to the wedding to watch, probably to harangue if I know him, but no more than that. It’s all unfortunate. If anyone’s to blame, it’s our own Donall Dearn.” One of her curtains whipped around him in the wind. He batted it away. “If I were to attack Ulster for this crime, I would in any case obey the laws of the *fír fer* and insist on single combats—not diabolical fiends with uncontrollable magics.”

“Then it is good, husband, that you do not join us. I will not be interfered with, nor ruled by warriors’ laws which I stand above.”

“Yes, you know but one song to sing. Well, my dear, sing it loudly, very loudly, if you expect to be heard over the Warped One’s growl.” He shoved the gauzy curtains aside and left her.

She watched him through the veils, his form vague, dissolving like a ghost. When this matter was resolved, there would no longer be something divisive in their lives and they would return to that happy union they had known until that night, seven years before, when the battle for dominance had begun. Now she did not care that he had more wealth or power than she; she saw one last goal, one obsessive objective to attain: Death to Cú Chulainn. Death to Ulster.

She turned back to her view of Calatin’s daughters but they had gone off in some new transformation to watch the armies gather.

INTERLUDE SIX



Dear Lord,

I am uncertain what to make of Senchan Torpeist again.

After our *terce* service this morning, I was surprised to find him in the yard. We were using the outside altar around the back of the *damliag*, and the old poet sat on the steps up to the cashel wall off by our second altar, the one we use when it's not a Fast Day. Senchan, who is not required to refrain from eating till after vespers like the rest of us, was munching on oatmeal bread.

"Your miller grinds good grain," he told me, then offered me the small warm loaf. When I declined, he insisted. "I know the rule governing Fast Days as well as you, and it doesn't hold when discourtesy to a guest is implied by refusal. If you don't have some bread, I shall be greatly offended and have to tell the Abbot."

"Very well." I accepted the loaf from him in Your Name. "Thank you." I sat on the step below him. Kevin and Suibne walked past. Both gave me hateful glances because of my special treatment.

Torpeist must have seen them, too. He said, "My, that close brotherhood you told me about last week seems only skin deep in some of them. It took only a crust of bread to divide loyalties."

"They'll do penance for it later. They certainly won't hold grudges like the people in your stories—like Queen Maeve."

"True enough ... but perhaps they're more jealous of your singing."

My face grew hot, a flush of both embarrassment and pride. "You heard? You were listening to our plainsongs?"

"Have you ever tried to sleep through them?" he asked, and we both began to laugh. "Truly, I was here when your ritual began. I like the singing—it's very much like a *suantraige* in its gentleness, a piece the harpists might have played." I nodded only, chewing the sweet bread. "How do you know when to shift your voices, to reply to each other?" he asked. "I saw no signal given."

“That’s easy—I’ll show you later, in the scriptorium. The songs are written down, and each one has *neumes*—little marks—that show when to change voices. One of the Popes, named Gregory, created this system, but one of the Lord’s apostles started the singing. He taught the songs to his flock while they were hiding out in catacombs.”

Torpeist tilted his head. “How extraordinary—singing, down amongst the dead.”

“And whenever one of us goes out with a satchel, he always returns with new songs. The tunes are memorized—” I glanced up at him, trying to imitate the arch look he often puts on “—much as the tales you tell are learned.”

At hearing his own familiar gibing tone, he raised an eyebrow. I admit I took enjoyment from this new way of dealing with Torpeist.

“What are your duties today, Fergil?” he asked suddenly.

“I work in the fields till *sext*. After prayers is my time in the scriptorium with you.”

“I should rather we walked outside the walls this afternoon.”

Surprised by his request, I answered “That is as you wish, but it will put us behind. It would be unfortunate to be unable to complete the—” I stopped speaking, realizing that I was about to admit that I wouldn’t wish for him to die before I had finished the stories. He seemed to intuit that, and he smiled at me gently.

“That isn’t going to happen, but it’s part of the surprise I have for you, Fergil. This afternoon, you must be prepared for anything. You told me that you looked forward to change—well, I’m going to give you a change like you’ve never known.” He started to get up.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

Before he could answer, his eyes closed and his face pinched sharply in acute pain. In a moment, this seizure passed, but by then I was standing, supporting him with my weight. Shakily, he tried to smile once again. He stretched out his left arm, wriggled the fingers. “They tingle,” he said, “as if I slept on my arm again on that cruel stone bed of yours.”

“Are you—”

“I’m fine,” he interjected. “The older you get, Fergil, the more you have to listen to your body’s complaints. After a certain age, it’s like being married to a shrew. Here, I can stand now just fine. You must get on with your work and I will see you again after your *sext* prayers.” He shook me off and edged down the stairs, then shuffled away, but stayed close beside the low wall running past the Curse Stone altar and on to our shared *clochán*.

I spent the next hours agonizing as I worked, fearing that he would die before I saw him again. There had been no hint of illness about him, no suggestion before then that something might really be wrong. Did the Abbot know about this when assigning me to the task? I had considered how he reacted to my confessions regarding the old poet, and all it did was

lead me to conclude that I should not ask him about this, that these were uncertainties I must work out on my own. I so feared for the old man, I hardly thought at all about his surprise, what he had hinted at.

When the *sext* service had finished, I withdrew directly to my cell. Old Torpeist lay on the stone shelf. “Did God hear your prayer?” he asked.

“God always hears, as you know well enough, curmudgeon.” He smiled up at the ceiling. “In truth, how are you feeling?”

“Things are not as I would have them. Your surprise will have to wait somewhat. I haven’t the strength for the journey just now.”

I went over to him then. His eyes seemed sunken deeper than ever, their sockets made darker by the pallor of his cheeks and forehead. He was sweating but the *clochán* was cool. “I will tell you about your surprise, though,” he said and made himself sit up, though this cost him a painful moment.

“It’s not important.”

He answered, “On the contrary, it may turn out to be more important than ever. Here.” He glanced around the cell, then turned back to the shadowy shelf and picked up a polished round stone about the size of his two fists combined. It had been hidden beside him before. With obvious effort, he lowered the stone to the rough floor of the cell. He straightened up, dusting his hands, and began to talk, in breathy stops like a man who has just run a great race.

“The first thing that impressed me, when I saw the monasteries was the huts. They’re just like tumuli—or like big inverted cauldrons, the kind you could put dead warriors in, to breathe life back into them. Big pregnant bellies of stone. Did you ever wonder if there was not a purpose in that—that perhaps you leave your huts every morning as from the womb, fresh as a newborn? A pure individual every day, think of that. Oh, don’t try and sway me with your blather about original sin and the like—not when your Pelagius has refuted the lot so eloquently.” He pointed at the stone. “This is the ninth stone, the center of a ring. It also completes the set of Curse Stones—eight more are out on the altar. More importantly, it is a piece of the tales—it is the key to all the tales you’ve written down.”

I admit I hardly understood a thing he was saying and confessed as much.

“Of course, of course,” he replied. “I hardly expected you to. Listen to me very carefully, because this is terribly important, as much so as everything you’ve heard so far. If you put this stone in a place and surround that place with the other eight at even intervals in a circle, you will travel into the past where these stories take place.”

“What are you saying?”

“What I’m saying is plain—you’re not believing, is all. With all of these Curse Stones in a group, you can move back through time. It’s true—it’s how I saw the past, how I lived through the events that I’m telling you about.”

“Torpeist, you are *mad*,” I told him. I could no longer pretend to accept any of his ravings nor play his games.

“Where do you suppose your superstition came from for the Curse Stones, of walking backwards around them as you speak? The idea is to throw your hate into the past, to completely sever its connection to you. Eradicate it from your life forever.”

“But as you complained, that is our superstition. I’ve told you that I don’t even hold with it. I do not share that foolish belief.”

“It’s not foolish. Doesn’t your great Augustine talk about moving through time? Three states of mind: memory, observation, and speculation. Three segments of time. If you use these stones, you can move from observation into memory.”

I shook my head. “But those tales aren’t in *my* memory. St. Augustine spoke of one’s own—”

“So he did. But I’m saying you can move into the memory contained in the stone.”

I could see that arguing with him was pointless. He peered at me with his face pinched in some discomfort and may have recognized the same in me. He leaned back against the curving wall of my cell and said softly, “Go ask your Abbot, then. Ask him if I am mad or if what I say is true.”

“How would Abbot Martin know?” I asked, but the incredible answer already raced through my mind: the Abbot had travelled through time. He had written down the earlier tales for Torpeist and as a reward he had voyaged into the past.

The old poet seemed again to read my thoughts, nodding as if satisfied with his pupil’s intuitive leaps. “That saint, Augustine, also believed that history had a purpose, a goal.”

“Why don’t you take me on this journey, if it’s so important? Right now, let’s go.”

“No. I can’t. I would die, Fergil. And we have a few more stories to complete, haven’t we?” He glanced around the *clochán* again, away from me. “Never mind for now. Perhaps you won’t need the stones. Now you must help me up and support me on the way to the scriptorium. My legs are too weak, and there’s so much, so much left to do.” He sighed, I think in frustration at his own body, the shrew.

VIII. A NEW INCURSION

1. Erasing the Past

From the plain of Magh Ai, Maeve's new army headed south to Ath Luain, south of the huge lake, Ree. Like brightly feathered birds in migration, they enclosed the shore of the lake: horses, chariots, tents and men. They trickled in groups and pairs to the water's edge; some splashed and bathed; others fished for a meal, soft flaking fish to smoke over a fire. Later, around the same coals, they would tell stories—past deeds to brighten the promise of adventure.

The following morning, Maeve gathered most of the force that Erc had assembled and led them to a place not far away where three rough mounds blocked the road's straight path. The grassy track detoured around the rock-strewn heaps and on into the valley. Most of those present knew this place, at least by reputation. It was called The Topless Heights of Ath Luain, and many in Erc's force raised their eyes to the three flat-topped hills that Cú Chulainn had lopped away, sealing this pass, segregating Ulster from Connacht. That titanic act had put an end to the *táin bó Cuailnge*.

Maeve gestured at the mounds of shattered mountain-top. "I want this pass cleared. We will not leave Ath Luain or take our revenge until you have re-opened the road. I want it wide enough for a chariot to roll through."

She left Erc to supervise their efforts and returned to the camp on Lough Ree. His hunger for revenge, she knew, would make him see the job done swiftly, and the initial eradication of Cú Chulainn would be fulfilled.

The work took three days; the warriors scooped with boards from their wagons, chiseled stones they could use to spade, even with their shields where the dirt was soft. Their continual efforts yielded a clay roadway between two vertical walls that ran a quarter of a mile, right through what had been the heights of the mounds. Erc sent a messenger back to Ree; then he and his bedraggled warriors sank down and slept until the army reached the Topless Heights.

Past Ath Luain the new army proceeded, following in reverse the route that Maeve's original legions had taken. At the Plain of Fual Maetha, the

queen drew aside. She stood in her bronze chariot and watched the eager army pass—the hundreds of carts and wagons, colorful warriors aboard or on foot, the brown clusters of their slaves, and the austere, grim Druids. Overlaid upon that army like mist were her visions of humiliation played out on this spot anew. Endless repetition folded those hate-filled moments into a prolonged torment of recollection. When she could stand it no longer, she slapped the horses and rejoined the army, covering the memory in their rattle and roar. The three daughters of Calatin shared what memories plagued her as they hobbled along apart from the rest—three dribbling voyeurs who knew more than Maeve ever would have liked.

A brief chilly rain set a double rainbow in the sky over Lough Owel, which Maeve took as an auspicious sign. But immediately the front ranks entered the humid lowland called Ath Fene and many of the chariots sank into the rain-soaked bogs and had to be shoved and wrested free. The torsion snapped one four-wheeled chariot apart, spilling kegs and cooking pots into the muck. The wailing team struggled desperately and sank deeper. To escape from the bogs, the muddy army swung south to firmer ground below Lough Sheever, then up across small shallow rivers. Wet and irritated, they finally camped at tiny Lough Analla.

MacRoth headed out alone to see if Ulster was preparing against them. He returned to report that no evidence could be found that showed Ulster preparing for combat. Nor did any men appear to be laid low yet by the Pangs of Macha, the Curse upon Ulster that Maeve was counting on to give her the province. The rainbow may have heralded good fortune after all: For now she stood at the door into Ulster and they knew nothing of her presence. She hoped as much luck would be hers during the following two days—when she would let them know with a vengeance that she had returned.

Well into the next afternoon the army reached the cemetery of Tailtiu. They diverted around the monolithic stones, the rows of barrow graves and cromlechs. But the three hideous sisters entered that elevated necropolis to pay tribute to the goddess of the Fir Bolg. They reasoned that Tailtiu the goddess might be able to aid them against Ulster, who had reduced her to nothing more than a name synonymous with death, she who had once *been* fertility, had been the very earth.

Maeve trailed the three to their ceremony. Twelve shield-bearing guards accompanied her: they would surround and protect her at all times hereafter in the province of Ulster.

From where she stopped—still not daring to tread on that sacred soil for fear that the many warriors she had sent to their graves might rise up, stalk her—Maeve could hear none of the chants that Morrigan, Badb and Nemain wove together.

The three twisted sisters danced disjointedly, their splayed feet wheeling in slow exaggerated steps. Then all at once they stopped. Like plants seeking noonday sun, they raised upright. They became as if without deformity of any sort, their bodies straight as poles in a rampart. Maeve could not believe this, but before she was convinced of the vision, the three became black, tattered trees. Their roots whipped out, plunged deep into the soil, through strata and down to the dormant core of Tairtiu to take from her some power over Ulster, whose decaying bones fed the soil and were leached into that sleeping essence.

The skittish army hurried on, but Maeve, like the sisters, remained unaware of them.

Erc took them to the edge of Muirthemne, where they made camp. Tairtiu loomed in the forefront of everyone's thoughts. Though the sisters had been kept sequestered from the rest of the army, it is in the nature of groups to discuss that which is separate and different. Some had dared to look at the cemetery and the three black trees. Tales of what actually had been seen grew and twisted much as the sisters themselves, but for all their fantasizing, no tale surpassed what the three might have done in fact; and, if only subconsciously, the army knew this, too.

The queen and Calatin's daughters arrived late, long after dark. Lugaid had seen to their tents. Both he and Erc wanted to discuss various strategies with the queen before embarking deep into Ulster's territory. As Maeve and her guards returned to her tent, the two young leaders approached her, but saw the look in her eye—the shattered look of one who had witnessed something beyond her ability to comprehend. No less shaken, her guards took their positions limply. Erc grabbed Lugaid by the arm and led him away. At the next tent they came face to face with the three dreaded sisters. For a brief moment—the flick of time before the eye responds and darts away—they glanced into those seamed faces and felt ice scale their bodies. Swiftly, gladly, they moved aside, and the three passed along.

"Tomorrow's soon enough to encounter *that* magic," Erc muttered, and Lugaid for all the weirdness of his forbears could hardly disagree.

He remembered, as a child of three, seeing the dead flung free for the first time on a Samain Eve. He had been fostered away not long after that, but the dead had remained as terrible as those three and the uncertain terror dripping from that recollection just as powerful; but his father had been in control of it all somehow. He could not recall his father having ever paid him any kindness, but he did remember his mother explaining once that magic put certain people one step past the world where the rest resided and that magic's hold could not be shaken off once accepted—this by way of apologizing for his father's neglect. The "other" world became something he fantasized, a dark blue circle that clutched him viscerally in dreams, in fantasies; but his father was always there, the cold, unflinching protector against that world. Calatin's demon daughters were of the same other world, only loose upon the earth. For them every night became

Samain Eve. He saw himself in his father's role against these three. If he feared them, he must not show it as Erc did so manifestly; he must deal with them in such a way that they would recognize him as an individual undaunted by their powers. Nevertheless, with great avidity he looked forward to morning but told himself that it was in anticipation of a new day—of great deeds and the laying low of a province.

2. The Alarm Sounded

That night Lugaid mac Blanaid was not the only person thinking of Samain Eve. An entire *tuath* of Ulstermen who lived near by Tailtiu had that redoubtable evening in mind as they peered out between the low hills and spied the glow of lights bobbing in and around the cemetery. Samain had long since passed; Beltain, too. The dark half of the year had ended and the promise of summer come uneventfully. And so the warrior-farmers wondered in trepidation just what might be stirring amid the ancient stones. Earlier in the day there had been thunder like that of a fierce storm, but no storm had come. They lacked any and all fondness for such omens, but as a group they had the reserves to overcome their innate fear and seek for answers. They took up their spears.

Half the night the investigators remained absent. When they did finally return, it was at a dead run and with newly severed trophies swinging from their fists.

“Connacht's invaded again!”

“The Queen of Foulness is back!”

They danced a war dance, accompanied by two women who drummed upon two leather shields. They whipped the gory heads around in spattering arcs before finally running up and tying the hair onto the poles of their houses. Their dance continued without the heads, with many weapons, intimations of sharp justice, vicious cuts, and wicked verses. And then, in the midst of the festivity, the proud men clutched all at once at their bellies and doubled over. They toppled like a row of felled trees, like cornstalks, dead, snapped at the base. Even as their wives and servants dragged each of them across the threshold, their stomachs swelled, ballooned outrageously, and the men writhed in protracted agony: The Pangs of Macha had returned. Maeve could not have asked for more.

The women knew then what had to be done. They left servants in charge of their husbands and ran out to harness their teams, collect their own spears, grab what provisions were at hand. They embraced and kissed one another, wishing all luck through their tears—expectant of never seeing each other again. Then they took off, on foot and in their wood and wicker vehicles.

Some of the women encountered Maeve's sprawled encampment and skirted close by the tents, fires, and guards to get a look. Traveling on, they carried their pestilential warning up through Muirthemne. The whole of that territory heard the news before dawn and were struck down before breakfast. The harbingers had passed on by then. Two had gone to Mt. Oriel to warn Cú Chulainn, but that house lay empty. In virtual isolation at Dun Dealgun, he remained unaware of the monstrous forces that sought him.

The messengers went through Conaille, Fernmag and Slieve Fuad, then finally to Emain Macha. Conchovor was just stirring when the alarm sounded on the hill and the doom spread like disease into his fort.

He did not know how long he would have—the Pangs sought Conchovor more quickly because his vanity had created the curse. His mind worked furiously to prepare against Maeve's invasion; he had half-expected this situation, and now it was just a matter of fitting plans to actual events. He put the weary messenger in the hands of a female servant, then had Levarcham sent for. "And get rid of every man on guard—replace them all with women," he ordered. "All of you servants, too. Get the children off the playing field, inside the walls." He did not want a repeat of the slaughter of the Boy Troop.

A few minutes later, Levarcham came hobbling into his tapestried chamber.

He turned to her, casting aside his other concerns. "My time's short, satirist—I can feel Macha at the gates already."

"What am I to do?" she asked as she shifted her stance, seeking for a little comfort in an uncomfortable body.

"You have to go again to Cú Chulainn for me. He's at Dun Dealgun with Emer. The Pangs won't touch him but no one has told him of Maeve's coming. You have to do that—and you have to make him withdraw here. This is where she's surely coming, to avenge her son's death. She—"

"No, you're quite wrong," stated a deep voice out of the shadows behind Levarcham.

"Cathbad," Conchovor exclaimed, amazed that the Druid had not been struck down.

"That's right," replied the Druid. He came forward to where the red light reflecting off the polished cedar paneling caught him in its beams. A wide, dark, animal skin enshrouded him, all but his head. That was hidden behind the snout of a demonic horse-mask. The outfit suggested that rites of divination were in progress.

"What have you seen?" Conchovor asked, even then wincing as the first clutch of labor tugged at his viscera.

"They come for Cú Chulainn, to exact revenge. His enemies are significant after the slaughters of the *táin* and since. Maeve has three hags

with Fir Bolg arts at their fingertips, and children of heroes—heroes themselves now, most of them. All these want the Hound’s blood. None of the heroes concerns me, but the Fir Bolg magic ... the Druids must protect him—must at least try.” He bounded forward as Conchovor doubled over. “Levarcham, move,” he ordered.

The poet scrambled up as fast as she could and Cathbad laid Conchovor on his back. The king’s belly bubbled up as if some rodent kicked around under his skin. The belly rose, expanding. Conchovor yowled from the pain. The muscles stood out like ropes in his neck and his skin reddened as if rubbed raw.

“Now you should go,” Cathbad told Levarcham. “Use all your wiles and jibes if need be to get him to abandon Dun Dealgun or great calamity will befall him there.” The aged satirist started to shuffle away but Cathbad grabbed her arm. “Beware his anger. The unreasoning hate he bears for Maeve can make him completely blind to reason.”

Levarcham nodded. She glanced at him—at all that she could distinguish through the mask. His eyes flashed with energy, a glance that told her he was seeing past her, past this moment in time. “Just how is it you’re not struck down like him?”

“The powers of the horse protect me. I saw this time coming and prepared what I could. A few of the Druids are also immune in this way—my foster-son, Geanann, for one. But there were only so many robes in which to court the goddess. Now go, we’re wasting time.”

Levarcham left the chamber. In the hall, she became aware of voices yowling in pain. Women dashed through the halls around her, some already armed and dressed in leathers, some with their hair spiked and paint smeared on their faces and breasts. They all wore their family torcs at their throats. They now headed their households and would represent the *tuatha* of Ulster in battle. Some, she saw, had teeth bared in anticipation—in hope that the battle would come soon. Levarcham hoped otherwise: She had to reach Dun Dealgun first. How on earth she would inveigle Cú Chulainn to Emain Macha, she could not guess.

3. First Notes of the Goltraige

Cú Chulainn had been drawn back to Baile’s Strand, not far from Dun Dealgun, by what force he could not say. He wandered up and down the beach, the surf roaring in around his feet. On the hill overlooking the strand, Baile’s budding yew tree flailed in the stiff wind coming off the water. Birds flew overhead, sunlight occasionally burst over him from behind the scudding clouds. All around him lay evidence of reawakening nature, but its zealous flowering did not manage to incorporate him. Something awful had begun to awaken within him—fragments of memory, of

sorrow and pain: The face of Aife's son looked down at him from the clouds. He saw the copper boat floating through them as if on the sea. He could not recall how he had killed his son, but he experienced the grief and remorse of the deed: sharp and untethered anxieties that tore at him like the barbs of his own spear.

To block the swelling depression, he took up his sling and flung stones at the flocks of birds heading north along the coast. Not one stone flew true to its mark. He hit nothing. At first he grew frustrated, but as the shots continued to go wide, he understood that something much worse than bad aim and bad feelings had settled upon him. He had a presentiment of disaster, and a notion that he was being stalked.

When finally he gave up on the sling stones, he found Levarcham the satirist on the palisade, watching. He quickly climbed up beside her and hugged her in greeting. Then he sat back.

"Tell me, poet—what manner of thing is after me?"

"A beast with many legs, flashing teeth of all shapes, and a hoary head. It's hunting for you right now and we must withdraw."

"I'm not the sort that runs."

"Then learn to be. The Druid Cathbad says you perish uselessly if you remain here. All Ulster will fall under the blade of Cruachan if your anger rules you now. It's all of us who will suffer for it."

"But rules of combat—"

"Maeve forswears all *fír fer*, and there's no Ailell to appeal to this time. She comes alone, making her's the word that guides the blades. You'll be the only one on the whole landscape playing fair."

"What are we without rules?" he asked.

"A question worth pondering someday, when the threat goes home. For now, let's get to Emain Macha. Yes, that's right—we'll be forcing rules upon her, do you see, wasting her nine day sanctuary. Then all of Ulster will arise and slaughter her once and for all."

"If there's any Ulster left by then."

"There will be, but we have to move you, the way the Morrigu moved the Donn, forcing Maeve deeper into the province."

He had stopped listening, so Levarcham quit speaking. He hung his head, finally muttered, "I am tired of this life." He looked up at her and continued, "So much of what I do in honor is squeezed like wax by others into a dishonorable shape, and my deeds turn into crimes."

She took the sling from his loose grasp. "Come, then. We've got to take Laeg and Emer, too."

"Emer," he muttered, "I love you without issue."

Levarcham eyed him worriedly. "Cú Chulainn, you're sliding back down this hill, to Baile's Strand. The sea will crash in and cover it up and you'll drown on your spit of despair the way Baile himself did. If you mean to pity yourself, save it for when you've the luxury of time. You have no time now."

He reacted to her harsh tone as if slapped out of a stupor. His eyes cleared and he seemed to her to take stock of where he was as if he had not known, as though he had been sleep-walking.

At the top of the palisade, he stole the sling back. “Next time I throw, I’ll hit the mark.”

“Good, that’s good. You’ll certainly have a wealth of targets.”

Muirthemne Plain had become a vast bonfire that raged well out of control. Maeve had slaughtered cattle, children, women, and the men she found helpless there. She had put every house in her path to the torch. Despite this, Cú Chulainn had not appeared. She had expected his warnings like before—a tree hung with the heads of her warriors, a body spitted on a standing stone, a distant spectral figure in white that no one could catch. But no such figure emerged, and only the fierce women of the plain accepted her challenges, fought their swift defense and perished in the face of impossible odds. He must have seen the smoke, black chimneys to the clouds. A hundred blacksmiths would not generate such smoke. Where was the mighty Hound of Culann? How could he fail to respond to her call?

Maeve rode up to Lugaid mac Blanad in his fine yellow tunic and his long, pleated hair. “Let you and I leave this stabbing practice to the others. I want to cross this plain today. I want to reach Dun Dealgun.”

“If we depart right now, it’ll be night when we arrive,” he complained.

“Afraid of the dark, my vengeful one? You lived your youth in your father’s darkness—what can there be outside here to equal the terrors of death’s door?”

“I know some of what happened in your first raid—of his nocturnal executions.”

“If he executes, it will be here while we are there. He may take some of these brave warriors from me before I entertain them personally, but I shall take his home and his wife. Would you like to have her for a few hours? The way he had your mother?”

His lips trembled into a snarl. “How many should I take?”

Maeve smiled to herself at the ease with which all men could be manipulated. “Lugaid, you take as many as you feel are needed to wreak appropriate damage. I for my part will bring along the twelve without which I never travel.”

“What about the three ogres?”

“They will remain here in case you are right and he does come in our absence. That you do not care for their company is all well and good, but I would advise you not to let them hear you call them such names or, when this is done, they might flock to *your* door.”

“You wouldn’t—”

“Me? Why, Lugaid, never. But I govern only their lustful hatred for this one individual. Beyond that, I have no control.” She brushed her hand across his young cheek. “I tell you because I should like you to live, that I might exercise my languorous gratitude.” She leaned across their chariot rails and kissed him deeply. Many satirists had for years referred to her as Maeve the Intoxicator; Lugaid had just discovered why. When his dizziness passed and he could think through her perfume, he said, “I’ll take them all, my whole troop.” But Maeve had already gone.

At the fortress, Levarcham went to Emer to explain how things stood. A small central fire lit the one wide room of their house, etched the walls with geometric shadows from the stacked blocks. Levarcham felt intimidated by the echo of her own voice, but she stated the reasons why they had to go as she had done to Cú Chulainn.

Emer refused to be swayed so easily. “When the ice queen came in for a bull,” she said, “we stood our guard and collected more heads than we had rails to hang them on. She comes back for a Hound and we have to flee at her approach. Who could have seen this travesty?”

“I hear the first notes of a *goltraige* plucked and I’m cold at the thought of the lament’s ending. We’ve been happy, always before. No sorrow resided in this house until today.”

Levarcham nodded but said nothing, aware that Emer did not remember the recent past. For her the Hound’s revived despair would be that much more painful and inexplicable to witness. For Emer, it had manifested as if by magic.

“You’re our friend and you wouldn’t lie, I’m sure, though you repeat Conchovor’s words and not your own.”

“No, not his—he’s laid out by the Pangs and only creaks his teeth. Cathbad warns you away. Dun Dealgun’s to be sacrificed, but not you with it.”

Emer looked around her at the stone blocks piled tightly by her husband. “Here,” she pointed, “I can hear Finnabair laughing as we wove linens and dyed them together. And Conchovor himself sat here on the feast to celebrate our fort. I’ve never abandoned my home. I didn’t see that the memories are to be left behind, too.”

“He’ll build you another.”

“Not if this *goltraige* plays out,” was all Emer would say. She left to gather her things together—her skeins of wool, shoes and tunics, a collection of healing herbs.

Outside, Laeg and Cú Chulainn had harnessed Macha’s Gray and the Black Sanglain to the wide Sickle Chariot. They did not take time to arm it with all of its scythes and blades as they would have before a battle. Seeing Levarcham come out, Laeg jumped down and ran up to her.

“This is killing him, can you see that? He crawls like a snail, hardly aware of what he does. Every bit of his body rebels. Every muscle twitches with the urge to stand naked and ready in a ford.”

“He’ll be twitching in a hundred pieces if he doesn’t go. I don’t know what the Druid saw and neither do you, but *his* death was in it. He’ll have time to fight, but not here.”

Laeg shook his head resignedly. “You know that Maeve is gaining precisely what she wants without even setting eyes on him. Without so much as a skirmish. Damn the Druids! How do they know that the death of him in that spinning bull dream isn’t the death of his soul that we’re witnessing here? What if they’ve killed him already with their poking into the future’s fat belly?” He did not expect an answer, but stormed off to the chariot.

Paralyzed by the dawning fear that she was destroying the Hound herself through the best of intentions, Levarcham could not follow after him.

Emer climbed up behind Cú Chulainn, put her arms around his waist and pressed her head against the back of his neck. His hands came up and closed over hers for a moment. Then he grabbed the rail and nodded to Laeg who, on his knees in front, snapped the reins. The shining car shot off down the hill, around odd, half-carved blocks of stone, between two sharp, small pillars where once a false king and an innocent girl had been impaled.

Levarcham could not move until the chariot had been swallowed by the twilight. Doubts continued to assail her as she shuffled off to help collect Cú Chulainn’s herd. Half a dozen women would drive them to Emain Macha, prostrate husbands in tow. The old satirist wondered how Maeve would enjoy the deserted hill.

No life stirred inside the strange block fortress of Dun Dealgún. Outside, Levarcham stared at it in wonder.

She had decided that the hill had some power of its own, maybe its own ghost. Maybe it was actually a *síd* and at any moment the fortress would be blasted away by a bright red light and those bizarre supernatural creatures would emerge.

The grass on the hill had grown soggy beneath her shoes, so she had chosen to perch on one of the cast-off blocks. Her sense of complicity would not lift, compelling her to fret that in trying to save Cú Chulainn, she had initiated his destruction from within.

Druid magic could certainly lie, of that she had ample proof. The priests were hardly infallible. Their magic came from nature in any case, from this realm. But Cú Chulainn, like the Fir Bolg, like the Sidhe so recently conjured, had at least one foot in another world, where nature’s influence did not hold, where time swirled in a different channel and certain mounds were like standing pools in the stream. A god had fashioned that lovely, black-haired boy; a god had shaped in him a hidden, monstrous aspect. To

Levarcham a possible solution seemed all too obvious: that this same god had swept his hand through the stream of time, forming ripples to distort the Druid's view.

She recalled a tale of the Hound's boyhood, back when his only name had been Setanta. He had deceived Conchovor into bestowing on him the arms of adulthood on a day when the Druids said that anyone gaining arms would become the greatest hero in Ulster but would live an abbreviated life. Setanta had replied that a short life suited him if it promised concomitant glory. How could Cathbad have forgotten that? How could he have forgotten Lugh's manifestation then to accord the boy the Gai Bulga? Levarcham shoved herself off the block. If she hurried, she ought to reach Emain Macha by midday. She would reawaken these memories in the Druids. She would show them that Setanta should be standing, fiercely proud, against the new armies of Maeve the Intruder. The warning—the warning could only be false.

From the corner of her eye she saw movement, and she twisted about. It was the night playing tricks upon her—a standing stone that had seemed to scurry. She could just make it out down the hill. Maybe there *were* Sidhe about, or the drooling ghost of Tamun the Stump.

Levarcham gathered herself up, and that was when the great weight dropped on her. The shin of her bent left leg snapped, the bone splintered and she fell into a hot, bright light that receded, taking sense with it. When consciousness returned, she found herself bound against the block of stone that had been her seat. Her legs were numb, the broken and swollen one twisted nearly backward, making her think of the Warp Spasm when it contorted Cú Chulainn. The pain, though significant, seemed to belong to her memory rather than to the event.

Some massive creature with many legs came shuffling up towards her. A torch bearer hurried along after it, making the thing glisten. Its huge, wide eyes became metal discs—the umbos on a row of vertical shields. The creature became a circular wall of men. Even as she identified it, the wall drew up and opened, and a hooded figure in dark blue emerged from it. The hood fell back and hair to match the moon came spilling out.

Levarcham was amazed. She had entertained in Cruachan the last time over a decade ago. Yet the Maeve of here and now looked not one moment older. She might have been fifteen except for her resoluteness that no child could have expressed; her demeanor that of a goddess. Levarcham was impressed.

“Where have they all gone?” Maeve asked.

Levarcham pretended not to understand.

“Come, woman. Your fall broke your leg but did not addle you. We are both of us sly sisters. You see, I remember you, but I do not care to be led a chase across Ulster until my time runs out. You know who I want. You know where he is.”

“I do,” the satirist admitted.

Maeve smiled thinly. “There. We two are wiser than the rest. Expedite my search and my Druids will attend to your leg. Where has the Hound hidden himself?”

“In Craebruad,” Levarcham began, “there’s a great verse I can tell that’s always met with applause.”

“Indeed.”

“It goes like this:

“Cruachan’s got a queen
whose quim is grossly obscene
from a torrential flood of blood
it gushed that turned the dirt—”

Maeve had snatched a spear from her nearest guard. She swept it before her, and Levarcham’s head spun away. Gouts of blood striped the wide stone above where the torso bucked. The left leg kicked and snapped off altogether. It rolled past Maeve, bounced on down the hill, like a rabbit hopping away.

Lugaid hurtled up to the queen. Excitedly, he announced, “The coals on the fire are still glowing under the ash.” Maeve was returning the spear to her guard. She paused to consider the edifice of blocks. She remembered this place too well—where her daughter had been stretched as if from delivering a child so that only the mystically endowed Hound would satisfy her. *Ah, Cucuc*: she heard the erotic moan as if Finnabair were right beside her in the dark. She hated him anew for his sexual powers, which he refused to share with *her*. “Burn the house.”

“But—but it’s all of stone.”

“Then stuff it with things that will burn. Start with the satirist’s corpse. Let Dun Dealgun stink of flesh badly used.”

She retreated to her ring and the guards closed up around her.

Under Lugaid’s guidance, they filled the house with wood and laid the body on top, except for the leg, which no one could find. The flames quickly reached the thatched roof and licked at the sky. Soon, from the heat, the great blocks of stone began to snap and crack, and tiny stones shot forth like comets fired from ghostly slings. The stars vanished behind the black smoke as if all the sky were passing with Levarcham into the dark realms of death.

INTERLUDE SEVEN



Oh Lord,

I am very much afraid. Soon after we had completed the last tale, Senchan was struck down as if one of the tale's evil sisters had taken a disliking to his description of her.

He did not even quit the scriptorium, but cried out and fell to the ground. The Abbot came immediately and had him carried back to my cell, and we've made him as comfortable as possible. His affliction is unaccountable and fearsome, worse than I imagined. One side of his face seems paralyzed: he tried to smile to show me that he was all right; he could only do this with part of his mouth, with the right side. His left eye, too, he admits produces no images, although he still hears on that side. And when he talks, his tongue is thick, making him sound drunk.

Abbot Martin confesses that there can be little time left. Senchan asked to go to the sweathouse for the steam but the Abbot fears to move him. We have instead added blankets to his bedding to keep him warm. He said to me, "Who would've thought I'd come to appreciate the hardness of this bed?" I began to weep, and the Abbot dragged me outside.

He was very stern. "Listen to me, Fergil, you must finish the tales with him. That's most important now."

I considered this to be the most mercenary thing I had ever heard, until I realized quite suddenly what the Abbot was saying. Senchan Torpeist *is* his tales. They are his life. If he is to survive, it will be under my stylus. Things he had told me earlier crystallized for me as I ran into the scriptorium, gathered up my tablets and parchments: when all learning was done by rote and everything was transferred verbally between generations, it wasn't mere words, it was a man's whole life passed down between the rhymes and rude jests. People took *souls* in their care, so precious a cargo to carry, adding their own soul, their own life's experience, to the

weight. Senchan had raised the sayings of Augustine at me, tying memory to his stones, making memory inestimably valuable. In some fantastic way that I can nearly grasp, he is saying that the goal of history is to remember the future.

Here have I been, often condemning Torpeist for forcing me to take on work, when all along he has been offering me his soul.

I must hurry.

IX. THE UNHINGING OF CU CHULAINN



1. *Rituals*

When the chariot containing Cú Chulainn, Laeg and Emer arrived at the foot of Ard Macha, only a tall, dark horse-totem, Cathbad, came out to greet them. They did not have to ask how things stood there: Outside the sharp pale of the rampart no more than a handful of women warriors stood guard. Perhaps two dozen more ringed the hillfort, the last defenders of the province. Laeg imagined the same scene all across Ulster, everywhere that Maeve approached. His thoughts flew like gulls across the sea, imagining the boat that carried the alarm to the Isle of Leodus; but would Conall Cernach arrive in time to wreak havoc upon Maeve's company? That journey might easily consume as many days as the Pangs.

He was pulled from his reverie by the sight of Cathbad gesturing fiercely through the opening in the rampart. Some of the women who had lined the rampart came running out past the Druid. They were singing a sweet tune—a lullaby, he recognized now. The reason for it eluded him.

They rushed at him and he retreated; glancing around, he saw immediately what had happened. Cú Chulainn had climbed out of the car. His skin had turned purple. His flesh rippled and stretched. One forearm knotted around, the hand sprouting knurls, becoming a crooked, demonic claw. The running women sang for all they were worth. They knelt before the roiling monster, appealed with perfumed hands, stroking his twisted legs, his thighs as far as they could reach. On the walls, the other women took up the lullaby, and Emer added her voice to the delicate song as she caressed his flaming cheeks.

“A dream lies light
Upon your eyes
Your gossamer lids do wear it
No one for me
Can ever refill
The place in my heart you merit.
My man made child by sleep’s soft smoke
I hold you nearer still
Than my own soul
Beside your own,
My soul that you inherit.”

The women sang more verses, all of love and of the adult reduced to childhood through dreams. Their voices blended, a cantabile harmony, every voice weaving its magic around the words, slowly, sinuously befuddling the Hound. Infused blood beneath his skin drained off. The color faded like a rash. Deformities—the rolling hills of his muscles—calmed like a sea in the wake of a storm. Exhausted, he sank back against the bronze and copper panels and hung there against the rail as if roped into place.

The women milled around the back of the chariot. Emer, with Laeg’s help, lifted Cú Chulainn above them. They took his body among them and carried him through the break in the lower rampart.

Cathbad came to the chariot. Emer gave him a severe and troubled look to which the Druid replied, “Yes, I know you’re not happy at this plot. You want him to stand at his home and decimate the legions of Maeve, and you cannot understand why we’ve interfered.”

“That, and my own guilt from having pushed your plot along, putting trust in you when I still see no just cause.”

“There is *great* cause. It isn’t the army that concerns me. It’s the three daughters of Calatin and their monstrous powers. They’re named for the Morrighu, but unlike the fates, they take a very active role in pursuit of their bourn—and their bourn is to kill your husband. Their magic is utterly alien to me. I’ve dreamed and meditated, spoken with spirits, studied the motion of the clouds, and every prognostic warns me not to let him tackle them. In battle, there’s none better, but had he remained in Dun Dealgun, he would not have survived to see any battles. Nor would you.”

“Then, I expect I should be thanking you,” she said.

“Unnecessary. I would do as much for any defender.” He smiled. “Now, on to other matters. There is a woman inside the fortress come from the west, a good friend of you both, named Niamh.”

At this, Emer set aside her distress. Although she had seen Niamh during the incident with the birds and Fand, she remembered none of it and maintained the belief that she had not seen Niamh in some years. Right now a good friend to confide in was what she needed.

Laeg drove his team on into the fort, leaving Cathbad and Emer to talk as they came up the hill. He did not know still if, for all the eloquent counseling, he could ever trust the Druid. To the aristocracy called warrior, all the magic in the world held no sway against the simple fact that when battle came, you acted. Now, as Emer had done, he had followed a Druid's path faithfully. But was the mere threat of magic a sufficient excuse? For the time being, he would not try to judge—for the time being until he saw the three witches and what they could do. In a way it was as if he were back in Magh Mell, with Cú Chulainn kept from him and no one to rely on. That the overworld could mirror so conformably the underworld disturbed him more than everything else. What had happened to the days when they simply got aboard their chariot and dealt their killing blows? Where the simple fight for a yes or a no?

Morrigan, Nemain, and Badb climbed the hill to Dun Dealgun with some effort, but no one dared to go and assist them for fear of becoming a sacrifice. The three reached the top, then circled the ruin, the cracked blocks of stone. One began smearing her cheeks and chin with a paste made of blood and meat from the errant leg of Levarcham that she had claimed. She passed the gruesome paste to her sister, who applied it and passed the cup to the third, Nemain, who likewise coated herself, then stuffed the remaining scoop of it into her mouth, smacking her wormy lips. Her delight changed abruptly to consternation. She began to tremble violently. The cup shattered against a stone. Forces of prophetic vision compressed and mashed and pushed her down into a dark amorphous heap.

Below her, halfway up the hillside, Maeve and the two leaders, Lugaid and Erc, stood in the shadows of morning and watched the fun begin.

Erc would gratefully have been anywhere else, but Maeve had insisted: "They may say or reveal a thing that gives you a key to his destruction, or perhaps even saves your life. Can you afford to disregard such a possibility?" He could not, of course. Not when the situation was couched in those terms, but he envied Lugaid, who had witnessed spirits of the dead emerging from Int Ildathach. By comparison, this was probably a mild experience. Lugaid certainly looked untouched by it—what little could be seen of him, anyway. Lugaid wore a tall helmet this morning, one topped by a charging hound. It had been his father's, Erc assumed, and it masked his face and shaded his eyes in the depths of its skull-like sockets. In fact, the shell of the helmet, when viewed in profile, looked more than anything like an oversized black skull. Erc suddenly realized how completely alone he was among his allies. Maeve, too, with her infamous sexual excesses, was something inhuman—part *Leanbaun Síðbe*, a devourer of men and, sometimes, women. Erc would have to get through this venture on his own skills, his own wits. The rest of these people—if he could call

them that—might readily decide to conspire against him. A screech from on top of the hill both startled and plucked him.

The dark heap, Nemain, rose up like a fountain, like a standing stone rupturing the earth's crust. She grew to an unwarranted height, no longer recognizable as her former self. Her sisters danced around her as around a fertility pole, leaping, cavorting in a manner so lewd that those watching stood transfixed like stones themselves.

As the two danced, they shifted shape, sprouted feathers and then wings. Their bodies thinned and stretched as their sister's had. Her standing stone figure unfurled its wings to join them, and the three magical carrion birds lifted into the sky. Within a few feet, the early sunlight blasted their glossy plumes. To watch them became too painful. They vanished past the ruin of Dun Dealgun.

"Where?" Erc asked rhetorically, unaware of having spoken aloud.

"They have scented him," Maeve replied. "Three foxes after the Hound." She laughed. "We will continue our path of destruction over this region and leave his capture to them. I want nothing standing between Taitiu and Emain Macha when we finish. That way, even should we inadvertently remain past our nine days' grace, there will be no one to get up and pursue us. If we reach Emain Macha and still have no Hound, then I shall find the way to burn Conchovor's majestic houses. Three orphaned daughters, three houses for the flames. I think our mistresses of sorcery should find that a fitting retribution."

"Without a doubt," Lugaid agreed in his helmet of leering death. He sounded bored.

Erc refrained from answering.

2. Phantasmagoria on Practice Fields

"We can keep him slumbering," Cathbad was saying, "so long as Maeve's Fir Bolg furies don't get in."

Geanann understood this well. He had completed over fifteen of his nineteen year training program in *Druidecht*, which had begun at the age of five after a series of prophetic dreams; and while he might not have had the pure gifts of Cathbad, he had been selected personally by the old teacher to train to become the next teacher in Ulster.

"They won't dare enter here physically I imagine, though we mustn't overlook that possibility. They will more likely conjure up something that will pass through the walls and into the room. You should expect visions, nightmares."

"Phantoms," Geanann said. He would not be tricked.

"Exactly so."

"How does one deal with a Fir Bolg conjuration?"

Cathbad shifted his horse-head to scratch it against his itching tonsure. “Geanann, I am very hopeful that, once you find out, you will tell me.”

“Oops,” said Geanann.

“In a word.” Amidst a flutter of loose hides, the old Druid gathered himself up. “Call me if you have trouble with him. The copper beam overhead runs through the heart of Craebruad. Strike it with your wand, the very walls of cedar will vibrate. Wherever I am, I’ll hear. So will the rest. We shall all come at your call, and I remind you, do not hesitate to strike it—if we lose him, we will have *no* force that might withstand Maeve’s.”

Three black enormous birds spiraled down onto Macha’s plain after making a full pass over the hill. They spotted the Sickie Chariot—wider than the rest—and recognized, penned among the less remarkable horses, the Gray of Macha and the Black Sanglain. They counted the few dozen women watching them from the walls.

Satisfied that their prey hid within one of the three large buildings on the hill, the sisters landed and resumed their true forms. On the ground they moved as one, three bodies with a single purpose. The first thing they did was to make themselves invisible to the eyes of those on the ramparts.

Unseen, the three knelt on the practice field and began to tear up grass and dirt, creating a small channel around themselves. They piled the displaced sod around the groove. It became not unlike a rampart wall in miniature, as if they were constructing a model of Conchovor’s fort. When a complete ring had been dug, the three began to dance inside it, to sway, the shambling one-eyed horrors. They took up a chant in an ancient tongue, which sped the wind. Nearby trees bent nearly to the ground. Sticks and branches ripped free, darted through the air and spun around the torus where the sisters danced. The debris knitted together into frameworks, vaguely skeletal shapes. Once complete, the sticks stood upright, pronged in place, rocked by the wind. Across the entire field, a collection of crossbeams. The circumference of the spell increased. Further out, bushes cracked and burst apart, their bits curving round the torus, then blowing out again. Over the frameworks, the brush wove itself like grubworms, adding layers of substance to the spindly frames. Tall grass bound the figures together. Elsewhere, motes of dust and the puff balls that rode the vernal breezes collided, layer upon layer, adhering into further ghostly unities, like creatures made of gauze. One leg, then the other withdrew from the earth. The wicker men lurched in unison toward the more ephemeral creations. The wind brought more material to both corps, that grew from them, becoming artful weaponry: swords, spears, and shields. The two armies careened forward. When they collided, their false weapons

rang as if made from steel and that first harsh note shook the whole hill of Ard Macha.

Immediately followed the blare of trumpets, thunder of ferrule on shield, the cries of wounded, dying men and the yells of others in battle-frenzy. The animated creatures moved as one massive body, a hundred puppets tied to three sets of invisible strings and worked by three invisible puppeteers. The wind blew away from the torus where the sisters danced, taking the sounds of false slaughter to Ard Macha. On the ramparts, the women, dumbfounded, clustered in groups, watched the flora of Ulster stagger through a bizarre death ritual below.

The noise of the battle crept into the room where Geanann sat. Subtle and hardly noticed at first, it built rapidly as though the sound had sought out Cú Chulainn and, finding him, had spooled into this one chamber.

Geanann wondered at the noise. Could the forces of Eriu have arrived so early? He reasoned it out: had Maeve's forces appeared there would have been a call to arms, a beating of shields and shouting of threats by the women. That was how Ulster went into battle—promising the enemy a brutal, frenzied death. None of these things had occurred; therefore, no army fought outside.

Something that would pass through the walls like a ghost, Cathbad had suggested. Geanann understood: here it was. Sound, a great cacophony that could slither through the strongest barriers.

“Clever monsters,” he credited.

Even as he spoke, his charge was stirring beneath the furs, dark eyes opening. Cú Chulainn sat up, listening attentively. His mild expression became taut, his features drew down into a face of shame. “My people are fighting the battle and I'm locked up like a sickly child who'll perish at one touch of sunlight. What am I doing here in bed when I should be with Laeg—” He stopped speaking, having come face to face with the leathery creature in the horse's head that barred his egress. “Get out of my way, fiend. Macha's Curse has no hold on me, and no courier of hers will keep me from battle.”

Geanann saw his opportunity in the Hound's confusion. “I come to tell you there's no battle being fought. Maeve's sorcery put this in your head to trick you out, to keep you battling phantoms while she and her army cut you down the way Cethern died as he hacked the stone that he thought was Ailell.”

“I'll take on stone and phantoms both, then cut the army down. Stand aside now or I'll send you back to Macha a gelded pony.”

Geanann drew his wand, and fear of more enchantment caused Cú Chulainn to hesitate. The Druid rapped hard against the copper beam. Some moments passed before Cú Chulainn understood the true situation. Then he made a mad dash for the door. Geanann tackled him in the doorway, and they wrestled, the groping Druid blind inside his helmet. He knew he could not triumph. The noise of the battle seemed to grow into a

roar in his head—the Hound’s fingers had found his throat. The next he knew, someone shrieked above the roaring and the pressure of Cú Chulainn’s grip was gone. After three attempts, he sat up and, twisting the mask back into place, found Cathbad and five other Druids had entered the chamber—about all it could hold. They had driven Cú Chulainn into one corner.

“Three vile witches are down dancing where the Boy Troop once played,” proclaimed Cathbad, his voice eerily hypnotic. Both hands moved in complex repetitive patterns through the air, so close to Cú Chulainn’s face that he could see nothing else. The Druid’s rings sparkled in his eyes. “Where you used to practice. They’ve torn the field into fighting men, illusions just for you, Little Hound.”

“They torment me, why? Why? I don’t know them.”

“They want to take your sanity from you, to lock it away and leave you pitiable, malleable, a dollop for Maeve’s reshaping. Easy pickings is what you’ll be, so don’t accept the proffered challenge on anyone’s terms but your own. Sleep is still the safest place. Rest for the battle that will come once Conall joins you, where back to back you’ll challenge all and none will walk away.”

“Conall and me,” Cú Chulainn slurred. His eyelids fluttered. “I’ll need to be my best for that one. Lugh—my father may come in my dream and give me power, the way he did once ...” His head lolled. He fell forward and though they were prepared, three of the Druids crashed down underneath him, unable to bear his weight. They crawled out from under as the others hoisted and dragged him back onto the furs.

“That may bind him till morning if the sisters don’t get in.” Cathbad took Geanann’s wand and spun it in elaborate fashion around the room. The noise of the battle diminished, becoming soft enough that they could hear Cú Chulainn’s steady breathing.

Taking back his wand, Geanann suggested, “We could move him to a room with a view. Then, the next time, he’ll be able to see for himself that it’s all a trick.”

“That might be helpful—provided the three don’t learn of it.”

“How could they?”

“I don’t know—but I’m willing to concede them anything.” He directed the five silent horsemen out, back to their other duties. To Geanann, he said, “Move him tonight. I’ll come and help. We’ll force the noise to seek him out again if it can. Tomorrow, I’ll watch over him and you can sleep beside your wife for a while. But refrain from speaking of this. The less minds that know of it, the less can be revealed.”

He went out, around the helical hall, and outside. The practice field, a ruin, lay as if in the aftermath of a gale. The armies had unwoven into debris, their orchestrators vanished. Cathbad knew it was only the first lull in a much greater storm.



During the night the sisters did not make their presence known. Cathbad would have been happy to have his *vathi* here with him. The prophecy-inspired severed heads might have told him things about the Daughters of Calatin, about the outcome of their confrontation. Unfortunately, the heads slumbered in undisturbed oblivion in his subterranean temple. In his mind's eye he pictured how the cavern looked, the walls hung with his golden scythe and the drying boughs of golden mistletoe. He remembered the dream many years back that had led him to Nessa, Conchovor's mother, whom he had come to love for a brief span of years. A dream raised out of blood had begun this arduous adventure. Perhaps a similar dream could predict the end. Not a bull-dream, a *tarbfeis*; that he could not risk at so critical a juncture. But he might be able to reach his cavern, awaken the heads and hear their warnings.

Cathbad climbed down from the earthen rampart. He took a torch and marched back up the hill. His hips ached, making him think of Levarcham. Where was she? He had exchanged many harsh words with her over the years but he remained concerned for her.

At the top, he turned right, away from Craebruad, and went across to a smaller house, Craebderg—the Branch of Blood. Lighting a torch, he ducked into the unguarded house. The interior reeked of cedar oil. Three rows of upright posts buttressed a shadowy network of crosspieces not unlike those of a massive standing loom. But where the frieze of a loom would be thick wool or bright linen, the horizontal bars in Craebderg were hung with hundreds of preserved heads.

Cathbad wove his way to the center of the house. It lay open to a wickerwork grille in the roof, beneath which lay straw and kindling for a fire. He touched his torch to it; then, as the flames spread, tugged off his horse helmet. The hair around his tonsure stood up as if spiked for battle—an inadvertent but fitting coiffure in this house.

He walked a circle around the fire, observing the heads, reciting names: the charred skulls of the sons of Uisliu—Aradan, Ainle, and Naise; the mummified faces of Anluan, Forgall Monach; two sleeping Maines of Maeve and Ailell. These would be his *vathi* here; their visages would surround him in his trance like the ghosts of a thousand ancestors.

He edged through them to the back. Behind a partitioning of linen curtains, he put down the horse head, then went rooting through his stockpile of possessions for the one he wanted. He pushed aside carved charts of his nineteen year calendar, sprigs of mistletoe, a bag of salt, formal robes of three colors and other skins of prospect, two ceremonial daggers

for ritual sacrifice and entrail divination. Finally, he uncovered what he wanted beneath a tied bundle of ash wands.

He went back beside the fire, adding two bricks of peat to it. Stiffly, he got down into the cross-legged position in which one communed with spirits and gods. He took the new headpiece and fitted it in place. Brown and speckled, black beads for eyes, the wren's head symbolized his curiosity.

Quietly, Cathbad cleared his mind, relaxing, allowing his soul to float freely into the atmosphere. Time passed without acknowledgment. Cathbad's breathing slowed so much that he might have been dead, propped in position, the unsevered trophy.

A golden chain appeared out of the peat smoke before him. He climbed it, through the grille and up into a cloudy realm—not the sky he knew. The sensation of motion within it seemed more like swimming than flying. He stretched out to find a spirit to guide him.

Red as if coated in blood, an enormous bird's head shot up in front of him, barring his way. The bird had one saucer-shaped eye on one side of its head and a depression on the other side. He tried to maneuver around the enormous totemic image, cautious and uncertain of its origin. A moment later he no longer had any doubt. Two more heads burst through the clouds, enclosing him. Their single, yellow eyes tracked him as if his body and not his spirit had been snared. These were no totems: the sisters had been *waiting* for him. How could they have guessed? The Fir Bolg's powers must have included a singular variety of *imbas forasnai*. They had witnessed his approach before he had determined what he would do ... or had they even planted the notion in his mind?

Cathbad hovered in their midst, revolving slowly like a fly wrapped and hung for a spider's meal. All of a sudden he dove at one of the heads. It hissed, the beak opened wide, becoming a huge vertical gash against the cloudy world of projection. He reeled back and circled the three again. The open beak screeched, dissatisfied; the sound sliced right through him. He pushed with his mind and shot above them, out of the circle for a split second, then recoiled with dizzying speed back to himself like a fish hauled in on a line. Caught by surprise, the huge birds came rising up after. Their wings hammered the air, the quick-time martial beat of a bodhran. At each beat their articulated bodies shot impossibly nearer.

From the clouds Cathbad hurtled along the chain, down the chimney of smoke, through the hole into Craebderg. He plunged into his body with such force that he skidded backwards and slammed against two poles. Rows of heads began to rock back and forth, clunking together percussively; three knocked against him as if nudging him to action. Dazed and helpless, he could only watch the smoke hole, certain that the enormous birds would descend at any moment, then rise up from the fire and stalk him. He sensed that he had been toyed with, that they might easily have killed him in the spirit world, cutting his golden link back to his body. No

resistance would have worked against that. What could the three be? His practices had put him in contact with gods, with *Sídhe*, and with the real three daughters of *Ernmas*. These Cyclopean sorceresses—they were most like the *Sídhe*, but their powers beggared his own resources. So, his enjoiner to *Geanann* to beware the *Fir Bolg* magic had been more true than he realized. How could he hope to protect *Cú Chulainn*?

Dejectedly, he pulled off the wren's head. He grabbed onto the crossbeams to climb to his feet. His knees wanted to buckle. Maybe he should seek out *Macha* ... but no, the *Pangs* were *Macha's* punishment on *Ulster*. She would not release the province from its penalty because of a threat; the nature of the penalty made the threat implicit.

He scraped his way to the partition, dropped the wren and retrieved the horse in order to travel abroad without fearing the *Pangs* himself. He left the fire burning, the heads stilled, the future unknowable.

The dawn had broken, and upon leaving the house of heads, *Cathbad* gazed down across the valley. Three black lumpish shapes capered upon the practice field—shapes each nearly as big as the thatched round huts that speckled the rest of the plain. He wondered where the real *Morrighu* were, that they allowed this parody of them to continue. Maybe they actually enjoyed the farce.

He set off across the hilltop, back into *Craebruad*. *Laeg mac Rianganbra* met him in the corridor. “Well, don't you look like the nightmare herself. A fine time for a fertility dance you pick.”

“Is there some point you wish to make, wag?” the horse asked sharply.

None of *Laeg's* sarcasm remained as he asked, “How does he?”

“I'm surprised you haven't seen for yourself.”

“I went, and I found the room empty. No one attending no one. I presume this is your handiwork, to keep him hidden from the magic out there.”

“It was my intention.”

Laeg nodded. “I shared sentinel duties earlier. From the rampart I watched the army they raised—quite an astonishing feat of conjuring, quite beyond anything I've heard of before that didn't have gods in the brew.”

“I could say the same.”

“I was afraid that you could.” He exhaled deeply. “Well, the horses are hungry for a run, the sickles in their nooks rattle to bleed some *Connachtmen*, and if I sharpen the spears any further they'll cut so fine that the wounds won't bleed till *Lughnasad*.”

“I would wish you all the things you want,” *Cathbad* encouraged.

“Possibly, but that doesn't mean you'll let me have them.”

“Not yet, no.”

The driver nodded again as if to say that he had expected nothing else. “This is so far out of my depth that I wouldn't dare to offer an opinion. I'll do something here that I've never done before—I'll trust you to tell me when it's time.”

"I'm honored," Cathbad chuckled. "No, really, I am." But he continued to laugh.

"You ought to be." Laeg moved, offering space to pass, and Cathbad obliged him. So, he thought, for this brief space of time the warrior will trust the Druid. There might lie the first positive sign in the entire undertaking.

He found Geanann seated beside the window, eyes red and watering. A cloudy sky hung outside like a tapestry of gloom, throwing a wan light down on the pale body of Cú Chulainn. Cathbad stared past his student and charge, reading the clouds, taking note of their speed, their shape, their color. A torrent was predicted in what he saw—not a good sign.

He went and patted Geanann on the shoulder. "Time you were with your wife. Sleep as he does, deeply. I shall surely need your skills again." Geanann dragged himself toward the door and Cathbad hunkered down with a groan. "One more thing," he remembered. "Before you retire, tell someone to have the women who sang yesterday stay in an adjoining room. I expect before the day's out I'll want their lullabies."

Geanann said, "His wife came, sat with him during the night, she and her friend, Niamh. I knew she should not, for fear that he would awaken, but she was utterly forlorn. The woman—Niamh pleaded for her. I could not refuse."

"You did right. Poor Emer, she's had so little joy since Bricriu's feast, and nothing in it her doing. Her life far out of balance and all she can do is watch the world tilt further."

"She sang a lullaby over him."

"Emer's voice is mellow."

"The lullaby was a riddle of some kind," Geanann went on. "It said, I think, that her husband would never enter Magh Mell alone so long as she was with him."

Cathbad did not know quite what to say. He drew his knees up and leaned his head against them. He must have dozed—when he looked up, Geanann had gone.

He sat a long while, shifted positions many times. Outside, a storm broke, a hard and steady rain that brought steamy vapors in through the window.

The roar of battle emerged through the downpour's hiss. The hill trembled again. Cathbad stirred and, looking to the window, found Cú Chulainn there, stiff-backed, naked. "Why has he come playing?" muttered the Hound, agitated.

"Who?"

"The harpist."

Cathbad strained but heard only the false battle engaged, the rain's sizzle. He got up and came beside Cú Chulainn. Down below, the stick armies crashed and battered, yowling like men. "What does the harpist play?" Cathbad asked.

“Songs of the *Sídhe*. It’s the harp of Meardha’s Son, because—look—it’s brought so many with it for the fight. My friends. Look at all of the dead friends come to wish me well. *FerDiad!* Come, no animosity could remain in my heart—come embrace.” He stretched out through the window and wrapped his arms around the air. Cathbad grew sickened to see this. Cú Chulainn babbled, “Old friend, you’re so cold. The *Sídhe* need more fires it seems. I’ll bring the fire with me when I come. Oh, Connla, my son—please don’t turn away. Forgive me.” He was blubbering now, the rain running over him, and Cathbad tugged him back from the window. The contact between them let him glimpse the haunted hilltop from Cú Chulainn’s perspective. A hundred dead, gray figures wandered aimlessly in the rain. He saw a crow squatting off to one side. He released the Hound, turned and snatched up a spear from off the wall. He heaved it with all his might and impaled the black bird against the wet ground.

The crow unfurled its wings. It became vapor or liquid, flowing around the shaft of the spear, swelling in size: it became the sister called *Nemain*. Unharméd, she stepped around the spear, giving Cathbad a hateful stare, then scurried off. Her cackle, so like the hiss of rain, was quickly lost.

Cathbad grabbed Cú Chulainn and dragged him back down. He was about to speak when a shrill voice interrupted him. In mockery it called out: “Cú Chulainn, little lamb, how can you sit here like an invalid when your land is burned, your neighbors all skewered where they lie. Brave women have tried to repeat your skill at countless fords but none can dance the surface flat or skim their throws, and every one has fallen. Why are you still hiding? Did someone wound your foot?”

His spear thrown, Cathbad sought angrily for another weapon. He found a sling, loaded it and snapped it off at the second temptress, the new bird. This shot smacked the ground beside her, but she squawked and flew off. Bitterly he thought, so much for the room with the view.

Cú Chulainn was heading for the door. Cathbad barely intercepted him. “No, you can’t—they want you to come alone. No rules is what they need.”

“Stop arguing, Druid. How would you know what they can do? They’re beyond your comprehension as much as mine.”

That was true, he had to admit. “Then give me three days to dispel their magic. If I fail, by then Conall will be here and you can challenge them together.”

“I can challenge them with *Laeg* right now. We can drive the *Sickle Chariot* into their mock war and skin their ugly forms. I’ll tear out their saucer eyes and squeeze their brains through my fingers into hard balls for my sling.” He started to shiver. Cathbad stepped back. Now Cú Chulainn could not be hypnotized. The Druid rapped his ash wand against the ceiling beam.

After a moment the women came pouring in, naked, led by Emer. They sang loudly to drown out the noise of war and the taunts of the crows. All

three birds circled outside like ravens above a carcass, but they dared not enter the fort. At day's end, their warriors unlaced and settled back to the ground as piles of twigs and leaves. The three conferred with rasping breaths. Their lumpy bodies—macerated from days without food, days ofensorcelling—pained them now. Liver spots darkened their scabrous skin, a bilious yellow tinted their eyes. The Fir Bolg magic took a heavy toll on its practitioners. Eventually the spells would kill them.

Like Maeve, they had anticipated a simpler, quicker execution of their plan. The Ulster Druid was very clever. He would not release the Hound to them until they showed their exhaustion, until they could be executed. They had to remove that man from between them and their goal, and they cursed their foolishness at not having killed him the previous night.

Meanwhile, Emer and the naked women in the fort sang sweet and gentle tunes that pressed Cú Chulainn down like heavy weights upon him, and Cathbad left to attend to his son both as a physician and in search of an answer.

Maeve looked up at the overcast sky at day's end and wondered what could be taking the three sisters so long. Now she did not care if they tricked Cú Chulainn out onto the plain or simply returned with his head.

She had retraced most of her original path into Ulster, and had obliterated everything that reminded her of that incursion: the trees that Cú Chulainn had stuck in their path, the one that Fergus mac Roich had jumped in his chariot and the one on which the Hound had hung the heads of her scouts; the farm of Daire mac Fiachna, where the Donn had been kept; and anything else that suited her whims. It had been an enjoyable revenge but it was growing tedious now. She wanted the head of the Hound, the final trophy. Only then would the hunger for vengeance stop gnawing at her and her life with Ailell in Cruachan become peaceful and productive again.

3. Deaf Valley

Two warrior women propped Conchovor's head up while Cathbad poured a broth down his throat from the bronze bowl. The bowl had stylized horses for a handle and was much larger than necessary to hold the small amount of broth. Cathbad, who had drunk from it earlier, tipped the bowl to drain the last bit of liquid. Before he drew it away, the king's body snapped rigid: head strained back, teeth bared against a fresh wave of intense pain. "It's the Pangs again," said one of the women.

Cathbad admonished her to silence, but he muttered, "The broth." He had the women ease Conchovor back down. The king's swollen belly

remained, but he had relaxed again. Cathbad set the bowl on the mound of Conchovor's belly, and soon the mound receded. Awed, the women looked to Cathbad for further instructions. The blackly minatory horse head flicked its desire to see them gone.

They filed out, and Cathbad sat cross-legged once more beside his son's bed. He raised his open hands to beside his head. "The Pangs have passed from you to the bowl, and for a time you're free of their pain. A crisis comes hard upon us. We entreat for steerage through treacherous turns in our stream, and no guidance but Conchovor's will suffice." As he ended his invocation, he noticed that the points where firelight reflected on the copper and cedar around him had brightened with colorful nimbi.

Above Conchovor a luminous mass inspissated into a shape with a long snout, holes in the translucence for eyes and nostrils, sharply pointed ears. The eidolon of the horse spoke softly, with Conchovor's voice. "I'm here, father. Thank you for uprooting my pain."

"I cannot do it too often, and it lasts but briefly, so we must hasten to our purpose. I'm trapped by those demon ensorcellers on the practice fields. Their knowledge is not of nature—it's dark and perverse and transcends my own."

"While we speak," the phantom whispered, "I can sense the three unnatural voyeurs trying to invade this conversation, to eavesdrop."

"I'm not surprised. Soon they'll trick Cú Chulainn. Sooner or later the Warp Spasm will defeat me. The women of Emain Macha can't drown the sounds of slaying stick men forever. His spirit becomes too volatile for my spells to quiet; he knows my art, besides: he's cast a look over a whole herd of deer to freeze them in their tracks when they've blocked his way, so that he could drive through them. Eventually, he'll exercise his skill against *my* will."

"Then while he sleeps and the three scrape about in vain, you must load him aboard his chariot and take him from here. Take him to *Glean-na-Bodbar*, the Valley of Silences. They'll expend much time and energy seeking him before they can find him there, and even if they should discover him, their skirmish can't make a sound in that place. The Tuatha de Danann have a house in the depths of the valley. Make it yours and he will abide. In three days Conall comes."

"I thought I was making that up."

The effigy continued as if it had not heard. "Women fight for Ulster now. They're this year's trophy—no one in her army will have the impudence to hang the heads of the helpless men. Each day Maeve's army grows less heroic; right now they've let each individual warrior woman stand as a champion for Ulster against one chosen warrior of Connacht. Though but two of the women have triumphed, the undertaking is more to their liking, these warriors of Erc and Lugaid mac Blanad. Once again, the ways of warriors interfere with Maeve's plans, her own disregard for them trips her up. We can hope, you and I, that this works to our advantage, but it

will not affect the machinations of Calatin's Daughters. Get away from them." The milky spirit sank back down into sleeping Conchovor.

Cathbad's trembling arms ached; he lowered his hands and let them tingle in his lap. Awhile later he stood, removing the horse head to wipe away the sweat on his face and neck. The room shimmered in colors brought by the broth, painting his night. He wondered if Conchovor's dreams would be as bright.

In a room not far along the corridor, Emer lay beside Niamh, both asleep as Cathbad entered the room. He thought Emer's hair glowed like the light from a *síd*, Niamh's like his golden scythe. The shadows cast by his torch pulsed and flickered, filled with colors like sunlit dew.

His torch awoke the two women. Cathbad had seen them both naked on more than one occasion, but apparently with the heightened perception of color had come a swollen sense of the erotic.

Seeing the fevered look on his face, Emer thought there must be trouble. She stood quickly and rushed to him.

Aroused and disturbed by his arousal, Cathbad hastily tugged on his horse head again. "Everything is all right—well, as all right as can be hoped under the circumstances, that is." He had to clear his throat. "I came here to wake you." He stammered, "Now, you must dress."

"Where are we going?" asked Niamh. "Why are you stuttering?"

"The effects," he replied, "of my potion, that I used to make Conchovor the receptacle for the horse spirit. He's told me what we must do to protect Cú Chulainn."

Niamh could not be certain of what she was seeing, so she got up and sauntered up beside Emer. "It's an interesting potion," she mused, "for it seems to have stiffened your costume, too. Or are you developing other equine aspects besides the head."

"This is not the time—"

"It never is, Cathbad," she said querulously.

Emer interrupted their dialogue to find out where they were going and when.

He told them that they would leave in an hour for a place named by the spirit, which he would not reveal in order to keep it from being purloined by the witches. "You two are as close as any to him. You and Laeg must convince him to accept an offer to attend a feast I'm throwing. I've already sent people ahead to prepare things. He won't know that it's otherwise."

"Another lie," Emer said.

"To save him, we must trick him more efficiently than the trio below. They will trick him in any case and you'll lose him if they are the only ones playing at deception."

"I'll speak with him," Niamh said, as she reached for her tunic and *brat*. "Then I will return to my room and meet you, Cathbad."

"What?"

“I have no one and nor do you. You said one hour and that is ample time for us to spend ourselves in warm good company. I have always been fond of horses and their many attributes.”

The Druid thought this over for perhaps two seconds before replying, “I’ll wait here.”

“I won’t travel with you this time,” Emer said once Niamh had gone. “You’ll take him out while he’s asleep and when he awakens I’ll have to face my betrayal made concrete. I’ll stay and tend to Conchovor, and when time collapses, Cú Chulainn can come to me, knowing that I sought only what best suited him.”

“Emer,” he began placatingly.

“No, Cathbad. It was your proclamation to a young boy that he would gather great honor and die young. I love that same boy but I *refuse* to rush him from the honor to the grave.”

“That’s how it shall be, then,” he said.

Emer nodded. She left him. His heated desire had left him, too. He felt like the betrayer of the universe. What was he going to say to Niamh?

Laeg cajoled and belittled the Hound as he had done at fights and fords when the tide of battle turned against them. He knew as he declaimed that his words were bouncing off Cú Chulainn as if the warrior had become stone. The desire to linger, to fight, outweighed other considerations.

It was Niamh, listening throughout without adding her own weight to the one-sided discussion, who reasoned that she possessed the means to move him from his course of self-destruction. In firelight the Hound hunched down, despondent. Laeg paused and Cú Chulainn said, “I’m not Fergus mac Roich, who owes the whole province a feast *geis*.”

“Absolutely so,” Niamh agreed, and Laeg indicted her with a glance. “There is something owed me, though, that you never delivered. You gave the women here birds, beautiful birds to delight them, but you had nothing for me.”

“I think I remember that. Yes. Well, I would be more than happy to get you three crows right this minute—I know where some lurk nearby—if certain people would give me my weapons and let me go.”

“I wouldn’t want those monsters in any case. Still, some debt is owed, don’t you agree? Effectively, you’ve not kept a solemn promise and in a legally binding sense I have the right to choose an honor price to recover face from the slight, however inadvertent.”

Cú Chulainn groaned, certain of what sentence she was about to pass on him. “You want me to attend a Druid’s feast as your honor price?”

Niamh laughed. “Hardly that. What I want is for you to swear that you will never go to battle without my consent.”

“*Niamh—*”

“No, Cucuc. You know I love you second only to Emer, and in any battle I would gaily lead your horses into the fray—but here the wisdom is not to fight but to persevere.”

“I wish I’d never listened to that satirical hag. I wish I’d never come here. My home is demolished and all Ulster thinks I’m a coward.”

“None of us thinks that and at the moment, my dear, we *are* all of Ulster.” She went to him and kissed him deeply. “I haven’t the riddling gift of your wife or the goads to apply as Laeg does. I ask merely that you honor me by agreeing to my price.”

“It is not a thing to be chosen. In all things,” he answered vehemently, resentfully, “in all things, honor must prevail.”

“And so I have my answer.” She hugged him, and got to her feet. “Remember that this bargain was struck and no one in Ulster will dare impugn your name.” She left then, to complete her bargain with Cathbad.

Long before dawn, the wagons had assembled and gone silently northward out of Emain Macha. In a morning mist, the three tired sisters prepared to repeat their phantasmic battle, thinking that surely no one could endure another day’s struggle, when Morigane announced, “All is not right.”

The other two read her implications and together they opened their thoughts to the harsh ancient magic. Their bodies compacted, and three crows sped shortly over the ramparts and up to the round, smoking house of Craebruad. They boldly perched on the sill of the window where Cú Chulainn had stood the day before. The room was empty, the furs thrown back as if in haste.

“Can he have passed us in the darkness to go after Maeve?” asked Badb.

“Then we’re fully successful,” Nemain boasted.

“Not for certain. We must seek him to be sure.”

They fluttered up into the stone sky, circled the fortress carefully in search of telltale signs. The Sickle Chariot was gone, so too the supernatural horses that pulled it. They could not be certain if other wagons and carts had also disappeared.

One thing they all agreed upon—he could not have driven his war chariot past them without their knowing it. Where, then, had he gone?

Morigane took a daring step. She dove down from the clouds, changing as she went into a shadow, swooping through the doorway into Craebruad. If the Druid were waiting, he might destroy her, but what she wanted to learn would not be disclosed from without. She floated into the heart of the fortress, into Conchovor’s chamber, where Emer and one costumed Druid administered to the prostrate king. The Druid suddenly whirled around, sensing her behind the linen tapestry. She scuttled back into the hall before he got up.

The nautiloid fortress unwound for her. When she spilt into the yard, her sisters awaiting like two innocent doves, she had visited every chamber.

“The Hound is not alone. His driver, many others—including our nemesis. Strangely, his wife remains.”

“The others might be in pursuit of him, to stop him.”

“Then we must seek out Maeve—”

“—ensure that he is not elsewhere—”

“—or hunt him down.”

“I’m famished,” added Nemain, but her sisters ignored her.

Screeching, the trio rose up from the yard and skimmed the treetops to the south. They let their bodies expand in the sky; the larger shapes took less effort to maintain with no portions of themselves to hide. They soared into gravid clouds, burst through into a fleecy landscape where the sun shone brightly. Its warmth replenished them and they basked in it before descending again to the moist gray and green realm of man.

At Imorach Smirommair, Maeve had pitched camp as once before. She sought for Cú Chulainn’s other house, where he had lain while recovering from wounds during the *táin*, but the exact location was unknown to her. This had become her new obsession, and the quest had led her armies in a fruitless snaking route, expending time and effort for very little. She still had not found the house, whereas the divagation put their camp at the southwestern border of Muirthemne and Crich Rois.

Erc had satisfied himself that the queen was mad. Her actions far exceeded simple revenge. Lugaid, too, had drawn this conclusion, albeit considerably earlier; but his own thirst for the same blood compelled him to continue.

The sisters heard as much in the men’s minds as they hovered overhead. Time had become a hurdle, not an ally. Just as obviously, Cú Chulainn had not come here. Agitated, the three swept away, north again, straining to sense the volatile spirit of the Hound of Culann. If he was awake, they would pin-point him like three ships seeking a nocturnal bonfire on a spit of land. The avatar in him made him distinct from all others.

At first they were too distant to fix upon him; but by noon they gained a glimmer of his location and they whipped up huge winds to throw them into the north. Over Lough Neach, the three banked to the west, toward the Sperrin Mountains and the place called Glean-na-Bodhar.

All they could ascertain even so close was the vicinity, that is, the mountain range itself. Systematically, the sisters began to search. Every cave, every grove of trees thick enough to hide a chariot. Nemain went north as far as the tombs beyond the height of Carntogher and found nothing. In one tomb the burial was recent, the chamber still smelling from the leather sheet covering the corpse. Beside the dismantled chariot that contained the body, a bronze amphora probably contained wine. Nemain considered stopping to have a feast here, but she could hear her sisters’ thoughts clearly and knew that they would certainly discern her rejoicing over tasty flesh and wine. Reluctantly, she departed the tomb.

The other two had by now crossed to the far side of the Sperrin range. Morrigan spied a herd of horses running freely, untamed. She had nearly passed them by when she recognized the Black Sanglain in among them. Her silent screech trumpeted like a *carynx* blast to her sisters. Soon the three rode the low wind through the valley, back to its end. The sight of a house and a cluster of chariots and wagons rewarded them.

The house there was a wide rectangular base with a pitched roof of reed thatching that peaked slightly in the center. Smoke scrawled from a hole in the peak. Fifteen, perhaps twenty-five people might have fit comfortably within, and the sisters knew better than to invade. They passed over, around, and set down in a grove some distance away but still near enough to keep an eye on it.

In amongst the trees, the three concentrated their energies to gain impressions of who was inside. It was still possible that Cú Chulainn had not come here and that the horses, chariots, and wagons were there specifically to deceive them. As hard as they tried, the images from the house remained tenuous. Music could be heard like a stream trickling, and hazy shapes appeared here and there, mostly women it seemed. “That house has protection,” Nemain said.

“Old magic,” proposed Morrigan. “They mean to drain us dry.”

“Then he *must* be within. Quick, let’s raise a new army.”

Their bodies still coated with black feathers, the three lumpish creatures dug a new trench and prepared their magic, but all three had doubts that it would work amply in this gorge. Something about the place seemed alert to their presence, almost as though the Druid, Cathbad, had charmed the landscape—an ability they preferred not to concede to him. That was something the Fir Bolg might do, but never the upstart Druids, the self-proclaimed “men of wisdom.”

Two new armies of grass and leaves, dust and seed rose up and began to hack at each other. As it had on the practice fields of Emain Macha, the sound collected like moisture and began snaking its way to its objective. But the Valley of Silences was so named for its unusual properties of absorbing sound. Where the Tuatha de Danann had erected their house, the various geographical tangents converged and the least amount of sound short of a complete vacuum could be experienced. The house had been a place for meditation, for the sick among the ancient race to mend in sustained peace.

By the time the clash of a hundred stickmen reached the house, it had been reduced to something like echoes from a war raging in Leinster.

The interior of the house was different than most: the floor was partially subterranean, with a ramp leading from the single doorway down to the dirt floor. One whole side of it had a shelf carved in the earth as a sleeping platform, large enough to accommodate two dozen people on a cold night. Cú Chulainn sat on a congeries of furs there, off by himself. The others—the women and Laeg—conversed quietly around the central

fire where their dinner boiled in a hanging cauldron; Niamh had shaved Laeg's jaw and now busied herself prinking his mustache. Cathbad sat off in a corner where he could watch the doorway. Peripherally, he saw the Hound stir at about the same moment that he heard the vague rumbles of battle. He clapped his hands. The chatter stopped, all heads turning to him as he gestured fiercely toward the Hound. On this cue, the women started their practiced chant. Cathbad hurried across the room. Sliding up beside Cú Chulainn, he could see that the recitation was failing to quell the urgent, caustic yearning for the fight.

Cathbad took the dark warrior by the arm. "Remember who it is and why they do it. Wait for the true battle. You have a promise to keep." More reluctant than ever, Cú Chulainn leaned back. He would not sleep anymore, had adjured them not to try and spell him from consciousness. So much sleep had left his mind murky; his dreams had grown alarmingly vivid, and they were not pleasant dreams. Niamh and Laeg came and sat with him.

The sisters manipulated their armies for two hours but not a single soul emerged from the house.

"Is it possible that none of our commotion reaches them?" asked Morigane.

"That's ridiculous," Nemain argued.

Badb listened to them bicker, and she let her warriors unbind and sink to the ground. She cloaked herself in mist, spun into the air, across the valley, and drifted down beside the house where she could not be seen. She heard the rhythmic chanting of the women within quite clearly. She could see the battle that her sisters still manipulated, but hardly a breath of its fury reached her. "We've been deceived," she said aloud. At that point, a girl from inside stole out of the house. Fearfully, the girl watched the capering stickmen across the valley. She blundered right into the mist around Badb. Before she could back away, she found the hideous features of the witch forming in the mist as if it were soft clay. The girl tried to scream, only gasped. The mist had enfolded her. Its tendrils whipped around her, a smoky cocoon. Like a cyclone the mist whirled back across the sky, and dropped into the dark grove.

"Stop sisters, you waste time," Badb hissed. "None can hear you in that house. It wears a charm of silence."

"That's hardly good news."

"But what have you got there?"

The two sisters came forward. Behind them, their floral warriors disintegrated. "A prize?" they asked of the cocoon.

"Yes, in its way." She gestured and the mist slid like water to the ground. The girl, a *cumal* of Niamh, was revealed and came forward as if in her sleep. The taloned fingers of Badb worked at her brooches and jewelry, which she piled in her other hand. The girl's tunic and robes fell away. She stood stiffly naked as if boldly displaying herself. "Mine now," Badb said.

She brushed her fingertips across the girl's face. "Speak for me—let me hear your voice."

The girl began monotonously to relate her life to them: years as a servant, a memory of having been punished, the kindness found in Niamh's *tuath*.

"To whom do you address these things?" Badb asked.

"To my mistress—to Niamh."

"My mistress, Niamh," Badb imitated perfectly. "Mistress, I went outside, to relieve myself, I meant no harm." She squawked delightedly.

"We're going to enter the house," said Morrigan, her own delight dawning.

"To get near Cú Chulainn."

"To find out everything." Three eyes shifted with gleeful unity at seeing their objective so near. Badb grinned crookedly, the only way she could. With her sisters looking on, her puckered face smoothed and paled. The spots vanished in her skin and her hair turned red and swept itself up upon her head in braids. She put on the jewelry. She had become the *cumal*.

"Keep her hidden until I return," she instructed her sisters.

"We all know that." They grabbed the girl's bare arms and hurled her into the brush.

"Would she taste good do you think?" asked Nemain, but no one was paying attention. Badb had sailed back to the house and Morrigan closed her eye to follow the train of events. Nemain unwillingly put aside her appetite again and joined her sister.

Badb entered hesitantly. She had to walk back down the ramp and could not escape attention in doing so. A lovely blonde woman came up to her and drew her aside. "You must have had a fine reason for going out like that—do you appreciate what's out there?"

"Yes, I know, but they were far away. And I found something." She used her own fear of this situation to make the trembling in her voice sound convincing.

"What did you find?"

"Well, it's—" Badb paused to take stock of the interior. Cú Chulainn paced beside the raised platform covered in furs on which his driver sat glumly. Cathbad was seated off by himself in a meditative pose. He might have been looking right at her, and that unstrung her. "You have to come and see it right away, mistress, I can't explain."

"What, an artifact of the de Danann?"

She understood the valley's special powers now. "Um, yes—I don't know." Was the Druid getting to his feet? She chanced a look; but no, he sat perfectly still with his hands up beside his headdress. "You must come see."

"If I must, but I won't go out there alone. Wait here." Niamh went across the room, gathering four of her friends from around the cooking fire. They each collected their weapons, shields and spears. Badb concen-

trated on the woman, excruciatingly aware of the Druid in the shadows, but not relenting to the desire to face him.

If I don't look at him he won't see what I am.

Then Niamh went up to Cú Chulainn. He stopped his pacing long enough to let her kiss him.

That one knows him.

She could hear her sisters' excitement but dared not answer them with Cathbad in his trance. However, she abandoned her original plan—to kill the women in order to draw others outside. A better plan had revealed itself.

Niamh returned with her entourage. “Now, show me—but go cautiously.” She followed the girl out and around the side of the house. An outcropping of rocks lay a hundred feet or so from there, like a mountain in miniature. She had to hurry to keep up, while scanning nervously in every direction. The girl rounded the stone. Niamh and her warriors followed.

On the far side of the stone, nobody remained to lead them: The girl had simply disappeared. As Niamh realized this she skidded back against the four women warriors. A moist, impenetrable fog swarmed over them as if out of the rock. Niamh cried out, but no sound emerged from her mouth. The fog drank it all. She scrambled to her feet and tried to reach the house, to warn them. In two steps she lost sight of the outcropping and could see nothing else. She stopped and tried to go back, but the rocks were not where she knew them to be. Nothing was there. Niamh stood paralyzed, unable to move in any direction, lost and terrified beyond her wits.

Inside the hut the others continued to wait for night to come. The tension in the house had become tangible, and this time when she entered, Badb was able to discern that it was not her own tension but that of the group, like a huge stone pressing down on them, its weight balanced on twigs.

She came in Niamh's guise and ran down the ramp to Cú Chulainn. “Hound, you must come see what I've discovered.” She wanted to touch him but feared that he might sense her identity through contact. Her hands hovered an inch from his shoulders. As if to decide the issue, he grabbed her wrists and led her out of earshot of the others. His wild, flickering eyes contained such ferocity that Badb expected him to tear her in half. Instead, he actually pleaded, “You must give me release from this binding vow. Let me go, let me do battle, tell me that you won't hold me back any longer.”

Badb swallowed the knot in her throat and nearly forgot whose voice to answer with. “Of—of course I release you. Take your arms up, slay all of them, Maeve and Erc and Lugaid. For me, do it for me.”

Cú Chulainn's expression was one of utter disbelief. Had she said too much? Did this Niamh not know the identities of the warriors? Then his

lips flicked, curled into a dazzling smile. “Ah, Niamh, thank you. Thank you for saying yes.” He kissed her, then released her. “*Laeg!*” he shouted as if across a field. The charioteer jumped where he sat. “We’re going to battle—right now!” Badb saw that it was time to be elsewhere. She stepped back into the shadows as everyone crowded towards the Hound. An instant later, she had vanished. The last thing she spied was Cathbad charging forth like a stallion at the gallop.

Returning to her grove, she dropped down where she had left. Her sisters came running up. “Well?” asked Nemain. She had hardly paid attention, had obviously been eating lunch instead; her face was coated in blood and gore.

“He will go now. This time they can’t hold him back. Nothing can stop him.”

She spoke the truth. Inside the house, Cathbad railed and denounced Niamh, at which point the real Niamh and her warriors came racing back inside. She heard the Druid’s vicious attack, his accusation that she had given in to a “romantic caprice.” Then he caught sight of her on the ramp and whirled to accuse her. “Do you know what you’ve sanctioned? We need another day—*one more day.*”

“I haven’t sanctioned anything. I was tricked outside—*we* were, that is. Into a fog. I’ve been gone for ages, terrified to move.” The four behind her nodded their vigorous corroboration.

Cathbad understood immediately, and turned back to Cú Chulainn with the proof on his lips, but there he held his tongue. He saw that it would do no good. The Hound’s eyes flickered with such lights as had not been seen since the final battle of the *táin*. Every muscle, every sinew in that pale body ached for combat. No magic was going to stop it, nor songs placate that raging soul. The validity of Niamh’s claim would be cast aside, a meaningless barrier.

Laeg had hung back during the altercation, but now came over to him. “Druid,” he said, “the battle is surely on. Whatever your intention, I accept that you acted for his welfare. You can see his face as well as I. Don’t interfere now. Support him, and if you cannot find the means to do that, then at least step aside.” Cathbad bowed his head. All of the visions, the warnings that he had seen while in his trance, all meant nothing. He let Laeg go up the ramp.

Cathbad stood apart from the pandemonium raging around him. Niamh tried to convince Cú Chulainn of her innocence; the women who had sung so sweetly before began to keen like a plague of *ban-Sídhe*. He searched for significance in all of it. He realized suddenly that one of Niamh’s *cumals* was missing. She had not gone out with the others, but she wasn’t here. Cathbad backed off and hurried up the ramp. From the doorway he stared out at a valley blued by late afternoon shadows. The three sisters must be hidden out there somewhere. They had engineered this grand deception, and they must certainly know they had succeeded. He would search for

the missing girl and at the same time see to it that the sisters stayed far away from Laeg and the others. He set off after the charioteer, who was running in the distance to find his horses.

4. Of Harbingers and Departures

At Laeg's distant call, the Gray of Macha left off munching on the gorse she had found and came galloping back through the valley. Her tail hooked up and she shook her head proudly. Shortly, she caught sight of Laeg but simultaneously sensed the three witches nearby in the grove of trees on the opposite hillside. The Gray stopped, questioning what she could feel. Their power translated into great malice for the mare. Laeg came strolling up, and she shied back.

"What is wrong with you? Come here—I'm about to give you what you've been yearning for, just like your master. Come on." The horse moved off. "I don't care for the looks of this," Laeg reflected, "it's a bad omen. This horse has never been skittish before, probably in her entire life."

Laeg tried to decide what to do. He was standing there, impotently, like a tree in the grass, when Cú Chulainn reached him. "What's taking so long? There's one of the horses right there."

"You think so? Then you go yoke her to the chariot. I'll seek out the Black." Laeg gave the Gray a wide berth during which they watched one another suspiciously; then he took off in a steady jog, making his whistling call to the Black Sanglain.

"What is wrong with my old friend?" Cú Chulainn asked the horse. "Here, come with me, it's time we were off." He took a step and the Gray backed up a step. He took another and the horse maintained the distance. "Why are you doing this?" he asked her.

Cathbad the horse-totem caught up with him and, overhearing the question, replied, "Most likely, she senses the Daughters of Calatin lurking nearby." While he said this, he drew his wand. Slowly he waved it in a circle around himself. As he aimed it at the hillside grove, it pulled on him. "They hide in there, in shadow not surprisingly. I think, though, not for long." He started toward the trees and, true enough, the pull on the wand abruptly ceased. Three crows burst out of the treetops and, squawking like rusty axles, quickly flapped out of sight over the mountain.

Cú Chulainn opened his arms wide and now the horse came to him. She had begun to weep for him, aware that the departed maleficence liked Cú Chulainn least of all. She rested her head against his shoulder. Where her tears dripped onto his feet, the water turned to blood. Cathbad saw this first and hastened to point it out. The Hound read the omen but refused to acknowledge its meaning. As men sometimes do, he had reached the point where every obstacle, every proof that he was wrong, only reinforced his dogged determination to invite destruction.

Laeg came strolling back leading the Black Sanglain by its bridle. The two horses broke away from the men and converged to nuzzle each other. Cú Chulainn took them both and walked away. Laeg saw the blood on his shoes, spattered on his ankles. He was about to mention it but Cathbad pulled him aside.

Cú Chulainn led the horses, one to each side. They nickered and huffed, their combined spirits twining with his. The dark forebodings upon him were illuminated for the horses, bright as sunlight. He called back, “Laeg, let’s hurry. You can prepare the chariot at Emain Macha while I see Emer.”

Laeg looked to Cathbad for a decision. “Go,” the Druid told him. “I’ll see you again at Craebruad.” The driver broke into a run.

Maybe, Cathbad hoped, Cú Chulainn’s powers as a semi-immortal hero would somehow triumph over all prognostics. Ulster had nothing else to hope for.

Emer sensed his approach long before the chariot arrived. She had wept part of the day, hot tears of anger at her husband’s obstinacy, and some at her own. From his perspective the simple answers had become tied in knots so tight that he could no longer live by them. He had gone to many battles before this one, lain bleeding, dying, while nothing she prepared could heal him; even so powerless to aid him, she had never doubted that he would endure. Now one small army barely a quarter of what had confronted him in the *táin* for the Brown Bull—one fraction of a force he had routed for nine long, bitter days—had entered their lives and Emer knew without a doubt that their lives would never recover.

As the distance between them shrank, the tension of the impending farewell grew around her like a barrier—like the wooden paling that circled the outermost rampart below. Unlike the rampart, there was no opening in her cincture, no escape from the pressure it exerted. When he came to her, he would shatter that wall and she would be naked, defenseless, powerless to help either of them. As she could not escape, she waited, applied herself to tending Conchovor, although the Pangs could not be cured and would last many more days. She sang to him, spoke to him of her terror. If he heard or understood, he could not reply, but tears squeezed from his closed eyes, and Emer took this as a sign that he shared her fears and her frustration.

Hours crawled past with excruciating slowness as though the cart and two men would forever halve the distance but never arrive. And then, too quickly, it was down to moments, and he strode through the hall, and she wished him approaching again, always coming home, no safer place than that in the world. Emer left Conchovor to the two-legged horses and went out to face her husband.

Without a word, they retired to the windowed room where he had been, for a day, a virtual prisoner.

"You don't need to tell me," Emer said. "I know it all, what you have to do and why."

He sat down beside her on the raised bed. "Is there a riddle for today for me?" He wished to make the meeting light.

Emer, her whole body trembling, replied steadily, "I'm the riddle for you, and I've always been." Fearfully, she reached her hand to touch him. Cú Chulainn folded his fingers into hers and tugged. She came to him like air, like a cloud skimming ahead of a storm, her body tilting, sinking down into the furs, and his beside, and then on top of her. They made love so tentatively that it might as easily have been the first time as the last.

In the sweet, languorous period that followed, she looked at him as she had on so many nights as he slept; this time he was awake, and he saw the look. Emer said, "Here's the greatest of riddles: that any two so consubstantial that they are like two identical flakes of snow or leaves from an oak should find one another amidst all the other snow and leaves that fall."

He could not reply to that in words, but proved her riddle by forming his body to hers once again. Afterward, she let him lie in her lap while she plaited his black hair and shaved his jaw so that his thick mustache looked like a cavern in his face. "You won't have to smear mud on your chin this time," she said, a reference to his younger days when the older warriors refused to fight him because of his beautiful, smooth skin. He had lacked the emblem of manhood, but they had been forced to honor his superior prowess as the heads with mustaches began to fill the rails of his chariot.

"No, I won't, but I'll have you shave it off for me. The same Hound as before is going out, and I want them to recognize that." He offered her his face, and she drew back her auburn hair before clipping his mustache. Then she shaved his lip smooth. His eyes were closed as though he had fallen asleep, and she smiled down upon the boy Setanta who had stolen her heart from her father's garden.

"Laeg will be impatient with me by now," he said in gentle urging. His eyes opened, gently gazing.

"In that case, you're overdue and must leave."

He sat up and gathered his tunic and his white, hooded robe. "When you didn't accompany them to Glean-na-Bodhar, I thought—"

"I didn't go," she replied, "because we wouldn't have been allowed our private good-byes. You would have left me there, the lights dancing in your eyes, but none of them for me."

Cú Chulainn knelt beside her and memorized her body. Their lovemaking left her looking as if she had been swept in by the tide, as wild and untamable as the sea. "I love you—more than all the rest of life combined," he said.

"Little Hound," Emer answered, "even when the cup is over-full, it cannot hold too much."

He grinned, and the lights like jewels flashed in his dark eyes. For her. Once more he kissed her, then drew up the cowl and marched out.

“Laeg,” he called upon emerging, but saw this was unnecessary. The Sickie Chariot reigned upon the hilltop. Its dozens of scythes, blades and darts gleamed like gold though all were made of bronze. Bronze in the form of phalera discs decorated the horses’ bridles as well, each bearing its own deadly points. Standing on the boards, Laeg was resplendent in his cloak of white feathers and wide, fanned helmet. He turned and the last of the light caught his face, showing three round yellow circles painted on his cheeks and forehead.

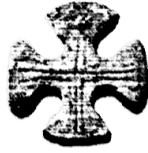
Niamh and most of the women warriors of Emain Macha surrounded the chariot. Cathbad was nowhere to be seen. The horses shifted nervously. With sunset on their trappings, they looked more than ever like supernatural steeds.

Cú Chulainn wedged through the crowd and climbed up behind Laeg. “Cucuc,” Niamh called. He faced her and she said, “You are the favorite son.”

Color flushed his cheeks. He gave Laeg a signal, and the women spread back. The blades in the hubs began to spin. The chariot dropped over the crest and down between the two other regal houses of Conchovor’s fortress. The women began to wail a paean to Lugh the All-Talented, father of the warrior, to bring him back if fate would allow.

None of them there believed it would.

INTERLUDE EIGHT



The final story remains to be told and Senchan slips away!

He apologized to me for the gloominess of it all, claiming that his own encroaching death colors his words, his very thoughts. “No more,” he says. “*You* must finish the tale, Fergil.”

Lord, please, he wants me to use his stones, his circle that I cannot even accredit, to pass back in time and witness the crowning events. I have not spoken to the Abbot. When I see him, the situation is so grave that to discuss such a mad scheme seems blasphemous. And what do I say when this does not work? How, after all, can his magic know where to take me, to the exact spot, precise place, where our tale left off? I asked him, not trying to seem contentious or opposed to the proposal. His slurred answer: simply that it will. That’s all. It will. Again he mentioned the Abbot, this time stating directly that Abbot Martin had travelled in this manner during the time he transcribed the earlier tales of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*.

To make my dilemma worse, Torpeist swore to endure until I return with the adventure fresh in my mind. Having promised this, he sank into a deep sleep from which I dared not rouse him.

Here are the stones, Lord, at my feet. I have only to take them, to make a circle around something—he kept saying “a cauldron,” and I reflected back on his comparison of our *clocháns* to cauldrons. This last stone here is the center. Do I hold it in my hands? Do I wish upon it, like when walking against the sun around the altar? Oh, it’s too crazy to describe! But where are my other choices? The Abbot demands his tales, Senchan is borne too near death, and I must complete the story for them both or fail, it seems, my order, St. Augustine, and history itself.

God help me in my labors.

I shall use the sweathouse.

X. THE HOUND OF CULANN



I. *Diversions*

“Here, Laeg, we’re not going to the battle directly,” said Cú Chulainn. “I wish to see Deichtire.”

“Your mother?” Inside his helmet, Laeg’s voice echoed like a wooden shield being beaten for war. Deichtire lived not far from Macha’s plain, and little divergence from their path was needed to get them there—that did not concern him. It was that Cú Chulainn’s desire to see her was an implicit admission of his impending demise. This Laeg could never have anticipated. Nevertheless, he withheld comment and let the chariot turn like a fish hooking through currents. Moonlight guided them to her house.

Deichtire’s was a dun—a smaller fortress with a single rampart and pale, more for keeping livestock in than unwelcome guests out. Her single hut was a huge one. A smaller cooking hut nestled against it, and a wall of piled stones penned her horses and cattle and pigs. She owned a wagon, but no chariot. That had been Sualdam’s and had gone to his family upon his death. She had little use for it in any case: Deichtire rarely strayed beyond the walls.

She had seen them coming and had walked into her yard to meet them, two torchbearers leading the way. Age had not ravaged her so much as had the loss of her husband in the *táin*. Time spent in her son’s company had always been rare, brief encounters. Most of his life had been devoted to his lavish fostering, to his training abroad and to battle. He was divine, which she of all people knew too well: sometimes, even now, she had dreams of the year spent with Lugh Lamfada, the sungod who had placed Setanta in her womb. From that union she had expected no normal child and this

had certainly proved true. She knew his ways, the pattern of his life; and his unheralded appearance—at a time when an army marched upon Ulster—alarmed Deichtire.

She approached him with wine in a huge chalice, for all three of them to share; but Laeg remained in the chariot, features hidden beneath the battle helmet. Cú Chulainn came to her alone.

Lights like fireflies danced under his lashes, as though a dozen or more torches floated in the darkness of the yard. His hair lay plaited upon his head and he had shaved the hair from his face. As if time had rolled backward.

It took her a moment to find her voice in the unnaturalness of the situation. Then she asked, “You’ll stay for a feast, Setanta?”

“Briefly. We’re off to take on Connacht’s best again.” His excitement in this was hardly concealed.

“Here, then, at least have some wine to slow the pace till you engage them.”

He accepted the cup and started to sip, but pulled it away, liquid splashing out. He wiped furiously at his lips. “What diabolical treachery is this?”

Deichtire snatched the cup and looked into it. With so little light, the change was not instantly identifiable; then she swirled the cup and saw how thick the liquid had become, no longer wine. Blood. She flung the contents away from them. The blood slapped a gash across the paling, as if someone had been slain there.

Deichtire ran to her cooking house and returned with a small bronze flagon. She refilled the cup from this, then drank to satisfy herself of the contents before passing it to her son.

Cú Chulainn took it from her and again began to sip. Faster than before he tore the cup from his lips, flung the liquid against the ramparts, a second jagged black stripe.

“Inside,” Deichtire said. “It’s safe inside—this magic will not follow into my house.”

They all went in, each wary and thoughtful; the happy reunion had been forgotten. Once more Deichtire drank from the cup, and this time she passed it to Laeg. He accepted it with obvious reluctance and took his drink with his face pinched, anticipating the odious contents. But after that initial, cursory sip, he drank deeply. Sighing, satisfied, he offered the cup to Cú Chulainn. “It’s a very fine, sweet red wine, I promise you.”

Cú Chulainn relaxed, taking the cup. The curse had lifted—whatever plagued him could not, as his mother said, follow him here. Making a great show of it this time, he poured the goblet from above, caught it in his mouth like a pool accepting a waterfall. An instant later he was spitting, choking up a stream of blood. He dropped the cup. Its sanguine contents soaked his shoes and his feet—in blood.

“I’ve no luck left. The world’s painting my future ineluctably in crimson.”

“No,” his mother protested even though she believed the same. With a cold and emotionless horror, she learned that her son had come home to say farewell.

“It’s not to be denied. Just as when Fedelm the Sídhe woman waved her sword over Maeve’s army and chanted, ‘I see you all red.’ Maeve wouldn’t hear it. Fedelm had seen me in all of their futures. And I see blood in mine now.”

“Cucuc,” Laeg said, “might it not be that you’re drinking the blood of Connacht?”

The Hound scrutinized his old friend for signs of prevarication, but there were none. If Laeg believed this, then so could he. “No wine then unless I’m going to bathe in it. For me, the best will be beer.”

They sat down together at Deichtire’s feast, which her servants made haste to assemble. With so little warning, most of what they offered was cold sliced beef, hard cheese, bread, butter and honey. Late into the night the threesome drank mead and beer, and talked, mostly of early times, of Cú Chulainn’s boyhood deeds.

“I remember when you were five,” Deichtire said, “when we lived in the house far south on the tip of Muirthemne. You had been fostered to, I think, everybody who was anybody—Sencha, Fergus, Blai Bruga, Amergin. But you had never visited Emain Macha. I’m not sure what got into you—perhaps your father and I had been discussing Ard Macha, as it was called then. In any case, you got up one morning and off you went, walking the whole way in as little time as most chariots take.

“The children of the fortress pervaded the playing fields at their various sports. You were a stranger and were required to ask their protection—do you remember?—but of course we had never told you about that bit of etiquette. The children felt snubbed by your refusal to comply. They thought you were challenging them, so they threw their practice javelins at you, their hurling balls, too. However you managed, you survived this rain of wood, but someone’s shot struck you and you threw a tantrum. That was the first anyone ever knew of the Warp Spasm, and suddenly instead of our sweet, gentle son, there stood a twisted, shrieking monster that set about bowling over fifty children with one shot. Then you chased the others—stealing their clothes where you caught them, you nasty creature. They ran screaming into Conchovor’s house where he and Fergus mac Roich were at one of their unceasing games of *fidchell*. My young brother silenced the lot and found out what had transpired. By this time, though, your anger had lifted through the pleasure of the game and you came dashing in, dragging clothes for half of them, nothing like the monster they described. Fergus and Conchovor tried awfully hard to be solemn while he gave you his protection.

“And you audacious puppy, you told him that in that case you would give *your* protection to the children you had chased—to the whole province in fact.”

“Yes, I did,” Cú Chulainn agreed, laughing till he held his sides. Laeg had fallen backwards against a post, happy tears running on his cheeks. He sat back up, seeing in the lull an opportunity to shatter all the dark forces closing in on them.

“I’ve heard about another time, not too much later than this event. You must have been living at Ard Macha, but you couldn’t have been more than six or seven. I think it was Fergus that related this.”

“I know what you’re going to tell,” Cú Chulainn interjected, but not so as to stop the process.

“Conchovor was at war with Eogan mac Durthact, as he frequently was in those days, over border disputes with Fernmag. He and little Cuscraid and a dozen others went after Eogan, but they left you sleeping peacefully in the fort. You didn’t have weapons anyway and so weren’t supposed to be involved. Cuscraid had just received his, I believe. Whatever the specifics, they had all had a rotten day of it. Neither side came out a decided winner. But Eogan’s bastards had burned Conchovor’s tent and supply wagon, and it was a cold night in Fernmag for our side. In the meantime, you awoke, found you’d been left behind, and went sneaking off from your keepers. You were probably halfway to Fernmag before anyone noticed that you’d escaped. When you did catch up with Conchovor’s dejected bunch, you crept in and stole somebody’s spears—”

“Blai Bruga’s.”

“All right, his. And you went out, killed a boar, set it cooking over a fire that you made, then strolled ever so casually back to where the rest were huddled in the chill and invited them all to your feast!”

Cú Chulainn nodded distantly, lost in contemplation of his early deeds. “When you’re young, it’s all so simple. There are only actions, not complications. You just do things, you don’t think if those things might endanger you.”

“You’re talking about tomorrow.”

“It’s today by now.” He dug his fingers into the dirt and turned up a splinter of bone, debris from some other meal that had been buried under new dirt. “As a child, I would have gone out, lopped off those hags’ heads and had done with them and Maeve. Now I’m required to wait, to delay my reply. That night, after I’d fed Conchovor’s group, we all slept there beside my bonfire. One of Eogan’s men crept in and shook me awake, I suppose to take me hostage since I was the smallest one there. I sat up out of a dream of battle and drove my palms together. His head lay between them, and the scream and the snap woke everybody straight up. I remember, Conchovor stood over the man’s body and told the group, ‘Hereafter, it should be known that it’s ill-advised to wake up Setanta.’”

Deichtire said, “I don’t see your point, dear.”

“Well, mother, Emer’s done what Eogan’s man did on plenty of nights, when she wants to make love in the early dawn or because I . . . might have

been snoring. And I never harmed her nor even tried. I never posed a threat to any save those who threatened.”

“And do you pose one now?” Laeg asked the implied question for him.

“Exactly, old friend. Do I?”

Their conversation could not pick up from that point. Deichtire got up, hugged and kissed them both, then went off to her linen-enclosed chamber. She wanted to advise her son to wait for Conall, but she would not voice this. He had to do as he saw fit. If she had learned nothing else about him, she had surely realized that. Instead, she stayed awake making offers and prayers to Macha, to whom she had always felt close. He had horses from the goddess as his team; surely, she might intercede to keep him from Maeve’s army until the time was right.

2. The Druid’s Last Trump

In the morning they ate hot pork and bread, then put on their war gear again. Cú Chulainn embraced his mother, crushing her to him, a tense gesture of farewell. “Remember that I loved you,” he whispered in her ear just before he hurried outside. In the yard, a pillar wrapped in black skins, with a maleficently painted horse’s head, stood beside the chariot.

“Cathbad?” Laeg inquired.

“And who else would it be?” came the gruff reply. “I’ve stood here half the night for you two to come out.”

“Why?”

“To ride along with you for a time—if I may.”

“As you wish,” Cú Chulainn said tersely. He jumped up to his position, turned and held out his hand to pull the Druid up behind him. “Watch where you grab the rail if you value your fingers.”

“Sound advice, thank you.”

They set off, Deichtire waving them farewell. She came outside her walls, to watch until the hills intervened.

Across the plains and into the hilly region of north Muirthemne, they rolled steadily onward until they neared a small hut untouched by Maeve’s army. A stream ran past it and Cú Chulainn insisted they stop so that he could get a drink. Laeg reined in, although somewhat suspicious of the Hound’s sudden thirst. Cú Chulainn jumped down. Cathbad followed him. The stream was low, in a ravine, and as they approached the embankment, they saw a blonde girl below on a large rock. Naked to the waist, she was washing clothes against the rock. The effort glistened on her skin, on her neck beneath her braids.

The clothes had rents in them and were crusted with blood. The blood did not want to come out but the girl worked hard at it.

Cú Chulainn muttered, “These clothes look familiar.”

“Don’t they?” replied Cathbad, enigmatically.

The girl set aside the saffron tunic to dry, then dragged another wadded garment out of the depths. Unfolded, it became a cape with a hood. Pink with blood, it had more holes through it, but clearly visible was a spiral circle of golden weave in the middle of it.

“That’s *my* robe. My sign.”

“So it seems.”

Cú Chulainn stumbled. Cathbad caught him, held him. The Hound glared up at the impassive horse. “You’ve done this, you created this illusion to pester me.”

Cathbad balked. “How could I? Did I also make you thirsty? Tell you to stop here?”

“Then what is this?” He turned back to the stream, and now the girl was staring at him—staring with red, shimmering eyes, her face become equine.

“Macha,” Cú Chulainn hissed.

She stood up on the rock. Beneath her, the stream surged and snatched the shredded clothing from the rock. They watched his tunic and cape slither past them, dragged by the current, then disappear into a deeper pool where they were sucked from sight. When Cú Chulainn looked back, Macha had gone, too, but her bare, wet footprints remained on the boulder.

“What do you say now?” Cathbad asked.

His agitation was lines like Ogham writing upon Cú Chulainn’s face. “I know her meaning. I know yours. I know what has been, what is now, and what shall hereafter pass. None of it is a mystery. Emer knew it, too, as did Deichtire. With so many of us practicing augury, can you be in the dark?” He thrust his finger at the stream. “This is what must happen. If we all saw it in the past, you would not argue, you would acknowledge our clear vision. How is the future in any way different from the past?”

“There is no difference, of course. Do you still want a drink?”

“Why, when I’d only contaminate the stream by turning it to blood?”

The horse shook its head slowly, and even hidden within, Cathbad’s expression could be read as only sorrow. “Good-bye, then,” he said. “A good hunt to you.”

“Yes, a good one. You’re staying here?”

“And you’re slaying there. I know all I have to, and Macha has business with me.”

“Thank you,” Cú Chulainn said. “I’ve no malice toward you. You’ve acted always for the good of Ulster, for Emer, and for me. You tried your best to wipe Connla and Fand out of me, and though you failed ultimately, you gave Emer and me many months of joy we wouldn’t have shared otherwise. Always, you have been honorable when dealing with me. I wish you years of continuance at whatever it is you do.” He took two steps, then paused to add, “Tell my uncle that I say the same of him. If his Deaf

Valley couldn't change the outcome, what could?" Then he went on. The Druid walked down the embankment and onto the wide rock to meet Macha.

"We go on alone," Cú Chulainn told Laeg, "along a dark road."

Laeg sent the chariot thudding across the rough, open fields again. "Then, we'll have to make our own light," he shouted back. From under his helmet, his painted disks shone like three suns.

The Daughters of Calatin paraded before the camped army like three *Sheela-na-gigs* that had somehow leapt to life off a stone relief or a grotesquely painted shield. They swayed and lurched, their black tattered *brata* trailing like extra limbs. It wasn't women dancing, it was arachnoid goddesses, an effect by no means lost on Erc. He could practically feel the delicate skittering of insect legs across his back, over his shoulder. What the three were doing—divining—was for the good of the army and all that, but he would have preferred to take his chances without prognostication if these three had to be endured at close range for much longer. Maeve he could do without as well.

For what—three full days?—he had been taken on the Great Muirthemne Meander. A hundred chimneys of smoke ascended before him; three times that many women had barred Maeve's path. That totaled a hundred single combats per day, nonstop bloodletting. Those Ulster women had remained with the army: their heads adorned every chariot rail, filled countless sacks soaked in cedar oil and piled aboard wagons. Hardly a farm or a *dun* remained untouched on Muirthemne Plain. It would be years of diligence and good weather before the grass came up green again, and not red.

With little else to do save tarry for the Hound, the army had been pondering the greatest coup of all: Emain Macha itself. No one except the Ulstermen themselves had ever dared assail it. The three houses on that hill gleamed in the warriors' minds like ruby carbuncles set on the dome of a Fomorian-sized helmet. The heart of the province, a hard but hardly impossible object, was the sort of task Erc could set himself eagerly.

Then the three squamous sisters returned and this shining, coveted ideal vanished, with one word from each of them to Maeve:

"He—" "—is—" "—coming."

So what, thought Erc. So, instead of a real, rich prize, a fair pillage to make the gods envious, they must tackle the illusive Hound of Culann, who once crushed twice their number all by himself. Only Erc continued to dream of Craebruad, Craebderg, and Tete Brec. The rest wanted what Maeve wanted, what Lugaid wanted, what those dancing goblins wanted: the head of the Hound, the ultimate trophy for Connacht's own treasure house. The whole, massive, glittering army stood silent, watchful. The

three horrid coryphaei would shortly reveal how it was to be done, where the soft flesh could be pierced, the blood drained.

An hour or more they squatted and stomped and gyrated on the plain to the north of Maeve's forces, their energies seemingly boundless. Then, suddenly, they were rushing at Erc, at everyone, scrabbling like black crabs around the leaders, through Maeve's dozen protectors. The three converged on Lugaid, and for once he looked nonplused by them, his icy facade not prepared for this assault.

As they circled him, they chanted to him:

"This light from later shines at you."

"The hero barks with three fangs on his jaw."

"Each on a stick—"

"Each pinnate as an ash leaf—"

"Each one will slay a king today."

*"The outcome of the battle hangs
on whether you can pull his fangs."*

"More to do," screeched one sister. She changed before them, sprouting wings again, more like a leathery bat than a bird. Her sisters spun, leapt, and transformed behind her. They turned hazy in the clouds.

"The hunt is on," Erc sighed in disappointment. His hope of conquering Conchovor faded like dew in the sun.

3. Dog Eat Dog

The evidence of devastation lay on all sides of them now. Spring trees stood leafless in skeletal poses, as if winter had set in again. But the "snow" that buried this ground was black and greasy. Every house they passed could barely be recognized as such. Wooden ramparts had been disintegrated, piled and burned, reduced to sticks of charcoal. Muirthemne Plain had become a wasteland, almost overnight.

Neither Cú Chulainn nor Laeg saw signs of the inhabitants of those houses—not living signs at least. The Midluachair road into the south cut across many streams and rivers. At each ford they found one, sometimes five or six, corpses, all of women, many naked and painted or oiled for battle; most had become food for carrion birds and wolves. None had heads. The string of torsos, of burned-out shells, outraged them both, but nowhere lay anything to strike back at.

When finally they spied some smoke ahead, Laeg excitedly whipped the team into a frothing run and Cú Chulainn twirled a spear with red penoncel, ready to slaughter *something*. Both men were disappointed in their efforts by what they found: the smoke came from a ruin, a wide *dun* without its walls or houses—just a mound of earth raised like a hedge

around debris. In the midst of this, three survivors of the holocaust had been cooking their meal.

Upon sighting the Sickle Chariot, the three ragged, filthy figures dashed into hiding in the rubble. Cú Chulainn made Laeg stop the chariot and let him out. He entered the battered ring, glimpsed a blackened face here, another there.

“Come out,” he said. When no one appeared, he added, “If I were a Connachtman, I’d have slain you by now. What good is hiding if your scraggly deer sings and chars with no one to attend to its basting?”

One of the wretches poked a head out. He saw long gray hair smeared to a greasy, smudged face. Only one eye looked at him from that face—the other had been torn out, the bloody gore still in evidence on the dirty cheek. The face was scrunched up to hide its blemish. “Who are you then if you ain’t a Connachtman?” asked the wretch, hers the voice of a harri-dan.

“I’m Cú Chulainn, Ulster’s defense. I’m on my way to slaughter the beasts that laid this house low.”

All three of the wretches crept out, still twisted and ready to run. No armed figure, whoever he claimed to be, was going to gain their trust. “Where were you yesterday?” bleated one of them. He saw now that they were all three crones, bent-backed like Levarcham, tired and worn by life, their clothes reduced to rags that failed to hide the sores and wounds festering on them. One eye had been torn from each woman.

“Connacht’s queen left us like this as a warning to you—a grand jest from Maeve.” The one held up her arm, and it ended without fingers.

“More like a sign for Conall,” he said, “the way they’ve left you squinting.”

“It’s good to hear a brave man’s words.”

“True, sister—we’ve had nothing to listen to but yapping dogs since Maeve came through here. She’s a plague, a shadow.”

“Would you and your driver stay, have a meal with us?”

Cú Chulainn shook his head. “It’s too far we have to travel to repay Maeve’s many kindnesses. Another time.” He turned to go.

“Warriors—high-born bastards!” cursed one woman. “You’re all alike. If we were beauteous maidens, wives of kings, you’d stay here, fuck us and leave smiling. Instead, we’re old, left alive as a cruel gesture and you refuse even to treat us fairly and give us a common courtesy.”

“Go on, fight for your dead friends and discard the living.”

“But how ever much glory you get from it, you’ll know that inside you’re a small man because you have no care for the small in life.”

“Cucuc!” Laeg called impatiently. “Let’s be off!” He could not hear what the hags said to Cú Chulainn.

The Hound, for all that he urgently wanted to leave, had pity for the poor old women, their torture on his account. He could remember his

own resentment at Maeve's ill treatment of him and others. She lived by manipulating everyone, and no affront bothered her.

"I'll stay just a minute," he replied to their invitation, "but only out of respect, to show you that you're not being snubbed." He gestured Laeg to wait for a few minutes.

"Won't your friend join us?" said one, slicing him a piece of the meat.

"No, he must stay with the team—our horses have less patience than both of us."

The three women clustered around the fire. "I'm giving you the shoulder because you're Ulster's champion."

"You honor me," he said politely, ignoring how stunted their catch was; but what proud stag could have been brought down by these three? The one woman passed him the shoulder slab. He clutched his spear still in his right, so he took the meat in his left hand and braced himself against the planted spear. The slice of meat dripped its juices down his thigh. He held it away, not wishing to stain his war cloak. Then, bending to it, he took a bite, tearing the soft flesh in his teeth. It was as sweet as a woman's kiss.

Cú Chulainn bent to it again. The cut of meat dropped from his fingers. He tried to reach the meat but, when he shifted his weight to the left leg, it would not support him and he toppled onto his side. He stared at his open hand. He tried to flex his fingers. They responded limply and he sensed a coldness crawling along his arm. His head swam. The whole of his left leg had become numb like his arm. "What has happened to me?" he gasped.

One of the wretched women came up. Standing over him, she said, "Not deer, not fawn. Greyhound!" Then she stepped back beside her sisters.

"You—you're the Daughters that Cathbad kept seeing."

"Yes," said Morigane, "and now you've seen us, too. Tell him we look forward to our meeting—when you see him next, in the afterlife."

Nemain walked at him, her shape changing, becoming more sinister and birdlike. She reminded him of the witch, Eis Enchenn, that he had slain on the Isle of Women. Nemain scooped up the shoulder slice and tore at it with her ravenous beak. Her red eyes glinted. "We *like* to eat dogs," she informed him.

He got up on one knee with lightning speed and swung his spear at her. The blade gashed her talons, cutting the meat from her hand, the tips of her fingers with it. She shrieked and jumped up, completing her transformation in a burst of oily, black feathers.

The Hound howled in hopelessness. He fell onto his back.

Laeg drove the chariot into the rubble. He had a spear at the ready, but the three harpies had escaped his range.

In one bound over the rail, he reached his friend. Cú Chulainn lay quivering. His tainted arm and leg had turned bluish. The fingers appeared to have withered, curled up like a baby's. "Help me stand," he begged.

"What can we do now?" lamented Laeg.

"We can go on."

"Oh, Little Hound, what madness can drive you any further? How do you propose to rout an army with one leg and one arm? You're no Fomorian—you'll fall over the chariot rail and cut yourself to pieces on your own scythes."

"Then I'll strap me to the rail, but we're going on."

Laeg pushed him into the chariot. "Yes, that's right, this is the road, isn't it—the one we took when you drove to the Burren, to Magh Mell? And all traffic on that road flows in one direction only."

"We've been down it before and come back against the current then," Cú Chulainn pointed out.

Laeg gasped. "You remember?"

"All, I think. All of it. And the one who stood by me through it all—even if you are a drunken fool." He undid the binding leather thong from his left shoe and tied it around his waist, then to the rail. "We ride."

Laeg jumped up in front of him and snatched up the reins. "And damn the winds that try to blow against us."

"I fear nothing," Cú Chulainn chanted, "so long as the sun lights the sky and the sea doesn't drown my land."

"Or the earth open up beneath us," Laeg finished. He snapped the reins, and the horses pulled. They would stop for nothing now till the scourge had been banished from their land.

4. The Host Beleaguered

Erc and Lugaid had figured out the riddle proposed by the three sisters, and they went to Maeve's tent to discuss it with her. The tent had been set up beside the lake, in amongst the large stones that lay there, some of which had been chiseled into standing stones. The interior of the tent was dry and dark.

"His fangs are spears," Erc explained. She had wine poured for him and Lugaid, but nodded to him that she was listening and wished him to continue. "We've been warned that they'll kill three kings, which could refer to a dozen different warriors here at least and possibly more, depending on what level of kingship the harridans included. I'm sure they wouldn't tell us, would they?"

“Unlikely,” Maeve agreed. “However, you two think in coldly logical terms of actual kingship. While you may be right to do so, I have always found magic incantation to have more metaphorical implications in its message.”

“Then, what is the meaning?” asked Lugaid from inside his helmet.

“That, I would not be so audacious as to surmise. With magic, it is best to wait for the answer. When the meaning comes, it will be obvious, to you both, to me.” She swirled her goblet. “But how do you like my Estremnidean wine?”

“Very good,” Lugaid answered, his voice echoing. “Most palatable.”

Erc drank without pleasure and only grunted his concurrence. “You don’t seem much concerned by the approach of this fiendish Hound,” he said.

“Not at all.”

“I thought revenge was the whole zest of your existence.” This was a bold admission, but he no longer cared for the danger Maeve represented.

She eyed him with barely concealed contempt—that he should address her as if so familiar with her attitudes. Nevertheless, he had voiced what she was coming to know about herself. The game had not been played as she would like; Cú Chulainn had not taken the bait and been swiftly slain. Raping the countryside, while it had its merits as vengeance over Ulster, had somehow stunted all of the joy in her sweetly desired reprisal. She wondered, would she feel anything at all when this was over? For so long she had lived with the passion of that reprisal; it had become her reason for existing, Cú Chulainn a growing cancer in her thoughts. When he was gone what would fill that void in her? What had filled it before that night when she and Ailell first bickered in bed? Had it been sex alone that drove her before? Since Fergus mac Roich had departed Connacht, she had found the notion of coupling fallen into a similar realm of tediousness, an exercise without excitement. Sex equated with torpor—how could that have happened? And the dreams that assailed her now, almost nightly—dreams in which she heard herself called Maeve Lethderg, and found herself married to king after king, drowning each in succession with her sexing. In the dream she dwelled at Temhair Mide, and lived in a fortress like none she had ever seen. It was as if she had already shuffled off this existence, and though still alive had begun to live out the next incarnation already. She realized that her thoughts had drifted off and the two warriors had opened a dialogue without her.

“What were you saying?” she demanded to know.

His annoyance plain, Erc replied, “We’re mapping out a strategy for how to cope with the Hound.”

“I happen to be an expert on that subject. Divide the army into three groups. That way you can close in upon him.”

“What about his spears?”

“Yes, that is why I say three groups. I shall give you a Druid for each of them, who can confront him, demand his weapon. The worst that will happen is we lose one king in each group.”

“If that’s the meaning of the riddle, as you said,” Lugaid added.

“Yes,” Maeve agreed, now peeved at both of her warriors. “My sons will enjoy the killing as much as you, so you will put them in your front ranks. Let them have some opportunity on their brother’s behalf.”

“As you wish.” Erc stood ceremoniously.

“You would not care for more wine?”

“No,” he said.

“No,” Lugaid agreed. “It’s time we prepared.”

He was right in this observation: as the two of them left Maeve’s tent, a runner charged down from the heights nearby, shouting that a chariot was fast approaching from the north. Lugaid and Erc set about their tasks hastily. Each took charge of one of Maeve’s groups. They gave the third division to her eldest—eldest in terms of scant minutes; but history has turned on such minuscule events.

The heralded chariot shot over the hill and into view. It drew up near the crest for a moment, offering the army a long, quiet look at Ulster’s two champions as they in turn sized up the army. The chariot sent a chill through some, the enormous horses and their deadly trappings made others swallow. Laeg, the size of his head tripled by the helmet, his torso buried in white leathers, was imposing. Only the short figure in the white robe failed to astonish—or, rather, astonished by comparison. He looked so gentle, peaceful, while surrounded by gleaming blades thin as leaves, monstrous steeds, the tang of death. Seeing him, some in the army wondered boldly what all the fuss was about.

Then Laeg snapped the reins. The horses kicked up. The chariot became a missile in descent, so swift in approach that Maine’s force had scant moments to prepare. The scythes slit a dozen bellies, cut off twice that many limbs. Laeg ducked and dodged spears and stones. Cú Chulainn performed his thunder feat, as if neither arm nor leg were hindered; but unable to hold both shield and spear, he banged his shield against the chariot rail. The clang shook the ground, an explosion that bowled the two other forces back. He spun the shield at the enemy’s weapons, rammed them in such a way that they glanced off the shield and flew back at the army. Some died by their own hands, their own spears.

An enemy chariot crossed their path to divert them into a snare. The Black and the Gray leapt the car; behind, the Sickle Chariot lifted free of the ground. Its hubs chopped the heads from both driver and warrior, the spinning wheels crushed the rails beneath, and the unpiloted chariot went careening wildly into Erc’s force before anyone else could try and stop it.

The Sickle Chariot thundered down on first one, then both wheels. At the back Cú Chulainn quickly set aside his shield, whipped up his spear

and slashed across those who chased closely after him. His point opened up a row of naked bellies to the air.

The Druid in Maine's group ran toward them and shouted, "Give me that spear, dwarf! Give it me or I'll find tales to tell that will wither you like carrion!"

"I need it more than you," insisted Cú Chulainn.

"I'll give you a bad name if you don't," the Druid swore.

"Well, I shouldn't like that. Here, then, it's yours." Cú Chulainn flung the spear with all his strength. It exploded the Druid's forehead and zipped on, trailing pink gore, and hit the next man along, throwing him back into others.

The chariot rode on through them, its slaughter undiminished, and swung around to return.

Erc ran to Lugaid. "This is impossible. He's slaughtered three dozen and not one of ours has nicked him." Lugaid agreed, but he suddenly charged over to Maine's stricken group, to where the speared warrior lay. Grabbing the shaft of the spear, he stepped on the dead man's throat while he wrenched free the embedded head.

Erc hurried after him, calling, "What are you doing?" He glanced at the returning vehicle, at the warriors contesting its path, who jumped, yelled their threats and hastily tossed their weapons, at the same time springing away, rolling, tumbling, some not quickly enough. The survivors scurried in to grab the spears that had missed everything, then tore after the chariot again. The whirlwind in the rear of that massive car continued to snag every weapon that made it over the rail, and somehow with nothing more than a flick of his wrist managed to turn them all back.

Lugaid hefted the long spear. "This hasn't done its job yet—it hasn't killed any king."

"What?" said Erc.

"Two men—a Druid and an *ecland*—no king by any definition."

Erc moved aside. The direction of Lugaid's observations was just becoming apparent to him. "Go on," he said, "the worst that happens is he bats it back at us."

"No," said Lugaid. "I don't expect to take *him*—not yet, not with the first one." Then he bounded two steps and with a snap of the wrist chucked the spear.

Its path in flight was perfect, placed precisely beyond Cú Chulainn's reach. The thong at his waist kept him from leaning far enough forward to snag it. Seeing the spear and the doom it spelled, he screamed, "Laeg!" and tried to grab Laeg's shoulder. But the charioteer, harried on the right by rocks and warriors ready to take him, didn't dare look up. The spear rang off one of the Gray's harness rings, veered between the reins and shot into Laeg's belly. He crashed back against Cú Chulainn. The horses dragged the chariot on, out of the thick of the fight, back up and over the hill. The

pursuing army slowed, then hung back to see what damage had been wrought.

Cú Chulainn had the thong untied by then. He dragged Laeg out of the chariot to a rock there on the crest, where he placed him in a sitting position. He unstrapped the huge helmet and set it aside, then made to remove the spear.

“No,” Laeg said. “It’s a hard wound, and I’m not made of patchwork. The tangs prick at my lungs with every breath I draw. You’d tear them out getting to it.”

Cú Chulainn was in tears. For himself he had anticipated, even welcomed the approach of death, but never for Laeg. “Why don’t I have the blood of Eocho Glas here to heal your wound?”

“You would have to heal around the spear, and that would not help.”

Cú Chulainn hung his head, seeing that he had killed his friend. “Laeg, Laeg.”

The driver said, “You haven’t the luxury to weep over me, Cucuc. They’re coming after us and it would rest better with me if you met them on our terms. Not theirs.”

The Hound looked up at the sky and took a deep breath. Then he rose up. “Today I become warrior and driver.”

“It’s not easy,” Laeg warned weakly, “to drive those two beasts. They’re willful like you.”

“But for this, we’ll all three be of the same mind.”

Laeg stretched up his blood-soaked hand and gripped Cú Chulainn’s arm. “Brave Cucuc. I’ll prepare the path to Liban and Fand for you again. We’ll meet next ... in the house of the women.”

Cú Chulainn nodded, his throat too tight for him to answer. He turned away hastily and shambled aboard the chariot. To his cachectic left arm he wrapped the reins before taking up his spear, and he gazed down over the crest, as proud and fierce as the god Lugh, his own father, upon the gathered army. Seeing him alone above the horses, some of the warriors began to hoot and cheer, while others ran up the hill ahead of the rest, eager to take him on while grief might slow his actions and numb his mind.

Cú Chulainn flicked the reins. His team bolted forward, a surge that flung the chariot into the air as it skimmed the crest. A wall of warriors approached, but Cú Chulainn’s battle-yell drowned their cacophony of boasts and threats—his curses at Maeve and all her brood.

At the head of the enemy force, a chariot came crashing through the line. It had another Druid in it, a white-robed priest who gestured graspingly for the spear.

“Here!” he called, his voice starting to bubble, “I have it for you!” And he flung his second spear. It caught the Druid in the middle, threw him out of the car, back over a team of horses and into the chariot below him, where Maine mac Medb rode. The Druid, like some ungainly flopping missile, impaled both driver and warrior with himself, and all three of

them left that cart as one. Cú Chulainn skidded on past, those on foot scrambling to avoid the whirling blades of his hubs. He hung his black shield across his back to protect his blind side and took up his third spear. At the same time the anger in him over the Druids' games and Laeg's mortal wounding began to reshape him as the Warp Spasm manifested.

The round shield flexed and bent on his back, the ripples of the Spasm expanding his flesh. His legs twisted, knotted. The right one darkened, suffused with blood; but the left leg could not complete the full transition. The muscles in his arms rose up like islands out of the sea, but the one arm remained shrunken. The hair on his head, woven into plaits by his wife, curled like snakes and whorled into spikes. The Hero Light spat and hissed across the tips—a rainbow over him. His face had become lithic—a cliff-face, a roughly sculpted rock. One eye bulged under the projecting brow; the other slid down along his cheek. He bellowed again, and bloody spittle sprayed out from between his teeth to soak the nearest warriors. They ran up and flung their spears and stones, their shots singing true. But the Spasm monster's indurate hide deflected them, curled the points and shattered the stones. So sure were they of their shots that they waited, expecting to see the Hound fall. Instead, with his swollen fingers twirling it like the blade in his wheel hubs, he struck out with the long spear and cored warrior after warrior. His roar deafened the survivors.

Outside her tent, Maeve stood within her protective girdle of twelve warriors. From the thick of the battle, a runner reached her with the news that the driver was dead, and Lugaid had gone to take his head while Erc appropriated the second spear. She paid the news little attention, instead watching the distant chariot crash through the line, shattering other chariots and slaying the warriors as if it were a living slayer. The sight of the slaughter failed to move her. Even the incredibly good news that Laeg mac Riangabra had died barely caught her attention. She listened to the news of his death as if informed that somebody's pet had been killed. His name might have been a nonce word in some vague verse. She could sense the upheaval approaching, the way a coming storm excites the air before it erupts. A shadow crossed her and she looked up at the three huge black birds circling above, patiently waiting.

The chariot circled and came back to cut down a new crop. Her warriors slapped their shields, howled and cajoled, all ineffectual against the war machine and its grotesque passenger.

Erc ran up, a long spear hefted by his shoulder. With a final leap, he heaved it at the oncoming chariot. For a breathless moment Maeve thought she was about to see Cú Chulainn's demise, but the spear, as if of its own will, sailed up, and little by little changed direction, then dropped unexpectedly, down like a striking hawk. It ripped into the Black Sanglain between two ribs. The tip poked out through the belly. Despite this, the two horses galloped on through the warriors; the spear slid down until the point dug along the ground, tearing the wound open. The spear snapped.

The Sickle Chariot rolled past Maeve's tent, the monster in it seemingly unaware of what had befallen his horse. He reached the lake, where an immense black rock shielded him, and he drew up there. By then the Warp Spasm was on the wane.

Anguish had reduced it, anguish for the horse. Cú Chulainn balanced on the yoke, on one foot, dodging blades on all sides. At the end, he drew his short sword and cut away the harness straps. He jumped to the ground. The Black moved falteringly away from the chariot, to where he stood leaning against the stone. Sadly, he hugged its neck, his fingers in its mane as in a lover's hair.

"Go back now. That lake in Slieve Fuad will take you and soothe your wound. I'll meet your mother soon I think." He reached to the wound and drew out the splintered shaft of the spear, tossed it aside. When he stood back, the Black Sanglain pressed its nose against him briefly, then turned away. It walked off unsteadily.

To the Gray, Cú Chulainn said, "What am I to do? You'll pull to the left all the while I'm going right." The Gray nickered. "Well, maybe we'll go straight, between us. Soon enough, we'll know in any case."

When he turned, he found a new Druid, this one with palms outstretched. "Why?" asked the Hound.

"Why what?" the Druid replied suspiciously.

"Why do you keep asking for it?" He took one step and stuck the spear through the Druid. Then he lifted the priest off the ground and shook him until the body went limp and heavy like wet bundled linen. "There, no more threats of unkind rhymes from you." He tossed the body aside and yelled, "Where are the three horrors who left me like this, who knew of the *geis* on me? Where's Maeve, who needs killing?" Bitterly, he limped over and pulled himself up into the chariot. "I'll have some answers."

He tied himself to the reins again and took up the Gai Bulga. "I wish they'd fought me on this lake. In water I'd have skewered them like fish." He drew up his cowl.

Running up to that rock moments after the Sickle Chariot had departed, Erc wrestled the long, barbed spear out of the Druid. "The first killed the king of charioteers," he grunted as he worked. "The second one the king of horses. Only one king remains." He stumbled back when the dripping spear pulled free and stared along its length with something approaching reverence. This spear would do supreme damage. And yet he hesitated. For glory, for his family, he ought to do this; but something held him back—he did not know why.

Lugaid came up behind him. Erc turned and unhesitatingly offered him the spear. "I'm honored," Lugaid said. "You got here first, and the king above the rest remains."

"I know. I don't mind."

"I'll remember this," promised Lugaid mac Blamad. He took the spear and ran the short distance to a chariot he had commandeered. He shook the spear and gave a shout. The chariot rumbled off.

Erc went and sat down in the reeds on a stone nearby. He glanced thoughtfully out across the lake.

On top of the unfinished standing stone behind him, three fat crows settled down. "There, it's done," one of them jabbered.

"Lugaid's the one."

"The honor's his." The crow strode between her sisters to see the young warrior.

"Erc—he would have changed it, and I've had quite the cauldron's fill of that."

"How Erc-some!" The three brayed laughter, their wings stretching out, flapping to lift them up. They sped low, across the lake, unseen by Erc who was still under their spell; unseen by the three larger feathered creatures that still circled the battle from overhead.

5. The Standing Invitation: Revenge's Stone

Chariots whipped past Cú Chulainn's, always held off by the scythes gleaming like teeth on every side. The Gray by herself made the chariot more dangerous than usual for them. Her path could not be judged in advance. At any moment the chariot might veer wildly to the left, tip onto one rim and Cú Chulainn slide out on the lower rail, dancing a precious distance—the distance between alive and dead.

Cú Chulainn did not see Lugaid mac Blamad's vehicle, but he heard the rumble as it approached from behind. The shield protected his rear and he paid no attention, far more concerned with dodging slingstones and spears from the enclave ahead. His course twisted and turned but the other chariot hung behind him. Lugaid drove with great skill.

Another wall of warriors assailed the Hound, their shots flung together, a hundred points seeking his flesh. He spun the Gai Bulga in his windmill feat around his hand, his wrist guiding it through convolutions of deflection. Some of the scattered weapons sailed at Lugaid and he had to dance on the boards to avoid them all. He drew up even with the Sickle Chariot where the ground was flat and would allow him room and a little time. He rested the spear on his shoulder, then snapped the reins.

Cú Chulainn saw the team beside him edge forward. He glanced over and saw the head of death driving. "Cu Roi," he whispered, believing that a ghost had risen to confront him.

Lugaid suddenly stepped to the side and hurled the spear. The distance between the two cars was short, but the spear seemed to slide along

the air; the time advanced on heartbeats. Twisting to bring the Gai Bulga around, Cú Chulainn moved to cover his side. The Gray took a mound ahead and to the right, which tugged him off-balance onto his right leg. Try as he might, he could not wring himself enough to block the throw. His own pinnate spear glided beneath the rail and across his middle, a delicate cut but one that sliced as deep as his spine.

All but the few warriors in flight from the chariot stopped abruptly and stared.

Cú Chulainn doubled over the shaft and dropped to his knees. The reins unwrapped from his wrist, but the Gray knew that something terrible had happened and she ran on until a wall of warriors blocked her way.

Cú Chulainn crawled down under the yoke and unharnessed her. The chariot tipped forward, the calyx at the front of the yoke pronged the ground like a Druid's divining wand finding water. He grabbed onto her leather trappings and hauled himself to his feet. The Gray nuzzled him tenderly. Her tears rained down onto his wound, and a cascade of blood ran down his legs.

"Go back to your lake ... with your brother," he told her.

The Gray did not want to leave but he pushed at her until she turned and walked toward the warriors. They stood aside and let the Gray of Macha pass through their ranks. Then their attention returned to Cú Chulainn. He still carried the deadly barbs of the Gai Bulga even if he was using the infamous spear to support himself. His withered left arm pressed against the wide wound in his belly, keeping the incision closed. He scanned the sea of enemy faces.

"May I go through you, to the lake, for a drink?" he asked. Erc ordered warriors to move aside, to let him pass. He hobbled along, each step an excruciation, but he paused beside Erc to thank him for his kindness.

At the edge of the lake, he set the Gai Bulga against the nearest standing stone and stumbled on. Pushing aside young green reeds, he splashed into the water. It was cold and it felt good—he had become feverishly hot.

When he bent down, his wound opened and part of him spilled out. Blood splattered the water. In the cloudy ripples, Cú Chulainn saw the face of Macha's Gray, as if the horse swam beneath him in the water. His eyes looked gently upon her until he scooped up water, and the rings of ripples erased her image. He poured water on his wound, over his face, finally cupped some and drank it. His element, it always revived him.

On the retreat from the reeds, his leg gave out and he had to crawl through the muck back to solid ground, grass, and the black roughly cut stone. With great effort, he used it to drag himself upright. The thong that had bound him to the chariot rail still hung at his waist, and now Cú Chulainn unwound it and looped it around the stone, tying himself there. He wedged his left arm across his belly under the thong to hold his en-

trails in. He could taste blood on his tongue. Flecks of black, like a flock of crows, had begun to dot the sky.

Three of these swelled and came down not far away, their shape changing to that of three wrinkled, one-eyed *Sheela-na-gigs* that he had seen before. He drew the sword from his belt and challenged them. “By all means, come close to inspect the damage that I may show you what surprises the corpse might offer.”

“No need.”

“We’ve done our work.”

“We took half your skill.”

He hissed at them. “I’d like it if you’d attempt to capture the other half.”

“Another time,” answered Morigane, “when the Hero Light doesn’t burn like a flame around you and dance like candles in your eyes.” The sisters withdrew.

The warriors came at last to look at him, Druids and servants amongst them. Some said, “He’s just a boy,” and others, “He’s a demon, not even human.” Erc said nothing. None of the bravely talking warriors approached the stone. A white glow burned around the young clean-shaven man, and his hair stood up in curled points. More than that, he continued to hold his sword out even though he looked to be dead. One naked warrior derided him: “A child—why are we afraid of a child?” He jumped about, making jabbing motions in Cú Chulainn’s direction.

The ground began to shake beneath their feet. From out of the lake, the Gray of Macha burst up, galloping hard through the reeds and into the warriors. She bit off the deriding dancer’s head, kicked and bit at the others who had been unkind. Erc thought: *His spirit’s entered the horse.*

Lugaid ran up through the ranks, dodging the mêlée with the Gray of Macha. “What are you all hesitating for?” he yelled at them. “Cowards.” He ran at the stone, full of fury. The raised sword, the lowered head that might have been glaring up at him through black brows, did not daunt him as it did the others. With one sweep of his arm, he cut off Cú Chulainn’s head.

The Gray of Macha raised her head and shrieked—a howl like that of the Nemain. Four men beside her died from the terror it instilled. The horse raced through the gathered warriors and none could stop her. She made a great leap from the shore into the water and sank immediately from sight.

Lugaid growled, “That’s an end to it.” He bent to pick up Cú Chulainn’s head, to show it off to them. The sword in the Hound’s dead fingers slipped free in that moment; the blade swung down like a pendulum. Its finely honed edge cut right across Lugaid’s wrist. He jumped back, screaming at the pain, writhing, stomping.

A Druid rushed to treat him. A warrior went to retrieve the head but Lugaid shouted, “Leave it, it’s mine!” He angrily took his sword in his left

hand and hacked at Cú Chulainn's sword hand until it dropped off. "There, mad dog, now we're even, you and I." He grabbed the smooth-featured head to show Maeve. The Druid was wrapping a cloth around his wrist and attempting to keep Lugaid's arm up above his head to stanch the blood. Lugaid took a step, swayed and nearly fainted. He embraced the Druid until his senses cleared. Then he stumbled a few steps, carrying the head, dragging the ministering priest behind him. "Where's the spear?" he asked the crowd. They seemed to be rotating before him. "Someone—someone get me his damned spear."

Just before he lost consciousness, he heard the answer: "It's gone. A bird—a raven carried it off." And he thought he saw Erc laughing.

The army of Maeve—what was left of them—had piled up stones to mark their comrades' graves and taken leave of that unpleasant plain. They would have buried Laeg mac Riangabra, if they could have found his body. Cú Chulainn they left tied to the standing stone, more out of respectful reluctance than as a display of their prowess. The queen had gone first. She had no interest in any of the army's work. The victor could not be entertained while the Druids administered to his wrist, and she dreaded confronting the Hound's extraordinarily calm visage. She imagined the black eyes would open, sparkling like dark wine in firelight, and they would laugh her down into the dirt with grim satisfaction. Never had she feared anything in her life even remotely as much as she feared the dead Cú Chulainn.

They had all gone by the time the wicker chariot of Conall Cernach came thundering over the same hill where Cú Chulainn had left Laeg. Conall drove in search of the army, seeking battle foremost. Shortly, he came upon the abandoned Sickle Chariot. The army had hacked it to pieces and stolen many of the scythes—some were in the burial mounds with those who had fallen at their touch. The broken car had been dragged some distance. The yoke had dug a long furrow as if for planting. Conall did not pretend to deny the meaning of the vehicle's sorry state. He had his driver head through the graves and toward the lake, where they could see the many stones standing. On one, the figure of a raven crouched but flew off as they rolled nearer. A gutted torso tied to that same stone came into view. What he had thought to be another stone, Conall recognized then as a gray horse standing guard beside the body, and the last of his hopeful doubts evaporated. He ordered his driver to stop.

The Gray came to him as he walked up. He patted the horse, spoke kindly to her, joined her in tears over his fallen friend. "Cathbad's prediction finally caught up with you. We always speculated that you would find a way around it as you did so many blades. How cruelly they've treated you in death, left you like a testimony to their shameless behavior."

He spoke to the horse. "I'm going after them. Come with me, replace one of my team." The Gray followed him for a chance to enter battle for Cú Chulainn another time. "Others will be coming soon from Emain Macha," Conall told the horse as he hitched her to the yoke, "but you and I have an appointment elsewhere." He ran and jumped aboard his own two-wheeled chariot. His spears waved like straight young trees around him. His rail was thick with desiccated heads. "We've come late to this meeting," he said, and his tight-lipped driver understood.

Conall's red hair flashed like a stream of fire in the sun as the wheels spun, over the hills and after the escapees. The Gray set the pace and the two horses ran like engines of the Fir Bolg.

6. Retribution

Cú Chulainn's head hung on Lugaid's rail. The maimed warrior had, upon awakening, removed all of the more trivial prizes the better to display the head of the Hound of Culann. His wrist throbbed now, a constant and unforgiving agony, but the blood had stopped flowing, the Druids' herbal ministrations had healed him that much. He looked forward to the victory feast, to times hereafter when he would daunt every warrior with his skill, proof of which would reside forever with this trophy. He looked forward as well to rejoining the army ahead, his injuries having kept him back from them. The army would shout his name, cheer him as their hero—the man who had slain the Hound. The Champion of Connacht. He basked in his own grandeur and so did not at first pay attention to the Druid who shared the chariot with him.

The Druid grasped his shoulder urgently, and Lugaid mac Blanad withdrew from his reverie of glory and swung around peevishly—to see that a single chariot had topped the nearest rise and was even now closing the distance. It seemed to skim the ground, and he thought he recognized the large gray horse on the left. The driver lacked any distinguishing features; but the passenger's coils of long red hair were all too easily identifiable. The bright glory of a moment before was eclipsed like a sun behind lowering clouds.

"My helmet," Lugaid ordered the Druid. His driver gave him a glance, understood from it that trouble approached, and whipped the team up. Lugaid took the helmet in a hand gone cold. He strapped it on clumsily, then took up his sword, which had been stripped from him while he lay unconscious. The Druid pressed back along the rail, out of his way.

As the pursuing chariot neared, Conall called out, "I challenge you, grim spectre, to give back your illustrious prize. I see it's properly displayed, only it doesn't belong to you. Your like doesn't deserve it, and

you're about to find that combat against a corpse is nothing like combat against the living Conall Cernach. But if you should slay me, boy, you'll own all of Ulster."

Lugaid could not refuse the challenge—not with a Druid on hand to bear witness to it. If he could delay Conall long enough, they might reach the army before the first blow was struck, and then hundreds would add their weapons to his and slay the red-haired killer.

"I have only one hand left," he argued, "and not my good one at that."

"And I have crossed-eyes, which makes me see two of you—shall I knock your head so that you share *my* curse?" He smirked. "Whining boy. I should never want it said that Conall didn't fight fairly. Here," he said to his charioteer, "I want you to bind my arm against my side." His reticent driver performed this while keeping the two chariots side by side.

Conall drew his sword with his left hand. He made a few ungainly swipes. "I'm inept, but I'll accept your terms. Now, do I have to let my blood out to equal your loss?"

Lugaid could stand no more sarcasm. "I'll do that for you, Cross-Eyed." He sprang off the boards and slashed viciously at Conall's prominent brow. Conall ducked and came up smiling. Again Lugaid swung, hanging over his rail, and Conall simply stepped past the blow and slapped the hilt of his sword against Lugaid's dark helmet. "That's the best choice in head-gear for you," Conall taunted. Furious, Lugaid slashed back and forth at him, climbing over the rail and riding outside of it, ahead of the wheel. Conall blocked every cut but as yet made no stab of his own, patiently waiting for the right moment.

Suddenly Lugaid's team shot ahead and the warrior, his bandaged arm hooked around the rail, was brought even with Conall's team. He glanced at the nearest horse, the huge gray one. She saw him in the same moment and both recognized the other. Lugaid tried to strike her and she twisted so that the two chariots slammed together. Lugaid slipped and hung on to the rail, on his knees outside of it. The Gray turned her head and bit into his shoulder, ripping out a wide chunk of him. The warrior screamed and scrambled to his feet, pressed back against the rail. His anger mixed with terror, he swung at her neck in the same instant that Conall's blade slipped like a breeze beneath the black head of death and lifted Lugaid's head away. It spun up and was lost behind them. The body stood against the rail a moment longer, but the outstretched sword pulled it away before the driver could make a grab, and Lugaid's corpse fell between the wheel and the rail. The spokes cracked and splintered the body, then suddenly caught and flung it underneath the car, which jumped once, then rolled on.

Unhandicapped, Conall crossed carefully from the back of his chariot to Lugaid's. The Druid made to bar his way. Conall stared at him, the crossed blue eyes an icy fire, burning sky. The Druid finally turned and told the driver to stop. He knew that Conall had a right to all that Lugaid had stolen, and he must permit Conall to take what trophies he chose. On

that, the law was plain. The driver obeyed with the greatest reluctance: On the horizon ahead he could see the trailing edge of Maeve's army. Surely, he thought, they must see him as well.

Conall untied the head of Cú Chulainn from the rail and placed it on board his chariot. He took the severed sword hands from both warriors, too, and walked back to where Lugaid's head had rolled, to collect that memento mori; but first, he spoke to the Druid. "Tell them I'll be back once I've settled Cú Chulainn in his grave. Tell them Conall Cernach feels there's still a large debt owed Ulster—" he held up Lugaid's head by the eye sockets of the helmet "—this is only the first payment." Then he climbed aboard his chariot. It made a wide circle around Lugaid's vehicle, and tore off the way it had come.

The driver and the Druid got down and went to the broken body of Lugaid to load it up on the chariot. They had hardly dragged him back before the first of the army reached them. Erc was among them, and they saw Conall's swift chariot scaling the hills in retreat. Erc sighed with relief. Had he not given up the spear, this gory wreckage would have been him. So much, he thought, for glory.

Upon his return to the lakeside, Conall found Emer and Niamh and other Ulster women there. They had taken the body, wrapped it in linens. Conall gave Emer the head and right hand of her husband. She turned with them and Niamh reached to accept them from her; but Emer hugged the head to herself and began to cry.

"His face is so innocent, empty of guilt or malice toward anyone. His hand used to push back my hair when we kissed. When ever will we kiss again?" Niamh's heart was breaking and she hugged Emer to silence her, then led her away. But Emer escaped and came running up to Conall a few minutes later. He had gone back to his chariot and was about to leave. "Wait," she called to him. "Dearest friend, there are things you should have for yourself. We found three of his spears beside him. Take them with you." One of the other women came up and gave them to Conall.

He accepted them grimly. "I'll find a good use for them before the sun sets today," he promised. "Don't bury him before I return. You deserve a rich *éraig*—for this is murder by any warrior's estimation, and he wants something to take with him to Magh Mell, some treasures that I can give. Where will you bury him?"

"Not here. We'll go to Dun Dealgun, to Baile's Strand. He should be there, under the yew tree."

"There I'll meet you next," he promised, then barked a word at the silent driver. The chariot rolled off.

Emer took Conall's horse and led it with her to the four-wheeled cart on which they had placed Cú Chulainn's body. Niamh had placed his head and hand within the wrappings, and Emer could imagine that he was whole

again, his features so soft and peaceful that he might easily have been sleeping. She sat beside him in the cart as they started their long journey north, the horse plodding along after them but looking to the west after the receding chariot, which was where he wanted to be.

7. Farewell

At Dun Dealgún, the women waited by the ruined stronghold for Conall to arrive. They had erected a small cromlech beside the yew tree of legend. From there, right above the palisade, the sea spray would reach, and this seemed fitting to Emer. She had the uprights of the monument built wide apart, the capstone low. The sea would float through the chamber on the air. Water had been his element in life; and so in death.

A four-wheeled chariot arrived from Emain Macha in the twilight. The horse-totem, Cathbad, drove it. Conchovor lay beside him, swollen and in obvious agony from the rattling journey. Cathbad had the elixir that would banish the Pangs, but he had withheld it thus far. Conchovor cried out at the news of his nephew's death, even though he had known it would be so.

Conall did not return that night, and they all began to fear that he had also been slain by Maeve's army. One of the women warriors saw a raven walking on Cú Chulainn's tomb and thought this might be one of the Morrighu, there to substantiate the death of Conall Cernach. But Cathbad went down and drove the bird off, and told them all to be patient.

Emer stayed the night in the tomb. The women circled it, their plaintive lament seeming to come in off the sea.

At morning light Conall's chariot rumbled into view. He and his driver were bathed in dried blood as if painted for war with it. But Conall's blue eyes gleamed and he stood proudly, unblemished by wounds. Emer came up to him. He hugged her, then went to the rails and untied the prizes that hung there. One was a Maine of Maeve's brood; another, the head of Erc, its expression in death as perplexed as in life. Three of them were ghastly, bluish, puckered and bloated faces, each with one milky eye.

"How did you do this?" Cathbad asked in awe.

"The same way I did the others—with one of Cú Chulainn's spears." He made a flinging gesture. "Shwip—right through all three of them at once. They tried to claw me and spit acid, but I danced 'round their threats. When the first head came off, the other two seemed to lose all will, and thereafter it was picking fruit."

"You came here across water. The crossing must have changed you somehow; metaphysical protection no doubt," Cathbad surmised.

"Maeve?" Conchovor groaned from where he lay.

“No. She didn’t even come to watch the slaughter. I don’t think she cared much what happened, to any of them. An unaccountable thing, I admit.”

“Conall,” pleaded Emer, “you’ve done this much—can’t you change the story, too? Take us back and undo it—apply your skill earlier? Cathbad, can’t you send him back in time?”

Conall touched her hair against her cheek. “If I could, I would’ve done that first. And no Druid thinks the past can be tamed, any more than you could tame the spirit of the Hound.”

Emer turned away from him and walked down the hill from Dun Dealgun. Cathbad went to Conchovor and gave him the cure he had asked for all night, but which required him to carry a copper bowl around with him wherever he went. Even with the Pangs thus diverted, he had to be assisted down the hill. Conall went beside Niamh. They carried the many severed heads with them.

At the tomb they did not see Emer. A torch burned under the capstone, throwing light upon the body. They entered, ducking down, and to their alarm found her lying in the shallow trench beside her husband’s body.

With a dawning sense of horror, Niamh understood why Emer had insisted that the cromlech be so wide. She wailed, “Dear Emer, what are you doing? *Please* get up.”

Emer’s eyes remained closed but she spoke to them quietly. “I am Emer. I’ve never loved or known any other than Setanta, nor even wished to. My Little Hound was all there was for me. No one else could understand, no one else could answer my riddles.” She sat up then, leaned over and kissed her husband’s cold pale lips. “Love of my life, my choice over all others. You took me in your heart and even returned once from the dead, but never twice I know now. We’re bound so closely, my darling Cucuc. How could I riddle when there’s no one to answer? When half of me has crossed the border, how can the rest not follow?” She lay across him.

For a minute no one moved. Then Cathbad went and kneeled beside her. His horse’s head went down next to her, brushing against the thick coil of her hair. The horse looked up into the eyes above. “She has gone,” he said. He stood beside Conchovor. The king said, “A silver chain links her to him in death as well as life. Put out the torch.” Solemnly, they each withdrew. Conall knelt to leave the heads and three spears next to Cú Chulainn.

By noon they had piled earth up to the height of the capstone. Cathbad had one of the stones from Dun Dealgun rolled down to close up the entrance, all but a space at the top where the sea spray could enter. The Druid worked for hours afterward to chisel their names in Ogham along the stone’s edge, their attributes and a blessing. Then the group gathered up and returned to Emain Macha.

Late into the night the women of the fortress sang a plangent *goltraige*, verses that led to an end which was the first line of the lament, that could go on eternally. But at last they stopped, letting the song die, letting it carry off their grief. The wind across the hilltop gusted up then, and they were amazed to hear a sweet tenor singing their verses far off in the distance, somewhere out across the plain, out beyond the distant practice fields.

Word quickly passed through Craebruad. Conall and Niamh among the rest came out to listen. No man could have been out there, spared from the Pangs of Macha—that they all knew.

The voice continued, nevertheless. It took the *goltraige* and slowly altered its form into a similar *gentraige*—a song of joy, shaping a happiness that ached with the need to laugh and love, expressing more than any one person could endure; even so far away, it wrenched their hearts. Then, after a few moments, a single female voice joined with it, weaving about it, ailing above, slipping below, teasing it with unexpected notes.

“It’s a song of the *De Danann*, it must be,” Conall whispered. Only Niamh heard him and she could not reply.

The voices grew softer, softer, until they finally folded back into the wind, and no one could be certain just when the singing stopped. Clouds had settled over the moon.

“What did it mean?” Niamh asked Conall.

Behind her, his head bare, the Druid Cathbad replied, “It meant they’re with each other. It was a song of farewell.”

COLOPHON



Dear Lord Our God,

This afternoon as the sky poured down a steady, cold and bitter rain upon us, we buried the poet Senchan Torpeist inside the grounds of our Innishmurray.

Abbot Martin spoke of him as a great man who had preserved history for all of us to know. He had kept the past alive. “A blessing on every one of us who relates his tales as he did and puts no other form upon them,” he said, and made a point of not looking at me while he spoke, although everyone else did. We all have added a prayer for him to our devotions this week.

The Abbot has said nothing directly to me about the disappearance of the sweathouse. I have caught him looking at me, though, and I know that he knows what has happened. Also, the Cursing Stones were returned to the altar, eight of them now, and as I did not do this, who else could have if not the Abbot? Another sweathouse will be built on the same spot. The stones are already being gathered and shaped.

I have had one brief encounter with what I believe is the *imbas forasnai* that Senchan spoke of—that, or else the *tarbfeis* from which the new kings were identified. I had a vision of Innishmurray. There were fewer monks than now, no one whom I recognized. Several ships landed at the wharf—ships much larger than our *currachs* and with heads of dragons. I saw these invaders in their helmets and with swords. They slaughtered all the brothers and set fire to the scriptorium. Every manuscript was destroyed, the Red Martyrdom everywhere. I could not escape it. Some of the finished works were brought out and passed around by the barbarians. Many of those works were of incredible beauty. They had been illuminated, painted with magnificent, elaborate designs, all breathtaking. All gone.

This vision has shown me my direction, and I give thanks, Lord, for the path You have revealed. I will leave here shortly on a sabbatical. With

me I shall take these tales I have written down, as soon as I complete the last one, and at every monastery I'll retell them, so that there will be hundreds of copies across the land. Then the invaders can never scrape us from the parchment, and our hero, Cú Chulainn, will thrive over Ireland.

No one has said a word either about the disappearance of Brother Brian. They assume he has run away and see the obvious connection with the vanished sweathouse, thinking it your warning to Brian for his peeping, which has caused him to flee the isle. While this is in *one* sense true, may God grant him happiness in his new world. I'm sure that it will suit him where this one did not.

The ninth stone, the black one, I shall keep with me always.



GLOSSARY

Note: the final *h* is aspirated, lighter than a *ch*, as in the Scottish “ach.” In general, first syllables are stressed, with exceptions, marked by a (‘) immediately *after* the stressed syllable. There are two natural diphthongs, written as pronounced: *ia*, *ua*.

Adaltrach (ah’dal-trah) a second wife, whose presence must be approved by the first wife.

Aér (air): Originally meaning a spell, this satiric verse type was believed capable of causing facial blemishes or even death.

Ail (pronounced like “isle”): an insulting *áer*.

Aircetal (air’ keh-tal): an inflammatory, satiric incantation.

Aisnés (ies nees’): a declaration in reproach, unrhymed.

An tsleg boi ac Lugh (an slay boy ach looh): Lugh’s spear of light.

Banais rígi (bahn’ is ree’ geh): literally “royal marriage,” this was a fertility rite.

Ban-Sídhe (bahn’ shee): literally “white fairy,” a screaming spirit that heralds death.

Beltain (bel’ tan): the Mayday feast, full of fertility rites. It often included the act of “beating of boundaries.”

Ben urnadna (ban ur-nah’na): a contracted wife, usually for a period of one year.

Brat(a) (braht): an enormous cloak, worn folded over and around the tunic.

Brithem(ain) (bre’hev/plural: bre’hev-an): the *judge* class of Druids.

Buanbach (bwan’ bah): a board game.

Carynx (kair’inx): a long-necked war trumpet, usually terminating in a stylized animal head.

Cathair (kat’air): a cluster of huts surrounded by a high wall.

Cendchaem (ken’chum): “smooth head,” the name of a fidchell board.

Clochán (klo-kahn’); pl., clocháin: a priest’s stone hut.

Coibche (ko’ghe): the right of purchase paid by a prospective groom to the bride’s family.

Crossan (kro’san): a fertility figure of wicker appearing at wedding feasts.

Cumal (koo’mel): a female slave.

Cumtach (koom’ tah): an oak box, a monastery shrine, in which leaves of a manuscript were placed.

- Currach (kooor' ak): a dugout boat.
- Damliag (dahm' lea): a church.
- Del chliss (klis): Cu Chulainn's deadly throwing darts.
- Derbfine (dair'vin-eh): an extended family, four generations large.
- Druidecht (doo' i dech): the knowledge and art of Druidry.
- Ecland (eh' klan): homeless, without clan.
- Epona (eh-po'na): alternate name for Macha, the Horse Goddess.
- Eraic (air'ak): the price paid by a murderer to the victim's family.
- Fear Dearg (farr dairg'): the "red man," a malicious trickster.
- Fer fognama (fair fo'na-va): literally, man of service.
- Fer for ban thincur (fair for ban theen'gur): man under a woman's thumb.
- Fiana (fee-yah'na): mercenary warriors.
- Fidchell (fee'hul): a board game.
- Fili(d) (fil'lee): the class of bards in Eriu.
- Fír fer (feer fair): "true man," this represents rules of combat.
- Fír Ulaid (feer oo'lie): literally, true Ulstermen.
- Fuil (fwil): blood.
- Gai Bulga (gie bol'guh): Cú Chulainn's spear.
- Geilt (gelt): Holy madness.
- Geis(a) (gesh/plural: gesh' ah): a Druidic curse capable of compelling someone to perform or to stop performing a specific act, potentially for the rest of his life.
- Gens (gens): a length of time lasting nine generations.
- Gentraige (gen' tri): pleasant or happy music. (see also *goltraige* and *suantraige*)
- Glam dicin (glahm dee' kin): a Druidic prescription in the form of a satire.
- Goltraige (gol' tri): sad, lamenting music.
- Grianan (gree ya' nan): a sunroom.
- Imbas forasnai (em'vas for'os-nie): the gift of precognition.
- Imbolc (im'volk): (February 1) also known as St. Brigid's Night, a festival date that divided the winter half of the year into winter and spring.
- Immram (im'rum): a supernatural voyage.
- Kerlowe (kair'low): "four books," a folio, such as the gospels, often located in monastery cumtachs.
- Leanhuan Sídhhe (laan'oun shee): an enticing but generally evil female fairy who lures men into the otherworld. Also spelled Leanan Sídhhe.
- Lughnasad (loo'nah sah): (Lammas night), it divided the summer half of the year into summer and fall and was an important agricultural festival.
- Merrow (mair'oe): a sea maiden.
- Nemeton (ne'veh-tahn): an oak grove sacred to Druids.
- Noinden (noyn'den): a measurement of time: nine nights.
- Oenach (en'ach): a union of the people; an assembly held every Beltain at which Druids judged pressing legal cases.

- Ogham (awch'em): the Druidic "secret" alphabet, composed of slash marks, usually found on standing stones.
- Rí coicid (ree koyk'ah): king of a province.
- Rí tuaithe (ree tyoo'ath): king of a single túath, one extended family.
- Rí túath (ree tyoo'ath): king of several túatha.
- Samain (sau'win): (November 1) the feast day separating summer and winter, on which the dead can escape from the grave.
- Sét (saet): a unit of value equal to one heifer.
- Sheela-na-gig: (shee'la na gig) a grotesque female fertility figure, usually portrayed with a hideously evil face and distorted genitalia.
- Síd(e) (shee): a mound in which the immortal Sídh dwell. The words for mound and people are pronounced identically.
- Suantraige (swan'tri): a lullaby.
- Táin (tahn or toyn): "raid," referring specifically to the Táin Bó Cuailnge (tahn bo koo-al'nyuh), the cattle raid that forms the previous set of tales about Cú Chulainn.
- Tarbfeis (tar'vesh): the bull dream, used by Druids to predict kingship.
- Tinnscra (tin'skrah): a woman's personal dowry
- Torc (tork): a circlet around the throat, indicative of the head of a family and, by elaborateness of craft and material, of one's station in life. Kings and queens had torcs of gold.
- Túatha (tyoo'ath): one's tribe or people.
- Vathi (Vah'tee): seers, in this case the living severed heads kept by Cathbad.
- Wurram (wer'rum): a mythical river monster.

PROPER NAMES

- Abhartach (av'ar tah)
- Aife (ee'feh)
- Ailell mac Mata (eye'lel mak ma'ta)
- Aillinn (eye'len)
- Ainle mac Uisliu (ein'le mak ish'loo)
- Aithirne (ah' hern)
- Amargin (ahv' er gin)
- Badb (bive)
- Blai Briuga (blie bree-oo' ha)
- Blanad (blah' nah)
- Boeve (boev)
- Bricriu Nemthenga (brik'ryu nev'yen-gah)
- Brig Bretach (bree bra' tah)
- Buan (boo' an)
- Buinne (bwin' neh)
- Cairbre Naifer (kair' bruh nee' fair)

Cairpre Cundail (kair' bruh koon' dal)
 Cathbad (kaf' fah)
 Cathrach Catuchenn (kar'ruh kah' dyu chen)
 Celtchar mac Uthidir (kelt' har mak oo' he-der)
 Cobthach (kow'tah)
 Conall Cernach (ko'nal kair'nah)
 Conchovor (ko'nah hur)
 Condere mac Echach (kon' der mak aek' ah)
 Conganches mac Dedad (kon'yank es mak dae' duh)
 Cormac Connlongas (kor' mak kon' lung-yes)
 Crimthan (grif' han)
 Cú Chulainn (koo hul'lin)
 Cuimgedach (kooy' guh dah)
 Cú Roi mac Daire (koo roy mak day'ruh)
 Cuscraid (koos' krie)
 Dagda (doch'da)
 Dáire mac Fiachna (dah'ruh mak fee'an)
 Deichtire (deh'ti-re)
 Derdriu (dair'dru)
 Devorgill (dae'ver-gil)
 Dian Cecht (dee'an haeht)
 Domnall Míldemail (doe'nal mil'de-mal)
 Donall Dearg (doe'nal dairg)
 Dubthach (duf'ach)
 Emer (eff' er)
 Eochaid Goll (yo'hee gaul)
 Eochaid Ollathair (yo'he owl'luh haer)
 Eochu Rond (yu'cho ron)
 Eogan mac Durthact (o'wen mak dur'haht)
 Etarcomol (ed'ar koe'vol)
 Fachtna Fathach (fah'nah fach)
 Fedelm Bhanfil (fae'delm ban'ful)
 Fedlimid mac Dail (fae'le mid mak dal)
 Feirceirtner (faer' kert nar)
 FerDiad (fair' di-yah)
 Fergus mac Roich (fair'gus mak roy)
 Fiachu mac Firaba (fee ya'hoo mak feer'ahv)
 Fiannamail (feyan' nah vahl)
 Findchoem (also Finnchoem) (fin' gem)
 Finnabair (fin' na-hur)
 Finnbennach (fin' ven-nah)
 Flidais Foltchain (flee die' folt' han)
 Forais Fingalach (for' eyes fin' hyuh lah)
 Fraech mac Fidaig (fray mak fi'day)
 Friuch (free'yooch)

Fuidell (fwee'del)
 Galeoin (gal'yen)
 Geanann (ga' naun)
 Imrinn (iv' run)
 Iollan (yo'len)
 Labraid (lou' ree)
 Laeg mac Riagabra (loy mak ree'an gahv'rah)
 Laegaire Buadach (leer'ee boo'yuh)
 Lendabair (len'ah var)
 Leochain (loe'hen)
 Levarcham (leh-vor'chum)
 Luain (loo' in)
 Lugaid Allchomaig Mac Nois (loo'hee owl'ho vi mak neesh)
 Lugh Lamfada (looh lauw'fah dah)
 Maeve (mav or mayv)
 Maine Mórgor (ma'ni mohr'gur)
 Manannán (mah'nah daan)
 Morann (mor'en)
 Morrigan[e] (mor ree'gen)
 Morrighu (mor' ree goo)
 Mugain (moog' an)
 Munremoir mac Gerrcin (mwin're-var mak gar'sin)
 Nad Crantail (nath kran'dal)
 Naise mac Uisliu (nee'sheh mak ish'lyoo)
 Nemain (nev' in)
 Niam (nee' av)
 Ochall Ochne (aw'kal awch'ne)
 Rochad (ro'chah)
 Rucht (rooch)
 Sanglain (soun'lan)
 Scathach (skow'ah)
 Sedlaing (shed'lee)
 Sencha (shen'ha)
 Senchan Torpeist (shen'kan tor'pesht)
 Senoll Uathach (sha'nul wah'dah)
 Sétanta (shay-dan'dah)
 Sualdam mac Roig (swal'dav mak roy)
 Uathach (wah'dah)

PLACE NAMES

Ard Aighnech (ar ie'neh): "ard" means "high"
 Ard Macha (ar ma'ha)
 Ath Fene (ah faen): "ath" refers to a ford across a river
 Ath Gabla (ah gow'la)
 Ath Luain (ah loo'in)
 Bernas Bo (bair'nas bo)
 Breasail (bray'sal)
 Breslach Mor (bres'lah moor)
 Cian Beara (ke'an bar'ah)
 Craebderg (kraev daireg)
 Craebruad (kraev roo'ah)
 Crich Rois (kree' roy)
 Cuailnge (kwie-al'nyuh)
 Cuil Sibrille (kil siv'rel)
 Cuil Silinne (kil sel'een)
 Dind Rig (din ree)
 Dub (doov)
 Dun Dealgun (doon dal'gun)
 Dun Sobairche (don se'ver-ka)
 Emain Macha (ev'in ma'cha)
 Es Ruaid (as roe'eh)
 Emain Ablach (ev'in ahv'lah)
 Femen (Plain) (fev'en)
 Fernmag (farn'mah)
 Fid Duin (fee doon)
 Finglas (fin' lus)
 Focherd (fow'hard)
 Fual Maetha (fwal mae'thah)
 Gatlaig (River) (gat'lee)
 Glas-linn (glas' lin)
 Glean-na-Bodhar (glen' na vohr)
 Granaird (gran'ard)
 Hy Maine (hie mah'nee)
 Imorach Smirommair (iv'rah smear'oum-mar)
 Int Ildathach (int il' da ha)
 Iraid Cuillen (ir'ard kwil'en)
 Isle of Leodus (lee-o'dus)
 Lough Derravaragh (loch daer'ra-var'ah)
 Lough Owel (loch o'wul)
 Lughlochta Logo (loo'law-da lo'go)
 Maeve Sleachtadh (maev slay'tah)
 Magh Ai (moy eye): "magh" means "field"
 Magh Mell (moy mel)

Magh Trego (moy tray'go)
Magh Turad (moy tir'ra)
Midluachair (midh-loo'a-hir)
Moin Coltna (moyn kolt'na)
Muirthemne (mur heyv' na)
Nith (River) (neeth)
Rathangan (rath an'yan)
Rath Ini (rath in' eh)
Slemain Midi (slay'wen meeth)
Slieve Fuad (shleev foo'id)
Slieve Fuait (shleev foo'id)
Slieve Cuilinn (shleev kwil'en)
Slieve na Caille (shleev na koy'la)
Táiltiu (toyl'tyu)
Témhair Mide (t'yower mi'hey)
Tete Brec (tet'eh brek)
Traigh Esi (try ae'suh)
Uisnech (oosh'neh)

Gregory Frost has been writing fantasy, horror and science fiction for two decades. His novelette “How Meersh the Bedeviler Lost His Toes” was a finalist for the 1998 Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for Best Short Science Fiction. His sf novel *The Pure Cold Light* was a Nebula Award semi-finalist in 1994.

For the two Irish novels, *Táin* and *Remscela*, Mr. Frost bicycled the route of Maeve’s cattle raid across Ireland. He reports that the Guinness flowed like water.

He has twice taught in the Clarion Writers program at Michigan State University, of which program he is also a graduate. For two years he was a researcher for non-fiction science shows which appeared on The Learning Channel and the Discovery Network. He is also a student of doshinkan aikido.

He is currently at work on two fantasy novels, neither of which knows that the other exists.

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