



# Rise of the Morrigan

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Not even the god who made her could tame her. When the Dagda took three girls and combined them into a single goddess—that he might have for himself a divine wife—he thought she'd be an obedient sub-deity and an extension of his rule. But the Morrigan is subservient to no man, no matter how powerful a god he fashions himself to be. If she is to rule, however, she must do more than defy the god who made her. She must win the heart of a mortal... Cú Chulainn didn't want to be a warrior. He dreamed of becoming a bard, a poet... But when he discovers he has the ríastrad, that he transforms into a werewolf when enraged, he finds he has little choice but to serve the whims of his king and defend Ulster. But can the beast be controlled? A faerie touched his heart... it calmed his rage... and he longs for her still... But there's another who pursues him, who hopes to win his heart... a goddess... Will the Morrigan win the heart of her beloved? Will Cú Chulainn find peace, or will he be destined to a life of battle?

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## Prologue

Cú Chulainn gripped the hilt of his broadsword and, pivoting his hips, struck down the twelfth champion Queen Mebd sent to challenge him in as many days. He had no choice. It was his fault the queen of Connacht had overtaken Ulster.

But the city was not her prize. It was Donn Cúailnge, the most fertile stud bull in the isles. Take down a city for a single bull? A strong bull means a strong herd which means warriors who were not only virile but satisfied. Donn Cúailnge was more than another head in a herd. He gave whoever possessed him a distinct advantage over the other clans.

Cú Chulainn knelt at the edge of the ford. With a rag torn from his tattered shirt, he wiped the former champion's blood from his blade.

"I should have struck down the queen when I had the chance," Cú Chulainn muttered under his breath. He hadn't chosen his words carefully. Evoking the rite of single combat—in lieu of a bloody battle —meant the greatest champion of each would do battle in their stead.

If accepted, in a battle to the death, the winner would claim victory for the whole army. Only Cú Chulainn failed to ensure Mebd named a single champion to face him before the rite was agreed to. Thus, in Mebd's understanding, he'd agreed to face all of her champions, one-by-one, not only her strongest and fiercest.

Sure, it wasn't fair. But there was no authority to appeal to. The traditions of war were exactly that—traditions, governed by honor. Apparently, honor was one of the many

virtues Queen Mebd lacked.

There was a time, Cú Chulainn remembered, when a dishonorable monarch risked the wrath of Fionn MacCumhail, chief warlord and leader of the Fianna. But Fionn disappeared—and with him went any semblance of civility between lords and monarchs.

So far, none of Mebd's champions had challenged Cú Chulainn. He defeated each of them with ease. He was, after all, the greatest warrior in the isles. It soon became clear, however, what Mebd's strategy was. She was not sending her strongest and best champions against Cú Chulainn first. She was starting with her weakest—gradually exhausting Ulster's champion so that once her strongest fighter came against him, they might be more evenly matched.

His blade clean, Cú Chulainn grabbed Mebd's fallen warrior around the waist and tossed his body into the river. He'd be carried by the current back into Ulster—the city that had been his own, the one Mebd had claimed—and the arrival of the corpse would signal Cú Chulainn's short-lived victory. There was no telling how long it would take before another one of Mebd's champions—one undoubtedly more skilled than the last—would show up to challenge him.

Cú Chulainn wiped his brow with his sleeve. His sweat was stained with blood—not his own, but it was blood no less. Cú Chulainn had seen his share of blood—his gifts in battle ensured he would in the course of doing his duty—but it still unsettled him. He had all the skill and physical prowess to make for a warrior. His body endured it, but his mind exhausted him. He did not enjoy taking lives—even the lives of his enemies.

And while he'd killed hundreds, he still remembered every man's face whom he'd ever cut down. Did these men have wives and children praying to the gods for their return? Did they have lovers? Never again would they enjoy the touch of a woman.

Never again would these men experience the thrill of a fleeting tryst.

For many warriors, it takes many years of battle before the weariness sets in. For Cú Chulainn, he'd grown tired of battle the first time his blade struck another man's flesh. A warrior wasn't what he wanted to be. But he was what he was.

And the moment he allowed himself an evening off patrol, a single night to enjoy a woman. But she wasn't just any woman. She was one of the most enchanting women he'd ever seen.

And she was familiar. Her touch. Her voice. Even her appearance. Why couldn't he place her? Perhaps he'd only dreamed of her...

And while he was with her, Queen Mebd's soldiers stole Donn Cúailnge and overtook Ulster. But he wasn't fighting for Ulster. He was fighting for her.

No, not the mysterious creature whom he knew the night before. He was fighting for his wife...

If only I'd listened to her... if only I'd left Ulster with her long ago...

His blade clean, Cú Chulainn dipped his rag into the water again. As he brought it to his chest he looked up and saw a beautiful woman—nude, but her body draped in vines of blossoms. He'd been tempted once. He wasn't about to fall for yet another woman's seductions. Her hair was dark, falling over her shoulders, barely covering her breasts. She was nearly as beautiful as the woman he'd known the night before. Beautiful enough that any other man might have found her irresistible.

Cú Chulainn quickly stepped ashore.

"Pardon me, miss? This is no place for a maiden."

The young woman cocked her head and with wide eyes examined the young warrior. "Cú Chulainn, do you not find me beautiful?"

Cú Chulainn scratched his head. Of course he did. Not that the woman didn't recognize him—he was the mighty Cú Chulainn! But a woman whose narrow hips suggested she be a maiden, but who approaches a man unclothed, was an undeniable source of curiosity. Most maidens exhibited more modesty than this one.

"Your beauty is not in question," Cú Chulainn responded. "But this is a river tainted with blood. This is a place of battle. It is no place for a maiden."

The young woman narrowed her eyes. It was not an uncommon view that women have no place in battle. Why should this maiden take offense at the notion? "A man such as you whose life is dominated by war could use some balance. A woman's hand at your side, one that might touch you gently, even as others raise their blades against you. And one who might fight beside you."

Cú Chulainn smirked. A woman, fight beside the great Cú Chulainn? There were only a few with the skill—the warrior women of Scotland—but such women were not typically found in these parts. And after his last experience with such a woman, he wasn't of a mind to fight beside another one. Not after what she'd done...

"There is one woman's touch I desire. It was on account of my desire for such... balance... that the Queen seized the Bull and thereafter all of Ulster. This is my battle to fight, maiden. I have no use for you as a lover and even less use for a companion in battle."

Again, the young woman narrowed her eyes. "You do not imagine a woman capable of battle?"

"No offense, maiden," Cú Chulainn said. "But war is not suitable for men, much less

women. I would not wish the curse of battle on anyone."

The young woman laughed. She approached Cú Chulainn and took his hand in hers. With the sweep of her leg and a flick of her wrist, Cú Chulainn found himself on his back, the maiden on top of him, with a blade pressed to his throat. Cú Chulainn had no idea where she'd drawn it from being that she was naked. But never in as many cycles he'd lived had he been so easily bested—not by another warrior, and certainly not by a woman.

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"You must be a witch!" Cú Chulainn shouted.

The woman laughed. "A witch? I am so much more than that, young hero. But you have rejected my offer—an offer that might have been your salvation. For that reason, I tell you, the time will soon come when you will fall in battle. Your blood will be evermore a curse on the land—for it will be the blood of a warrior who spurned the invitation of the Morrigan."

A black cloud of smoke surrounded the woman. A black crow flew out of the cloud—and when the smoke dissipated the woman was gone.

Cú Chulainn returned to his feet. How many times had the Morrigan interfered in his affairs before? He hoped this time would be the last. But to propose she become his lover? Cú Chulainn thrust his blade into the ground in anger. To spurn a goddess... he'd be cursed! But to accept the advances of the phantom queen, the wife of the Dagda? He'd never escape the good god's wrath. He was damned either way.

"Cú Chulainn, hero of Ulster!" a man's voice spoke.

Cú Chulainn gripped his broadsword by the hilt and pulled his blade from the ground. Eventually, Cú Chulainn thought, Mebd's final champion will fall. Cursed by the Morrigan, or not, I will see this through.

Cú Chulainn's thoughts drifted to the woman from the night before. Was she even human? He couldn't recall ever having met her before, yet she seemed familiar. The woman's whose touch, whose desire, had coursed through his body like electricity. The one for whom his lusts had distracted him for only a night, a night that allowed

Mebd to make her move. A steep price to pay for a single night of passion with the creature, the woman, whom he'd desired... But for Cú Chulainn, she was worth it.



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### PART I:

Babd ? Sétanta

1

Fifteen Years Earlier

"He did something with her," Babd said, her hands firmly on her hips. Her two sisters—Macha and Anand—had dismissed Babd's worries before. Not the first time the triplets' mother had taken a week's retreat to visit family. Her marriage to their father was a strategic one, meant to unite the clans and consolidate their father's power. Now, Fionn MacCumhail was the undisputed chief of the Fianna.

But mother had been gone for almost a whole cycle. This time was different. She never spent more than a week with family.

Macha, Babd's darker haired sister, sighed. "What do you think he did to her?"

Anand shook her head. Her hair was a lighter hue of brown than Macha's. Anand was Fionn's favorite—a fact that had always perturbed Babd. "Father wouldn't harm mother. If he did, the clans would rise against him."

Babd sighed. "But why wouldn't he tell us where she is?"

Anand shrugged. "You know father. He will not show weakness. Perhaps thy had a tiff and his pride is wounded. She'll be back soon enough."

Babd shook her head. She wasn't surprised that Anand was the first to defend him. Fionn wasn't exactly a loving father. Not abusive. Just cold and distant. Always consumed with matters of war and power. If he wasn't leading the clan's warriors against some kind of enemy he was locked alone in his study, planning for war and drinking himself dumb. That was why he'd gravitated to Anand. She was the intellectual one—gifted in matters of knowledge and reason. He valued her. More than once, Anand claimed, father had emerged victorious in battle only because he'd followed her strategies. He prized Macha, too, though for different reasons. She was strikingly beautiful—a daughter he presumed might one day be given in marriage to forge a strong alliance.

Anand and Macha were useful...

But Babd was good for little more than housework. She was the plain daughter. Not ugly, but of average beauty. Not dumb, but competent of wit. While the girls were triplets, they looked nothing alike. Macha and Anand were uniquely gifted. But what was Babd's talent? Her mother had always told her that some of the greatest gifts one might possess are discovered with age. And what their father lacked in affection for Babd her mother had in abundance. While her mother would never admit Babd was her favorite the two had an undeniable bond. They understood one another. Neither Macha nor Anand had such a connection with their mother. Babd just sensed that something was wrong. Something awful had happened. She didn't know what. But she felt it.

Babd pulled Macha aside. Anand, supposedly more intelligent than the other two, too often lacked common sense. Until she saw the proof, evidence of some kind, that father had done something nefarious to their mother, she wouldn't so much as consider the possibility. But Macha—she was at least open to considering it.

"If we confront him together," Babd said. "He'll have to at least tell us something."

Macha took a deep breath. "Will he? Or will he chastise us for questioning him at all?"

"The worst he'll do is assign me more housework. He won't do anything to you."

Macha shook her head. "He does not favor me, you know. The only reason he doesn't assign me any tasks is that he is frightened I might be injured, or worse, disfigured in some way that I might not be as desirable, as valuable..."

Babd nodded. She knew as much—didn't mean she didn't resent the fact that the bulk of the housework nonetheless fell on her. "As if cleaning the stalls is going to somehow tarnish your beauty?"

"Perhaps he's worried I'll take a kick from a horse," Macha said through a chuckle, "It happens, you know."

"Only if you're dumb enough to work behind the horse and spook it in some way. But I suppose you're right. Since you've never even cleaned the stalls you wouldn't know. So, better not let you clean the stalls at all."

Macha shrugged. "Not like I'm exactly eager to steal the chore from you."

Babd grabbed Macha's hand and guided her semi-reluctant sister toward their father's study. Babd wasn't about to barge in on her father alone. She hoped having Macha with her might tame the tongue lashing she was sure to receive for disturbing him. Fionn didn't treat his daughters equally—but he pretended to whenever any two or more of the sisters were together. Babd wasn't going to avoid his wrath. But, perhaps, with Macha beside her, he'd delay punishing her at the moment and, if she was lucky, he'd forget he ever intended to at all. As little thought he seemed to give the girls at all it wasn't an unlikely possibility.

Babd pressed open her father's study door. Macha lingered behind. Fionn's study was more like a war room than what one would normally call a study. It consisted of two separate rooms—the first room full of maps approximating battlefields. All battles Fionn had won. Anand memorized the details of each one, how many lives were lost, and what each victory meant for Fionn and the Fianna. To Babd, though, they all looked the same. All drawn in charcoal. Lines and arrows indicating the movements of troops.

The main room was where Fionn would meet with his highest ranking warriors to discuss strategies before a battle. The other room was Fionn's workroom. Probably where he drew up these war maps to begin with.

But now, there was a golden glow emanating from the room.

"What is that?" Macha whispered.

Babd shook her head. She didn't have a clue. "A candle, perhaps?"

"Seems too bright for that..."

Babd nodded. Macha was right, but what else emanated so much light? Babd carefully pulled away the bottom corner of the curtain that separated the back room where her father was from the larger room where she and her sister stood. She felt her heart flutter. If she was caught...

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Babd gasped. The light was pouring from what appeared to be a brown leather bag. Not a large bag. It couldn't hold more than a few apples, perhaps. But when her father reached into it and retrieved a long sword, glowing with the same energies that poured from the bag itself, she had to bit her lip to prevent herself from shrieking. How was it possible for a large sword to fit within such a small bag?

"Macha... that bag dad has been carrying around with him. Ever since he came back... came back without mom..."

"What about it, Babd?"

"It's enchanted somehow. Dad pulled a sword from it, there's no way... from a bag that size?"

Macha tilted her head. "Are you sure it came from the bag? I mean, perhaps you saw it wrong?"

Babd shook her head. "He pulled it from that little bag and it was glowing with some kind of magic. The same magic glow was coming out of the bag!"

A look of sheer terror fell on Macha's face. Babd furrowed her brow. But her confusion lasted only a moment.

"What are you two doing here!" Fionn's voice boomed, as both of his daughters cowered.

Babd shielded her face, afraid he might strike her. Wouldn't be the first time.

"Daddy!" Macha said. "It was her idea! Babd... she said you were up to something. Something with mom... she wanted to come to ask.."

"Come ask me what, Babd?" Fionn asked.

"She's never been gone with family this long, I was just afraid something bad..."

Fionn bit his lip. For a moment Babd thought she saw her father's usually impenetrable demeanor soften. Was that a tear in his eye? Something bad had happened... but what?

Fionn turned away for a moment. Was he choking down his tears? Babd had never once seen her father cry. Warriors don't cry. At least they don't let anyone see it if they do.

"Father," Babd said, softening her tone. "What happened to mom?"

Her father's shoulders rise and fall. He was taking a deep breath—something he often did when he was trying to calm his temper. Fionn turned and looked back at her. His eyes were watery, but he wouldn't allow his tears to fall. "Your mother won't be back."

Tears welled up in Macha's eyes. "Is mom dead?"

Fionn shook his head. "Not dead. Just... changed..."

"Changed how?" Babd asked.

Fionn shook his head. "There are forces in this world too strong for girls of your age to comprehend. Perhaps when you are older..."

"Dad," Babd said. "I can take it. What happened!"

"I told you," Fionn said, raising his voice. "Not until you're older. Now unless you want to spend your week scrubbing the cellars, you'll both go back to your room and never speak of this matter again."

Sétanta gripped his spear tightly as he ran through the forest, dodging tree branches and hopping over large stones in his path. Sétanta was one of the best hunters in the land, but he took no pleasure from the hunt. Most men were addicted to the thrill of the chase... of the kill. But Sétanta wasn't like other men. In fact, he was barely a man at all. Most of the boys he'd grown up with weren't. But hair had started to appear on Sétanta's scrotum earlier than expected. With its appearance, he had come of age.

Despite his youth, Sétanta was adept as the most experienced hunters in Ulster. Most would say he was gifted. But Sétanta lacked a taste for his talent. Given the choice, he would prefer to study with the bards—to tell tales, sing songs, and please the crowds. But such tasks were for men slight or frail of frame, lacking the gifts Sétanta possessed. For him, his prowess was no gift at all. It was a curse.

Still, people expected a feast—and Sétanta was tasked to capture the hog.

Sétanta dashed briskly through the forest. But hunting a boar took more than speed, strength, or agility. It required strategy. The boar was fast, but Sétanta only had to chase it to the river's edge. He'd have the hog cornered. He'd used this tactic dozens of times before. It always worked.

Boars weren't smart enough to learn from one another's mistakes. Do boars communicate at all? If they do, Sétanta figured, they couldn't discuss much. They weren't the brightest creatures in Albion's forests and groves.

Any conversation they had would be quite boar-ing.



Sétanta giggled to himself as he had the thought. No one else would find the joke particularly funny. But he didn't care. He found himself amusing—which was all that really mattered.

Not to mention, no matter his physical gifts, Sétanta wanted nothing more than to become a bard. If he convinced his mother to allow him to join a troop he'd be trained in the art of the story, of poetics, of music. He'd learn how to command an audience with humorous tales and his wit. Even his boar-ing joke, he imagined, if told on the lips of an accomplished bard might win over an audience. A skilled bard enthralled his audiences with even the dullest of tales while a novice lost his crowds with the greatest legends.

Despite Sétanta's golden tongue—he'd often won over small crowds with tales—it was his gift as a hunter, and a potential warrior, that the people of Ulster celebrated. Why tell tales, most thought, if one had the chance to inspire them? While the people would always appreciate an entertaining bard, they celebrated their warriors.

As his mind drifted into the realm of unrealized dreams, Sétanta nearly lost sight of the boar as it darted through the thicket.

Grabbing his spear with one hand and lifting it over his head the young hunter charged after the boar. Just a little further...

As the boar charged out of the thicket and neared the river bank it dug its hooves into the ground. Sétanta had just enough time before the hog changed directions and took off another direction.

He threw his spear.

A perfect hit, right through the heart.

Head over hooves, the boar tumbled into the river.

The hog's blood stained the water as the current started to carry it away.

Fortunately, it was a slow-moving river. Sétanta might have to get a little wet—but after a successful hunt, a dip in the water would be refreshing.

Sétanta leapt into the river and kicked his legs hard—it was much easier to swim with the current than against it.

Just as Sétanta reached for the hog, barely grabbing one of its hooves, a blue glow appeared in the stream.

Seconds later, two arms—the texture of tree bark and covered in moss—took hold of the hog and pulled it under.

"No!" Sétanta shouted. He recognized the creature—a Fomorian, a notorious people who came from the seas. Man-like in shape, but something else. He'd never encountered one himself but he'd heard more than his share of bardic tales of their kind. Most of the stories told of them coming from the seas, the oceans, but apparently, they weren't as partial to saltwater as he'd assumed.

Sétanta screamed. He'd be damned before he allowed anyone—much less a Fomorian—to steal his kill.

And if he showed up in Ulster without a hog, without something for the feast...

Taking a deep breath, Sétanta dove beneath the waters. A burning sensation filled his chest.

Kicking his way back to the surface, he gasped for air. Everything turned into a blur...

What was happening? His heart was beating so hard he feared it might tear itself out of his chest. Then he felt his bones crack and expand, his skin tightened. Rage consumed him—a fury beyond his control.

And whatever consumed him drove him beneath the waters... as if someone... or something else had possessed his body. His eyes open wide, even beneath the water, he felt his hand reach and catch something...

Everything was still a blur.

There was a struggle.

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Then blood, so much blood...

The bitter flavor of blood assaulted his tongue as his own jaws ripped through flesh...

Everything went black.

The pounding in his head was nearly too much to bear.

He felt the heat of the sun radiating off of his face... the sun? He'd started the hunt in the evening...

How much time had passed?

Shielding his eyes and opening them he saw the body... the Fomorian's corpse, mangled, its abdomen was torn open as if by a bear.

A bear wasn't to blame... he'd done it...

He didn't mean to. He'd never killed anyone before. Not even a Fomorian... but still, the creature was almost human. Its skin, bark-like in appearance. His head, oddly shaped. A bit longer than a normal human head. The closest thing to a human, that wasn't one, he'd ever seen... and his guts... what had happened to his insides?

Sétanta's stomach churned... and a second later he'd inadvertently answered his own questions as he vomited blood and pieces of meat on the ground beside the Fomorian's mangled corpse.

Stumbling to the river, Sétanta cupped water into his hands and rinsed the vile taste from his mouth.

Returning to his feet he stepped back and examined the carnage that surrounded him. He cringed, spotting the half-eaten corpse of the boar he'd caught.

The people of Ulster didn't get their feast. But when he never returned they'd assume the worst. It would be only a matter of time before his mother would send a hunting party to track him down. They'd assume the worst... if only they knew...

It wasn't that he was afraid they'd discover he'd killed a Fomorian. If ever you encountered one, at least if the bardic legends were to be believed, you were lucky to survive at all. But if they knew how he'd done it... what he'd become...

Whathadhe become?

3

"This is your new mother."

Babd exchanged incredulous glances with her two sisters. Her father was an emotionally stunted man—Babd accepted that—but did he really think he was going to just replace their mother?

And with this... whatever she was?

She seemed human, for the most part. Her skin pale and smooth, without blemish. Slight of frame with long, green hair and eyes to match. The hair and eyes proved it. She was something else.

"My name is Grainne," the mysterious woman-like creature said, a hint of sadness in her emerald eyes. "I do not expect you to call me mother."

When Grainne looked back at Babd's father, at Fionn, the empathy she'd had in her eyes when she looked at Babd and her sisters was instantly exchanged for fury. She didn't want to be here any more than Babd wanted a replacement mom.

Whoever she was, she'd been brought here by force. Wherever she came from, whomever her strange people were... all she'd known before was gone. She was the prize. A bounty Fionn had claimed for himself after another one of his senseless raids of the countryside's villages.

Babd barely thought of the man as "father" even though he'd punish her if she dared

address him by his first name. To think Fionn thought to kidnap a creature, presumably because she was beautiful, and gain her affection after attacking her people betrayed his arrogance.

And to think to make her a wife without any sort of consequence? She was a small woman if she was a woman at all, but Grainne had some kind of magic about her.

Fionn was playing with fire, blinded by his pride, unable to imagine the consequences that might befall him if he ever rested his eyes or turned his back to this woman. At least, Babd thought, if she were in Grainne's position she'd be looking for the first opportunity to kill the man who'd probably destroyed, or at the very least took her from, everything she loved.

That's the thing about gold, gems, and treasure. It knows no other loyalty than to whoever happens to have seized it. But a woman... whether she be properly human, or something else... was more precious than gold, silver, or even diamonds. And despite Fionn's presumptions—and the blind ignorance of most powerful men—women were not a thing to be possessed at all. Quite the contrary, in fact.

Babd had seen it many times. Blinded by their lusts, men often lost all sense when it came to women. You didn't have to be magical, like whatever Grainne was, to realize the power this afforded a woman should she arrest the passions of a man in such a way. The bards told many tales of whole wars fought and whole kingdoms that fell on account of mighty men who'd fallen into a woman's snare.

Men might think they rule the world. But women have the power to destroy the mightiest of kingdoms. If the All-Father had made man to rule the earth, the Mother Goddess had made woman to rule man.

A clever woman, if she had the slightest beauty to her, needn't take up arms to do it. A well-timed smile, a giggle, or a wink was all that was needed for certain men to be

taken in such a manner. Babd, through her keen sense of perception, had discovered the secret—the more powerful the man the more susceptible he was to a woman's charms.

Babd wasn't as beautiful as her sister, Macha. But Macha was too naive to use her beauty to her advantage. And while Babd wasn't as intelligent as Anand, there is a difference between the sort of knowledge that memorizes facts and the kind of perception Babd had.

Yes, that was Babd's gift. Not beauty or intelligence—but craftiness. To Fionn and even her sisters, she was good for little more than housework. Babd was fine with that. If they didn't see her, if they didn't realize what she was capable of. She'd use that to her advantage.

Not even her sisters, who had shared a womb with Babd, understood her. No one did. Except, perhaps, this mysterious woman, Grainne, whom Fionn would force to become his wife and presume to make the girls' mother.

Something about the way Grainne looked at her—at Babd, not at Macha or Anand—suggested she saw Babd for who she was. Perhaps that was Grainne's magic. Something not unlike the kind of perception that Babd had, herself. The kind capable of discerning another's true nature, their motives, and predict their next steps.

Not a prophecy. Babd was no oracle. The gift she had was better than that. Oracles do little more than reveal inevitabilities. They proclaim events fated to be. But with craftiness, with perception, Babd could discern someone's character, their motives, and from that, she predicted what they would likely do next, not what they were destined to do.

That made her more powerful than an oracle. After all, once one knows fate one is thereafter powerless to change it. But if one knows what is likely, not certain, and has



a certain degree of craftiness—well, that woman could change the future and craft her own destiny.

Fionn didn't say another word. So bold—to show up and declare Grainne their new "mother" and leave, as if his word defined the laws of nature itself.

Neither Macha nor Anand would have any of it. Not even acknowledging their would-be mother's presence. They each met Grainne's cordial greeting with a cold shoulder. But Babd didn't blame Grainne. She wasn't the one who'd presumed to make herself their mother. She was, quite likely, more a victim here than they were.

A slight grin cracked Babd's face as her eyes met Grainne's. It wasn't that Babd was happy about what her father had done. But, unlike her sisters, Babd understood what Grainne was going through... and she felt that for some reason this beautiful woman-like creature understood her, too.

"Would you like me to show you around?" Babd asked.

"That would be nice," Grainne said, returning Babd's grin with one of her own.

"Don't sweat Macha and Anand. They'll come around. They're just a bit put off by the whole idea that dad thinks he can just up and replace mom..."

"I get it," Grainne said. "If I were in their shoes, I would likely act the same way."

Babd cocked her head. They never wore shoes at all in the house. One of her father's many rules.

Sensing Babd's confusion Grainne piped up. "My apologies. I used an expression from another time. A time yet to come to pass."

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Babd scrunched her brow. Grainne's attempt to explain her strange idiom hadn't done much to assuage her puzzlement. "What are you, anyway?"

Grainne laughed. Babd wasn't one to mince words. "I am a dryad, dear."

Babd squinted. "What's a dryad? I've never seen anyone like you in any of our villages..."

"I'm not from any of the surrounding villages. Your father took me, I think, as much out of vengeance against a druid... the druid who brought me to this world."

Babd sighed. So many questions. What to ask first? Unsure where to start, she just asked them at once, in rapid succession. "Wait, why did my dad want revenge on a druid? The druids are peaceable people... and what do you mean a druid summoned you? Summoned you from where?"

Grainne pressed her lips together. "From Annwn."

Babd rolled her eyes. Of course, Grainne would only answer one of her questions. The last one she asked. Which, it seemed to her, might have been the least important one. "Annwn? Like the otherworld? The bards speak of such a place... father says Annwn is but a faerie tale."

"It is a place likely to be featured in tales told by faeries," Grainne said. "I imagine that it is from the fairies that your bards have learned such tales. So, in that respect, I suppose your father is correct."

Babd squinted again. "You speak of faeries as if they are real..."

"Of course they are, dear child. You don't believe in fairies?"

"Father says they are made-up creatures, a people of myth the common people believe that they might cope with their miserable existences."

Grainne sighed. "It is not my place to say this... but your father knows better than that."

Babd nodded. Not that her father actually believed in faeries. But he believed in magic. The strange bag she'd seen him use proved that much. But where had he gotten it from? "My dad... he has an item... a bag..."

"An oxter bag," Grainne said.

"You've seen it?" Babd said, her jaw dropped.

Grainne took a deep breath. "He used it to intimidate the druid who'd summoned me."

"Is it... the oxter bag... something from your people? Something from dryads, or maybe faeries?"

Grainne shook her head. "How your father acquired the Oxter... it isn't my place to put the burden of such a truth on your shoulders."

Babd rolled her eyes. "Come on. You think I'm going to tell dad? You think I'm some kind of snitch?"

"Not at all," Grainne said. "I can see your truth. And your questions are genuine, your quest for truth is real. And your pain... I do not wish to add to it."

"My pain," Babd said, "is only on account of not knowing the truth... you said it yourself, my quest for truth is real."

"Be that as it may," Grainne said. "In this case, knowing the truth will only exacerbate your pain."

Babd shook her head. "I'd rather hurt from the truth than remain restless in ignorance."

"He acquired the Oxtar from a sorcerer..."

"A sorcerer... you mean, like a druid?"

"Yes and no. A druid wields the natural, benevolent forces of the earth. A sorcerer... he touches something darker... he manipulates the forces of the earth, arrests them to his destructive will."

"Tell me who this sorcerer was!" Babd demanded.

"His name is Fear Doidrich," Grainne said. "But he only acts in concert with another... a force greater than any common sorcerer or druid might wield alone."

"What force are you talking about?"

"The Dagda," Grainne said. "At least that's the greatest source of his power."

"The good God?"

Grainne nodded. "That is what his name means, yes. But his goodness... it is contingent on sacrifice..."

A sharp pain struck Babd in the chest. A sacrifice... The worth of a sacrifice was not found in a god's value of an offering, but in the loss of the one who offered it. And there was only one thing Fionn had ever valued apart from his own power. Only one thing he might offer in exchange for something so powerful as the Oxtar...

"Dad sacrificed mom..."

Grainne pressed her lips together. She would not confirm Babd's suspicion. But she didn't need to. Her silence spoke loudly enough. And Grainne had been right. The truth hurt... it was nearly too much to bear.

Sétanta took a deep breath. He hoped Taliesin would have answers. If any bard would know what the hell it was he'd turned into when he killed the Fomorian, it was Taliesin. According to the lesser bards, Awen—the elixir of the gods—flowed through Taliesin like blood. And if anyone knew the tale about how he'd become the bard of bards, they'd believe it was true.

Sétanta had only heard Taliesin speak once before—if anything, it was that encounter that convinced him he wanted to be a bard. Sitting around a fire, his eyes wide, goosebumps on his arms, as the master bard told tale after tale, each more haunting than the last.

Sétanta was the king's nephew. The bastard child of Deichtine, King Conchobar's sister, and a man whom Sétanta had never met. His mother never spoke of his father, and Sétanta didn't bother to ask.

As the king's nephew, he got away with most things. As a bastard, most people didn't pay him much mind. It was an odd combination, but one Sétanta had often used to his advantage. Not like he was up to mischief—he'd never been whipped at all as a child—but if he were anyone else leaving Ulster with a war steed might have raised some eyebrows.

He was seeking Taliesin—and the rumor was the master bard often tagged along with a particularly powerful druid named Diarmid who, some believed, commanded the very forest, the great oaks, bidding them to come to his aid. It was this druid's power, many believed, that had given Fionn MacCumhail—chief of the Fianna—a decided

victory over the Fir Bolg. But why would a druid ever help such an abominable man? It didn't make sense. But as the nephew of a king, Sétanta rarely found that good sense had anything to do with politics.

Pulling back on the reigns, Sétanta slowed his horse from a gallop to a trot. There was something in the distance, something in the forest. A flame? Too colorful. Yes, there were reds and oranges, but what Sétanta saw also swirled with green and blue energies, forming something of a cone over the trees. One moment it was spinning with a fury of power, a second later it was completely gone.

Sétanta rubbed his eyes. What by the name of the good god was that?

Brilliant, whatever it was.

The trees were too dense and the pathways through the forest too cluttered to go through on horseback. Dismounting his borrowed steed Sétanta tied its reins to one of the trees. It was risky tying up a horse—horse thieves were common in these parts—but these weren't heavily traveled glades. It was a risk to leave his horse behind, but a calculated risk Sétanta deemed worth taking.

Whatever that magical cone was he saw before—chances were if Taliesin was in the area he was involved in whatever was going on. Bards had a way of showing up whenever things were about to happen to inspire new tales. And the magical cone of energy Sétanta saw... he couldn't imagine there wasn't a story behind it.

Sétanta whisked his way through the forest. He moved like a deer—fast and graceful, dodging, ducking under, and leaping over tree branches as he moved toward where he'd seen the mystical cone. As he drew nearer, a drumbeat echoed in the distance. With it, voices—were they shouting, or singing? Sétanta wasn't sure, but there was a rhythm, a purpose, to their chants.

As an avid hunter, Sétanta was no stranger to the forests. But these trees... it was almost like they were aiding him, speaking to him, guiding him to his desired destination. The drumming ended. The singing faded to a murmur—what was a chorus of voices now resounded, muffled, through the trees as if only two voices remained, to men in conversation. Pray one of these men be the master bard! Sétanta thought as the trees seemed to usher him forward, parting their branches as he entered a clearing.

Massive stones, boulders, perfectly arranged in a circle formed what appeared to be a kind of temple—a giant Oak in the middle.

"May I help you, child?"

Sétanta turned and there he was—Taliesin, adorned in bearskins, a small lyre in his hand.

"It's you!" Sétanta exclaimed.

The master bard chuckled. "Indeed, it is. I've always been me."

Sétanta shook his head. "Taliesin! You're the one I've come to find!"

The bard smiled wide. He had a kind face and a radiant brow. There were only a few torches in the clearing, but the light seemed to all gather upon the master bard's brow. It was a glow bright enough that when Sétanta gazed upon the bard, it was as if the rest of the world faded to black by contrast. "I expected you would find me soon enough."

"Wait, you know who I am?"

"I know who you will become."



Sétanta scrunched his brow. The bards told tell tales, but divining the future was not a skill he was aware the bards typically possessed. Of course, Taliesin wasn't your average bard. He was the master bard, the bard of bards, one born of both cauldron and the womb of a goddess. At least, if the tales the lesser bards told about Taliesin were true. "If you know what I will become, do you know what it is I have become?"

"You have the blessing of the ríastrad."

Sétanta squinted. He'd heard of the ríastrad. No child possessing the ríastrad had been born to the people of the Ulster in more than a generation. One who had the ríastrad was known to transform in combat—to become something of both beast and man.

But in the tales, the legendary warriors who had the ríastrad weren't possessed by a whatever creature like the one that overtook him when he slew the Fomorian thief. And, so far as he knew, those with the ríastrad didn't feed upon their enemies. "What I experienced, it was no blessing. It was more like a beast, an animal, that claimed my body..."

"It is indeed the spirit of a beast. In your case, should you believe the tales that will one day be told of you, it is the spirit of a wolf. But it is a spirit that can be tamed."

Sétanta shook his head. "What came over me... there was no taming that creature. It acted out of rage..."

"Out of your rage, child. If you wish to tame the ríastrad you must first learn to tame your anger."

"But I'm not an angry person..."

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"Aren't you?" Taliesin asked. "Swallowing your anger does not make it go away."

Sétanta bit his lip. There was some truth to what Taliesin said. Sétantawasangry. He was embittered by the fact he couldn't pursue the life he wanted.

He was infuriated by the fact he was a bastard, that he didn't have a true father. It frustrated him that everyone expected him to hunt, to become a warrior when all he wanted to do was write poems, sing songs, or tell tales.

He hated it all. He hated the fact he had gifts he didn't want... and never had the opportunity to see if he had the gifts he hoped he possessed. "So what do I do, then? I can't act out on my anger... people would get hurt."

"People will get hurt," Taliesin said, "if you allow your anger to fester, to boil up until it bursts out in the form of the ríastrad. You need to find a way to channel your anger into something less destructive. You need a release. Once you have it, you'll not only manage to tame your anger, but you'll tame the wolf inside of you."

"I wish I wasn't so suited to fight. I wish I wasn't a hunter or a warrior at all. I wish I was a bard, like you."

"Whoever said you had to choose?" Taliesin asked.

"Are you saying I might be both a warrior and a bard? I've never heard of such a thing! The warriors often jest that a bard is but a woman with the appearance of a man!"

Taliesin shook his head. "But it is in the hands of a bard that their exploits might become legends. And what of it? Why should a woman be more suited for poetry but a man more equipped for war?"

Sétanta shook his head. "I don't know. I never thought about it. I mean, a woman fighting?"

Taliesin shrugged. "Why not? You might be surprised how deadly a woman could be."

Sétanta huffed. "I'll believe that when I see it!"

The master bard pressed his lips together. "Never underestimate anyone on account of appearance, and certainly not on account of gender, young warrior. A true warrior is tested not by the might of arms but by his unwillingness to underestimate his, or her, opponents."

Sétanta winced. He hated the sound of that... warrior... he despised the brutes who took pride in being warriors.

"Perhaps your heart's desire," Taliesin said, ignoring the look of disdain on Sétanta's face, "to learn the bardic arts might serve you well in your quest to tame the ríastrad."

"Yes!" Sétanta exclaimed. If he only he learned to channel his anger into a verse, if he had that release... it might just work. "But how? All of Ulster expects me to fight, they expect me to become a champion. And if they learn I have the ríastrad I'll have no way out!"

"Again, child. You don't need to abandon one gift for another. Imagine what you might be as a warrior poet."

Sétanta snorted. "I can imagine it. But the people of Ulster..."

"They will believe it when they see it, child."

"I'm not a child, either. I have hair on my nuts."

Taliesin bellowed a laugh. "Very well, young man! Should you like to train in the bardic arts, there is a troop that might take you in."

"A troop?"

"A bardic clan. You should find them if you head squarely out of Ulster in the direction of the setting sun. There is a field of clovers, a place called Emain Macha, about a day's journey on foot if you maintain your course. There is a troop that maintains the field. Approach them in humility, boast not of your lineage. Share with them your intentions, and hide nothing. Not even the ríastrad. A true bard is committed to the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it might be."

Sétanta sighed. "My mother, even the king. They'll never let me go."

Taliesin shrugged. "You managed to leave and find me! Do the same again."

Sétanta nodded. "Can I ask you a question?"

Taliesin smiled wide. "Of course, young man."

"What was happening here, before I arrived? I saw a cone... some kind of magic... and music. There was music."

Taliesin squeezed Sétanta's shoulder. "What you saw was the end of but a chapter of a tale yet to be told. Perhaps, in time, you'll learn it."

5

"Give it back to me!" Anand yelled as she tried to wrestle their father's Oxter out of Macha's hands.

"Papa charged me with it," Macha said, clinging to the bag. "He insisted we not play with it."

Babd rolled her eyes. Fionn hadn't exactly trusted Macha with the Oxter—but he did tell her to be sure no one played with the damned thing. Macha included.

"But he'll never know!" Anand replied, again attempting to yank the Oxter out of Macha's hands.

Macha looked at Babd with urgency in her eyes. "Tell Anand what Papa said, Babd."

Babd shrugged. "He told all of us to leave it be."

"He did not! He told me to keep you two from messing with it."

"That's not what he said!" Anand insisted.

Babd rolled her eyes. "It doesn't matter what Dad said. The point was that none of us were supposed to touch it. He didn't mean you should hold it, either, Macha."

"How else am I supposed to keep you two from messing with it if I'm not holding it!"

Anand and Babd exchanged glances. Anand wanted to experiment with the Oxter. Macha wanted to prove her worth to her father—to show that she was trustworthy, that she was more than a pretty face. And Babd couldn't give two turds either way.

"You both realize what that bag can do, right?" Babd asked.

"Papa said that if you reach into the bag you can retrieve anything you wish, but that there's always a cost," Macha said.

Anand rolled her eyes. "He just told us it came with a cost so we wouldn't play with it."

"The point is that it belongs to Dad," Macha said. "Cost or not, we shouldn't be messing with it because it's his."

"Then why don't you prove it?" Babd asked. She wasn't typically so devious, but her sister needed to be taken down a notch. Babd didn't know what the cost was, but she understood more about magic, more than her sisters did, to realize her father wasn't telling tall tales when he said using the bag would have consequences. "I mean, hasn't Dad changed since he got the Oxter?"

"It wasn't the bag that made him so angry all the time," Anand said. "It was losing Mom. The bag is harmless."

"But Dad said..." All it took was a momentary distraction and Anand made her move, ripping the bag from her sister's hand. "Why do you have to be such a daddy's girl all the time, Macha?"

"No Anand!" Macha yelled as Anand reached into the bag.

A half-second later she pulled out a small ball of reddish-brown fur. The miniature

puppy quickly turned to Anand, licking her in the face. The fair-haired girl giggled. "You see," Anand said, "this thing is great!"

Macha sighed. "Just wait. Using this thing always comes with a cost. That's what Papa said."

"What's the worst that could happen?" Anand asked, now rolling around on the floor with her newly acquired puppy.

Macha continued lecturing her sister. Meanwhile, Anand ignored her and continued playing with the puppy. The girls' giggling, however, was suddenly silenced as Anand's body stiffened.

"What's happening?" Babd asked, trying to shake Anand back to her senses.

"It's the Oxtter!" Macha said, looking in horror at the bag as red energies emerged from the bag and enveloped Anand.

Anand's eyes sprang wide open, but where her irises should have been there was only black.

"Babd, do something!" Macha shouted.

"I don't know what..." Babd said, as another voice—Grainne's voice—interrupted.

"Girls, step away from her—now!"

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Grainne's eyes were glowing. A bright green magic—the sort only the druids wielded. But Grainne wasn't a druid. She was another creature entirely, a dryad, she'd said. Grainne took the girls' stiff body in her hands and Anand's entire frame went limp. Grainne waved her hand over Anand's body, and Anand began shaking and foaming from the mouth.

Anand gasped

As Grainne raised her hand over Anand's body she pulled some kind of black shadowy figure from Anand's chest. Whatever it was released a loud shriek—one so high-pitched Babd couldn't help but cover her ears. With a wave of the hand, Grainne cast the dark presence back into the Oxtar bag. The puppy Anand had pulled from the bag disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"Miss Grainne?" Macha said, her voice trembling, her brow scrunched. "How did you... I mean... what are you..."

"She's a dryad," Babd butted in.

Grainne pressed her lips together. "What I am matters little. Never mind any of that, girls." Grainne reached and brushed a stray curl away from Anand's sweaty brow. "You all might know what I am," Grainne said. "But I'll make you girls a deal. If you keep my secret, I'll keep yours."

"You won't tell Father that we were playing with his Oxtar bag?" Anand said, still trying to catch her breath.



"We?" Macha protest. "You mean that you were playing with it?"

"Whatever," Babd said. "If Dad really trusted you, as you seem to think, he'll blame you for what happened, if he ever finds out, as much as he blames Anand."

Macha sighed and looked at Grainne. "You really won't tell Dad?"

Grainne smiled. She had a kind smile. Everything about her seemed to exude a kindness, a peacefulness. It was unique. Not many humans, except perhaps some of the druids, experienced such serenity. "I won't say a word to your Father."

Macha nodded. "I think I speak for all of us. If you don't tell Father then you can trust us. No one will know what you can do."

A day's journey on foot—in the direction of the setting sun. That's what Taliesin had said. If the master bard had intended him to make the trip by horseback, he would have said so. Sétanta had to act soon. The sun's place on the horizon shifts throughout the year.

Taliesin's directions would expire if he didn't act quickly. After all, the slightest alteration in his bearings and he'd miss Emain Macha, the clover field where the bardic troop he sought was supposed to gather.

Sétanta quickly gathered his supplies. A new pair of brógs—such ornate shoes were not meant for warriors or hunters. Usually, Sétanta went barefoot or wore thin leather wrappings. He wrapped his feet accordingly in preparation for the journey. But Sétanta was hoping to join a bardic troop. Something fancier, like a pair of brógs, would be necessary. He'd only worn these on occasion, during festivals. If the bards accepted him, his brógs would be standard attire. He packed a knapsack with fruit, jerky, and bread.

Sétanta had his spear. He hoped he wouldn't need it, though his chances were better he would than he wouldn't. A lone traveler was always at high risk of being attacked by thieves.

Not that they'd stand a chance against him—most thieves traveled in bands of twelve or fewer. Lacking any real skills for battle, as most thieves did, Sétanta was certain he could handle any who might cross his path. Even without going into the ríastrad—which he fervently prayed to the gods wouldn't happen—he had the skill to

handle a dozen or so thieves alone.

At least the sort of brutes whom he might find in such parts. Not that downing a dozen men would be easy—it wouldn't be for most warriors—but such thieves had no real skill for combat, and Sétanta was better than most warriors.

Sétanta intended to make the journey in haste. As soon as he fixed his bearings on the setting sun.

A felicitous coincidence, Sétanta thought, that the very "cure" for his condition was something he'd always dreamed of pursuing. Ever since he was a young boy... ever since he first heard a bard tell a tale.

His chest tightened. Was he more eager or terrified? Eager to join the bards, of course. But terrified they wouldn't accept him. Frightened, too, that if he didn't leave soon, the ríastrad would return. If what Taliesin had said was true, and Sétanta had no cause to doubt it, he'd harbored enough anger and resentment over the years that he suspected even the slightest disturbance could set him off.

And if the people of Ulster saw him like that... sure, he might kill a few of them. But the legendary warriors of Ulster, those who possessed the ríastrad, were so celebrated he'd never be able to escape the life they'd expect for him. They'd overlook a few bodies, if that's what it took, to have another protector, another warrior with the ríastrad to return Ulster to her days of glory.

If such days ever existed at all... some bards recounted the tales of old as they were, no matter if the facts disrupted the sentimentality of the people. Others, the kind of bards whom Sétanta hoped he'd never become, retold their tales with flourish intended to flatter their audiences. Such bards, in Sétanta's view, did more harm than good.

A worthy tale is one that unsettles its hearers, spurns them to act in such a way to change their lives for the better. Flourished tales might earn a bard quick fame, but they only bolstered the vanity of a people. Sétanta hoped to tell tales that would inspire people to strive toward greatness. Not to delude crass people into believing that they had achieved greatness already.

Of course, Taliesin was the better sort of bard. His tales challenged and inspired. With his golden tongue, the master bard had a way of chastising his hearers without causing offense. Spurning them to action without flattery.

His tales were aspirational, of course. But they also contained just enough chastisement to rouse a sense of pious discontent, the kind that caused enough alarm that people would want to grow and change but not so much it turned people away in anger. If Taliesin recommended the troop at Emain Macha, Sétanta was certain they would be skilled in such a way.

As the sun dropped below the horizon, Sétanta chose a cluster of stars that sat on the night's sky in the place where the sun had set been before to maintain his bearings. He surveyed the forests on either side of his path. With the sun down, the thieves were likely up.

Thieves depended on the element of surprise and superior numbers. Sétanta had the upper hand on both counts. He expected them to attack—nullifying the element of surprise.

And in his case, even twelve-on-one in favor of the thieves would not be an advantage.

A twig snapped somewhere in the distance.

Sétanta gripped his spear and turned. That wasn't an animal. When a deer or a boar

steps on a twig there's no hesitancy about it. This wasn't a quick snap. It splintered a little before breaking. Like a nervous foot, lurking in the shadows, attempting without success to go undetected.

Yes, it was a man. A thief.

"Come, thief!" Sétanta demanded. He'd only heard one step. But thieves never traveled alone. Still, what they didn't know he knew he'd use to his advantage. If he called one of them out they'd all likely appear, imagining him too foolish to call out a thief if he thought there were more. "I know you're there."

Ten shadowy figures emerged from the tree line.

"Give us your wares if you hope to live through the night!" one of them demanded.

"Only ten? I expected more." Sétanta chuckled. He wouldn't have to actually kill ten of them. Once he put down a two or three the rest would see his skill and flee. Thieves don't become thieves out of valor or bravery. They're cowards by nature. All they needed was enough cause to believe they might not prevail before they'd retreat again into the forest.

"Boy," one of the thieves said, wagging his finger. "You're barely a man at all. It would be a shame to lose your life before it even began. Turn over your goods and you can be on your way."

"How generous of you," Sétanta said as he widened his stance, ready for a fight. "But I suppose some of you have families to feed. And I begrudge you not for your desperation. But it would be a shame, indeed, if you were to lose your lives tonight."

The ten men all laughed in unison. "He's kinda cute," one of them said to the others. "Can we keep him?"

"If you want my wares, come and get them!" Sétanta declared. "Or do what would be wise and return to your families."

Three of the thieves stood forward from the rest—Sétanta couldn't see most of their features with only moonlight to said his vision, but he saw enough to realize they were the largest three of the bunch.

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The three men stood around him. "Let go of your spear, boy," one of them said. "Such a weapon is more suited for hunting boar than defending against grown men."

Sétanta smirked. With a twist of his body, he pivoted on one foot. Gripping his spear tightly he swept around with a force, taking the legs out of the three men. Three thuds as their bodies hit the ground.

"I warned you," Sétanta said. "Return from whence you came! I do not wish to deprive children of their fathers this night."

As the three men struggled back to their feet, the rest came charging after him. Sétanta shook his head. This wasn't how he wanted this to end. After all, just because he was good at fighting didn't mean he took pleasure from besting others in combat.

His brow turned hot.

It wasn't that these men tried to rob him. He understood that unskilled peasants often had few options if they hoped to survive. But he couldn't just turn over his goods to these men, either. If he did, they'd only repeat their folly and if the next traveler they targeted was less skilled they'd likely kill him to seize his belongings. He had to face them, which is what infuriated him the most. He had no choice but to fight. And Sétanta hated fighting...

With a thrust, he speared the first charging man through the abdomen. With a kick, he fended off the next as he retrieved his spear from the first attacker's gut and thrust the opposite end of his spear through the second man's neck.

The third man stopped in his tracks and took two steps back.

"Please, young man. I have three children... I have no other way..."

Sétanta nodded as he gripped his spear, now stained with blood on both ends. "Return to your family."

Something struck Sétanta over his head from behind. The boulder one of the thieves struck him with shattered over his skull, sending him into a daze. The heat boiled up within him again...

Then the anger... the same sensation he'd had before. The ríastrad. He couldn't control it.

"Run! All of you!" Sétanta shouted as he felt his body contort, his bones cracking, his skin hardening. "This thing... it will kill you all!Run!"

The thieves, the moonlight highlighting their terror-stricken faces, stepped back away from him. But they weren't running. Not yet... and even if they ran straight away their chances of escaping the ríastrad were slim.

Sétanta knew what was going to happen. They'd die, each one of them. Nothing angered him more than that. But as the rage boiled up, the ríastrad only became stronger, more uncontrollable, more barbaric...

Sétanta had no choice but to watch. He only had flashes between his blackouts. Chasing them down, one by one, through the woods. His jaws ripping through flesh. Bodies and blood. If he just gave up his attempts to control the beast, if he released the anger... he'd retreat into another blackout. At least that way he wouldn't have to see it... he'd only have to live with the bloody aftermath.



Grainne was gone almost as quickly as she'd arrived. A shape-shifter, most likely a druid, fled with her at his arm. There was no mistaking it—when he looked at her, his love for her was unmistakable. He was the one from whom Babd's father, Fionn, had taken Grainne—Babd was sure of it—and now the mysterious dryad was gone.

Together, she and her druid lover fled through the forests, escaping Fionn's rage. Babd watched the whole episode from her window. And then... somewhere in the forest, a giant cone of magic emerged, something powerful, something she'd never seen before. Whatever it was, Grainne had done it.

And, while Babd had no idea what kind of magic it was, she sensed that Grainne was gone. Perhaps it was her gift, her sense of perception—but Grainne wasn't coming back. She'd never see her again.

A tear cascaded down Babd's cheek.

Grainne had barely been there a month. But in that time Babd felt like she'd finally met someone who understood her, who saw her for something more than a girl suited for chores. Not that Babd was opposed to doing chores—all young ladies had chores—but she did more than her share, twice what either of her sisters did. And still, her father hardly appreciated her.

Fionn burst into the room, anger consuming his face as he tossed his magical Oxter bag into the corner. "Diarmid Ua Duibhne! I curse the day you were born!"

Anand followed closely behind her father. "If it were not for him, father, you would not have defeated the Fomorians."

"Is that what you believe, daughter? You and everyone else! But it is a lie!" Fionn was shouting as loudly as he ever had.

Babd lowered her eyes—the last thing she wanted to do when her father was in such rage was give him a reason to acknowledge her existence. He'd probably take his rage out on her if he noticed her.

"My apologies, father," Anand said, second-guessing her momentary boldness. "I am just a girl. Pay my words no heed."

"A girl and a fool! I nearly killed Diarmid Ua Duibhne once! It is he who would be nothing were it not for me!"

Anand shrugged. "Then go after him, again."

Babd shot daggers at her sister through her eyes—going after Diarmid meant going after Grainne. While Babd wished Grainne never had to leave, the dryad had been a prisoner, a creature of beauty Fionn had hoped would eventually develop affection for him. Or, at least, he'd beat her down until she was resigned to accept her lot as his next wife. Either way, it was good Grainne had escaped.

"Your Oxtar bag," Macha piped up. "You can pull anything from the bag." Babd pulled at her hair. Now Macha was helping him?

Fionn took a deep breath. "I can retrieve whatever I desire from the Oxtar. But it cannot change me...but perhaps... yes, that's it! Girls, prepare yourselves for a journey. Ensure you are well fed and bathed. This time, all three of you will be coming with me."

"Will you take us to mother?" Babd asked.

"To your mother," Fionn said, hanging his head. "I'll take you to the one who knows where your mother might be."

Babd nodded. A small consolation—but if there was a chance they might recover their mother, then what harm was there to allow Fionn to chance some fantasy of being able to catch up to Diarmid and Grainne? Babd knew the truth—they'd fled, not just the countryside, but they'd fled to some other world. If Fionn figured out some way to pursue them, at the very least, it would mean that he would be gone. Not a bad thing in Babd's mind. But why did he want Babd and her sisters to go with him? Sure, if daddy dearest disappeared it wouldn't be the end of the world. But what in the name of the gods did he have planned for them?

Babd tossed and turned all night trying to imagine what in the world her father had planned. Usually, following her gifts, she anticipated what he was up to. She found most people's behaviors predictable. But on this occasion, she was completely stumped.

Babd forced her eyes shut. Just stop thinking! She told herself. That's why she couldn't sleep. She didn't have answers but she couldn't stop concocting theories. Someone grabbed Babd by the arm, yanking her out of her bed.

"What are you doing!" Babd protested.

She wasn't sure who the man was—probably one of her father's lackeys. He had a hood over his head, the sort a thief might wear. Two other men stormed into the room and grabbed Anand and Macha. Both girls shrieked as the men who'd broken into their bedroom carried them out of the room.

Babd didn't struggle. What was the point? She was just a young girl—not even a full-

grown woman—her chances of overpowering an adult man were slim to none. The man holding her covered her eyes with his hand. What's the purpose of that? No sooner did she think it and something squeaked—something like a door on hinges. Babd felt her body tumble onto a cold, hard surface. Opening her eyes she saw another man throw Anand inside and then a third man toss in Macha. The last man slammed the cage door shut.

"What is going on!?" Babd shouted at the three men as they walked away, ignoring her question.

The sound of a cracking whip startled the attentions of all three sisters. The next thing Babd realized they were moving—caged like slaves when they traveled by carriage. As moonlight struck the carriage she noticed her father holding the reigns... where was he taking them?

"Dad!" Babd screamed. "Why are we caged! We aren't slaves! We're your daughters!"

Anand nudged Babd, hinting that she best shut her mouth. Fionn ignored Babd's protest, cracked the reigns again. The carriage picked up speed. Moving faster meant a louder thud of hooves, more squealing from a poorly oiled axle.

The planks of the carriage rattled against each other. All sounds that likely made it easier for Fionn to ignore his daughters' screams. After a while, even Anand who'd had the utmost faith in her father's intentions began demanding answers.

All three girls knew better than to speak to their father in such a tone. But how many hours had passed? Most of the night... the sun was likely to rise soon. The longer the ride went, the more anxious Babd felt. The more her sisters, too, were emboldened to protest. After all, the most Fionn had ever done to his daughters for addressing him in such a tone before was give them a whipping.

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Whatever he planned now... it wasn't good. And while Macha and Anand lacked Babd's gifts of craftiness and perception, even they realized that their father's plans weren't beneficent.

"Father, I have to go..."

Fionn pulled on the reins, slowing it to a halt. Finally, Babd thought... she could get out of the cage. For just a minute...

Dismounting the carriage, Fionn grabbed an animal hide and threw it over the cage. Resuming his place, he cracked the whip and they were off again.

Babd sighed. She wasn't fibbing. She really had to go... So she did.

She expected her sisters to protest. They didn't. They probably had to pee, too.

What other choice did she have?

8

The next thing Sétanta felt was something cold and wet pressed to his brow. He opened his eyes. A beautiful woman, her face radiating with a golden glow, stood over him dabbing his forehead gently with a moist rag.

"Dearest woman," Sétanta said. "You should not tend to me. I do not deserve such care."

The woman said nothing. She smiled. But the glow... it glittered all around her like some kind of magic. Something he'd never seen.

Sétanta grabbed the woman by the wrist as she reached to dab his forehead again. "Tell me, woman. What are you?"

"My name is Fand," the woman said.

"Fand? What sort of name is that?"

Fand pressed her lips together. "Our people have always attended those consumed by the ríastrad."

"Your people? Are you a part of the bardic troop from Emain Macha? They are the ones I seek..."

"No, I am not a bard," Fand giggled. "But they are aware of your presence. They shall be here soon."

"Again, I beg of you, tell me what you are... your beauty, Fand, exceeds that of any woman..."

Fand's pale cheeks blushed. Her eyes... they were golden to match the glow that adorned her countenance.

Sétanta's heart raced as Fand ran her cool rag across his chest. He'd never felt so enthralled by a woman. Yes, he'd had his crushes. What boy hadn't? He'd even enjoyed few youthful flings. But he'd never fallen under a woman's spell, never felt the kind of allure that welled up in his chest as Fand's eyes met his.

"I am of the Fae. And though I must say, I am not without desire for you, my young warrior poet, I'm already betrothed to Manannán mac Lir."

Sétanta raised his brow. How did she know so much about him to declare him both a warrior and a poet? Still, while Fand's knowledge of him was curious, his greater concern was Fand's would-be husband. "Manannán mac Lir... The son of the sea?"

"You know of him?"

Sétanta shook his head. "No, I simply know what the name means. Why would a creature so beautiful as you choose to marry a sailor?"

Fand laughed. "He's not a sailor... and he was not my choice. He's the king of the Sea Fae. Though he now rules many realms of land and sea."

Sétanta rolled his eyes. "So, I have to compete with a king..."

"There is no competition," Fand said. "No matter what my heart might desire... I cannot..."

Sétanta grabbed Fand and kissed her. The connection—whatever magic he had, whatever the ríastrad was, seemed to dance within him, sending his heart into a flutter, even as her magic tingled on his lips.

As Fand pulled away Sétanta's eyes met hers. "Are you sure about that? No competition, I mean?"

Fand stood and stepped away from the young warrior poet. "There cannot be... there could never be... what I feel for you, it is but lust. Love cannot possibly spark over such a brief encounter."

Sétanta bit his lip. "Did you feel it? The magic between us..."

"I did," Fand said hesitantly, glancing back at Sétanta over her shoulder.

"That has to mean something..."

Fand sighed. "It means you are with the ríastrad and I am faerie. Nothing more."

"I wasn't talking about the magic that passed between our lips... I was talking about the magic in our hearts. Tell me, I was not the only one who felt it."

"I cannot..."

"You cannot what?"



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"I cannot say that you are the only one who felt it. But we cannot entertain such feelings... I am here for one reason, to help you master the ríastrad."

"My love, your grace has quelled my rage."

"I am not your love. I cannot be your love..."

Sétanta sighed. "I was under the impression that it was the bards, here, the troop... they were to teach me the bardic arts..."

"And they shall," Fand said. "Once I've attuned the ríastrad to your soul, that it might be one with you... in harmony with your spirit."

"If you could do that, of what use are the bards?"

Fand smiled. "My magic will unite your spirit with that of the ríastrad. But thereafter the beast within you will respond to the dominant condition of your soul. Should anger prevail, the ríastrad will act in kind. But should your spirit know serenity and peace, the ríastrad will emerge as an instrument of valor, of justice, as a guardian of peace."

Sétanta reached out his hand. "Take my hand, kiss me again."

"I desire it... but I cannot... please, you must receive my gift that I might depart before you are found."

"Before I'm found?"

"The bards... they are the ones who brought you here..."

"They brought me to you? Then why must you leave?"

"They brought you here... but they do not know of my presence. If others knew what we could do, how we could influence the ríastrad... your enemies would come after us..."

"Why would my enemies attack fairies?"

"Because in our presence, the ríastrad knows only calm... our magic pacifies the beast within you. It is also why we can never be... were we to be together..."

"I would be vulnerable, perhaps. But I do not need the ríastrad to survive, Fand. I do not wish to be a warrior at all. Allow me to be your lover and I will do more than survive, I will live!"

Fand shook her head. "You cannot escape what you are... I only hope you can find the happiness you seek in my absence. All of Ulster depends on it."

"Fand, please..."

The faerie extended her hand—a wand appeared and as she waved it over Sétanta he felt something inside him change. The ríastrad... it was now one with his soul. He felt, for the first time since the ríastrad had first emerged, something akin to peace. But this peace... it would not endure. Not even the bardic arts compared to this desire, the passion he sensed in Fand's presence. She had been his cure, but if she leaves and returns to her betrothed, he feared he'd never find the peace he required.

Leaping to his feet Sétanta reached to embrace Fand... but as his arms enveloped her she disappeared in a cloud of golden dust.

Sétanta sighed. "Until we meet again... we will meet again, my love..."

"My love?" a smooth, deep voice said from near the tent's entrance where Sétanta stood. He turned, and there stood an older man, dressed as most bards tended to dress. Yes, he wore a pair of brógs, fancier than the pair Sétanta had brought with him. He had a long, red beard, untangled and well-trimmed. His shirt had more frills than Sétanta was accustomed to seeing the men of Ulster wear—warriors and hunters, which most of Ulster's men were, dressed with more simplicity. Still, this was a kind man.

"My love..." Sétanta chuckled. "That wasn't meant for you."

"I should hope not!" the bard released a deep-bellied laugh. "But if you have love on your heart, you already have an ingredient that has made for many great bards before you."

"And your name?"

"You may call me Iolo, Sétanta."

Sétanta cocked his head. "You know my name, already?"

"Of course," Iolo said. "Taliesin sent word of your impending arrival."

Sétanta shook his head. "How did he send word? I came here straight away after he told me to see you out." "He sent us word many cycles ago of your arrival, Sétanta. He's not like any other bard. While we learn to tell the tales of old, Taliesin can tell tales still to be told."

"How is that even possible?" Sétanta asked.

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"The mysteries of Awen are many," Iolo said. "And Taliesin was born of the cauldron of Awen before he was born of Ceridwen's womb."

Sétanta smiled. "I know the tale. How young Gwion was tending the cauldron of Awen... a brew Ceridwen had meant for her disfigured son."

"Indeed," Iolo said. "Then you know how by mere accident the young Gwion's thumb was scalded, and the first three drops—the only three drops of the brew that could bestow the gift of Awen—blessed him when he nursed of his burned thumb."

"How he shifted into different creatures to escape Ceridwen's wrath..."

Iolo nodded. "He became a hare. She became a hound and chased him to the water's edge. He became a salmon, and she became an otter bitch. He shifted again, this time into a bird."

"Yes," Sétanta said smiling wide. "But Ceridwen shifted, too, this time into a hawk. And young Gwion, finding a store of corn, turned into a single grain in hopes that she might give up her pursuit. But she didn't."

"She became a hen and swallowed every grain until she finally consumed Gwion whole."

"But that was not the end of Gwion's tale. He grew in Ceridwen's womb until he was born anew. But she could neither bring herself to kill the child she'd nourished in her womb for months nor could she bear to keep him... so she cast him in a basket in the river."

"Until the child was rescued by prince Elffin ap Gwyddno..."

"And retrieving the child from the basket he saw his radiant brow... and named him..."

"Taliesin," both Sétanta and Iolo said in unison before sharing a laugh.

"That's one of my favorite tales," Sétanta said.

"Mine, too," Iolo replied. "And it seems you already have the gifts a good bard requires... a good cadence in your voice, a fine tenor..."

Sétanta nodded, smiling wide. "Yes, but I still lack something... my heart aches... for I met the love of my life and was turned away. For she was already betrothed by another."

"This is not something you lack," Iolo said. "No bard would ever again tell a single tale if he were not seeking something. Our tales are not ways by which we merely preserve the legends of our people. Our tales do more than entertain crowds. They also shed light on the future... and you do not need a full dose of Taliesin's Awen to do it. From our tales we can illuminate paths forward, teach people the ways of wisdom and insight that they might live fulfilled lives."

Sétanta nodded. "And the bard... he is destined to always seek, but never find? If I never find my love again... I don't know what I shall do."

"The bard does not only tell audiences his tales, that their futures might be revealed. He tells tales for himself, too. Perhaps, should you master your arts well enough, you will see a path that leads to the future you desire."

Sétanta chuckled. "But if I realize my desire... will I have any reason to continue

telling tales?"

Iola squeezed Sétanta's shoulder. "Young apprentice. In youth, we have singular desires. As we grow our desires multiply. The day all your desires are fulfilled will be the day you die."

"One more question..."

"Yes?"

"The ríastrad... I trust you know the curse that dwells within me?"

Iolo nodded. "I do."

"And you do not fear me?"

"We are not thieves lurking in the woods. What should we fear?"

"You know about that?"

Iolo nodded. "If you'd sent word ahead and asked for our protection, we would have guided you to Emain Macha. No less, you have arrived unscathed. The same cannot be said for the thieves who stumbled across you."

"Then you know... that I'm a killer..."

Iolo cocked his head sideways. "It is not every potential apprentice who comes with promise to both tell tales and to be the subject of tales himself. That you seek us to aid in taming the ríastrad means you are no killer. Perhaps, one day, you shall be even a hero."

"Is it enough that I be a bard? I have no desire for heroics."

"We are all given what we are given. Today, your path forward is dim. Perhaps, as you acquire a few more tales, you will find that your own tale is one worthy of future bards."

Babd was startled awake as the carriage came to a halt and someone—a young man with dark hair and beady eyes, flipped open a corner of the hide that covered the girls' cage, flooding the cage with blinding sunlight. A sinking feeling hit Babd's stomach. She and her sisters were being treated like livestock being prepared for sale.

The carriage went dark again as the dark-haired man dropped the hide, covering the cage that held Babd and her sisters.

Based on the sound of two feet striking the ground, Babd surmised that her father dismounted the carriage.

"So you've brought them," the man said.

"I have," Fionn replied. "They're in the carriage."

"So I've seen. My master would like to see them for himself, to ensure they are pleasing before finalizing your request."

"Understood," Fionn said.

"To understand we're pleasing?" Babd asked her sisters with a whisper.

"Surely just one of us," Macha said. "And since I'm the prettiest, he'll choose me."

"You're not the prettiest," Anand retorted. "But if he thinks so, I won't object."



"To choose us as what?" Babd asked, though she suspected she already knew the answer.

"As a wife, of course!" Macha said, her eyes even wider than her open-jawed grin.

Babd rolled her eyes. She and her sisters were far too young for that—but now that they were likely of childbearing age, though just barely, it was not unthinkable that girls of their age might be quickly betrothed.

"Who do you think our suitor is?" Macha asked. "A king, perhaps!"

"You really haven't been paying much attention, have you? Don't you recognize the man who looked at us before?"

Macha shrugged. Babd cocked her head. She wasn't sure either.

"He was with father when he returned with the Oxter."

"You mean when he returned without Mom," Babd said, narrowing her eyes.

Anand nodded. "I think that man is aligned with the Dagda. He's trading one of us to him, so he can acquire something new."

"Even better!" Macha exclaimed. "To be the wife of a god!"

"Presuming he chooses you," Babd said.

"Of course he will choose me!"

"The question is what father is hoping to acquire, and why," Anand said.

Macha rolled her eyes. "Isn't it obvious? He wants revenge against the druid who kidnapped Grainne."

"The druid didn't kidnap her. He rescued her. Dad was holding her hostage."

Before either sister responded the hide was pulled off the cage, this time all the way, the sunlight forcing all three sisters to shield their eyes.

"Come this way, all of you," the man said as he released the lever that had locked the cage from the outside.

Covering her eyes, Babd slid out of the cage and tumbled on the ground. Her legs had fallen asleep and gave way beneath her. The man extended his hand and caught Babd by the arm. Babd looked at him curiously—the look on his face, she saw right through it.

When his eyes met hers he immediately blushed. Was this young man taken with Babd? Usually, it was Macha who garnished that kind of attention. But Babd would use this to her advantage if push came to shove. She grinned sheepishly back at the man, meeting his eyes with hers and then casually looking away and giggling.

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Play coy... feign some interest or fascination with the man... lure him in...

"Fear Doidrich," Babd said out loud. The name just came to her. How did she know it? She wasn't sure. Her sense of perception, it usually just gave her vague impressions, not names and facts.

The man's disposition suddenly hardened. "This one's a witch!" he shouted toward a tent where Fionn had retreated, presumably to meet with the Dagda.

Babd huffed. So much for playing the flirt.

Fionn appeared at the entrance, his face red with fury. "None of my daughters are witches!"

"But this one is, for sure! She spoke my true name—only a witch would know it."

Fionn narrowed his brow, piercing Babd with a stare that would make most children her age and to run and hide beneath the bedsheets.

A second later another figure appeared from the tent. He was a towering man—in fact, if what Babd and her sisters had discerned was true, he wasn't a man at all. He was the Dagda, the great god. He'd merely accommodated himself to the appearance of a man—a look he'd mostly gotten right aside from the fact his proportions were slightly out of whack. His torso was longer than that of a normal man which gave his legs the appearance of being too short. Though, when he stood beside Fionn, the two had legs of similar length. Nonetheless, the Dagda towered over Fionn, his shoulders above the top of Fionn's head. The Dagda had a long, red, beard and pale skin. Still,

the good god had kind eyes and a youthful energy about him.

It was hard to tell his age—his skin was soft, like that of a man not yet twenty, but his countenance also exuded a wisdom that suggested he was much older. Despite his awkward proportions, he wasn't awful looking at all. Macha could do worse, should he choose her. At least that's what all three sisters had presumed was most likely until the Dagda spoke.

"All three of them will do."

Fionn stomped his foot on the ground. "The deal was for one of my daughters as your bride, not all of them!"

"The deal," the Dagda said, staring down at Fionn, who was a rather tall man himself, "was for my choice of your daughters."

"But what would you do with three wives? A single wife is enough to vex even the most patient of men! And you dare take three?"

"I am not a man. Need I remind you of that? All three of these girls, in their own way, possess ideal virtues."

The Dagda approached Macha.

"This one is the fairest girl of the land. Her beauty would be the envy of all the gods. But one such as me requires more than beauty. I need a wife with whom I can converse, who may not be my equal but can at least engage matters of the mind."

The Dagda strolled over toward Anand, placed one of his massive hands on her shoulder. "This one will do nicely for that."

Then the Dagda approached Babd. He looked at her curiously; she shot daggers back at him. "This one, what is her name?"

"Babd," Fionn said. "Of my three daughters, at least this one has nothing that might draw her to you. She is the plainest of the three, good for little more than housework."

Babd wanted to curse at her father. But she thought better of it and bit her tongue.

"But that's the one!" Doidrich screamed. "She's the one who knew my name. She must be a witch."

Fionn bellowed a deep laugh. "Babd? A witch?"

"None except my mother have spoken my true name until now," Doidrich said. "But this one knew it the moment she saw me. Divination is the only answer."

Fionn, his jaw dropped, looked at me intently. "Is what this boy says true? Did you speak his name, a name you could not have possibly known?"

"I don't know how I knew it," Babd said. "He must've said it. I swear, I'm no witch."

"The witch lies," Doidrich said.

The Dagda approached Babd and looked at her in the eyes. "You cannot lie to a god, my dear. I can see through you."

"I don't know how I know his name. But I swear, it has nothing to do with witchcraft."

"Now she speaks the truth," the Dagda said. "And perhaps you are right, Fionn. Maybe she is good for little else than housework. But all the other gods know I have

more than enough of that to do. Besides, she intrigues me. I stand by my terms—I'll have all three."

"Surely there's another way," Fionn said, a hint of urgency in his voice. "You've already taken my wife. Now to claim all of my daughters?"

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"If you wish to be granted the gift you've requested," the Dagda said sternly, "this is the only offering I will accept."

Fionn, his head hung low, spoke clearly. "Very well."

"Very well?" Babd pried up—it was less a question than an objection. "Your revenge, Father, means more to you than your own daughters?"

Fionn approached Babd and gently touched her face. "I see your mother in your eyes. In Anand, I hear your mother in her voice. And in Macha, I sense your mother in her grace. It is not that I love you less, Babd, than I demand my revenge—it is that I cannot stand to live with her memory haunting me the rest of my life. The Dagda is powerful—the most powerful god of all. He will give you a greater life than I ever could and, should I say, he will treat you better than I have."

For a moment, Babd wanted to slap her father. He was right—he hadn't treated her well. But he was her father. She clenched her fist as Fionn leaned over and kissed Babd's cheek, then he did the same to Macha and Anand.

Fear Doidrich approached and took Babd by the hand—she yanked it out of his as quickly as she could. He took her hand again, this time clasping his hand around her more firmly before giving her hand to the Dagda. Then, he gathered Macha and Anand, neither of whom resisted at all.

Babd looked up at the Dagda. His eyes were suddenly aflame with magic—red magic. The Dagda blinked.

Fionn screamed as his body expanded and changed. Massive wings sprang from his back. His bones popped loudly as they grew. Scales formed on his skin. In a matter of moments, he'd change completely. He'd become a dragon.

With a flap of his wings and a cloud of dust kicked up beneath him, he took off into the skies. He released a torrent of flames into the clouds—the flames coalescing into a single, flat, oblong portal of some sort. He flew into it and disappeared.

Babd looked at her sisters. They were both in tears, overcome by the sheer horror of what they'd seen. But not Babd... she bit her tongue. She'd always known her father was a monster. Now, he was in both appearance and temperament. And to think that this was what he wanted... that becoming that was worth the cost of each of his daughters. For a moment, Babd pitied her father. So much rage. So consumed with vengeance.

"You see," Doidrich said. "This one, the one I say is a witch, was unaffected by her father's transformation. It's as though she's already familiar with such magic!"

"Enough," the Dagda said, interrupting Doidrich. "Bring them together. It is time the three shall become one, that I might have my wife."



10

For the thirdtime Sétanta told the tale of Ceridwen and Taliesin and for the third time, his audience cheered him loudly.

"Quite impressive," Iolo said, squeezing his young apprentice's shoulder. "Especially considering you've told this same audience the exact same tale three times."

"You would think they would get bored of it," Sétanta chuckled. "They are like children, eager to hear the same stories time and time again."

Iolo smiled wide. "A good bard awakens the child in all his hearers. I'm proud of you, Sétanta."

"As am I," another man said—his voice was familiar, but he hadn't heard it in nearly five cycles, not since before he'd joined the troop at Emain Macha. Sétanta quickly turned and standing in front of him was Conchobar, King of Ulster and Sétanta's uncle.

Sétanta furrowed his brow. "How did you find me?"

The king cracked a half-smile. "I've known you were here all the while. I thought to compel your return sooner, but I was counseled otherwise. No hero who has before possessed the ríastrad learned to tame the wolf overnight."

Sétanta's heart sank into his stomach. "You know... how do you know?"

"I've known for some time, nephew. Ever since you bested the Fomorian..."

"How did you know?"

"When you did not turn up in time for the planned feast we sent scouts to find you..."

"You feared for my safety?"

The king nodded. "And the people were growing restless in anticipation of the feast."

"Of course," Sétanta said, rolling his eyes. "It's just like the people of Ulster to care more for their bellies than for the safety of the king's bastard nephew."

"Is that how you imagine the people think of you?"

"Of course it is," Sétanta said. "I've noticed the whispering behind my back."

"They whisper because you show promise! Promise to be the hero we've longed for. The people's gossip is not at all at your expense!"

"And now that you know that I have the ríastrad..."

"When you abandoned us I knew that the ríastrad must have had something to do with it. I knew you must have been afraid. Who wouldn't be? And I also knew the heroes of legend, those who had the ríastrad before, every one of them, endured some kind of trial in an effort to master the warrior within."

"The monster, you mean?"

"It is a matter of perspective, is it not?"

Sétanta shook his head. "But I don't want to be a warrior."

"Some things about our lives we choose for ourselves. Others are given to us, expected of us, writ into our destinies."

"I don't want that destiny."

"You can fight it if you wish. But you cannot deny what you are."

"A monster..."

"A hero."

"I see what you're doing. A moment ago, you said I was given a warrior's gift. Now you're attempting to appeal to my better sensibilities by suggesting I'm destined to be a hero."

"Perhaps I misspoke before. Most heroes are warriors. But not all warriors are heroes. It is destined you will be a warrior. The gift of the ríastrad has made you one already. But if you are going to be a warrior or a hero, is a matter of your choosing."

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"I still don't know how you found me here."

King Conchobar glanced at Iolo, who had turned to stir a pot of stew, pretending he was not paying attention to the discussion between Sétanta and his king. "Not even your mentor is so bold as to deny your destiny, nephew."

Sétanta grimaced. He looked up to Iolo. He trusted him. But Iolo had let the king know he was studying the bardic arts. "I can't believe he..."

"It is he who convinced me, nephew, to leave to your training as a bard. I was of the mind to send for you straight away when news of your presence here reached Ulster. But it was not Iolo who alerted us to your presence here."

"Then who?"

"That would be a question for your bardic mentor."

"Iolo?"

Iolo retrieved his spoon from his boiling pot and took a sip of whatever stew he's been brewing. "As I've taught you, young apprentice, some tales beg to be told. I cannot forbid the other bards from telling a tale they deem, already, worthy of verse. It is not I who spread the news of your presence here. But your legend..."

"My legend? You can't be serious," Sétanta said, interrupting Iolo.

"The king is correct. You get to choose whether you be a hero. But you do not have a

say as to whether or not your tale becomes a legend. The question is what sort of legend your story will become. Will your tale inspire generations of would-be heroes, or will your story be but a cautionary tale? The Awen inspires tales of both kinds, and both serve their purpose."

Sétanta sighed. This was precisely the sort of life he'd hope he'd escaped when he left for Emain Macha. "But I am not ready. The ríastrad... I have not had yet an occasion to test it since I've grown in the arts. What if I leave and it overtakes me again? What if it be not a rogue Fomorian or a band of thieves who happen to be nearby the next time I'm overcome with anger."

A kind smile split Iolo's face. "My deal with your king was that I would alert him when I was certain you were ready if only he permitted you to train in the arts uninterrupted until that time. The king would not be here if you were not ready, apprentice."

"But I don't feel ready... there is so much left to learn."

"Even I have much left to learn, Sétanta. The day we cease learning is the day we die. You will continue to grow in the arts as you tell tales and live your own. But you know all I have to teach, you have all the skills I ever did when I first left Taliesin's side as his apprentice."

"But how do I know I am ready? I mean, it's one thing to be ready to tell tales. It's another thing to know I've tamed the ríastrad."

Again, Iolo smiled wide. "Come, both of you, and have a bowl of stew before you are on your way."

"Stew will satisfy my belly, it won't satisfy my worries..."

"Will your worries be any less if you leave hungry? If anger should come over you, seek out a tale, a verse, or a song that your anger might be tempered. With it, the wolf inside of you will be tamed as your spirit is consoled."

"Thank you, Iolo," King Conchobar said. "The stew smells delicious. It would be an honor to feast together before we depart."

"The honor is mine, my king."

Sétanta took a deep breath and served himself a bowl of stew. What else could he do? There was no sense, after all, in stewing over his problems. When the stew is ready it is meant to be consumed.

And Sétanta was ready. He'd acquired every skill needed to tame the ríastrad. But there is a difference between being well trained for a battle and actually facing the enemy. No training can fully prepare a warrior for when spears clash when two warriors lock arms and fight to the death.

But every warrior has to go through the initial dread of battle. His confidence comes not after training, but upon achieving victory after victory. It struck Sétanta that he'd pacified his fear, for a moment, by entertaining his experience as a warrior. Perhaps, he thought, that despite their very different dispositions, a warrior is not so different from a bard. There is, after all, a sort of poetry to battle. With the right verse, a verse to tame his spear, and thereby to tame the ríastrad, he could be both a bard and a warrior.

"Come, Sétanta! Let us celebrate your return to Ulster!"

Sétanta shook his head. "Your idea of a festival is, to me, more akin to a funeral."

King Conchobar shook his head. "Why must you be so stubborn? The life of a hero is

no cause to lament. Your name will be remembered forever."

"What good is it to have a man's life retold again and again if he is dead, and the life he lived was one of misery?"

King Conchobar patted Sétanta on the back. "Nephew, it is not the circumstances of life that determine your happiness. It is, rather, your disposition with respect to the lot of life you've been given."

"So you're saying I should just tell myself that I want to live a hero's life?"

"Tell yourself enough times," the King said, "and eventually you might believe it."

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"Doubtful," Sétanta shrugged.

"I'll tell you what," King Conchobar said, pulling at the tip of his long, white beard.

"No celebrations. Rather, join me as my guest to a meal with Culann."

"Culann the smith?"

Conchobar nodded. "He's but a common man, who performs a common but a noble service. Perhaps if you hear of a common man's hopes and dreams it will offer some perspective to the life for which you're destined to lead."

Sétanta bit his lip. He wasn't exactly thrilled by the idea of having a meal with the local smith. Culann was a kind enough man, no doubt. But Sétanta knew what this was about. If Sétanta saw how a common man's livelihood depends on the valor of a few heroes, people like Sétanta who might rise up to defend Ulster from outside threats, he might find a hero's life is about more than bloodshed. But this wasn't news to Sétanta—he'd told the tales of heroes. He knew why people celebrated them. But a hero still had to live a life by the spear, a spear stained by the blood of men, and rarely enjoyed the life he protected for the likes of men like Culann the smith. Still, Sétanta couldn't deny a single meal with one noble citizen of Ulster was far preferable to the feast Conchobar had planned to otherwise celebrate his return.

"Very well," Sétanta said. "I'll join you for the feast."

"Splendid!" the King exclaimed. "Until then, I have matters of the kingdom to attend to. Meet us at Culann's just after sundown."



Sétanta nodded. "I'll be there."

Sétanta had some time to kill. He wasn't particularly fond of the idea of being noticed and recognized. Never before had people paid him much attention at all. But now they knew he had the ríastrad. They knew what he was... or at least what they thought he was. Still, dressed as he was, like the bards of Emain Macha rather than one of Ulster's hunters or warriors, few recognized who he was. Instead, they pegged him as a bard and, as was often the case when a traveling bard showed up in town, he attracted an audience.

So, Sétanta told his favorite tale. It was one most of them knew: the Tale of Ceridwen and Taliesin. But they had never heard him tell it. A good bard could tell a well-known tale a hundred times and still leave his audience clamoring to hear it again. Proper inflection, a good amount of rhetorical flourish, and an array of well-timed gestures were key.

The crowd was so enthralled by Sétanta's every word that he immediately went from one tale into the next.

Before he knew it the sun had set.

Sétanta quickly rose to his feet and brushed some dust from his behind. He'd been sitting on a stone as he told his tales. He'd lost track of time—the thrill of telling tales to the citizens of Ulster, it was different than telling tales to the bards of Emain Macha.

Those bards knew all the stories—they were more inclined to listen than they might critique his performances and advise him how he might improve. To tell tales to a crowd of genuinely eager common folk was far more rewarding. Sétanta took a deep breath, feeling more than satisfied with his experience.

How much time had passed since the sunset? Sétanta had to hurry. Being late to a meal—even one hosted by a common blacksmith—was considered poor manners. He dismissed the small crowd that had gathered around him to the tune of several groans. They wanted to hear more stories. But Sétanta was already late to dinner—how late, exactly, he wasn't quite sure.

Culann lived in a stone house on the outskirts of Ulster. While considered one of the common folk, due to the necessity of a smith to provide spears, blades, and armor to the kingdom's warriors, the blacksmith lived in relative luxury. A wise king, like Conchubar, treated his smiths well. It was one of many reasons, Sétanta imagined, that the king had graced Culann with his presence and why, furthermore, he invited the would-be hero of Ulster to join him.

Sétanta didn't like wearing heavy armor. The way he saw it, greater agility served him better in any conflict than a breastplate or a set of greaves. Such things limited the wearer's movement. Still, Sétanta valued a trustworthy spear. He'd need the blacksmith. Thus, in his mind, joining the king for a meal with the smith was something of a political gesture.

Still, Sétanta's mind was elsewhere as he approached the blacksmith's residence. The look of wonder on the faces of children, not to mention those of grown men and women, as he told his tales. That was what he'd been dreaming of. He got more of a thrill out of that than any sort of battle or hunt.

A loud bark startled Sétanta as he approached Culann's home.

He has a dog? Culann thought to himself. A half-second later a large hound was bounding toward him from the shadows, barking and snarling at him as if he were an intruder.

"Down boy," Sétanta said, trying to remain calm. But it didn't work. The dog growled

at him. Sétanta wasn't surprised that the smith had a guard dog. Given his profession, his wares would make a fine bounty for thieves, particularly those looking to acquire weapons. It made sense. But Culann must've been expecting him. If Sétanta really was such a guest of honor, as King Conchobar had said, he imagined that Culann was eagerly anticipating his arrival. Why was his guard dog on the loose?

Sétanta didn't have his spear with him. Not that he wanted to fight the dog, but with his spear, he'd be able to keep the hound at a distance. A few whacks with the blunt end of his spear might also pacify the dog's apparent rage.

Sétanta took a few steps, cautiously, toward the dog. The closer he got to the dog the louder it barked.

"It's okay buddy... shhhh..."

Sétanta slowly lowered his closed fist toward the dog. One should never show an angry animal an open hand. That's how people lost fingers. A dog probably couldn't bite a finger off entirely, but a mangled hand wasn't desirable either.

The dog sniffed at Sétanta fist.

Then it snapped, sinking its jaws into Sétanta's forearm.

"Culann! Get your dog off of me!" Sétanta shouted, unsure if the dog's owner heard him.

Then his chest tightened... it was the same sensation he'd had before... when the Fomorian tried to steal his boar when the bandits confronted him on the road to Emain Macha. The power of the ríastrad was welling up inside his chest. But he didn't lose consciousness. He didn't lose control. He didn't even change shape—not completely. His skin hardened, resisting the dog's bite.

A strength filled his frame. He quickly swung his arm to spare it from the dog's attack.

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But the dog went flying and struck the side of the well. The dog yelped on impact, collapsing on the ground.

"No!" Sétanta yelled. He hadn't meant to hurt the dog, only to spare his arm. It was self-defense... but as Sétanta lowered his hand to the dog's body he felt no rise and fall of the hound's chest. He checked the dog's nostrils—no semblance of breath.

"What is the meaning of this!" a voice shouted from behind Sétanta as he knelt next to the dead dog.

"Culann," Sétanta said, rising to his feet. "My apologies... I didn't mean to harm your dog. He came after me. I thought you'd be expecting me..."

"You are hours late! The King, himself, has already left! Why wouldn't I leave my dog on the prowl?"

Sétanta dropped his head. Had he really missed the entire meal? It had only felt like he'd been telling his tales for an hour, maybe two. But if he'd missed the meal it must've been several hours more. No wonder Culann—a man with a thick frame, a long black beard, and thick hair on his arms and legs—had already retired for the night. "Tell me, Culann. How can I make this error up to you? I regret that I lost track of time."

"I cannot leave my wares unguarded. Until I can replace the hound, perhaps you can serve in his place."

"Me, a guard dog?"

Culann chuckled. "Is it so much a stretch? They say you have the ríastrad... you are a dog of a sort, already, are you not?"

Sétanta bit his tongue. So much for being considered a hero. He was just a dog. And now, he owed the blacksmith compensation for his loss. "Very well," Sétanta said. "I am at your service."

From that day forward the people of Ulster called Sétanta by the name of Cú Chulainn, that is, the hound of Culann. It was only a matter of weeks before Culann replaced his dog—but the nickname stuck. If tales were ever to be told of him, Cú Chulainn was the name by which he'd evermore be known... no matter what else he did, no matter how many tales he told as a bard, or battles he might win as a hero, he'd be first remembered as the man who disrespected the Blacksmith, killing his hound.

What did the Dagda mean when he said "the three shall become one?" Babd supposed it wasn't unheard of that a god might want many wives—even three sisters which, she figured, was probably the fulfillment of some kind of weird fantasy of his. Yes, even the gods had to have fantasies. Why wouldn't they? Babd and her sisters all followed the Dagda into his tent.

The place was enchanted. On the outside, the tent appeared to be barely large enough to accommodate the Dagda alone. But when Babd walked inside it was like she'd entered a great hall lined with cold smooth stones, torches consumed with red magic flames lining the walls. All the girls' footsteps echoed as they walked, following the Dagda, with Fear Doidrich following close behind. Babd practically felt Doidrich gawking at her behind as he followed them.

The hallway opened up into a larger dome-shaped room. In the middle was an altar, and in front of it, a giant cauldron bubbled with a liquid that seemed to sparkle beneath the magical lighting of the place.

"Sit on the altar," Doidrich said. "All three of you."

"Please don't sacrifice us!" Macha begged. "We're too young to die."

"My dear," the Dagda said, "I would not dare to snuff out your life. I intend to grant you each—all three of you together—a great gift. The gift of divinity!"

"Divinity?" Anand asked, choking on the word.

"Marriages between a god and mortals never end well," the Dagda said. "But of three human souls, one goddess might be forged."

Babd and her sisters exchanged glances. What girl wouldn't want to become a goddess? It wasn't the prospect of divinity that frightened all three of them. It was the loss of their individuality, the notion that they'd be forged into one person, one divinity.

But they didn't have a choice. To resist a god... it would have been pointless.

"Join your hands," Doidrich said.

Babd felt each of her sisters, standing on either side of her, grab her hands. Doidrich dipped two bowls into the cauldron and handed one to Macha and the other to Anand, who each took the bowls with their free hands. Then Doidrich dipped the third bowl into the cauldron and put it to Babd's lips.

"You must all drink at the same time," Doidrich said. "Place the bowls to your lips."

All three sisters did as they were told—they each drank from their bowls. Babd sipped carefully at first. It was unlike anything she'd ever tasted. Sweet and inviting. She instinctively gulped—it was as though she'd tasted divinity itself and couldn't get enough.

A tingle consumed her body. When Doidrich pulled the bowl from her lips she looked down at her body. Her eyes were blurred, her vision divided into threes—the sort of sensation one might have after consuming too much wine. Then the three visions coalesced into one...

She looked around—she didn't see her sisters. They were gone. And the body she had, it was different. Her skin, no longer pale and white, but a light shade of purple.



A strength coursed through her limbs. She felt her chest. She had breasts... Babd gasped!

It was as though when all three girls combined they'd collectively aged into maturity. Babd seemed to be in control of the body... at least for now. But she wasn't alone. Her sisters were there. She felt them. She sensed them. They were there with her... or was she with them?

Babd's heartbeat accelerated as the Dagda approached. She stood, nearly matching his height. "A fitting wife. The beauty of one, the intelligence of the other... and the intrigue of the third. It is for that fleeting intrigue I shall name you, wife. For you are something of a phantom."

Babd nodded. She didn't dare speak. She was too shocked, too confused by whatever she'd become, to even begin forming words. She managed to crack a smile, but she hadn't willed it. Was that Macha or Anand who'd grinned? It must've been Macha...

"Behold, my apprentice," The Dagda said, gesturing toward Fear Doidrich. "Bear witness now to our marriage. The union of the good god and his phantom queen, the Morrigan!"

### PART II:

The Morrigan ? C

12

Who am I? I am Macha, the fairest of all the land. I am Anand, with all the wits of war. And I am Babd with her craftiness and magic. Though, even as Babd, I'd never realized I had such magic. When I was just Babd, I'd barely scratched the surface. Now, all the magic Babd ever had is realized and magnified in my divinity. I am the phantom queen, the Morrigan.

I am the triple Goddess. The three sisters are not lost. They are all here, alive and well. But together we are something more. When one of us speaks, we all speak. When one of us moves, we all move.

"Come and lie with me, wife," the Dagda said, snarling through his beard as he reclined in his bed.

"No thank you," I curtly replied. "Tell me what you did with our mother."

The Dagda reached down and adjusted himself before rolling onto his side. "She is well. Free of petty human concerns."

"If she was well, she would have come back to us."

The Dagda pulled at his beard. "I did not have use of her, wife. She was but a gesture

of your father's sacrifice."

I winced. "Fionn."

The Dagda cocked his head.

"He's never been much of a father to us. Please, refer to him as Fionn."

"Very well. Your mother is the price he paid to acquire his Oxter. To think, foolish mortal, that he believed he could earn the praises of men if only his magic rivaled that of Diarmid Ua Duibhne!"

My stomach churned. "You're sick."

"It was not I who made the bargain."

"But you agreed to the terms," I snapped back.

"As I said, your mother is well."

"Where is she?"

"She grazes the countryside..."

"You turned my mother into a heifer?"

The Dagda laughed. "Of course not! She is but a doe."

I screamed, clenching my fists. "So now she must live in fear of hunters!"

The Dagda shook his head. "Her hide is impenetrable, wife. Fear not, she will live

many years now free of your father."

"Fionn!" I lashed back.

"Of course, she will no longer be subject to his abuses."

"Turn her back. Return her to me."

"Why should I do that? I can sense your reluctance to embrace our marriage. Lie with me, embrace me... and perhaps I will restore her to you."

I narrowed my eyes. "You rightly condemn Fionn as an abuser, but you attempt to use my mother to seduce me? You're no better than him!"

The Dagda sprung from his bed with more vigor I expected a mere man of his size would have been capable of. "I am a God! I am better than him! I am better than any man!"

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"If you were better than any man, you wouldn't need to use my mother as a bargaining chip in a desperate attempt to compel my affections."

"Once you lie with me, wife, you will know pleasures beyond compare. There will be no more compulsion..."

I laughed out loud. "You flatter yourself too much, even for a god!"

"I made you, woman! And I can unmake you!"

"They call you the Dagda? The good god? You're no better than a brutish man. In fact, you're worse because you have power. You will not unmake me. To do so would be to admit your failure. And I suspect, from what I can tell, you're too proud to admit that you, the great Dagda, could not even convince the wife you made for yourself to join you in a tryst."

"You're infuriating, woman!" the Dagda stomped his foot, sending a quake through the earth.

"Goddess," I said. "I am not just a woman. I am a Goddess. And you will treat me as such."

"You're my phantom queen!"

"And I am the queen of what, exactly? Your own proclivities? Thank you, but I'll pass."

I turned my back to him and he shouted and a loud thud echoed across the room. I turned back to examine the source of the sound. The Dagda had released his oversized manhood—or should I call it, his godhood—and slammed it on the table. I covered my mouth to prevent my laughter.

The Dagda's face turned red in a fury. "You cannot say you are not impressed by this!"

"Impressed? And you call me a phantom... that thing is frightening!"

With a fury, the Dagda covered himself again and stomped out of the room. I suppose wounding a god's pride might have consequences. But in truth, I felt sorry for whatever bull he must've stolen that thing from. It was hideous. And to think I'd find it pleasing? It seems the cluelessness of most men, when it came to the things that might please a woman, was a trait they'd inherited from the gods.

Do not forget—I was once Babd, and her gifts remained mine. I was perceptive enough to realize that once the Dagda's fury had subsided he'd return to me like a puppy begging for a treat. Sure, he might have to go on a rampage through the countryside first. A few earthquakes and storms might befall the local clans as a result. But he'd get over it and come to his senses.

I'd spent most of my life in trepidation. In different ways, as Macha, Anand, and Babd, I feared Fionn in various ways. I always used my various assets—Macha's beauty, Anand's intelligence, and even Babd's cleverness to remain aloof and unrecognized—to appease Fionn's wrath. I'd lived in fear of an insecure man before, and I wasn't about to do so again—even if that man is a god.

I wasn't sure how I felt about my new divinity. I had all the memories of Macha, Anand, and Babd. None of them had died. Their lives now flowing together like three small streams now merged into a single, unruly, river. And like the mighty River

Hafren, I was wild. Untamable. I would not be directed. I would forge my own path. And if I had to defy a god to do it, so be it.

The door creaked. The Dagda walked in, his head hung as low as was possible for a deity of his towering stature.

"My apologies, wife..."

"What are you apologizing for?" I asked, smirking and mildly amused by the Dagda's predictable though sudden change of approach.

"I have ruled eons without a woman that was at all near my equal. It is all I ever wanted. Yet, still, now that you are here I treat you like a mere mortal."

"You treat humans like that?"

"Most humans... they consider it an honor to..."

I huffed. "Taking that thing would be no honor for anyone."

The Dagda sighed. "My point is that I wanted to be loved by one who was in every way equal to me that once it became possible I did not know how I should behave. This union... it is as new to me as it is to you."

"I doubt that," I said. "You're still yourself. I am... I don't know what I am. We are all here, all three of us. Which as I see it means your task is triply difficult. Should you desire that we desire you it takes more than demands or expectations. You must win over all of our hearts—even if our hearts now beat as one."

The Dagda nodded. He opened the door and gestured toward its opening.

I cocked my head. "You're kicking me out?"

"I'm setting you free, Morrigan..."

"Free?"

"That I might win your heart properly. You are free to pursue a love of your own. You must come to know what I have known for ages upon ages... that love with mortals inevitably breeds only pain. And perhaps, in time, you will come to desire me as I do you."



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"But I am still your queen?"

"You may rule the land of the dead, even as I rule the land of the living. You will be the Queen of Samhuinn."

"You're making me a queen for dead people? Is that really a prize at all?"

"You will stand at the precipice of life and death. You will usher fallen souls to the cauldron of rebirth where they might be reborn anew. You will determine the outcome of wars since war is nothing more than an instrument of death. Your influence will extend beyond Samhuinn—even the earth will cry out to you as it receives the blood of the fallen. And should you, from such a lofty role, find love from a mortal, one that satisfies your deepest longing, then I will cede my authority over the earth to you as well. But choose wisely the mortal upon whom you set your heart. For the love of a god or a goddess never wanes. When we love, we love eternally."

I raised my eyebrow. "You'll let me rule both realms And you will restore my mother to me?"

The Dagda nodded. "With your chosen beloved at your side. But should you grow weary of it all... I will be waiting. And should you desire it, we will consummate our union. The divide between the living and the dead will cease and we shall rule all, together, forever."

"So that's it? I just need to compel a human, any man of my choice, to love me?"

The Dagda shook his head. "The mortal must love you even as you love him. You cannot compel a human to love you, nor can you violate the will of others to bring it about. You may whisper suggestions to mortals, you might appear to them in various forms, but you cannot bend their will to yours."

"It is agreed," I said with a nod. "But should a mortal petition me, and if I fulfill his request, and by doing so he comes to love me..."

The Dagda nodded. "You may respond to any petition made by a mortal with your own judgment, but the petition must be made by the mortal freely."

I grinned. A part of me, it must've been Anand, was already trying to imagine ways we might identify such a lover. Macha, too, was already swooning at the possibility of romance. It seemed almost too good to be true... but how could I turn the offer down?

Either way, as I saw it, I would end up a queen... and that's not a bad outcome for a girl who was once deemed of little more value than a maid. Better than the life of a beauty desired by men but respected by none. And far superior to living a life serving tyrants as a sort of strategist. We had a better opportunity as one, as the Morrigan than the lives any of us three were destined to before.

ú Chulainn

Cú Chulainn raised his spear, blocking a strike from Forgall Monach. Forgall was a retired but renowned warrior. There hadn't been a single occasion for Ulster's warriors to go to war in many cycles. Not since before Cú Chulainn had come of age. A few skirmishes with roving bandits in the surrounding countryside hadn't given him much of a challenge. Thus, King Conchobar saw fit to pair him with Forgall Monach. Forgall didn't have the strength or agility he'd had when he was once the hero credited with expelling the Fomorians from the countryside. But Forgall had skill. As adept as Cú Chulainn was in combat, he'd never faced a genuine champion. He'd never fought in a real war.

King Conchobar was determined to see that his would-be hero was well prepared.

The problem was that Cú Chulainn was distracted.

Emer, Forgall's only daughter, caught his eye—taunting the young warrior with her beauty as he sparred with her father. Her hair was long, wavy, and red. She wore a thin, nearly translucent dress that showed off her athletic frame. She wasn't thin—though Cú Chulainn typically found smaller women more alluring, something about Emer captivated him. He appreciated a woman who had a certain strength to her, a confidence. Even from a distance, Emer's blue eyes drew him in, as if he were a salmon on the end of a baited line.

Emer only caught his eye for a moment—but that was all it took. With a quick strike, Forgall knocked Cú Chulainn's spear from his hand. Forgall jabbed his sword toward Cú Chulainn's neck.

"A warrior must be ever attuned to his surroundings, but always giving his opponent his full attention," Forgall said, gripping his blade by the hilt.

Cú Chulainn rolled away from Forgall's blade. "How can one do that? It seems to be a contradiction. If I am paying heed to my surroundings how can I maintain a full focus on my enemy?"

"You have more senses than sight, young warrior."

"So I should listen to my surroundings?"

Forgall nodded. "Open your ears, yes. But you must also use your sense of touch, you must learn to feel the battle around you..."

Cú Chulainn rolled his eyes. "How can I feel what I do not touch?"

"Do you think your sense of touch is limited to your skin? An accomplished warrior has a range of touch, a sense of anything that happens within his sphere of presence."

Cú Chulainn shook his head. "I don't even know how to develop that kind of sense."

Forgall pressed his lips together. "You have trained, too, as a bard, have you not?"

Cú Chulainn nodded. "Of course."

"Then you know of the Awen. How it inspires your tales."

"I do."

"The Awen is not exclusive to poets. Tell me, when you tell a tale for the first time, how is it you know what to say, how to inflect your voice?"

Cú Chulainn shrugged. "It's just a sense, an instinct. I don't know how to explain it."

"It is the same for the warrior," Forgall said, tossing Cú Chulainn back his spear.

Cú Chulainn reached up and caught it in mid-air. "So I need to just sense what's around me?"

"There is an art to a tale. A battle is a kind of poetry, a tale unfolding at the moment."

"How do you know so much about being a bard?" Cú Chulainn asked.

Forgall pressed his lips together. "When you've been around as long as I have you don't miss much. For instance, do you think for a moment that I haven't noticed how you've been eyeing my daughter?"

Cú Chulainn blushed. "My apologies. I mean no disrespect."

Forgall laughed. "Do you think I'm unaware of Emer's beauty? You are not the first young warrior to find himself... distracted by my daughter."

"You told her to tease me. To test my focus."

Forgall shook his head. "I did not. But my daughter is strong of will. She is taken with you."

"Then grant me her hand," Cú Chulainn said, taken aback by his own suggestion.

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Forgall chuckled. "Do you think I'd wish my own daughter to become a widow?"

"I'm healthy. Not planning to die anytime soon."

"None of us plan to die. But should Ulster go to war, and you are the King's champion, we will all be doomed."

"You're forgetting. I still have the ríastrad. I do not use it when we spar."

"That's your problem. The beast inside of you—you may have it tamed, but the beast is still reckless even as you are. Perfect your skill, refine your ability, and even the ríastrad will fight with precision. You fancy yourself a bard... tell me, can you name a single warrior of old who had the ríastrad and died of old age?"

Cú Chulainn bit his lip. He hadn't thought of that. Nearly every story of a hero with the ríastrad ended the same way—they fell in battle. Yes, they died as heroes, but they died young no less. "I suppose you have a point."

"Of course I have a point! And you imagine you will be the exception, that you won't leave my daughter without a husband when you are so reckless in combat?"

Cú Chulainn took a deep breath. "Tell me what I must do to earn your blessing."

Forgall stroked his beard. "There is another warrior... one who might aid you better than I."

Cú Chulainn cocked his head. "Another warrior? I know of no such accomplished

warriors in all of Ulster."

"She is a Scot."

"Seriously?"

"What, you don't imagine that a Scot would be a warrior?" Forgall smirked.

Cú Chulainn chuckled. "It's that you called this warrior, 'she' that took me off guard!"

"The warrior-queen Scáthach is not one to be underestimated, young man."

Cú Chulainn stared at Forgall incredulously. Scáthach was known for more than her valor in battle—she was known for her short temper and the fact that most whoever defied her, even her most trusted companions, often found their heads divorced from their bodies. "Are you hoping to make me a warrior that I might earn your daughter's hand? Or are you hoping to simply put me away?"

Forgall grinned widely. "The way I see it, Cú Chulainn, is that if you should die at her hand then at least I've spared my daughter a widow's fate. If you should survive her methods... well, then, I should have reason to hope you might be the sole warrior with the ríastrad to defy the tradition of premature death."

Cú Chulainn glanced again at Emer, who now sat upon the balcony rail to so tempt him with a display of her crossed and shapely legs. It was the first time a mortal woman had captured Cú Chulainn's attention since he'd been but a boy. Ever since his encounter with the faerie, Fand, no human woman had managed to draw more than a fleeting glance from the warrior bard. Emer wasn't Fand. But Cú Chulainn couldn't deny that he desired her.

And if it took him training with the brutal queen, Scáthach, to earn Forgall's blessing,

that's exactly what he'd do.

"Very well," Cú Chulainn said. "I will go to Scáthach. I will prove myself worthy. And I will return to make your daughter my wife."



14

How does a goddess know when to open her heart to a mortal? It was my opportunity to choose my beloved for myself, the only time in my life—in any of our lives—that we'd had the freedom to make any such choice. If I resented the Dagda for everything else I was at least grateful that he'd afforded me this chance. But I had to wonder if this was all but some kind of trick. He'd almost admitted it when he'd revealed his design that I might, by having my freedom to love whomever I would, eventually return to him.

I couldn't allow that to happen. I'd rather wander, unloved, but a goddess nonetheless—even if only the queen of the realm of the dead—only engaging the earth in matters of death and war—than spend eternity married to the Dagda.

The strange power that coursed through my divine body...

What was it?

As Macha, I was clueless but appreciated the beauty of the mysteries that had melded to my tripartite soul. As Anand, it was something I could use. I needed to explore it, figure it out, subdue my power. But as Babd, it was just magic. Powerful, mysterious, and useful. I couldn't master it. I had to honor it, revere it, allow it to grow within me as a part of me. It was not some kind of mysterious, otherworldly, power. I was an otherworldly goddess. It was as natural to me as it was for an infant to seek her mother's breast, to explore the world and come to know what works and what doesn't. Yes, the power, the magic, whatever it was. It was a part of me.

I just had to grow into it. I had to learn and explore.

A black raven soared overhead. I heard its thoughts. It was hungry and on the hunt. It eyed the ground hoping to see a field mouse scurry through the clovers. It scanned the trees looking for a nest and unguarded eggs it might claim as a meal.

Did the raven hear me, too?

"Come here!" I commanded.

The raven started to circle, spiraling its way toward me as it perched itself on my shoulder.

I grinned widely. Yes, it was my magic. Was such power called magic when wielded by a goddess? No, this wasn't some kind of power I had to master, it wasn't an ability acquired by appealing to a deity or offering a sacrifice. I didn't need a trinket or an enchanted object to wield this power. It was simply me... Yes, that was it. It was as natural to speak to the bird as it was to move an arm or leg, to inhale a breath of air, to scratch and itch.

Just as natural as it was for me to spread my arms, which quickly turned to wings, as I shifted into a form that matched my raven friend. Together, we expanded our wings and returned to the skies.

The thrill of the breeze fluttering through my feathers...

Could I change into any form I desired? It took no effort at all. I didn't even know I'd done it. But here I was, now a raven myself, soaring through the skies.

I released a loud caw.

Yes, I was still a goddess. But I was a raven, too. And I could be a maid. I could be a hag. I could even become a man—not that I had any desire to. Maybe I could become a bear or, perhaps, a dragon. My flesh was like clay, subject only to my will. I could do anything... I could be anything...

Why did the Dagda think, with such power, I wouldn't secure the affections of a man should I find one upon whom to cast my heart? From what I've experienced—or at least what I observed as Babd during our divided human lives—was that the affections of men were achieved first through the eyes, then the flesh, and only later by the heart.

It's why our father had believed that Macha would one day be wedded to a king or some noble who would see her as a prize. It was purely on account of her beauty. No betrothal was ever exacted by a suitor who spent time conversing with a potential bride. Rather, as was usually the case, the supposed suitor would examine a female from afar, seeing nothing but the appearance of her body, and decide on such scant a basis whether she was desirable.

As Macha, I'd been oblivious to that. I'd thought that the men who gawked over me were interested in me. But as Babd, even as Anand, I always knew better.

As I soared next to my raven companion I observed the world below. It was a beautiful place from this perspective. I dared imagine if humans saw the world from this point of view they'd imagine they'd become gods themselves, fashion a fantasy that they could rule this place. But nature could not be ruled. Not even by me. Not by the Dagda. The bird's-eye-view was as deceptive as it was thrilling.

A voice cried out to me in agony.

I turned to see a single man fallen, his blood soaking into the earth... it was his voice that cried to me, still. It was like his soul, now soaked into the blood-stained ground,

was pleading for my aid.

Then I saw why. A group of bandits circled his carriage—the fallen man's wife and children inside. The thieves... there wasn't much more to take from this family. But I heard the bandits' thoughts... their vile thoughts... I had to do something.

I dive-bombed to their position. I sensed the fear of the mother and her children as one of the bandits approached, loosening his trousers.

I settled on the mother—was I still a raven? It didn't feel like it. It felt like I'd merged with the mother's spirit, with her soul.

The woman stood up and with a fury charged the man. Her anger, her rage. It was mine, too.

But with my aid she was more than furious, she was courageous.

She quickly grabbed a small knife and dove at the thief, gouging him between his thighs.

The bandit released an ear-piercing cry as blood soaked through his trousers. I was certain that whatever it was he'd planned on doing to this woman or, I shuddered, her children... would no longer be possible.

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I leaped from the woman and dove into one of the children—a young girl, not yet come of age. Once my spirit touched her soul she, too, sprung to her feet and with a rope wrapped it around the thief's neck. She pulled. I lent her my strength. She pulled harder. The man gagged as he struggled to get free. She wouldn't allow it. I wouldn't allow it. I whispered to the girl—it was subtle enough that she'd think the thought was her own. She tied the rope to the back of the carriage and kicked the bandit's flailing body to the ground.

I knew what to do next... even as the rest of the thieves who'd surrounded the carriage before began to scatter.

I spoke to the horse. It began to gallop, dragging the first thief behind the carriage, his wounded crotch leaving a trail of blood-stained dirt behind them.

And then, I heard the man cry again. No, not the bandit. It was the father who had been slain before...

Thank you, goddess!

Had I just answered my first prayer? Perhaps, as a goddess of death and war, it was only the prayers of the deceased I heard.

As he cried to me, as I answered, my own body dissipated in a cloud of smoke.

I reappeared... elsewhere. I stood before a giant cauldron. A flame raged beneath it and the potion inside of it was raging at a full boil. The potion itself swirled with several colors—reds, purples, and greens. Every bubble that boiled to a pop released

sparks of golden magic into the air. The Dagda had said I'd usher the fallen to the cauldron of rebirth. This must've been it.

"Where am I?" the man asked. I looked up, and the father who'd died just moments before stood before me.

I cocked my head. All of this was new to me, too. But I certainly didn't want to let this man know that I wasn't entirely sure what I was doing. I was a goddess. I had to act like one.

"You are in Samhuinn, the land of the dead."

"So it's done... I am... dead?"

I nodded.

"And you are... I know you are a goddess... but what should I call you?"

"I am the Morrigan," I said, trying my best to communicate benevolence through my smile.

"And this cauldron..."

"The cauldron of rebirth," I explained. Thankfully, as Anand, I'd studied the ways of the druids. I knew enough to at least sound like I'd done this before. "Like the seasons, our lives pass through seasons of growth, seasons of maturity, and seasons of decline. But once we've reached the season of death the cycle continues through rebirth. Once you enter the cauldron, your memories of your former life will be wiped away, but the wisdom you've gleaned will remain with you. You will carry that wisdom into your next life."

"Will I be able to return to my family?"

"It is beyond my control where or when you shall return." In truth, I wasn't sure if I had any say in such matters. Perhaps I did. If so, I didn't know how. "You may return as a child born just moments after you passed. Or, you might return a thousand years later..."

The man sighed. "I wish I could tell my family goodbye... I wish I could hug my children one last time..."

Tears welled up in my eyes. "May the life you lived be a token of your love always present in their memories."

The man nodded. "Thank you."

I extended my hand. He took it and carefully dipped his toe into the boiling cauldron. He smiled, pleasantly surprised that despite the temperature, it did not scald his flesh. After all, he didn't have flesh anymore. He looked at me, nodded as if to signal his gratitude, and stepped inside.

The potion simmered and popped...

And he was gone.

I blinked.

I was back on the earth. Back in the form of the raven. I extended my wings and took off again into the skies. Was this what I was destined to be for eternity? Was I supposed to be the one who guided souls from death to rebirth? I didn't know what to make of that. Not like I'd ever had any real experience with death. I'd experienced loss, sure. I'd lost my mother. I'd lost Grainne. As Babd, Macha, and Anand my

experience with death was limited. But I'd done more than help this man enter the cauldron of rebirth. I'd also saved his family.

I could do more than guide the souls of the dead. I could save lives. I could intervene in the world... in tragedies like an attack on a family by bandits. Affairs when death lurked over people's lives, ready to pounce. Whenever murder was schemed in a human heart. Perhaps I could even affect the outcomes of war.

It was only when blood was shed that this man's prayer, his plea, found my ears. Chances were, even in the short time I'd been the goddess of death, other people throughout the world had died, too. But I never met them at the cauldron. Why not? I didn't know. Perhaps some other gods or goddesses guided others to the cauldron. I was, after all, a goddess of war. Was it since this man died a violent death, and not quietly in his bed, that I was the goddess who had purview over his soul's reincarnation? Or maybe it had to do with the gods or goddesses he'd revered in life. Either way, I'd helped this man by protecting his family on his behalf. I'd seen him through death to rebirth. It was an honor.



Cú Chulainn and Ferdiad circled one another in the arena. Cú Chulainn's weapon of choice was the spear. It was light. Easily thrown if a long-range attack was called for. A broadsword, like the one his sparring partner Ferdiad carried, could break a spear with a single strike. But broadswords were heavy. Even under the *ríastrad* Cú Chulainn found them cumbersome. His agility had always been his advantage.

Coupled with the *ríastrad* he could dominate Ferdiad. But Cú Chulainn hadn't revealed the *ríastrad* since he'd arrived in Scotland. If he were here to train, he wanted to train as a man. Become the best warrior he could be apart from the *ríastrad*. That required, beyond a lot of meditation and recitation of verse to quell the beast within, a certain degree of secrecy. Yes, Ferdiad was probably the closest friend he'd had since he was a child. But not even Ferdiad knew what he was... about the beast that raged inside of him.

Ferdiad was a massive man, nearly two heads taller than Cú Chulainn. His thick coat of hair and beard gave him the semblance of a bear. While he was one of the gentlest people Cú Chulainn had ever met—under normal circumstances he wouldn't so much as swat at a mosquito—when he went to battle he fought with a fury that made him practically unstoppable. And for a man his size he was rather agile. But compared to Cú Chulainn he was slow. Cú Chulainn anticipated his strikes, moving out of the way, swinging around to strike him in the ribs with his raw-hide covered spear.

Scáthach, the warrior-queen of Scots, circled the arena as she observed her two most prized pupils. She was a pretty woman despite the long scar that split her face, starting between her brows, crossing her nose, and down her right cheek. She never

spoke of how she'd gotten the scar. Rumors abounded, of course. One of the most common was that she'd done it to herself—scorning her parents' attempt to marry her off to the wealthiest suitor when she'd first come of age. If the rumor was true it had apparently worked. Scáthach had never married. She preferred the intimate company of women—usually more than one at any given time—and given the fact she'd bested most any man she'd ever faced in single-handed combat, no one who valued their life dared criticize Scáthach's choice of lovers.

"You two fight like friends!" Scáthach said, shaking her head.

"We are friends," Ferdiad said.

Scáthach winced. "You are partners. I never said you should become friends."

"What would you have us do?" Cú Chulainn asked, regretting it the moment he did. Scáthach's methods were unorthodox. What she'd come up with to solve what she deemed a problem would undoubtedly be painful.

"As I see it, the two of you have spoiled one another. As you are, you're both worthless. I could make you fight to the death..."

"Scáthach, please," Cú Chulainn said...

"Silence," the warrior-queen interrupted. "I said I could do it. Doing so would kill the friendship that softens you both. At least one of you, then, would emerge the warrior you must become. I have not dismissed the idea. But your matches... it better resembles two lovers dancing a jig than two warriors in a clash of arms."

"We are not lovers!" Ferdiad said, his jaw dropped

Scáthach grinned. "I know you are not. For, if you were, one of you would clearly

emerge above the other."

"I don't follow," Cú Chulainn said.

"When two join in a tryst one must assume the superior position..."

"With another man! I've never..." Cú Chulainn protest.

Scáthach smirked. "Would I care if you had? My point is that if you two are to progress in your training we must find a way to put your friendship aside. I could compel you two to become lovers... I admit I'd enjoy that..."

"I'd sooner die!" Ferdiad said, stomping his foot.

"Men... so afraid to admit their attraction to one another... give up your feigned protest, Ferdiad. I can see through it."

"There is no attraction!" Cú Chulainn insisted.

"See how easy it is to get under your skin?" Scáthach asked. "You call yourselves warriors, but you find yourselves wounded by the mere suggestion that you might enjoy a few of the forbidden proclivities that most warriors give in to while at war."

"I've never heard of such a thing," Cú Chulainn said, shaking his head in disgust.

"Because you've never been to war. And those who have never speak of such things. Especially to those who haven't been in combat themselves. War changes men and women alike, in ways you'd never imagine. War heightens every sense a man might possess. It awakens lusts, passions, and thrills that most would never entertain under usual circumstances. But such taboos are only so because of custom. But when you are in war all custom, all tradition, is forgotten. There is you... your fellow soldiers..."

the enemy... and the thrill. War brings out the truth, our true desires... even if those desires might be what the elders of your tribes might call forbidden."

"I promise you," Ferdiad said. "I have no hidden desire to lie with another man."

Scáthach chuckled. "I was speaking of the willingness to kill another human being, but the fact that you felt the need to defend yourself on that point is revealing."

Ferdiad gripped his blade tightly. Scáthach was getting under his skin—but that was her style. She wanted her warriors angry. She wanted them to train with a rage that they might learn to use their rage to their advantage in battle.

After all, as Scáthach had insisted many times, the thrills of war are unruly. She didn't believe in subduing the rage, mastering it, like Cú Chulainn had learned to do to keep the ríastrad at bay. Rather, she believed in unleashing it at the proper time. Only Cú Chulainn knew that if he allowed her to do what she intended if she discovered what he was, there'd be no going back. She'd insist he use the ríastrad, even in training. If people got killed, so be it. Cú Chulainn respected the warrior queen's skill and learned what she taught—but he wouldn't allow her to tap into that part of him.

"Ferdiad," Scáthach said. "You're dismissed for the day. Your turn will come tomorrow."

Ferdiad nodded, kicked at the dirt, gave Cú Chulainn a friendly nod, and shuffled his way out of the arena.

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Scáthach took Cú Chulainn by the hand and looked into his eyes. "Now, young would-be warrior. Let's see if you can control your rage against a woman."

"You want me to fight you?"

Scáthach laughed. "I am not going to fight you."

"You want me to... sleep with you?"

Scáthach laughed even harder. "You couldn't handle me in bed any better than you could handle me on the battlefield."

"I don't understand..."

"I have another... partner... for you to spar against today."

Scáthach placed two fingers between her lips and released an ear-piercing whistle. Cú Chulainn winced at the sound—on account of the hound within him such high-pitched sounds that most human ears casually tolerated were particularly piercing. Moments later another woman appeared—a woman smaller than the warrior-queen, her hair long and reddish-orange. Her face was freckled, as was often the case for women who had such hair. She was cute. She held a small dagger in her hand.

"Cú Chulainn, this is Aife."

"You expect me to spar her?"

"You think you can take me?" the young red-head said, defiant in tone.

"No offense," Cú Chulainn said. "I'm sure you're more than capable. But yes..."

Scáthach grinned. "Aife and I grew up together. She's the only warrior in all of Scotland who had ever bested me. Though I should say, she's only done it once."

"I'd do it again, lass, if you'd ever accepted my offer of a rematch!"

Scáthach smiled. "Aife has a certain fire in her belly..."

"Fire or not," Cú Chulainn said. "You seriously think we'd be evenly matched?"

Scáthach shook her head. "Not at all. I think, Cú Chulainn, you are no match for her at all... at least not as you are. Take your places and prepare for a match."

"What do you mean, 'not as I am?'" Cú Chulainn asked as he assumed his fighting stance and gripped his spear.

Before Scáthach answered, Aife released a howl. Cú Chulainn turned away from the warrior-queen and looked at his opponent. She'd changed. Her hair, still orange and red, had grown and now covered her whole body. Her skin had thickened and her frame had expanded. Aife had the ríastrad.

"Scáthach! You want me to faceher!"

"Not as you are. I know your secret, Cú Chulainn. I've always known. Did you think I hadn't heard the rumors that spread about you from Ulster?"

"I cannot allow it... I can't let it out..."

Scáthach ignored Cú Chulainn's protest. "That is not the only news that has reached me from Ulster. You came here, did you not, seeking to prove your worth that you might acquire Forgall's blessing to marry his daughter?"

"I did," Cú Chulainn said. "What of it?"

"I have it on good authority that Forgall has betrothed Emer to Lugaid mac Nóis, king of Munster."

"What? How do you know this!"

"It does not matter. But I can assure you it is true."

"No! Forgall... he sent me here not to earn Emer's hand but..."

"But so that he could be rid of you," Scáthach finished Cú Chulainn's thought as she walked circles around him.

Aife snarled on the opposite side of the arena. Cú Chulainn shook his head, clenched his fists, and screamed.

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"That's it!" Scáthach said. "Unleash the monster inside of you. Release the anger!"

The next thing Cú Chulainn knew a red ball of fur collided with him, sending him tumbling to the ground. It wasn't the collision that unleashed his rage—it was what Scáthach had said... what Forgall had done. But he still had the faerie's gift. He had the ability to control the wolf. And he had the means—he had his poetry, his tales. He needed a verse... something that would make sense of everything.

The collision with Aife didn't give him the time to think. He had no choice. He allowed the ríastrad to emerge. His skin hardened. His brow broadened and thick fur covered his body. The wolf wouldn't fully take over, not now. He had enough control to influence the beast. But he'd been taken by surprise. Not just by Aife, who now had him pinned to the ground, but the news about Emer's betrothal. All he had over the ríastrad was influence... the rest was all beastly instinct.

His jaws locked with Aife's as their bodies tumbled through the dirt.

Fur, fangs, rage... and lust.

Pain and pleasure, all at once. Claws tearing at one another's flesh even as their two bodies merged in carnivorous passion.

There was no sense in trying to resist. All the pain, the betrayal, the heartache. He'd loved Fand once, but she'd been given to another Faerie. And he'd finally allowed his heart another chance to love, he'd placed all his hopes on being with Emer. That was gone, too. Now there was Aife, the ríastrad—two of them—coming together like it had been destined by the primordial gods. But love had nothing to do with it. Not for



Cú Chulainn. Not for Aife. They'd never so much as seen each other before. This was bestial desire—an irresistible, animalistic urge.

He might have been able to stop it. If he really wanted to... but why would he want to? He had no one left whom he might love.

So many battles. Warriors, passing from this life into the next. The confusion on people's faces when they encounter me for the first time. At first, no one knew who I was. They realized I was a goddess. They knew I'd appeared to guide them into the thereafter. But they didn't know who I was. Until they did.

I don't know if it was because I hated war or because I loved it. As Babd, I'd never had much taste for it. But as Anand, I couldn't get enough of it. It wasn't the death and bloodshed that drew me in. It was the passion of men as their spears and blades clashed. As Anand, I'd often played a role in helping our father develop strategies for victory.

Split the army into threes, lure in the enemy with a small force giving them the illusion that they had the upper hand. Then, attack them on the flank with two other armies, hidden in the forests and bushes. I'd come up with the strategy—Anand did, that is. And my father used it liberally. It worked until people got wise to it. Then, we had to think of something else.

As Babd, though, I was more inclined to spare as many lives as possible. I wanted to align myself with whatever side I believed deserved to win. It wasn't necessarily whatever side had the more just cause to go to battle. For instance, I once came upon a village that had been attacked by another army without provocation.

The army was short on resources and sought to take what they required. One would think, as a goddess of war, I should come to the defense of the village. Only this particular village was dominated by cruel men, men who beat their women as if their

wives were slaves, men who were pompous and arrogant. Sure, they had done nothing in the course of the conflict at hand to warrant the attack. But in this particular case, the army that attacked them was an army of men who honored their women, who trained their children to honor the gods... So, I helped the army succeed in destroying the village. The women and children, while they were terrified and lamented the loss of their men, would be better off even if taken captive by their enemies. And they were...

But it wasn't true that I sided with one or the other side in a battle. Sometimes there were individual warriors on either side who honored me. The more times I intervened in wars the more soldiers across the isles began to call upon me. I did not always care, one way or another, which side should emerge victoriously. Sometimes it was the hearts of certain honorable and brave men and women who garnished my affections. I wanted them to survive and endure as heroes.

"What are we doing?" I asked myself.

"We're making a difference. We're helping people."

What the... Macha asked a question. Anand responded. But who am I?

I am Babd...

But I am the Morrigan. Three but one. Together, one divinity, one personality. But we were still distinct? I couldn't wrap my mind around the very mystery of my own essence.

"We must consider our future," I responded.

"We need to find love," Macha replied.

Anand huffed. "Love can wait."

"It can wait, but why should we?" I asked, confused by the fact that I was both talking to my sister and myself all at once. "If we find love of our own we will ever be free of the Dagda. We will rule the domains of both the living and the dead."

"So we're doing this for the power?" Anand asked.

"We're doing it for love!" Macha insisted. "What is eternity, even as a goddess, if one cannot love and be loved!"

"You're both right," I said. "There is a truth to what each one of us... each part of us... is saying."

Something arrested our attention. It was a voice—but not one we could hear. It was a bit like the man's prayer before, the dead man who thanked us. But now... no, this man was not dead. He was very much alive. And he wasn't calling to us. But his voice... his spirit... it drew me in, no less.

"A warrior?" Anand asked.

"And a bard!" Macha said, giggling with excitement.

"Yes," I said. "But more than that, his heart aches. Can you feel it?"

"He wants to be loved..."

Anand huffed. "And he fights for it. He trains to prove his worth."

"Come sisters," I said. "Let us examine this man, consider him, and discern why it is his spirit calls to us. It may be that he, like the man before, that death draws near this

man and he simply requires our aid."

When we found the man what we saw was not a man at all. And he was not alone. There was a woman... a woman like him.

My stomach boiled. Was I jealous of this woman... this thing?

A part of me wanted to seize her by the scruff of the neck and take her place atop the young warrior. Even in their bestial form, whatever they were, there was something beautiful about them.

"There are stories of such warriors," Anand said. "Father always examined the children of any village he raided in hopes of finding one."

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We nodded together—any gesture we made we had to do as one.

"But these two, they do not love each other," Macha said.

I looked at them more closely, I reached out with my spirit and touched their souls. "The passion between them, it's steeped in rage. It's almost like they've come together as little more than a release."

"I still hate her," Macha said.

I chuckled to myself. "But you can feel it, can't you? When they are together he's completely miserable."

"That's because his heart aches for another..."

"It's not love he feels," Anand said. "It's loss. It's the ache of his heart that calls us."

"But this woman, this other creature who is like him..."

"He doesn't love her," Macha said.

"I know," I said, grinning for all of us. "But I think we can use her... she can help him secure the revenge he seeks."

I didn't know how it happened—even as I considered this young warrior, the man who was also a wolf, I saw visions of his own memories. The love he lost. Most recently, a young lady—whose father had given her to another. But there was a pain

deeper than that, still. It was buried beneath years of attempts to forget her, a thousand tales the warrior told in hopes of forgetting her...

"He's in love with a faerie," Macha said.

Anand laughed. "It's a good thing we're a shapeshifter..."

"It won't work," Macha said. "He won't be able to love us so long as his heart is still tied to the real faerie princess. If we appear as the faerie, he'll see through it..."

"We need a strategy," I said. "A way to unravel his past... to resolve his love lost with both the young lady to whom he'd hoped to marry and the faerie he'd met once before."

"I have a plan," Anand said. "But it isn't going to be easy..."

"But we must be certain," I said. "That this is the mortal we desire..."

"I agree," Macha said. "The Dagda said when a god or goddess loves, that love will last forever."

"Perhaps one whose heart has missed its chance at love so many times will fall more easily once love is finally in reach."

Anand and Macha seemed convinced that this warrior, this monster, this poet... that he was the one. I, as Babd, was less convinced. Not that I wasn't drawn to him. It wasn't even that I didn't find him attractive. I was as obsessed over this warrior as either of my sisters. And what they felt in our body I felt, too...

But the path we were following, the way we'd have to secure this man's love. Should he catch us in our scheme it was just as likely to spurn his affections as it would be to

win them. But even as I tried to convince myself otherwise, even as I tried to talk myself out of it, the more I watched him, it was too late.

I loved him already. All of us did.



Cú Chulainn rolled over in bed. Aife stared back at him. Ever since they'd first met, more like collided, in the arena they could barely keep their hands off of each other. Cú Chulainn didn't love her. She didn't love him. But they were warriors, the both of them. They were, quite likely, the only two human beings on the earth who possessed the ríastrad. Whether transformed or not, the attraction was undeniable. But that's all it was for either of them. She was using him as much as he was her.

"How long are we going to keep doing this?" Cú Chulainn asked.

Aife smirked, leaped on top of Cú Chulainn, and kissed him on the lips. "Until I get bored."

Cú Chulainn huffed. "You must desire more than this... whatever this is."

Aife shrugged. "Don't ruin the fun by talking."

Cú Chulainn pivoted his hips, tossing Aife back onto the bed. "I'm serious, Aife. I want more out of life than this..."

"You're a warrior, as am I. This is the most we will ever get out of life. Why not enjoy it?"

"I'm not saying I don't like it..."

"Obviously you do," Aife said, smirking, as she glanced down between Cú Chulainn's

legs.

"I'm just so angry. Like when we're together I forget about it for a few minutes."

"You don't last a few minutes... more like seconds."

Cú Chulainn sighed. "You know what I mean."

Aife took a deep breath, rolled off of Cú Chulainn, and began dressing.

"Where are you going?" Cú Chulainn asked, still lying there in all his glory.

"Where are we going, don't you mean?"

Cú Chulainn scrunched his brow. "I don't know where we could possibly go."

"It's clear to me you won't be any fun at all until you take care of what angers you so deeply, lover. And I'm tired of hearing about it."

"Take care of it? How are we going to do that?"

Aife smirked. "You and me, together. In our... better form. What do you say we go and get your revenge on this Forgall fellow."

Cú Chulainn shook his head as he rose from the bed and draped a cloth around his waist. "It isn't your battle, Aife."

Aife scratched her head. Took three steps toward Cú Chulainn and grabbed his hand, placing it on her womb. "For our child's sake, it is my battle."

Cú Chulainn cocked his head sideways. "Are... you serious? You're with child?"

"We are with child, you donkey's arse. And I'm not about to bring our child into this world while leaving him the example of a father who lets his enemies get away with their betrayals."

"Hisfather? How do you know it's a boy?"

Aife shrugged. "I'm always on top. That means boys, doesn't it?"

Cú Chulainn scrunched his brow. "I don't think that matters."

"Either way," Aife said. "Boy or girl, our child will be destined to be a warrior like each of his parents."

"Our child will be cursed with the ríastrad unless the gods see fit to spare him or her from such a fate."

Aife shook her head. "It is a gift, lover! Perhaps once you've put away your rage, once and for all, you'll be able to accept that."

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"It isn't rage that fuels your ríastrad?"

Aife huffed. "Of course not. The ríastrad feeds off of whatever emotion you give to it. Mine feeds off of desire... and pleasure. The pleasure we experience together... and the pleasure of slaying a man in battle."

"That explains a lot."

"Not like you've had anything to complain about."

"What about Scáthach? She won't allow this. If two of the warriors under her tutelage attack Ulster it will start a war!"

"We don't need to attack Ulster. Just this Forgall fellow."

"But he's a citizen of Ulster."

"And from what I've been able to ascertain, he has a fortress of his own within the kingdom."

Cú Chulainn bit his lip. "How did you know about that?"

Aife shrugged. "You said you're worried about Scáthach? Well, this has been Scáthach's plan ever since she learned of you, and she learned of your betrothal. This is how she intends to make of you the warrior you came asking her to train you to become."

"I don't know. I mean, if I kill Forgall... I couldn't do that to Emer."

Aife shook her head. "She isn't going to be yours either way. Do nothing and she marries the king of Munster. But kill Forgall... and you can finally have your vengeance. At least you can be free."

"Maybe," Cú Chulainn said. "But won't that just leave me with guilt?"

Aife pushed Cú Chulainn back on the bed and straddled him. "Please... he has it coming. It was he who betrayed you. Only a man of weak fortitude would feel guilty over something like that."

"I'm not weak."

"Then prove it," Aife said before pressing her lips against his.

That he should have a child with that woman... my divine blood boiled within me. But he still had no love for the woman, Aife. Thankfully, she had no such affection for him either. She was content with having a man who would satiate her passions. The mother she was becoming craved a man capable to defend her child, a warrior who'd raise their child to do the same.

Which is precisely why we were thrilled that she was more than eager to take our suggestion... the help our beloved get his revenge. Yes, we'd untangle the web of women who'd come into his life. We had to free him from whatever part of him longed for any of them so that his heart would be ripe for us....

I spread my wings and soared over Forgall's fortress. Once the two warriors transformed they'd be able to scale these walls. The problem was that our dear Cú Chulainn merely wanted to frighten the man. If that was all he accomplished we'd accomplish nothing.

No, we had to unravel each of his failed attempts at love. Shattering his relationship with Aife would be both the easiest and the hardest of all. On the one hand, they were bound together only by passion and lust. There was little love between them. But Cú Chulainn was an honorable man... to abandon a wife who was set to bear him a child would require a massive betrayal, something he couldn't forget or forgive.

We couldn't turn her against him. I might be a goddess, but I can't dictate what humans feel or do. All I could do was make suggestions. I could whisper in their ears, even make them think that my words were their own thoughts...

I'd used this tactic before, though I'd only been a goddess a short while, to give certain warriors boldness and others cowardice. It was the principal way I affected the outcomes of battles. Sure, I could possess a warrior here or there, give them an extra dose of strength and power. But if I whispered in their ears I could embolden some and terrify others. There is something magical in humans—it's a power that lies in their thoughts. A simple thought could transform the fiercest warrior into but a mouse at the sight of something so innocuous as a shadow. All it required was a little fear. But a well-placed thought did the opposite, too. Even a common housewife could become a lionhearted hero if she entertained the proper thoughts if she developed a little courage.

We three sisters chuckled to one another, albeit in the confines of our single body. We had immeasurable powers. We could do things we hadn't even discovered yet. But a little whisper in an unsuspecting ear and we could dictate the rise and fall of kingdoms.

And it was so much easier when the heat of a battle hindered a person's ability to reflect on their thoughts. When blades are slicing through the fog of war and spears are flying through the air most warriors will act on the first thought that strikes the mind.

What we had to do was clear. Let Aife and Cú Chulainn carry out their plans. The fact that they had different ideas for what they should accomplish by this little assault, Anand believed, gave us a strategic advantage. We just had to wait for an opportunity. There would invariably come a time when their interests would conflict. When they did, we'd speak. We'd give one or both of them a simple thought, an idea... and we'd be one step closer to making him ours.

Cú Chulainn and Aife exchanged glances as they stood at the gates of Forgall's personal fortress. That's the thing about being a hero—should you survive the war you generally aren't wanting for much thereafter. One thing King Conchobar, and kings of Ulster before him, did well was that they honored the kingdom's retired warriors. A hero like Forgall probably wouldn't inspire bardic tales by his legend—such tales generally ended in a warrior's death. But the consolation prize was a full life lived in relative luxury.

Storming Forgall's fortress would normally be a difficult task for two people. But this wasn't a castle. Its fortifications were built mostly for the sake of keeping roving bandits or wild animals away.

Wild animals...Cú Chulainn chuckled at the irony. He was something of a wild animal. Aife was right—he needed to deal with his resentment—but was this really the way? His stomach turned in trepidation. This just felt wrong.

A bird cawed from behind where he and Aife stood. Cú Chulainn turned, glad for some kind of distraction, and saw a raven perched upon a tree branch. Its beady eyes fixed on him. The raven made something of a croaking sound.

"Ouch!" Cú Chulainn said as Aife jabbed him in the ribs with her knuckle.

"Focus... don't forget. We're doing this for the sake of our son."

Aife placed her hand on her womb—just a small bump at this stage, less than a lunar



cycle since she'd first announced to him she was with child. Cú Chulainn took a deep breath and nodded. "Alright..."

Aife nodded, grabbed Cú Chulainn by the tuft of his shirt, and pulled him in for a kiss. "More of this is waiting for you after this is over."

Cú Chulainn nodded. "I was thinking... maybe we should just destroy the place. Don't kill the man. Let him live in poverty, knowing what he did. If we kill him, he'll only suffer a little while."

Aife rolled her eyes. "But if we strike him down, in that single moment he'll feel all the pain he might otherwise feel in a lifetime of regret. Besides, if we allow him to live, a warrior like him, like any real warrior would, will be looking for his chance at revenge."

Cú Chulainn bit his lip. What she said was a slight against him. She was implying that if he didn't go through with this he didn't have the heart of a real warrior. Of course, a warrior isn't what Cú Chulainn ever wanted to be. He didn't care.

"Still, this is my chance at revenge, Aife. I'd prefer we leave him breathing. Perhaps injured, but he must survive."

Aife rolled her eyes. "You realize that leaving a man maimed but not dead is far more difficult than killing him outright?"

"I'm not saying we have to maim him," Cú Chulainn said. "But if it comes to that... he did not kill me. He deceived me. An injury to the flesh to repay the injury he waged to my heart. But to kill him would not be just."

"We aren't here for justice, lover..."

"Speak for yourself."

Aife huffed. "So long as we achieve an end today that will allow our son to become the warrior his father has yet to become, I will be content with the outcome."

"Then it's decided. I do not intend to kill him."

Aife nodded. "I understand."

Cú Chulainn nodded as he looked at Aife again, her red hair blowing in the breeze. "You know, you really are beautiful."

"I know," Aife said, smirking. "You're a lucky bastard to share your bed with me."

Cú Chulainn laughed. He wasn't in love with Aife—but he did appreciate her companionship, and he appreciated her body... and the ways she moved her body... She might not have been the object of his heart's desire, but it was undeniable that she'd effectively dominated the attention of every other part of his flesh. He'd never known someone so comfortable in her flesh, so seductively confident in who she was and what she wanted. A part of him envied her. What she wanted, one way or another, she always got. She wasn't so subject to the winds of destiny that, at least in Cú Chulainn's case, seemed to carry him along like a fallen leaf blowing in the breeze. He had resisted his destiny at nearly every turn and at every turn, it overpowered his desires. But Aife... she was the mistress of the wind itself.

Cú Chulainn reached and took Aife by the hand. "Alright, I'm ready."

Aife squeezed his hand back and smiled. Aife derived a sort of carnal pleasure from transforming. The *ríastrad* was not for her like it was for Cú Chulainn, a curse. She never felt more herself than when she unleashed the *ríastrad*. Another thing Cú Chulainn envied of his lover. He wished he could embrace what he was in such a

way... to embrace the power, the horror of what he was capable of under the ríastrad. Life would be easier if he not only accepted it but looked forward to becoming the wolf...

Cú Chulainn and Aife shifted in unison. For Cú Chulainn, it was much easier to maintain control when he shifted on purpose. This way, he felt a sort of kinship with young Gwion, the boy who would later become Taliesin in his favorite tale. That's what he believed the faerie, Fand, had given him... the gift of Awen. The same power Gwion had sucked from his burnt thumb when tending Ceridwen's cauldron. This was different than when his rage compelled a shift. Drawing on Awen, rather than rage, he was not subject to the wolf's bestial rage. He controlled the wolf...

As for Aife, perhaps it was because she and the wolf within her were kindred spirits that there was no such antagonism, no difficulty maintaining herself after transforming. The ríastrad didn't overtake her will because her will and its were one and the same. She didn't need the faerie's gift. Even if she drew on Awen, she'd probably not have much use for it. For Aife, the ríastrad was an extension of herself... not some kind of beast clawing at her soul to get free.

Yes, Cú Chulainn and Aife had something in common. But they were not the same.

Fully transformed, Aife made her way to the fortress and scaled its walls. Cú Chulainn hadn't ever done that—at least not that he recollected—but he followed suit. He wasn't sure how his claws managed to cling tenaciously to the stone walls of the fortress. His claws naturally found the crevices between the stones, and when they didn't, they broke through making holes of their own by which he pulled himself up the wall.

Aife, in all her glory—beastly, furry, and red—bounded over the wall and howled as she perched herself on top.

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Cú Chulainn lept atop the wall beside her. Only he didn't howl. This was not a moment to relish. He was here out of necessity. To right a wrong that had been done against him. There was no thrill in what he had to do.

Something struck Cú Chulainn's shoulder and ricocheted off of him.

Cú Chulainn turned. An archer stood on the wall, the opposite side of Forgall's fortress. The look of horror on the poor chap's face when his arrow couldn't penetrate Cú Chulainn's hide was unforgettable. Cú Chulainn was no hero like this—he was an invader, a terror, a nightmare...

A bell sounded. The archer, who must've doubled as a lookout, had apparently alerted others to the presence of the two beasts who were assaulting the fortress.

Aife howled a battle cry.

Cú Chulainn growled and leaped from the wall to the floor below, landing on all fours. A blade struck him in the back, which Cú Chulainn barely felt. He quickly pivoted, now on his hindquarters, and swiped the warrior to the side with one of his massive paws.

Three more soldiers charged his position, all carrying broadswords.

A blur of red fur came flying from the walls and collided with them. Aife tore at their flesh with her jaws.

Cú Chulainn hesitated. He wasn't here to kill anyone... not Forgall, not any of his

men. But Aife couldn't be stopped.

Instead, Cú Chulainn turned to the pens and released the livestock. He shattered a silo of grain. If he caused enough damage, he figured, Forgall would suffer enough.

But so far, the aged warrior hadn't so much as made an appearance. He was supposed to be brave...

Brave, but smart. He knew what he was up against. He knew better than to strike at Cú Chulainn and Aife head-on.

Cú Chulainn heard a shriek. It was Aife.

Bounding around the corner he saw her, hot tar dumped from the wall above, burning her fur.

Atop the wall stood Forgall. His eyes met Cú Chulainn's.

"Come after me, you wretched creature!" Forgall demanded. "I know who you are and why you've come. Come and face me like a man!"

Cú Chulainn bounded up the wall and met Forgall face to face. Towering over his former mentor, the man who'd first sent him away to Scotland to train with the warrior-queen, the man who'd falsely promised he'd give him his daughter's hand if he proved himself worthy...

"I was right about you, Cú Chulainn! You are a coward! You face me like this... but you'd never face me man to man!"

Cú Chulainn snarled. Forgall was right. This was not honorable. Sure, he could maim the man, he'd get his revenge. But if he did... if he did it likethis...there would be tales

told of him, no doubt. But he'd be the best some other warrior would conquer. He wouldn't be a hero...

Cú Chulainn had never wanted to be a hero. But he wanted to be a monster even less...

Taking a deep breath, Cú Chulainn listened to the Awen... he recalled how Gwion so seamlessly shifted, from hare to salmon to bird... He released the ríastrad and stood before Forgall.

Cú Chulainn stood there in front of his foe naked.

"Forgall, now would you be the coward who dares attack a man unarmed?"

Forgall gripped his broadsword and smirked. "You're a fool, Cú Chulainn. In one form or another, you still have little more than the wits of a blacksmith's hound."

There wasn't much room to move atop the fortress wall. Could he survive the fall in this form? He wasn't sure if he could shift back into the ríastrad quick enough before hitting the ground if he jumped. He'd have to do his best to dodge the blow from Forgall's broadsword. His chances weren't great given that Forgall was an accomplished warrior, seasoned by battle. Still, he had no choice.

Cú Chulainn widened his stance as Forgall charged him.

His best chance was to drop beneath the warrior's strike and go for a leg-sweep. All it took was a single pivot... but he'd also leave himself open to take Forgall's strike to the back if the warrior anticipated his move. And a strike to the back, if he didn't die, would likely rob him of the use of his legs for the rest of his life. But it was his best chance... his only chance...

He had to time it perfectly...

As Forgall swung his blade, Cú Chulainn ducked, pivoted, and went for the leg sweep.

Forgall hopped over Cú Chulainn's foot.

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Cú Chulainn's back was exposed. He couldn't move out of the way quickly enough. He'd have to take the blow and pray to the gods it took his life rather than his legs. He couldn't imagine living without the capacity of his legs.

A roar startled Cú Chulainn. He quickly turned in time to see a red blur of fur and fury collide with Forgall, knocking him from the wall. The two hit the ground outside the fortress walls with a thud.

"No!" Cú Chulainn shouted.

But it was too late. Aife had already sunk her fangs into Forgall's gut. Even if he'd survived the fall, by some kind of miracle, he wouldn't survive that.

The sound of weeping to Cú Chulainn's left arrested his attention.

"Emer," Cú Chulainn said, his voice trembling. "I'm sorry... I didn't want this..."

Emer ran and embraced Cú Chulainn. "I saw what he did to you... how he tricked you... it is I who am sorry."

Cú Chulainn nodded. "I wish things could have been different between us. But you are to be married to a king..."

"I do not love the king!" Emer said. "And besides, the contract of betrothal is now null with my father's death."

Cú Chulainn sighed. "After what I've done, how could I dare take you as my wife?"



"You saved me from a marriage to a man I could never love. My father wanted to make me a queen. But Lugaid mac Nóis is a tyrant. A brute. You've saved me from a life of misery. Or at least you shall if you will have me, still."

Cú Chulainn stood there in disbelief. Forgall was dead. He'd expected Emer would hate him for it. But he wasn't the one who'd killed her father. He looked down at Aife. She stood there, now transformed back into her human form, her face now three shades redder than her hair. "Come with me, lover! It is done!"

Cú Chulainn took a deep breath. "I told you not to kill him. You said you understood!"

"I said I understood, I did not say I agree! This is what is best for our son!"

"Your son?" Emer asked, taking two steps back.

Cú Chulainn shook his head. "I am sorry..."

Emer took a deep breath then shook her head. "I admit, it is a shock to hear. But why should I hold that against you? You and I were never intended until now. That is, should you accept my proposal."

Cú Chulainn nodded. He turned again toward Aife. "Leave, woman. Leave and never return to me!"

"You would abandon your son for her?"

"It was not I who abandoned him. It was you who abandoned me when you killed Forgall."

"I saved your life, you ingrate!"

Cú Chulainn shook his head. "I'd rather die than live with this man's blood on my hands."

"Forgall was right!" Aife shouted. "You are a coward! Our son will be better off never having known a father of such weak resolve. Cursed are you, Cú Chulainn! You will never find peace. You will never sleep another night knowing at any moment I might be there, ready to exact the blow to your back you should have received on this day. For the sake of our child, I will have my vengeance!"

A raven—the same who'd appeared before the attack—flew and perched itself on Cú Chulainn's shoulder.

Cú Chulainn... I shall come for you, soon, my love...

A shiver went down Cú Chulainn's spine. Did he really hear the raven speak those words, or was it merely in his head? As the raven flew away, Emer took his hand into hers.

"Come with me, my love."

Was it Emer who'd spoken before? He could swear it was the raven who spoke, who'd called him 'my love.' But the day's events had probably warped his mind. Even shifting in and out of the *ríastrad* sometimes gave him temporary delusions. That had to be what it was. The raven, he figured, must've been a delusion. After all, ravens don't speak. And they don't generally land on men's shoulders.

But he knew the raven had been there. And as strange as it was that the raven would perch itself on his shoulder was the way it disappeared. He didn't see it fly away. It just... disappeared.

How odd, Cú Chulainn thought as he interlaced his fingers with Emer's.

### PART III:

#### The Morrigan

20

I heard him cry as his body hurled to the earth. Even a warrior so renowned as Forgall, who'd faced death a hundred times in the heat of battle, was afraid for the half-second it took for his body to crash to the ground.

His death, from my perspective, was but collateral damage. Still, I strive to be a just goddess. He paid his life that I might advance my scheme to make Cú Chulainn mine. I owed him.

I stood there, doing my best to communicate empathy with a kind smile, as he approached the cauldron of rebirth.

"Noble Forgall," I said. "For most of your life, you fought honorably. But when you deceived the young warrior that he might flee you brought your own death upon yourself."

Forgall collapsed to his knees and, with tears in his eyes, looked up to me in desperation. "Divine Morrigan, It was only my intention to give Emer, my daughter, a life better than that of a warrior's bride."

I nodded and extended my hand. In truth, I was already impressed that he knew who I was. Whatever I'd done, in my short time since the Dagda had made me what I am,

had garnished me something a reputation. He took my hand and I helped the warrior to his feet.

"I cannot fault you for your actions, Forgall. A good father will go to any length to protect his daughter." I winced as I said it. I thought of Fionn, my own father... how he'd gladly given us up to the Dagda that he might become a dragon, that he might secure vengeance on the druid who'd taken Grainne from him. Emer begrudged her father for betrothing her to a king, and a tyrant no less. But a woman could do worse than become a tyrant's queen provided he wasn't the sort of king who'd demand his wife's head if he thought her out of line. But Forgall had acted out of love.

I was jealous of Emer, now, on two accounts. First, because she intended to marry my beloved. And second, because she'd had a loving father...

Still, lest my jealousy might turn to envy, I had to temper my rage. I had a plan. I'd certainly see it through.

"I was wrong," Forgall said. "She loved Cú Chulainn... dare I say more than he ever cared for her. I've known warriors like him all my life. He may have desired my daughter. He might have had affection for her. But he didn't love her. Not the way she did him."

I nodded. Forgall was right. Cú Chulainn's heart was still set on the faerie Fand, the one whom he'd barely encountered and quieted his soul. I'd heard his thoughts. He tried to convince himself she'd been a dream. But she was real and he knew it.

Still, intervening in Cú Chulainn's attempt to wed Emer was going to be a challenge. Cú Chulainn might not have loved her fully, but he did desire her. He had more affection for Emer than he ever did for Aife.

But Emer did love the young warrior... she was taken with him. I was powerless to

change that, the Dagda was clear. I was not to interfere with a human's will. Nonetheless, I could answer petitions of the dead. If such a petition might at the very least complicate the relationship between Cú Chulainn and Emer, so be it. If I offered Forgall a simple request...

"Tell me, noble warrior. What would be your final request before you enter the cauldron of rebirth?"

"Do you regularly grant all the fallen such requests, goddess?"

I shook my head. "I do not. Suffice it to say I am in a generous mood. Question me again, and my disposition is likely to change."

Forgall nodded and, stroking his beard, looked at me with wide tear-filled eyes. "Can you make my Emer fall out of love with the warrior?"

I shook my head. "I cannot interfere with such matters of the heart."

"I didn't think so," Forgall said. "It was worth asking."

"Think, warrior. You know your daughter. I cannot manipulate her heart or her will, but is there something that might occur, that might befall her and would cause her to consider casting Cú Chulainn from her heart?"

Forgall stood and, staring in the cauldron, pondered the question for a moment. "I would rather not test or tempt my own daughter. However, if you might test the warrior's affections... he clearly loves another, though I know not who. If you can discern it, afford the warrior a simple choice—a chance to be with the one whom he loved before my Emer and the chance to stay with Emer himself. Should he choose my daughter, so be it. I will resign the matter to the fates. If, however, he should choose to entertain his love for the one upon whom his heart has always been set,

perhaps my daughter will see his heart belongs elsewhere and will leave him of her own accord."

I pressed my lips together. I could not manipulate Cú Chulainn's will. And if I could not affect a human heart, still less could I ever direct whom a faerie might love. Did she even remember the mortal? Alas, there was little in my power to do. But Forgall's request was simple. I should simply afford Cú Chulainn and the faerie a chance...an opportunity... how either of them might act on such a chance was up to them.

"So be it, noble Forgall," I said, extending my hand that he might take it as he stepped into the cauldron. "May your journey from death to life anew be a peaceful one."

Returning to the earth I took the form of a raven, spread my wings, and took to the skies. I had work to do...

Aife had answered my call before, perhaps she would answer my plea a second time. I could use her, still, to accomplish what had to be done in an effort to win my beloved's heart.

? Cú Chulainn

It was supposed to be a joyous occasion, and for the most part, it was. The marriage of Cú Chulainn and Emer, the daughter of Ulster's fallen hero.

Forgall had simply fallen from his fortress walls while trying to clean a bird's nest from one of the turrets. A tragic accident...

That's what Emer had told everyone, anyway. If she told them the truth that someone with the *ríastrad* had done it, and they believed her that it was not Cú Chulainn, the people would expect him to avenge her father's death. And since Aife was the mother of his child such calls for vengeance would put him in an impossible predicament. Cú Chulainn appreciated that Emer understood him so well she did not demand vengeance against Aife... she was a better woman than Aife ever was.

Cú Chulainn didn't want revenge. What had happened to Forgall was a greater punishment than Forgall's sin demanded. And Cú Chulainn still blamed himself for it... after all, he'd agreed with Aife, he knew her temperament. Why had he been so foolish to trust she could exercise restraint?

"That damn raven," Cú Chulainn whispered. The bird hadn't stopped cawing since the ceremony began.

"Just ignore it," Emer said.

He wanted to. If it were any old bird he might have been able to. But Cú Chulainn had seen this raven before. At least he'd seen one that looked exactly like it. It had

perched itself on his shoulder and whispered something in his ear before it vanished into thin air. And now, to show up to interrupt his wedding to Emer? A coincidence? The appearance of a raven was something of a trope in many of the tales Cú Chulainn had learned during his training. Almost always an ill-omen, not the sort of thing one wishes to appear at his wedding. Especially not after the last time he'd seen a raven...

"The marriage of a man and a woman," one of the local druids who'd been brought in for the ceremony began... Cú Chulainn had heard this sort of speech before. How the cycle of death to life is reflected in all things. How as the seasons turn the earth itself testifies to the pattern of our own lives. How if we embrace the cycle we'll find ourselves attuned to the earth, contented in life, and in harmony with one another. It was all true enough. But Cú Chulainn struggled to hear the druid speak on account of the damned raven.

"Focus, my love," Emer urged.

Cú Chulainn nodded. This was supposed to be a solemn occasion. A cause to celebrate. His bride should have arrested his attention. She was beautiful. He'd longed for her ever since the moment he first saw her. Did he love her? He thought he did. What was love supposed to be, anyway? It wasn't at all like what he'd found in the tales he'd learned as a bard. Such tales, as noble as they might be, are meant to inspire and encourage. The conformity of a tale to facts, to real life, is secondary. For a tale isn't told for the sake of the past. A tale is told that those who hear it might be enriched by it.

No sooner did the druid finish her speech and with the branch of a mighty oak consecrate the marriage did a shout come from the city walls.

"An army approaches from the south!"

Cú Chulainn squeezed his bride's hands as he held them. "The other warrior can



handle this. This is our day."

Emer shook her head. "No, husband. You are Ulster's greatest and noblest warrior. The lives that will be lost if you do not fight... I do not want our wedding night to be stained with blood!"

Cú Chulainn sighed. "Very well. I will make short order of this army... and I will return that we might consummate our marriage before the sun rises on the morrow."

"Promise?" Emer asked, smiling at her husband.

"With all that I am."

Cú Chulainn gave Emer a quick, but passionate kiss, as he shed his robes and mounted a horse that had been readied for him only seconds after the lookout had sighted the approaching army. The armorer tossed Cú Chulainn his spear and he grabbed it in his hand before charging out the city gates.

How long had it been before anyone dared attack Ulster? Sure, King Conchobar had led armies against foes all across the isles but never had an enemy been so bold as to march upon Ulster itself.

No matter, Cú Chulainn gave his horse a quick kick sending it into a gallop. If he got there ahead of the rest of the Ulster's warriors he hoped his presence might thwart a clash of arms. The best way to achieve a victory is to prevent bloodshed from the start... at least that's what he'd always been told.

Cú Chulainn crashed through the front lines—this wasn't an experienced army, what made them so bold as to wage a war on Ulster? Reaching deep into his will Cú Chulainn called upon the *ríastrad*. The wolf responded obediently and came to the fore.

With the ríastrad invigorating his frame, Cú Chulainn leaped from his horse and with a single swipe from the blunt end of his spear took out a row of five soldiers.

He hadn't killed them.

Probably knocked them out.

He didn't want any more soldiers to die than was necessary. Frighten them enough so they will retreat in horror... war is a dreadful thing, it leaves children without fathers and, sometimes, without mothers, too. He wouldn't wish such a fate on his worst enemies.

Indeed, many brutes conquered armies by the sharp end of their spears or the sharp edge of their blades. But if Cú Chulainn was destined to be a warrior he intended to be a hero. What if he could conquer an army without shedding blood?

Cú Chulainn twirled his staff overhead as the soldiers, jaws dropped, stepped back away from him.

A shock struck Cú Chulainn's body. He went into convulsions...

A man in a black robe and hood appeared—he was channeling lightning from the end of his staff, which he gripped tightly with both hands.

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Cú Chulainn released a howl as the ríastrad took full control, fighting against the sorcerer...

"It's him." The sorcerer spoke with an echo to his voice. It sounded as though he'd spoken from within a cave, but he was standing in the middle of a field. "Seize the beast."

The men he'd taken out before quickly threw ropes over his body. Had it been just a few ropes they wouldn't have been able to hold him under the ríastrad. But the power that had seized him—this wasn't druid magic, it was something else.

The sorcerer released his spell. More than a dozen ropes now constricted his frame.

"Sétanta of Ulster," the sorcerer said. "By the authority of Manannán mac Lir you are under arrest."

Cú Chulainn knew that name. Where had he heard it before? Manannán mac Lir...

It dawned on him. That was the name of the Faerie King... the one whom Fand was supposed to marry.

Cú Chulainn released the ríastrad and returned to his normal size. It gave him enough slack in the ropes to quickly leap out of them.

The sorcerer raised his staff again.

"Wait," Cú Chulainn said. "I have no quarrel with the Faerie King. I will face

whatever charges have been levied against me willingly. There is no need for constraints."

The sorcerer nodded and lowered his staff. "Very well, but if you resist..."

"I won't," Cú Chulainn said. "Take me to the King."

Three Fomorian warriors, called from the depths of the sea. Called by the Faerie King, Manannán mac Lir, himself. I could use these creatures.

Not even as a goddess am I privy to knowledge about the origins of these strange sea-dwelling people. Some believe the Fomorians are gods. Like me, in fact, they are capable of changing shape. Either the most beautiful creatures one might ever set his eyes upon, or the most hideous. In their natural form, they were human-like in stature, bipedal with all the features a man might have. Though their heads are typically long, twice the length of a human skull, and their skin, while leathery to the touch, resembled the bark of a mossed oak.

But there is a spark of divinity within them, a magic of a sort. It's of a different sort... drawn from the wellsprings of the Otherworld and coursing through the sea. Ancient magic, older than even most of the gods, much older than me. Perhaps they came from the void that was before the world came to pass. No one knows, for certain.

According to Anand, when father led the Fianna against the Fomorians there were faeries there, too. The Faerie King, Manannán mac Lir—whose name meant son of the sea—had some kind of connection to these sea-dwelling Fomorians. Was the Faerie King one of them? Given the meaning of his name, it made sense. Perhaps the Fomorians were to the sea what the faeries were to the earth. Keepers and guardians of the magic that courses in each domain.

When I found the faerie, Fand, she was already wandering the countryside near the coast. She simply couldn't stand to be with her own husband, Manannán mac Lir.

Ever since she'd encountered Cú Chulainn, she too was enraptured by his presence. Her heart beat for him as mine had come to do. What was it about this strange warrior that drew the affection of the likes of both a faerie and a goddess? Was it the power he wielded in the ríastrad? Was it the whimsy with which he told a tale? It was none of these things, but all of them. He might have been a warrior and a poet—but combined he was a poem of a kind himself, a complex array of verses that alone meant very little but when taken in concert had so much depth a goddess could lose herself within it. That was Cú Chulainn...

And like mine, Fand's affections for Cú Chulainn did not wane over time. They only grew... grew until she couldn't stand it anymore. Until she could no longer tolerate the presence of her husband.

Manannán mac Lir was not at all oblivious to this. Surely he wasn't. And he knew where she was. The three Fomorian warriors were but scouts, in fact, sent by the faerie king to keep tabs on her whereabouts.

How could I cast the final blow between Fand and Manannán mac Lir? I had to drive a wedge into the gap that had already formed between them, to drive them apart further still. I needed to set this up so Cú Chulainn would arrive and appear the hero.

I realized there was a risk, of course, in bringing Cú Chulainn and Fand back together. This was the one love he harbored in his soul that could not be easily untangled. But even on the night of his wedding to Emer, should he find occasion to come to the rescue of his long-lost love... well, in that case, his marriage would be doomed. And still more, if I wanted to free his heart from the faerie, if I wanted him to ever love me I had to bring them together even if only that I might find cause to separate them. So long as their love for one another lingered in the realm of fantasy they'd never let it go. So long as he harbored dreams of one day being with Fand, his heart would never be mine.

Again, I had use for Aife. Three Fomorians lurking along the coast...

Hunt them down! I whispered in her ear. But do not kill them! They will believe it was Cú Chulainn who came after them in defense of his beloved, Fand! By so doing, you will set all the Faerie Kingdom against Cú Chulainn, and still more, you will drive a wedge between Cú Chulainn and his new wife, Emer!

It was the last part, I think, that convinced her to act. If she could lure Cú Chulainn out to defend Fand on the very night he was supposed to have married Emer, the marriage would likely be doomed from the start. It was only the first part that gave her pause. She did not want to see Cú Chulainn fall to the Faerie King. She wanted vengeance herself... for the sake of their child.

Do not worry, my faithful warrior. I will protect him from the Fae...

Indeed, I'd have to... the Fae had magic at their disposal that could overpower Cú Chulainn even if he were in the ríastrad. It was that power I'd need to use to draw him into this affair. But I couldn't allow them to imprison him or, worse, kill him. I'd need to act. I'd need to intervene...

There was only one way I could do that...

I'd have to reveal myself to my beloved...

"Where is Fand?"Cú Chulainn asked, kneeling before King Manannán mac Lir.

"Do not pretend yourself ignorant!"

"I know not of what you speak, your Highness." Cú Chulainn kept his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him. He was not sure what Faerie custom dictated, but when brought before an earthly king under any sort of accusation it was deemed inappropriate to look him in the eye. An odd custom, when Cú Chulainn thought about it. After all, it is often the guilty who divert their eyes away from their accusers. No wonder it was rare any who stood accused before a king would ever be deemed innocent. Tradition, itself, demanded the suspect assume a posture of guilt.

"My own army sent to recover you saw you in your true form! You are the one with the ríastrad who captured my own wife's affections!"

Cú Chulainn grinned a little. Fand still had feelings for him? All the times he'd fantasized about finding her again. Imagining their touch... their kiss... the magic flowing between them. He'd thought it little more than a fantasy. Surely she'd forgotten about him soon after their encounter... at least he'd presumed as much. But to hear she'd been longing for him as much as he had for her, that her love for him had driven a wedge between the man she'd had to marry.

For a moment, Cú Chulainn's heart soared. Then, it sank into the depth of his gut. He'd just married Emer... But the marriage hadn't been consummated. Until it was, he'd have an out... but did he want to take it? To do that to Emer after all she'd been



through? After all he'd promised her? His heart longed for Fand, but his honor, his virtue, all of it told him he should follow through with his commitment to Emer. Cú Chulainn swallowed his thoughts. He was getting ahead of himself. He had to survive this ordeal before even considering what he would do.

"I confess," Cú Chulainn said. "I do have the ríastrad. And I do love Fand... I've always loved her. Since the moment she quieted the beast within me."

"And you dare assault my Fomorian scouts on her behalf? What was it, some feeble attempt to impress her, to lure my wife to your side?"

Cú Chulainn cocked his head and raised his eyes—meeting the king's gaze straight on. "Wait... what?"

"Again, you imagine you can fool me with your feigned ignorance?"

"I do not know what you're talking about."

"My Fomorian scouts, whom I sent to keep watch over Fand. They tell me that they were assaulted by one with the ríastrad."

Cú Chulainn sighed. Aife, it had to be Aife... was this her way of getting revenge on him? Turning the Faerie King against him? How did she know he harbored a love for Fand? Cú Chulainn's blood boiled in his veins. Not only had Aife killed Forgall, but now she was conspiring against him. Would he ever rest? He'd never kill the mother of his child... at least not until his son came of age. But so long as she lived she'd seek ways to avenge what she thought was a betrayal.

"Your Highness, there is another with the ríastrad. A warrior, a woman. I trained with her under the warrior-queen Scáthach."

"Our kind can sense the presence of a ríastrad when it attempts to usurp a human mind. It is why Fand came to you to begin with! That the beast would be tamed."

Cú Chulainn nodded. "That's because the beast has no need to usurp this woman's mind. She and the ríastrad are both monsters of a sort. Their union... it's more like they willingly share the same body."

"Preposterous!" the king bellowed. "You expect me to believe when one with the ríastrad appears to thwart my Fomorian scouts... who attempted to free Fand from their presence... that this other warrior who supposedly has the ríastrad was the one who did it when it is you who has harbored affection for my wife all these years?"

The king wasn't wrong. But how did he know what he felt for Fand? "Why do you think I love your wife, your Highness?"

The king rolled his eyes. "Of course you do. A faerie cannot love a human who does not love her in kind. We are not capable of such sentiments. That my wife still pined after you meant beyond a doubt that you felt the same. Otherwise, her love for you would have waned and she would be at my side still!"

"I never knew," Cú Chulainn shook his head. "How was I supposed to know she loved me, too? That my loving her would have such consequences?"

"Which is why I never came for you until now. Not until you assaulted my scouts. Not until you attempted to play the hero and lure her to you again."

"I told you," Cú Chulainn said, rising to his feet in defiance. "It wasn't me!"

"Lies!" the king shouted, before turning toward the sorcerer—the one who'd debilitated him with his spell before. It was while under the ríastrad the sorcerer had bound him before. He probably didn't stand much of a chance in a re-match with the

strange, veiled, magician. Still, his odds were better escaping with the aid of the ríastrad than in his mortal form.

No sooner did he change his shape did the sorcerer raise his staff and take aim directly at Cú Chulainn. He'd anticipated it... he tried to run, to flee... his only shot was dodging the sorcerer's attack. One zap from the sorcerer's staff was all it would take...

He dodged the spell once.

But the second time... he tried to move out of the way. But as fast as he could move the sorcerer's magic was faster, as fast as lightning. Cú Chulainn winced—he was done for.

Then, silence...

It was like the world all around him had stopped... like time, itself, had frozen in place.

The sorcerer's spell—a single, powerful, beam of lightning was suspended in mid-air, not three feet from where he stood. For a moment he simply stared at it, mesmerized by the power of the jagged beam of magic that coursed from the sorcerer's staff and had nearly taken him out.

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Then someone... something... appeared in front of him. Only Fand, of all the creatures he'd ever seen, human or otherwise, exceeded this figure in beauty. She was tall—taller than he was, even when under the ríastrad. Her skin had a purple hue to it as if this creature belonged to the night itself. Her hair, long, black, and flowing... she wore golden armor as if she were a warrior of a sort. But her face. She looked upon him with kindness. With affection, even.

"Cú Chulainn," the woman said. "You must flee and return to your beloved. For the Fomorians have been dispatched to kill her on account of her love for you."

"What?" Cú Chulainn said. "How is this possible... what is happening... and who are..."

"I am the Morrigan," the woman said.

"The Phantom Queen?" Cú Chulainn asked. He'd heard her name referenced amongst warriors as of late. He figured she was something of a superstition. Lesser warriors were known to invent deities of their own, powerful but imaginary beings that they claimed would come to their aid in battle. Never did he think once that she was real...

"This is not the first time I've appeared to you, my love."

My love? Not only was this a goddess—but she loved him? Certainly, not a romantic sort of love. Why would a goddess love him in that way? Rather, it was the kind of affection a god or goddess might have for a mortal whom she cherishes, who for whatever reason, she has seen it fit to protect. That had to be it.

"The raven... you are the raven..."

The Morrigan nodded. "I am."

"You were there at the wall when Forgall fell."

Again, the goddess nodded. "I was. For when a warrior falls I appear that I might usher him into life thereafter."

"And at my wedding... you wouldn't stop crowing."

The Morrigan smiled wide. "My apologies for the disturbance. I only meant to warn you of the approaching army."

Cú Chulainn took a deep breath. "You could have been a bit more obvious about your warning. Why not appear then as you are now?"

The Morrigan shook her head. "Perhaps I could have. But I did not want to interfere with your wedding. And my appearance tends to unsettle most mortals. There were many people gathered that day."

"Then why come to me now, to tell me that I might go and rescue Fand—the creature who has held my heart since I was barely a man?"

"It is not my place to tell you whom you should love, my love. I did not wish to interfere in your marriage, nor do I wish to see the faerie Fand die on account of Manannán mac Lir's jealousy."

"But if I go to save her, how will I know what I should do? Should I follow my heart and remain with Fand? Or should I do the honorable thing and remain with my wife?"

"As I said..."

"It's not your place. I know. But a little wisdom wouldn't hurt."

"In matters of the heart, young bard. We are all but fools."

That this goddess had addressed him as a bard, not a warrior, made him smile. Yes, this goddess saw him for what he was. Not for the role destiny had forced upon him. Cú Chulainn chuckled to himself.

"Are even the gods fools in matters of the heart?"

The Morrigan pressed her lips together. The question had perturbed her. Cú Chulainn hadn't meant to cause offense, certainly not against this goddess who'd mysteriously appeared and spared him from the sorcerer's spell.

"My apologies," Cú Chulainn said. "I spoke out of turn."

The Morrigan turned back toward Cú Chulainn, a kind smile now splitting her face. "Think nothing of it. But I cannot hold time still forever. You must run. Escape this place and rescue the faerie... for once I resume time, you will not have much of it before the Fomorians attack."

Cú Chulainn nodded in gratitude and turned to run—carried along by the vigor of the ríastrad. He still didn't know what he would do, whom he would choose... but he did know he couldn't allow Fand to die. He had to save her. And he was grateful that this strange goddess had given him such a chance.

My heart soared even as I sent my beloved off to redeem the faerie whom he imagined he loved. He couldn't resist her. She couldn't resist him. But alas—I had him where I wanted. And now he knew who I was... did he love me? Not yet. But once he cast off the love of Fand and Emer, both, he'd see his heart was meant to be mine. Yes, the Fomorians were dispatched to take Fand's life. Though I must confess, that was my doing... I appeared to them as if I were the Faerie King himself.

They couldn't tell the difference. Manannán mac Lir was jealous, but he didn't want his wife dead. He wanted her back. I had to give my beloved the occasion to be Fand's hero, the opportunity to come to her aid.

I extended my hand, time still stilled, and touched this strange magic the sorcerer had cast against Cú Chulainn. Whomever this was, he'd been a pleasant surprise. He'd been useful in my attempt to set my beloved against the Faerie King. The sorcerer wasn't of the Fae.

The magic he cast had a tingle. I dipped my finger into it and lifted my finger to my lip. Not Awen—not the power the Druids wielded. It was faerie magic. Only, when wielded by a man, their magic changed. It drew on humanity's nature rather than the nature of the faeries, who'd served the earth as guardians and protectors. It became something of its opposite. The faeries had recruited him because they needed someone else, a human, to do some of the unsavory things they couldn't do. Faeries, despite their infinite access to magic, are constitutionally incapable of violence.

I touched the sorcerer—unfreezing him alone.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The sorcerer looked back at me through the darkness that shrouded his face beneath his cloak. And he laughed...

"Tell me!" I demanded.

The sorcerer dropped his hood. I groaned. I'd seen him before, when I was still human... before all three of us were made one.

"Fear Doidrich," I said, recognizing the man I'd thought to be a Druid... the one who'd served the Dagda.

"It is I, indeed, my phantom queen."

"What are you doing here? Did the Dagda send you to thwart my efforts?"

Doidrich smirked. "The Fae have always served the Dagda well. My purpose here is in service to the Fae, at the Dagda's request. The fact that their interests and yours have happened to intersect is but an unfortunate coincidence."

I pursed my lips. I didn't trust Doidrich any farther than I could throw him. Of course, aided by divine strength I might be able to throw him quite a distance. I resisted the temptation to test my theory.

If the Dagda was trying to interfere with my effort to secure the affections of my beloved I had reason to be pissed. He'd told me he wanted me to come to him, eventually, of my own accord. Not like that was going to happen, no matter how things ended up with Cú Chulainn. But sending his lackey to try and screw with my plans wasn't helping much, either.



Of course, he didn't know my plans. Little did Doidrich, or the Dagda for that matter, realize arresting Cú Chulainn helped my cause. It gave my beloved a reason to go after Fand, to protect her from her husband who meant to kill her for her lack of devotion.

"Well, give the Dagda my regards," I said, waving my hand.

Doidrich narrowed his eyes. "You have no affection for him. Why would you offer him your regards?"

I smiled wide. "To give one regards only means to give one... consideration. Tell him I am giving his attempts to interfere with my pursuit plenty of thought."

"I told you," Doidrich said, placing his hands on his hips. "I am not here to thwart you in any way."

"Of course you aren't," I said, rolling my eyes.

"You're a fool," Doidrich said, pulling his hood back over his head.

"Excuse me?"

"You seek a complicated man. A man whose heart has been given to others, many others, in various ways. But you could have chosen a mortal who loved you already."

I raised one of my eyebrows. "A mortal who loves me?"

"I am a mortal, goddess... in spite of my power."

I almost gagged on my tongue. "You? You think I'd ever cast my affections on you? You were the one who, at my father's behest, gave me to the Dagda to begin with."

"I confess, I was a coward. Too afraid to come to your defense when the good god in all his might demanded I bring all three of you to him," Doidrich said, then took a deep breath and exhaled it forcefully. "Perhaps I cast my affections as foolishly as you do."

"You're full of dung," I said. "You have no reason to love me. You don't even know me."

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"And you know this warrior whose heart you pursue?"

"Besides," I said, ignoring his question. "What you say makes no sense at all. You'd defy the Dagda now when you were too cowardly to do so before?"

Doidrich smirked. "My love for you is on account of my love for power. And the Dagda is not here. Were you to succeed, your power would exceed that of the Dagda."

"And you'd be by my side... more powerful as my spouse than as the Dagda's lackey?"

"Precisely."

I rolled my eyes. "You're too late, you know. Even if I could ever imagine myself falling in love with you—which I should say is highly unlikely—I've set my heart on someone else. So why bring it up, now?"

Doidrich shrugged. "Many gods have been polygamous. Why shouldn't you? Just because a god or goddess does not fall out of love does not mean that the divine cannot love many humans at once?"

"And you'd be content to be my second love?" I huffed.

Doidrich laughed. "Of course, my goddess! After all, it is the power that moves my passions. Far be it from me to allow petty jealousy to interfere with my heart's desire."

"And you already wield the Dagda's power. That magic you used..."

"It is a gift from the Fae, not the Dagda."

"I have to go."

"Go? But time is stopped here. We have as much time as you're willing to offer."

"That's the problem, isn't it? I can barely stand conversing with you over the course of no time at all. And you expect me to love you for eternity?"

Doidrich chuckled. "I'll grow on you in time."

"Like a boil?"

Doidrich cocked his head. "Do you love boils?"

I shook my head, turned, and left—allowing time to resume as I did.

Doidrich might genuinely love power, even the power I could give him. But to love someone for what they give you, for the power you acquire, as a result, is not love at all.

It was different when it came to my affection for Cú Chulainn. If he were to love me, I would gain great power. But such would be the case no matter what mortal I might have chosen to love. It wasn't about power for me. It wasn't merely my freedom from the Dagda, either. For, once again, I could attain that no matter whom I chose as the object of my adoration.

It was Cú Chulainn's complexity, his depth... the heart of warrior combined with the grace of a bard. He was complex. And as three mortals combined into one, so was I. I

resonated with his struggle. A fate had been thrust upon him he didn't choose. And while a part of me enjoyed being a goddess... it wasn't my choice. As Babd, as Anand, and even as Macha I'd had hopes and dreams for what my life might become. But as a goddess... as an eternal creature who'd never die... what was there to hope for other than escaping an eternity as the Dagda's wife?

I'd never love Doidrich. But encountering him forced me to consider the meaning of my existence. Was I bound to interject myself in wars forever, to guide the souls of the dead to rebirth when I would never die or have the opportunity to enter the cauldron myself?

The question made me feel like something of a fraud. I didn't want to die. And I wouldn't. But would there be a time when weary of my eternity I might crave death itself? The chance to be reborn, to enter the cauldron, to start a new life with a degree of wisdom inherited from the life before, the chance to start anew, with a blank slate...

There is only one reason why one might not want to ever die... and that is if one is blessed to be in love and share their life with one who loves them in turn.

If I could not secure Cú Chulainn's love, what would become of me? Would I be destined to an eternity resenting the very dead whom I was meant to guide to the cauldron of rebirth? I shuddered at the thought...

I simply couldn't fail. Whatever it took to make the warrior love me, no matter the cost... that's what I'd have to do.

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Cú Chulainn leaped from his horse and, gripping his spear, thrust it into the heart of one of the Fomorians.

One down...

The other two were closing in on Fand's position. Fand was powerful in her own way—but her power, as a Faerie, was not the sort of magic meant for war or even for self-defense. Even the Faerie king had to recruit a human army and a powerful sorcerer—undoubtedly promising them some kind of blessing—when he'd come to arrest Cú Chulainn. Of course, no one knew everything the faeries could do with their power. Perhaps it was less the capacity of the magic they used and more the constitution of the faeries themselves that made them incapable of violence. After all, the magic the sorcerer wielded, what was it if it hadn't come from the Fae? And these Fomorian warriors. Three other creatures, somehow recruited by the Faerie King, to do what he could not... to murder his wife, the faerie whom Cú Chulainn loved.

Cú Chulainn inhaled as the *ríastrad* invigorated his gait. He didn't need a horse... he was faster than any steed in this form. Raising his spear overhead he threw it, catching the second Fomorian between the shoulder blades. The creature crashed into the sandy ground.

Two down...

Cú Chulainn yanked his spear out of the second Fomorian's body and charged the last Fomorian who was closing in on Fand.

"Sétanta!" Fand shouted as she saw him. Not many people still called him by his true name. But the last time he'd seen Fand that's the only name he'd had.

Cú Chulainn again raised his spear. The second Fomorian turned, raised his hand, and cast some kind of blue magic against his spear, causing it to turn around in mid-air and fly back toward Cú Chulainn.

Under the ríastrad Cú Chulainn was not only more agile, but his senses were also heightened. He dodged his own spear as it darted toward him through the air.

He didn't dare turn his back on the Fomorian to recover his spear. He'd have to rely on his strength... if only he allowed a little more of the wolf to emerge he'd use the beast's jaws or claws. Whatever it took...

It wouldn't be the first Fomorian he'd bested that way...

He hoped it would be his last.

But the Fomorian shifted shape—he took the form of a giant fish and dove into the sea.

Cú Chulainn stopped by the edge of the sea.

"I can't believe it's you..." Fand said coming up behind him.

Cú Chulainn looked at her and his heart skipped a beat. In an instant, he released the ríastrad and resumed his normal appearance. "It has been too long..."

A tear fell down Fand's cheek. She was even more beautiful than he'd remembered. "I cannot help that I love you still..."

"As I love you," Cú Chulainn said.

"It is on account of our love my husband now seeks my life..."

"Still, if I'm by your side, the Fomorian who remains will not dare come after you again..."

"Sétanta, my love. I cannot be with you. My husband would never..."

"I do not know how marriages work amongst the Fae, but in Ulster, if a husband ever attempted to take his wife's life he would be imprisoned. She would be released from the marriage contract."

Fand nodded. "That would be just and right."

"Then if such is true, for the sake of all that is right and just, you are not married..."

"But what of you?" Fand asked.

Cú Chulainn winced. "I had only just spoken my vows to my would-be wife when your husband sent an army after me... But the marriage was never consummated."

"And there was another... a woman with the ríastrad, like you. She assaulted the Fomorians before..."

Cú Chulainn nodded. "It is a wonder they were able to escape..."

"I don't know," Fand said. "She seemed to give up her pursuit once they fled... undoubtedly to my husband."



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Cú Chulainn bit his lip. Restraint had never been one of Aife's virtues. If she didn't kill them, she had a reason. Nonetheless, there was no sense dwelling on her. She was his past. But his future was with Emer, or Fand if she would have him. "Marry me, Fand."

"I'd be forever exiled from my home... I could never return..."

"But we would be together," Cú Chulainn said, taking each of Fand's hands. The tingle of her magic warmed his hands.

"I don't know how it could be possible... a marriage between our kinds... it is forbidden!"

"You cannot return to Manannán mac Lir and I would prefer never to return to Ulster. If I do, I will be destined to live a life of battle."

Fand placed her hand on Cú Chulainn's cheek. "But you must return to Ulster, at least once. Think of the woman whom you left under the pretense of your vows. You owe her the truth."

Cú Chulainn sighed. He dreaded that conversation. But Fand had a point. What sort of man would leave the woman he'd committed himself to in word before consummating his vows without at least an explanation? He had to be the sort of man who deserved Fand's love. "I suppose you are right."

Cú Chulainn heard a caw. He looked overhead—it was the Morrigan, appearing again as a raven. If a goddess blessed their union who could prevent them from finally

being together? He had one thing left to do—and it frightened him more than any warrior he'd ever faced or any battle he'd ever fought. He had to tell Emer.

The threads that bound his heart, that kept him from loving me, were continuing to unravel. Aife was out of the picture. Emer would be soon. Only Fand would remain and what were the chances a union between faerie and human would work?

Still, I couldn't take the chance it might. At the proper time, I'd reveal to Fand the truth—that her husband had not dispatched the Fomorians to kill her, he'd sent them to rescue her. That they did not heed his orders was not her husband's fault.

And if that was the case, her marriage was not void by his betrayal. He'd never betrayed her. He loved her even though her heart desired Cú Chulainn. It might not be enough for her to return to him. She and the Faerie King were at odds before I ever got involved.

But Fand was betraying her husband even as I soared overhead. I couldn't watch. The passion Cú Chulainn had for her, it should have been mine. It would be mine. But I had to stick to my plan. I had to allow everything I'd set into motion to bear the sour fruit it was bound to do when everything came into its season. Still, to see the man whom I loved, his body enthralled by hers... him inside of her and her hands exploring his body...

Was I angry? Yes. But I was only angry at myself. This was my plan—but what other path was there? So long as his doomed relationship with the faerie did not run its course, so long as he did not thereby betray the woman he'd already vowed to marry, I'd never have my opportunity. This was the only way to free his heart that he might seem as his true love.

I spread my wings and soared across the countryside. The wind ruffling my feathers wasn't enough to distract me from what was happening... between Cú Chulainn and Fand. But I was willing to break my own heart if that's what it took to satisfy its desire.

Some mortals imagine that the gods don't know pain. They think only humans know what it means to hurt, to ache, to desire... but that's not correct. Never during my human lives—as Babd, Macha, or Anand—had I experienced such a longing, such a desire, such a need that yet remained unfulfilled.

As three girls I'd known loss. All three of us lamented our mother's disappearance and, while only as Babd did I really understand what my father had done, all of us hated him for what he'd done to her.

As Babd, I briefly mourned Grainne's departure. But even that was nothing compared to the emptiness I experienced now, as a goddess, whose love remained unrequited.

As gods and goddesses, we were not immune to human sentiments like love, sadness, or pain. Rather, as immortal creatures, our love, our sadness, our pain never died. All our emotions were heightened even as our power was infinitely greater than that of humankind.

If only Cú Chulainn realized the depth of my love, the profundity of everything I felt for him...

I did not like the things I'd had to do to win his heart. I was like some kind of puppet master, pulling at the strings of human hearts, deceiving people to act as I hoped they would... only to see my plan carried out toward an end that would allow me to be with the one who was meant to be mine.

But who could judge me for it? I was a goddess... I am a goddess and evermore shall

be! It was that word, evermore, that haunted me. It was the prospect of an eternity unloved or, worse, at the Dagda's side that drove me to do whatever I had to do to see my heart's desire realized.

Mortals like Aife, Emer, Cú Chulainn, or even Fand—for faeries do not live forever—live one life then are reborn anew, they have another chance to realize whatever of their former lives went unfulfilled. But we who are divine get no second chances. Yes, what I was doing, the manipulations of my hand, were regrettable. But whatever pain I might cause would be temporary. If I did not have my love, the pain I'd know would be eternal.

Not only can gods and goddesses feel pain. They know fear, too... not the fear of death, but the opposite. I was afraid of an infinite existence without my beloved. Whatever I had to do, that's what I would do. What other choice did I have?

Cú Chulainn gripped Fand's hand tightly as the two lovers stood outside Ulster's gates.

"You have to tell her the truth," Fand said.

"I know," Cú Chulainn said. "I just hate what I know this is going to do to her. I mean, she just lost her father... and now to lose the one who she'd thought was about to become her husband?"

"If you wish to be with her..."

"No," Cú Chulainn said, waving his hand. "I want to be with you."

"Then find the strength to face her in your love for me."

Cú Chulainn nodded. Still, he feared Emer more now than any foe he'd ever faced. He didn't want to hurt her. He never wanted to hurt her. But all he'd ever done since he first laid eyes on her, training with Forgall, was bring her pain. Still, she loved him no less. Why would a woman continue to love a man who brought her only heartache? Matters of the heart, Cú Chulainn had learned in many tales, were rarely sensible. And what he was about to do didn't make much rational sense, either. But he had to follow his heart.

Cú Chulainn took a deep breath. "I'll be back shortly."

Fand shook her head. "I'll come with you, my love."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

Fand shrugged. "I can vanish should any threat befall me. But I want to be there for you..."

Cú Chulainn nodded. Fand, who had no real means to defend herself other than to feel into the invisible ether, had more courage at the moment than he did.

No sooner did they pass through the gates and Emer was upon him, wrapping her arms around her would-be husband. "I was so worried, husband! When you left, and the army fled but you did not return..."

"I am well," Cú Chulainn said, grabbing Emer by the shoulders and putting some space between them. "Emer, this is Fand."

"Fand?" Emer asked, tilting her head. "Are you a..."

"I am a faerie," Fand said.

"Husband, why would you bring a faerie..."

"Because I love her," Cú Chulainn blurted. He hadn't meant to be so direct.

Emer scrunched her brow. "You love her? As in, you care about her well-being..."

"No," Cú Chulainn said. "I'm in love with her. I've always loved her. Ever since I met her as a boy. I'm sorry, Emer. I never thought I'd see her again. But the army that came, they'd been sent by the Faerie King... and I ended up rescuing her from the very King who sought to kill her..."

Emer turned her back to him. Her shoulders quaked. Cú Chulainn lifted his hand and

put it on her back.

"Don't touch me!"

"Emer, I'm sorry... I never meant..."

"You never meant what?" Emer turned around and poked Cú Chulainn repeatedly in the chest. "That you would leave me without a father? That you would woo my heart and then leave me before consecrating our marriage bed? No, of course you didn't mean to do that. It was purely an accident!"

Cú Chulainn took two steps back. "Emer... I..."

"What is the meaning of this?" The voice came from behind Emer. King Conchobar, now his hair turned completely gray, marched toward them with purpose. "Is this a faerie you've brought into Ulster's walls?"

"He says he loves her," Emer said, kicking at the dirt.

A wide smile split the king's face. "A marriage with one of the Fae... the possibilities... what is your name, young lady?"

"I am Fand..."



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King Conchobar tilted his head. "Fand, Manannán mac Lir's queen?"

"Unbelievable!" Emer cried.

King Conchobar raised his hand. "What is the meaning of this, that you should come to love Ulster's prized champion?"

"My husband seeks my life," Fand said. "Sétanta rescued me."

King Conchobar stroked his beard. "A curious predicament... should we allow you to stay and marry our warrior, you may be able to heal our wounded in the event of war... the strength we'd have against any other army."

"I could," Fand said, nodding. "But I do not know if we can stay..."

"Rubbish!" King Conchobar exclaimed. "I insist that you do!"

Cú Chulainn sighed. This wasn't what he wanted. He'd dreamed of leaving Ulster behind, building lodgings in the forest where he and Fand could live out their lives. He had to think of something. "If the Faerie King raises up an army against us, on account of me marrying his wife... he'd be able to heal their wounded, too."

"Then we would be evenly matched. And his soldiers still couldn't breach our walls."

Cú Chulainn shook his head. "I don't know..."

"I insist," King Conchobar said. "Emer, my dear, I know this news must cause you

great pain. But I urge you to accept this union as what is best for Ulster."

Emer clenched her fists. "What choice do I have..."

I hadn't anticipated King Conchobar would embrace the union between Cú Chulainn and the faerie. It was but a minor complication. I'd intended to reveal to Fand, after the two left Ulster together, that her husband loved her still, that the Fomorians were acting of their own accord. I'd hoped she'd be moved by her honor and return to her husband. There is nothing more important to a faerie than her sense of honor.

Anand had an idea... it had worked before with Aife. We'd used her to assault the Fomorians, to turn them against the faerie to wound Cú Chulainn's heart. But Aife believed in vengeance. For her, to allow anyone who'd wronged her to escape her wrath was to admit defeat, to acknowledge a weakness—something contrary to her instincts as a warrior.

Emer had no such beliefs. She wasn't a warrior. She wasn't a killer. But she was a woman whose heart had been spurned by the very man she loved. She was angry. She was wounded. Her heart churned with a perfect recipe of emotions suitable to conjure up a drive for revenge.

But to kill a faerie... it wasn't easy. She'd need a unique blade, one poisoned by my cauldron... one vested with the power to take whomever it stabbed through death and into rebirth with a single strike. I could provide her with such a blade...

All at once, Fand could be put away with and Emer, if not punished by the king for the murder, would be the one who killed Cú Chulainn's beloved. He'd never return to Emer after that. Yes, Cú Chulainn would have to mourn the loss of Fand... but as an eternal deity, I had the time to wait. I'd soothe him in the wake of his loss... I'd

gradually present myself as a new chance at love... it would work. If Emer pulled it off. Either way, I could always revert to my original plan and reveal to Fand that her husband desired her still. She'd leave to preserve her honor. But would that put Cú Chulainn's love for her to rest? Not likely... he needed to lose her, to mourn her, and to heal.

Kill the faerie...

I only whispered the suggestion in her ear as she wandered Ulster's streets. My whisper was subtle enough that she might think the idea was her own.

Emer shook her head. "I think I'm losing my mind..."

Kill Fand... I can help you do it...

She'd realize, now, that it wasn't just her imagination speaking.

"Who's there?"

I appeared in front of her. "Dearest Emer..."

Emer gasped.

"Your heart cried out to me and I have answered."

"Are you..."

"I am the Morrigan. I am the Phantom Queen."

"But you are a goddess of war! Of war and death! That is not who I am. Killing her is not the answer..."

"Death is but a turning of a page, one season turning to another, even as one moves from childhood into adulthood, so too does one pass from death to life. It is time that the faerie should complete the cycle, that she should return to me."

"Then why don't you kill her yourself?"

"That is not my way. I do not assault mortals."

Emer shook her head. "I don't understand. Why do you care about my broken heart?"

"Your heartbreak simply affords me the opportunity to collect the faerie. It is her time. And you are the one I've chosen as my instrument to return her soul to me."

In truth, I'd never ushered a faerie from death to rebirth. Would the cauldron work on the Fae? Probably not. But she didn't know that. I imagined the faeries had some other deity, some other force, to whom they appealed in their own cycle of rebirth. Still, what Emer did not know I'd use to my advantage. This had to succeed... it was my best chance, yet.

"Very well," Emer said. "I will take her life and my own. Provided you will take me, too, to your cauldron. I am weary of this life. My father is gone, and my husband, too... his heart now belongs to another."

I smiled. What she wanted... it was well within my power. And more than that, it would work to my advantage. In a single night, both Fand and Emer would be out of the picture forever. And I would be left to console Cú Chulainn for as long as it might take until he came to love me, as he did the faerie, as he'd once hoped to love Emer.

"I will be with you," I said as I held out the blade I'd prepared for this very purpose.

Emer took the blade, her hand trembling as she grabbed it by the handle.

"It will take only a small strike, anywhere on the faerie's flesh, and the blade will accomplish my purpose."

Emer nodded. Her hand continued to shake as she held the blade and examined the blade. "And will the blade do the same for me? Can I cut myself on my finger or thumb or must I plunge it into my heart?"

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"Again, dearest Emer. A single cut will suffice. Though the deeper the blade strikes, the quicker it is sure to act."

Emer took a deep breath. "Thank you, goddess. I will join you in the cauldron of rebirth before the sun rises."

I nodded, gently stroked Emer's cheek, and wiped away a tear. "I promise you, dear Emer, you will find happiness. You will carry with you the lessons of this life and finally realize your heart's desire in the next."

I assumed the form of a fly that I might follow Emer as she approached the chambers—chambers of honor given to Fand and Cú Chulainn that they might enjoy whatever comforts Conchobar offered. He had great plans for them, given the power she brought to Ulster by being wedded to his prized champion.

Emer moved with trepidation, each step down the hall deliberate as she approached and pressed open the door. She was dressed in black, perfect for maneuvering through the shadows.

She pressed open the door. Cú Chulainn and Fand both laid together, a blanket covering their bodies while the man she'd once hoped to become her husband slept. But the faerie... she was alert. She looked upon her lover with wide eyes, stroking his long hair...

The look on Emer's face... She saw the love Fand had for him. She was second-guessing her intentions.

You must do it, I whispered as I buzzed near Emer's ear. Do not be dissuaded... the pain will only last a moment, then it will all be over.

"You truly love him," Emer said calmly. She was supposed to sneak up and take the faerie by surprise.

"I do," Fand said.

"I came that I might have my revenge... but how can I blame you for what your heart desires?"

The faerie smiled kindly. "I never meant for you to be hurt... this is not your fault, Emer."

Emer sobbed. "I know... it just hurts..."

"Where did you get the blade?"

Do not answer her!

"It was given to me by the Morrigan."

"The Morrigan. Are you certain?"

Emer nodded.

I wanted to scream. They couldn't know I'd set this up. If Cú Chulainn learned of my manipulations...

"This is not the first time she has interfered in these affairs, I fear..."



Emer shook her head. "I believe she was there at our wedding. There was a raven who crowed continually. Cú Chulainn was distracted by her... he must've known..."

I buzzed around the room in a fury. But the situation was still salvageable. Cú Chulainn already knew I'd taken an interest in his love life. But he believed I'd supported his desire to be with Fand. And he wasn't wrong. I did want him to be with Fand only that I might pull them apart again, that I might break his heart that it might heal again devoid of his love for her.

Emer lifted the blade and pressed its sharp edge to the palm of her hand.

No, Emer!

If she took her own life, but left Fand alive, Cú Chulainn would turn to his faerie bride for comfort. The tragedy would only deepen their love.

I appeared in full-form and with a bolt of energy zapped the blade out of Emer's hand.

At that very moment, a golden cone of energy appeared in the middle of the room.

A man in a black robe and hood appeared—it was Doidrich. He quickly grabbed the knife from the floor and charged after Cú Chulainn who was just starting to stir in his bed.

Emer dove across Cú Chulainn's body, shielding him from the blow, as the blade struck Emer in the shoulder.

"No!" I screamed. I grabbed Doidrich and threw him against the wall.

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Fand retrieved the blade from Emer's back. The power of the cauldron, it was already starting to work... only I'd never seen what it would do when someone yet to die was exposed to the potion brewed from the cauldron. She wasn't dead yet. The cut was shallow enough that it would still take some time to work. How much time, I couldn't say.

Fand placed her hand over the wound and channeled faerie magic into Emer's body. A golden glow enveloped Emer's body. She healed her before the poison and the blade took her life.

Emer screamed. "But I wanted to die! Without my love, without Cú Chulainn, what is left of this life worth living!"

"You!" Cú Chulainn shouted when he spotted Doidrich. "You come to kill me at the Faerie King's behest?"

Cú Chulainn was overcome with rage. He charged Doidrich as the *ríastrad* began to emerge.

Doidrich quickly lifted his hand and shot Cú Chulainn with a bolt of energy, the same lightning he'd cast before. My beloved fell, his body convulsing, on the floor.

Fand charged the blade that I'd given to Emer, the one infused with the cauldron's power, and overwhelmed it with power until it dissolved into thin air.

"It was her!" Doidrich said, pointing at me. "She was the one who did all of this!"

"I only came that true love might be realized..."

"That you would make the warrior love you, you mean," Doidrich said, sneering through his cowl. "That you might dissuade his heart away from either of these noble women!"

"I confess," I said. "I do love Cú Chulainn."

"She was the one who gave me the blade!" Emer added. "She told me to kill the faerie."

Doidrich smirked as he released Cú Chulainn from his spell. Now that Cú Chulainn knew the truth, Doidrich had no reason to kill him. Now, in his jealousy, Doidrich was going to torment me by letting him live, by making me watch as Cú Chulainn chose the woman he'd love.

"And my husband..." Fand said.

I lowered my gaze to the ground. "He loves you still. It was I who set the Fomorians against you."

"You what!" Cú Chulainn shouted as he approached me, clenching his fists in rage.

"I was setting you up that you might be her hero... that you two might be together."

"Only you had other plans after that, did you not, Morrigan?" Doidrich asked.

"What Emer said is true. I am the one who gave her the blade."

"I can't believe this!" Cú Chulainn shouted, his eyes piercing me like daggers. I couldn't even bear to return his stare with a glance.

"I only wanted you to love me, Cú Chulainn. To love me as I love you..."

"These plans of yours... if you loved me you wouldn't try to have the one I love murdered and turn the other woman whom I love into a murderer, in turn!"

Fand cocked her head slightly. She'd heard what I heard. He confessed he loved them both. Either way, my plan had been foiled.

"My plans were misguided, I see that now."

"Misguided?" Cú Chulainn rolled his eyes. "You are a goddess... how can you be so misguided?"

"I was but a girl once," I said. "Three girls in fact. And you are the only one—mortal or god alike—whom I ever saw who could claim all of our hearts. But your heart, it always belonged to others..."

"If my husband loves me still," Fand said, taking Cú Chulainn's hand. "I must return to him."

"You what?" Cú Chulainn asked, his rage against me quickly changing to disbelief.

"The love Emer has for you... she was ready to give her life to save you from the blade. The depth of love she has for you, Sétanta... it's the sort of love that can only be consecrated by a vow. It is a vow you've taken for her as I took one like it for my husband. Consummated or not, your words and promises were spoken. It was wrong for me to come here to be with you. You should be with Emer."

"Fand... I don't know what to say..." Emer said, shaking her head. "I do not know if I can move forward with my husband knowing his heart was so easily swayed from his vows once before. So long as that memory haunts me, I don't know that I can ever

love him again in quite the same way."

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"Your memory," Doidrich said. "That is the problem, is it not?"

"What are you doing, Doidrich!" I demanded.

Cú Chulainn raised his hand to silence me. "Be silent, Morrigan! You've done and said too much as it is!"

Doidrich reached into his cloak and retrieved two vials. "Unfortunately, this will only work on humans. However, if each of you—Cú Chulainn and Emer—take this potion this entire affair will be forgotten. Cú Chulainn, you will forget you ever loved Fand. And Emer, the heartache you now feel will vanish. You two can be happy, together, again."

I didn't speak. Cú Chulainn was right. What I'd done was wrong. I was ashamed. And there was nothing I could say.

Cú Chulainn and Emer both took the potion from Doidrich and swallowed it quickly. Fand stayed just long enough to watch. She had to see it as I did. By taking the potion, Cú Chulainn made a choice. Fand had of her own accord declared she'd return to the Faerie King. But he could have tried to stop her. He didn't. He chose his human bride over the faerie, and he never even gave me a moment's consideration.

The moment he swallowed the potion, Fand disappeared. Presumably, she'd returned to Manannán mac Lir.

After swallowing it, both Cú Chulainn and Emer looked up and saw me even as Doidrich disappeared in the shadows. "Who are you?" my beloved asked.

"I am the Morrigan," I said.

"The Phantom Queen?" Emer asked.

I nodded.

"A goddess!" Cú Chulainn exclaimed. "Come to bless our marriage bed!"

I pressed my lips together. I couldn't ever bless their marriage bed... but then it occurred to me... by forgetting the whole affair they'd both forgotten my role in it. I'd have another chance... only this time, I had to be more careful. I had to win his heart properly. I'd have to do it without deceit, without violating his union with Emer. It wasn't going to be easy—but I had an opportunity, and that was enough to give me hope.

"Yes, may your union be a blessed one," I pronounced before shifting into raven-form and flying out the window.

I had to come up with another plan... a way to bring war upon Ulster. No, not that Cú Chulainn might be harmed in any way. Quite the contrary—so that he might grow weary of his life in Ulster, that he might begin to consider... other... possibilities. But this time, I had to proceed honestly. If Doidrich returned, and I suspected I hadn't seen the last of him in his power-hungry effort to take his place at my side, all he'd have to do is expose my plans. This time I had to be sure that whatever I planned would not prevent Cú Chulainn from loving me if he were ever to discover what I'd done.

### PART IV:

#### Cú Chulainn ? The Morrigan

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"Can you believeit?" Emer asked, gripping her husband by the arm. "It's glorious! And to think, it was given to Ulster on occasion to celebrate our marriage!"

Cú Chulainn nodded as he examined the majestic stud bull. Donn Cúailnge was well-known throughout the isles, but he'd never been tamed. A wild bull who, it was said, was so fertile he could multiply even the wealthiest kingdom's riches a hundredfold. But the bull was something of a legend already, the subject of a few tales that Cú Chulainn had learned in his training at Emain Macha. If the stories were true, whole wars had been fought elsewhere between kingdoms who had tried to take Donn Cúailnge into their possession.

As one famed tale went two whole armies slew one another until only three men remained of the victorious side. But the three men could not, with all their might, tame the bull. They'd won the war and lost the prize. It was a cautionary tale about the causes of war. As Cú Chulainn understood it, the tale was meant to cause one to consider the costs of war and measure them against what might be attained in a victory. If the victory is not worth the cost, or if the cost should spoil the victory, then the war should not be fought.

"It is quite a gift," Cú Chulainn said. "But once news reaches other kingdoms that we possess Donn Cúailnge..."



"Do you think they'll try to take him from us?" Emer asked.

"They most certainly will," King Conchobar said, placing his hand on Cú Chulainn's shoulder.

Cú Chulainn nearly leaped out of his boots. He didn't realize that the king had been standing behind him. "Your Highness, it is an honor."

The king nodded. "I must confess, when I thought you were going to marry a faerie, I believed that her presence was going to be a blessing to Ulster..."

"Marry a faerie?" Cú Chulainn asked, raising his eyebrows. So much as he could remember he'd only ever met one faerie before—the one who helped him tame the ríastrad. Still, so much had happened since then that he barely remembered her. He recalled the event, but when he tried to picture her, to imagine the strange faerie who'd aided him that day, his mind was completely blank. No matter, surely the king was out of his mind. King Conchobar was now advanced in years. The old man's faculties were fading by the moment. He often said strange things. Better not to press him on the point. Entertaining an old man's delusions could only breed new problems—particularly when the old man in question happened to be king.

King Conchobar waved his hand, dismissing the thought. "Never mind it. Such was not meant to be! Clearly, the gods smile on Ulster on account of your marriage to Emer! We never should have questioned it! Only a god could have tamed the great Donn Cúailnge!"

"We should prepare the other warriors," Cú Chulainn said. "Once the other kingdoms receive word that we possess the bull..."

King Conchobar laughed. "Yes, Queen Mebd of Connacht has already sent an emissary begging we permit our bull to mate with her herds."

"That was fast," Emer interjected. "The bull was brought to us just last night and this is the very first time we've ever seen him."

"She has a point," Cú Chulainn said. "How could the Queen of Connacht know we'd acquired Donn Cúailnge when we'd barely learned of it ourselves?"

King Conchobar shrugged. "Likely she'd been pursuing the bull, too. She's long been obsessed with taming him. Chances are she received word someone had tamed the bull before it was delivered to us."

"I think you should share him with her," Cú Chulainn said. "Her armies are greater than ours."

King Conchobar smiled wide and slapped Cú Chulainn on the back. "But she doesn't have a single champion who could rival our Cú Chulainn! If she'd thought she could take him from us she wouldn't have bothered to ask that we share him with her. She's making her request from a posture of desperation. Which is why I am confident in my refusal of her request."

"Are you serious?" Cú Chulainn said. "She will attack eventually. If what you say is true, that she's spent years trying to acquire the bull, do you think for a moment she's going to give up because Donn Cúailnge has come into our possession?"

"When she attacks, we will prevail."

"But at the cost of how many lives?" Cú Chulainn had raised his voice. This was why he hated the fact that he'd been destined to be a warrior, a champion. War would come upon him and, if it were like every conflict he'd examined in the baric tales, it would be on account of someone else's greed. The King didn't want to share the bull with Queen Mebd because he wanted to keep all the bull's offspring for himself. But if she ever attacked, even if Ulster prevailed, it would not be without significant

casualties. But human lives mattered less to the king than riches.

"If you fight well," King Conchobar said. "Perhaps you can take down her entire army before a single one of our warriors is lost."

"Are you insane?" Cú Chulainn asked. "You expect me to take on a whole army?"

"You've done it before," King Conchobar shrugged. "When the faerie army marched on Ulster during your wedding."

Cú Chulainn cocked his head. Again with the faeries. Cú Chulainn remembered his wedding. He remembered speaking his vows. He remembered an annoying raven cawing overhead. And he remembered lying in bed with his wife, blessed by the Morrigan herself—which, he presumed, must've been the raven who'd joined them at the wedding. But there was no battle and no faerie army. Still, once again, he dared not question a senile man, much less one who happened to be king.

"I urge you, as a humble citizen of Ulster, to consider the queen's request. What loss would it be to us to allow the bull to mate with her herds? Donn Cúailnge is said to be fertile aplenty—he could impregnate her herd and all of ours and still have enough virility to spare."

King Conchobar nodded. "Such might be what I would have done if I were still a young king, inexperienced in matters of politics. Connacht is quite likely the most powerful kingdom in all the isles, second only to Ulster. To multiply Queen Mebd's herds would allow her to keep pace with our growing strength. It would allow her to remain in contention to usurp our position in time. And since I am aging fast, and there is no telling how many more years I might protect the good people of Ulster as their king, if she has the chance at all to rival us after I am gone you'd better believe she'll take it."

"And if we do not yield to her reasonable request now she is likely to attack sooner rather than later."

King Conchobar shook his head. "The queen is bluffing, young lad. Trust me on this matter. Do your duty when called upon and allow me to worry about matters of the Kingdom."

My beloved hated the prospect of a life of war. He always had.

But it was more than battle itself that haunted my Cú Chulainn. It was the threat of it, the weight of a kingdom on his shoulders, the burden of lives contingent on his defense.

Yes, I'd lost him for a time to Emer. He seemed to love her now that the faerie had been wiped from his memories. But life with her, life in Ulster, would always be the life of a champion, the life of one on whom the security of the kingdom relied.

I'd tried to intervene before—I'd tried to complicate his relationships, to interfere with matters of the heart. But as much as he loved Emer, he hated war just as much.

So long as they remained married, I'd have to show him that he'd never be more than the very thing he'd resisted becoming since he was but a boy. He'd have to be a warrior. For, Emer would never leave Ulster. It was her home. She was not the adventurous type who'd run off with my beloved—not as he'd once fancied he might do if he were to marry Fand. Emer craved stability. She desired children.

But Cú Chulainn would never bear her children. His seed would never take hold in the womb of a plain woman like Emer. It was only because Aife was like him that she found herself with a child.

I couldn't help but laugh at the irony of it all...

That I should give Ulster a virile bull, the most fertile that the isles had ever seen...

It would sting. It would water the seeds of discontent in his marriage that had been there from the start.

And, if my plan worked as I'd hoped, it would prime him to desire a bride more suited for his... unique... constitution. Not a brute, like Aife. But a goddess who would gladly open her womb to his seed.

I took it upon myself to inform Queen Mebd of Connacht that Ulster had acquired Donn Cúailnge. She would undoubtedly seek an alliance, one that King Conchobar was too stubborn in his old age to ever accept.

Still, more seeds were sown. This time, the seeds of conflict that, over time, might sprout into war.

And when it came to matters of war, I was queen.

Cú Chulainn wouldn't have a choice. He'd have to fight.

And when the time was right I'd appear to my beloved again... I'd offer him a way out... a chance to escape it all and take his place at my side to rule over the realms of both the living and the dead. What man could ever refuse such an offer?

Before, I'd tried to sever the strands that bound his heart to the women he loved quickly. This was a different approach. It would take many cycles before he'd grow weary of his marriage, tired of his role as Ulster's defender. His love for Emer would die a slow death this time... not by a great betrayal, as I'd attempted with Fand. No, this time his discontent would fester for a decade or more. He'd come to crave a new love, the sort of love only I could offer him.

War was coming. Maybe not today. Probably not tomorrow. But Cú Chulainn knew it was an inevitability, eventually. So long as Donn Cúailnge remained in Ulster's possession and King Conchobar was unwilling to negotiate with Mebd's requests, it was only a matter of time before her armies would attack.

For nearly ten years Queen Mebd made her petition to King Connacht and each year the king declined her invitation. But the king, whose mental faculties had been declining steadily for the better part of a decade, had nearly lost his memories entirely. Mebd was simply waiting for her chance... a time when she could exploit Ulster's weakness under a senile king but before Ulster could replace him with a younger king who had his wits all about him.

Queen Mebd was just waiting for an opportunity.

Cú Chulainn had always trained with spears rather than blades. He found them easier to wield. His agility was one of his greatest assets. But it struck him as he got older that as his agility declined he remained strong. The spear had always treated him well. But it was time he refined his abilities with the blade.

Spears are wonderful—they can be thrown and take down an opponent from a distance. But spears are also easily broken. And, if he throws it, he'd be unarmed aside from a small dagger, if needed. So, Cú Chulainn took up Forgall's broadsword. Emer's late father had trained him with it before but, before he'd sent him away to Scotland, he'd always resisted practicing with it. Still, it seemed wise he at least develop some competency with the blade. Even with the ríastrad, he needed to be

sure he'd mastered every skill possible.

Thankfully, King Conchobar was willing to send for his old sparring partner. It didn't take much convincing. Conchobar had never met Ferdiad but, to hide his senility, the king acted like anyone whom he thought he was supposed to know was like an old friend.

Ferdiad, whom the warrior-queen Scáthach had paired him with when he used to train in Scotland, was quite the bladesman. There wasn't a warrior in all the kingdom better suited to help Cú Chulainn master the broadsword than Ferdiad.

"How has Scáthach been?" Cú Chulainn asked as he shook his old friend's hand.

"As ruthless as ever," Ferdiad said. "Though she no longer trains me. She's been busy with your former lover and her child..."

"Her child..." Not a day had passed when Cú Chulainn hadn't thought about the child he'd had with Aife. How much time had passed since that affair? It seemed just like yesterday.

"He's a good kid," Ferdiad said. "Quite the warrior. And he seems to have acquired his mother's... abilities..."

Cú Chulainn shook his head. "Emer and I are unable to produce children. I wonder, to this day still, if it was only because of the fact that Aife and I..."

"Because you were both... wolves?" Feridad asked.

Cú Chulainn nodded. "I wonder if that's why we were able to produce a child... if for some reason I cannot breed with other, you know, normal humans."



Feridad shrugged. "It's possible, I suppose."

"But the boy is now training with Scáthach, too? Isn't he too young for that?"

Feridad laughed. "By his appearance, you'd think he twice his age. Your son is taller than you, Cú Chulainn."

Cú Chulainn cocked his head. "How is that even possible..."

"Maybe it has to do with the blessing of the ríastrad. But that boy has grown more quickly than any child I've ever seen."

Cú Chulainn smiled. "A part of me wishes to meet him. But Aife would never allow it. And I don't know how Emer would feel about that."

Feridad nodded. "Probably best you never meet him. That woman... she's poisoned him against you, Cú Chulainn. She's used her hatred of you to fuel him, to make him as fierce and ruthless as she ever was."

"I really wish you hadn't told me that, my friend."

"It's best you never know and avoid the boy, Cú Chulainn. Take my word for it."

Cú Chulainn nodded. "Anyway, I could use some help mastering the broadsword. It's never been my weapon of choice."

"Well that's why I came from Scotland, isn't it?" Feridad smirked, "I should say, it's about time you've come around. Spears are for pansies."

"Excuse me? I've taken you down with my spear alone more times than I could count."

"Correction. You used to... but since you've left, I've had no one to train with aside from Aife..."

"And my son?"

Feridad nodded. "And training with the likes of them... it makes you better."

"And training with me didn't make you better?"

Feridad smiled widely. "You always held back. When I sparred with Aife it always felt like I was genuinely fighting for my life."

"Restraint was never one of her virtues," Cú Chulainn smirked. "But let's see if you're better for it. Take up your arms. Let's see if I've still got what it takes to drop you in less than a ten count."

Feridad scrunched his brow. "How about a fifteen count?"

"You would grant me a handicap on account of my age? I can still down you in ten."

"I'm suggesting how much time I'll give you to try and take me down before I down you in five!"

32

Everything was going according to plan.

My beloved had trained for war. He expected it. He obsessed over the possibility...

Meanwhile, his marriage was strained. No children. He hardly had time for Emer. Not that he was busy fighting wars or battles—not a single army had dared attack Ulster. It wasn't that other kings and queens didn't want to take the stud bull from Ulster. Many did, though only one of them was gaining power and strength relative to Ulster that she might rival Ulster.

I first appeared in Queen Mebd's chambers, taking the solitary queen by surprise.

"Guards!" the queen shouted.

I raised my hand and maintained my composure. "There is no need for that. I am not a threat to you."

"Who are you?" Mebd asked. Connacht wasn't, traditionally, a pious kingdom. Few in Connacht believed in the gods at all. It was no surprise the queen would think I was but a common intruder, despite my divine appearance.

"I am the Morrigan, goddess of death and war."

Mebd sighed and her shoulders sank. "And you've come for me..."

I cocked my head. "It is not your time to die. I've come to aid you in your quest to overcome Ulster."

Mebd took a deep breath, likely out of relief that I hadn't come to claim her life. "How might you help? Ever since King Conchobar acquired Donn Cúailnge Ulster's wealth has grown beyond compare in all the Isles. And more than that, he has a warrior who has been blessed with the ríastrad. Even if I raised up an army to rival Ulster's, how would I ever acquire a champion to rival theirs?"

I heard several footsteps echoing outside Mebd's quarters. "I'll tell you. But you must send your guards away."

I quickly shifted into the shape of a fly and buzzed around the room.

Three men, spears in hand, burst into the room. "You've called us, my queen?"

"False alarm," the queen said. "I thought I'd heard an intruder but have now realized it was but a dream. My apologies, good sirs..."

"It is always an honor, your Highness," one of the soldiers replied.

Queen Mebd nodded and the three men left.

I resumed my natural form.

"You were saying?" Mebd asked.

I nodded. "I will handle Ulster's champion. Do not worry about him. But King Conchobar is reckless with his wealth, and he trusts that none of his enemies would dare attack him so long as Cú Chulainn remains his champion. He has neglected his armies who, now a generation removed from any meaningful battle and hardly

trained at all, lack the skill to match your warriors."

"It is not a question of skill, Divine Morrigan. It is a question of numbers. Even if he has no army of his own he has the wealth to acquire whatever mercenaries he requires."

"But such takes time. If you were to develop an army capable of assaulting Ulster's walls, if you took them by surprise you could claim the city before he had the chance to bolster his numbers with hired warriors."

Mebd shook her head. "Our scouts watch Ulster constantly. And every day their champion, Cú Chulainn, patrols the city's perimeter. And still, supposing you managed to remove Cú Chulainn from the city for a time, even if I raised up every male of age in all of Connacht we wouldn't have enough men to conquer Ulster's walls."

"He is not the only monarch who might hire mercenaries."

"But he is the only one who can afford to."

I grinned widely. "As I said, he is reckless with his wealth. He sells off the bulls of his herds, the bulls who come from Donn Cúailnge's stock."

"But he would never sell those bulls to me. He sells them only to roving herders, men without aspirations to ever challenge his dominance over the Isles."

I quickly changed shape—I took the form of a man, dressed in humble rags, and carrying a single staff. "Indeed, he does sell his bulls to roving herders... those who might appear like this..."

Queen Mebd smiled slyly. "And you will purchase the bulls from Donn Cúailnge's

stock on my behalf?"

"I will," I said. "While you may not accumulate wealth in the sort of excess that Ulster boasts, if you invest your proceeds wisely, you can raise up the army you require."

"Very well," Queen Mebd said. "But I must ask, why would you come to our aid? Our people have never revered you, or any of the gods for that matter."

"Suffice it to say, good queen, that I care little for your success as a kingdom. But I do have reasons that are my own to see Ulster challenged and fall. It just so happens, I believe, that you are the monarch in all the Isles best suited to accomplish what I desire."

Most mature bullscan cover thirty cows in heat. No wonder so many men petitioned the Morrigan that she might allow them to be reborn as bulls in the next life.

If anyone ever envied a bull's life, on account of its many lovers, Donn Cúailnge was on a whole other level. Not only could he cover more than three times the cows a normal bull could handle, but his progeny were especially virile. None of the bulls born from Donn Cúailnge's herds quite matched his production—but in the decade and a half since Donn Cúailnge had belonged to Ulster their herds had multiplied a hundredfold. The herds had grown so numerous that every patch of the once-grassy groves surrounding Ulster had been stripped bare. And the smell of manure had been so strong, for so long, that most in Ulster had grown accustomed to the odor.

But King Conchobarstillrefused Queen Mebd's requests.

And, as Cú Chulainn had rightly observed, the Queen of Connacht had far more wits about her than King Conchobar. In addition to his deteriorating memory, the king was drunk more often than not. He'd grown fat from feasting, no doubt attributable to the gross wealth Ulster had amassed.

Meanwhile, if what the scouts reported was true, Mebd had acquired many of the bulls produced from Ulster's herds. While Conchobar never sold them directly to Mebd he'd sold many bulls to roving herders, many of them likely proxies for Connacht. Thus, while Ulster had grown wealthy, Connacht had grown in power. Only, unlike Ulster, Mebd sold off and slaughtered her herds for meat to cull her herds to a reasonable size.

Ever since Donn Cúailnge had been given to Ulster, by some mysterious benefactor who'd meant to bless Cú Chulainn's marriage to Emer, it was likely Ulster would become a target. Cú Chulainn had warned King Conchobar from the beginning that spurning the requests of others, especially one with the ambitions of Queen Mebd, was unwise.

He'd attempted to counsel the king that great wealth did little more for Ulster than make her a target of envious kingdoms and, lest Ulster acquire more warriors and strengthen her fortifications, the richer the kingdom became the more likely it would be Ulster would fall. Still, on every occasion Cú Chulainn attempted to warn his king accordingly, his worries were dismissed.

"What do we have to fear?" King Conchobar would ask. "We have you, Cú Chulainn! We have a hero with the blessing of the ríastrad!"

While Ulster's wealth had been spent largely on luxuries for the people—and even Cú Chulainn could admit that life in Ulster had become quite leisurely—Mebd had spent her wealth to secure champions from the various tribes and to grow her armies. Meanwhile, Ulster's supposed warriors had grown fat and reckless. Few of any of them had seen a single battle. In short, all of Ulster had grown complacent. They'd taken their security and riches for granted.

But Cú Chulainn knew better. He'd heard and even told many tales of those whose wealth had become their downfall. It was a matter of time before Ulster would fall—and if Cú Chulainn couldn't defend the whole city alone it would likely be a bloodbath.

In truth, Mebd didn't need Donn Cúailnge. She'd managed to grow her kingdom and her armies strategically and wisely. After a decade of having her requests turned down by Conchobar, Cú Chulainn expected it was only a matter of time before she'd attack. Not that she needed any of Ulster's riches—but on account of principle. When Mebd



first approached Conchobar and requested Donn Cúailnge's services her kingdom was starving, they needed aid and Conchobar had refused her requests, time and time again. She'd attack now purely for the sake of revenge. And, while Cú Chulainn hoped she wouldn't attack, he couldn't blame her if she did.

"Come to bed!" Emer said.

"I cannot. I must train, then I need to patrol the perimeter."

"How long has it been, my love? We've been married fifteen years and more often than not I have slept alone while you obsess over an enemy who might never attack."

"Mebd will attack, Emer. It's not a question of if. It's a question of when."

"And in all these years of patrolling the perimeter of Ulster, have you ever encountered more than a few bands of roving bandits?"

Cú Chulainn shook his head. What Emer said was true. But in his gut, Cú Chulainn knew an attack was imminent. He realized his concern had masqueraded as an obsession. He understood that nearly no one in all of Ulster, not even his wife, shared his worries. But he had to be ready...

"Come, lie with me tonight," Emer said. "It has been more than a year since I've known my husband and my passions are growing restless!"

Cú Chulainn cocked his head. Had it been a full year since he'd last made love to his wife?

Even a year ago, Cú Chulainn hadn't been as obsessed as he was now. But with every passing day, it was likely Mebd's armies were gaining in strength and Ulster was only becoming more vulnerable. King Conchobar was practically useless as a monarch—if

Mebd attacked the armies of Ulster would be slaughtered, both on account of their lack of training and due to a lack of leadership. The only thing that had prevented Mebd from attacking, Cú Chulainn believed, was sheknewhe'd been on the lookout. ShefearedCú Chulainn—as most did. Conchobar knew as much which was one reason why he'd neglected Ulster's armies.

What Emer didn't understand was the whole weight of Ulster rested on his shoulders. If he was distracted, for even a minute, and Mebd knew it... nightmares of the possibility had haunted Cú Chulainn's nights.

So, Cú Chulainn trained himself to exhaustion. With Ferdiad's aid, he'd come to master the broadsword. He'd grown nearly as competent with the blade, if not moreso than he'd ever been with a spear. Even without calling upon the ríastrad, no warrior was likely to best him. At least none he'd ever sparred. Even Ferdiad, who'd initially prevailed in nearly half of their sparring sessions, barely prevailed in one out of a hundred matches.

And since Ferdiad had returned to Scotland, Cú Chulainn hadn't entertained so much as a single challenge an aspiring warrior. After all, few young men were more interested in training for battle than they were in the frivolities life in Ulster provided.

Even Cú Chulainn had grown weary of telling tales to Ulster's citizens. They were too blind by their luxuries to hear the lessons the tales were meant to teach. Sure, he was a skilled storyteller, his performances were always welcomed and celebrated, but he felt he'd failed as a bard. What good is a bard, Cú Chulainn though, if his tales did nothing more than entertain?

Had Cú Chulainn's desire for Emer waned? Not at all. He wanted nothing more than to give himself over to a night of unrestrained passion with his wife. But how could he enjoy a single night when all the while his worries about what armies might be lurking outside Ulster's walls occupied his mind?

Mebd's army was ready. It had multiplied in size. With my blessing, she scoured the countryside and acquired champions from many regions. Other kings and queens offered their best that she might finally conquer Ulster. She was a wise queen, she promised that should she usurp King Conchobar as the strongest monarch she would gladly share of her spoils, she would grant stud bulls from her herd to any who petitioned her for it. She had visions of unifying the isles and more than one monarch was willing to lend her their best champion to see Ulster fall in her quest to realize it.

None of these champions were a match for Cú Chulainn, of course. But they would strengthen her army, no less. It wouldn't take long, at all, to overwhelm Ulster provided Cú Chulainn was sufficiently distracted...

Yes, he'd erased Fand from his mind. The potion had done that. But he hadn't forgotten her in his heart. If he saw her, just once...

Or, someone who looked like her...

I could do that. I could be her, and more than that, I could capture his affections for a night. My stomach churned in excitement at the possibility. I'd loved him for so long, and the chance to spend a night with him... in time, I'd reveal to him I was the woman he'd want. I'd come to his aid to defeat Mebd's assault and offer him the chance to flee Ulster forever...

Our affair would remain a secret. I didn't want to harm Emer. But she and he had grown far apart already and it was by his action, his obsessions that their marriage was

strained. I could not compel him to lie with me. That would be his choice.

I saw my beloved patrolling Ulster's perimeter as he'd done many nights before.

Mebd's armies were ready... she'd march once I'd lured him away from his patrol.

I appeared in front of him as if I was the faerie Fand...

Cú Chulainn stepped back and shielded his eyes as the glow from my faerie form nearly blinded his eyes.

Faeries don't always glow, of course. They can when they wish to, when they are evoking their magic. I didn't wield faerie magic, but I could mimic it.

My divine heart fluttered as I beheld him up close. All three of us, as the triple-goddess, were drawn to Cú Chulainn for different reasons. Macha was enthralled by his beauty. Anand was attracted to his valor as a warrior and champion. Babd swooned over his mastery of verse. While each of us had found different men appealing, for different reasons, Cú Chulainn was the only man we'd ever encountered who claimed our heart as one. Each of us loved him for different reasons, but together, we loved him with a depth no mortal could possibly comprehend.

Cú Chulainn cocked his head. "You... you seem so... familiar..."

I nodded. "My love... how long I've desired to appear to you, that we might finally be together."

My heart skipped a beat as his eyes traced every contour of my faerie frame. In my natural form, I'm an impressive specimen, no doubt. I am a goddess, after all. But the faeries have a different sort of beauty. Their bodies, dainty in appearance, do not

exhibit strength or power although they are quite powerful in their own way. If this was the shape my beloved most desired it would be but a small sacrifice to remain this way.

"I don't understand," Cú Chulainn said, his voice softer than I'd ever heard him speak. "Something about you..."

I pressed my finger to his lips. "No need to speak... I am yours already..."

He took my hand in his, our fingers intertwined, and kissed me on the lips.

"Is there someplace we can go?" I asked.

"Come with me," Cú Chulainn said, breathing heavily. "We will get lost in the forest... and we will conquer the night."

35

How had he allowed it to happen? One single night, lured away by a mystic creature... she wasn't human, she couldn't have been human. The glow about her when she'd appeared. The power he'd felt coursing between their bodies as they united beneath the moonlight as it pierced the canopy of the forest, barely illuminating her perfect body.

And he returned to find Ulster aflame, Queen Mebd having likely slain his ailing king...

It was his worst fear...

Cú Chulainn crushed a boulder with his blade. So many nights without so much as a hint of her armies on the horizon... and now, he abandons his patrol for a single night, one night of pleasure and bliss...

This was his punishment. It was what he'd deserved for betraying Emer for the sake of an alluring woman, the strange creature who'd captured his passions in an instant.

How could he have been so weak... how could he have ever succumbed to such a sensual temptation... he loved his wife. But even as he regretted it he couldn't cast this strange beauty from his mind.

Had Queen Mebd sent this woman to him, to distract him for a night? It was such an unlikely coincidence Cú Chulainn didn't think it possible it had been purely a matter of bad luck. This was one of two things—a scheme concocted by Mebd, or a

punishment afflicted upon him by the gods...

After all, the goddess, the Morrigan, had blessed his marriage... she must have been angered he'd betrayed his wife...

How could I have been such a fool!

Cú Chulainn gripped his broadsword by the hilt. Could he storm Ulster and re-claim the city? What would be the point? How many lives had been lost already? He could only pray Emer was still alive. She likely would be. She wasn't a threat to Mebd's warriors. But if Mebd realized she was his wife...

Cú Chulainn shuddered at the thought. Mebd would use Emer as leverage. If he assaulted the city head-on all she had to do was bring out Emer, a knife to her throat, and compel him to lay down his sword. And he'd gladly do it. He hated the fact he hadn't been faithful to his wife. He regretted the fact he'd neglected her desires for so long. But he would gladly die, if it came to that, to spare her life.

Of course, there was the possibility Emer was unharmed. He'd lived with her in what was once Forgall's fortress. While it wouldn't stand forever against Mebd's army, the fortress wouldn't be Mebd's first target, either. Presumably, once she'd claimed Ulster and ousted Conchobar, she'd have other more pressing matters to attend to before concerning herself with the fortress. Eventually, she'd want to likely install one of her own nobles or champions there—but until then, Emer was safe... hopefully.

Then again, Mebd knew Cú Chulainn was out there, it was just a matter of time before he'd come to Ulster's rescue. If Mebd was smart, and she was, she'd make seizing Emer a priority.

Still, Cú Chulainn wasn't inclined to gamble with Emer's fate either way. Storming the city was foolish, even under the *ríastrad*, he'd be powerless if by chance Mebd had

found Emer.

But there was one tradition that he could evoke. One that would spare lives.

Cú Chulainn entered Ulster—his broadsword sheathed to communicate his peaceable intentions. Cú Chulainn gasped. Half the city had been set aflame. The bodies of Ulster's men, many of them dismembered, littered the streets. These men weren't warriors. They'd never been adequately trained.

This hadn't been a battle. It had been a slaughter.

"Queen Mebd!" Cú Chulainn shouted as he walked through the streets. Enemy warriors stood by the perimeter, none of them bold enough to dare confront Ulster's only champion. "Face me, Mebd! I have a proposal!"

Whispers passed from warrior to warrior. They weren't sure what to do.

Queen Mebd appeared from behind one of Ulster's buildings—her armor was stained in blood, as was the blade she carried at her side.

"Cú Chulainn, the hero of Ulster," the queen declared. "It seems you chose an odd time to indulge in the pleasures of the Fae..."

Cú Chulainn cocked his head. The Fae... that's where he knew the woman who'd appeared to him. That's right. She was the one who'd appeared before. The one who tamed the wolf within him... it had been years and he could barely recall the incident. But that must be why she'd seemed so familiar...

"What is done is done," Cú Chulainn said. "Tell me, what of Ulster's women and children?"



"I'm not a brute, Cú Chulainn," Mebd said. "None of them have been harmed. Not yet, anyway. Not even your wife."

"My wife..."

"She is well... and she will remain so if you drop your blade."

Cú Chulainn shook his head. "And the prize you seek, Donn Cúailnge?"

"We've acquired the stud bull already."

"They why do you remain in Ulster. You have won. Leave these people be."

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"And leave you alive to one day seek me out to get your vengeance for the fallen of Ulster?"

Cú Chulainn sighed. "I could fight my way through your army. I could find and slay the bull myself..."

"You could," Mebd said. "And I could execute your wife..."

"Then it seems as though we are at an impasse... might I offer a way to resolve the matter once and for all?"

"I will listen to your proposal, Cú Chulainn."

"I evoke the rite of single combat. Choose from your champions whomever you might and should I prevail in combat you will leave the city to mourn its dead."

"But what of Donn Cúailnge?"

"I care not for the stud bull. Whether I win or lose, the bull may remain yours."

"And if you should lose?"

"My death will be your victory. You will no longer have reason to fear my vengeance. And there will be no one left to stop you from doing whatever you desire with Ulster."

Queen Mebd smiled. "It is agreed. Let us codify the compact with our blood, yours

and mine."

The queen took her blade in her hand and sliced her palm. Cú Chulainn drew his blade only a hand's length from its sheath and did the same. Both of them joined hands, hers in his, their blood mingling and binding each of them to the contract as stated.

"Very well," Mebd said. "I will send my first champion and he will meet you at the river's edge."

"Your first?" Cú Chulainn asked, raising his eyebrow.

"You did not say, in the terms discussed, that I must select only a single champion to face you, Cú Chulainn. You said I could choose from my champions... and I choose all of them."

Cú Chulainn grunted. He wasn't accustomed to making such negotiations. He'd been trained in battle but he'd never fought in a true war. And negotiations like this, these were usually exacted between monarchs. In terms of the negotiation, she'd bested him. But this was a minor victory that would soon be a mistake on Mebd's part. After all, what champion could Mebd select that could best him?

"This is not wise," Cú Chulainn said. "Each of them your champions must face me in single-handed combat. By the time this is over you will have lost all of your champions and only I will remain."

"We will see, by day's end, which one of us was the true fool."

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"What are you doing!" I demanded, appearing before Queen Mebd in my natural form.

The queen laughed. "The warrior, Cú Chulainn, will be dead by day's end."

"I delivered you Ulster and the stud bull. I do not wish to see Ulster's champion fall."

Mebd shrugged. "Then again, perhaps he will prevail. I doubt it."

"You believe you have a champion who could possibly best Cú Chulainn?"

Queen Mebd shook her head. "He has to defeat all of them."

"Even so," I said. "He'll drop them all, one by one. Surely you realize..."

Queen Mebd laughed out loud. "I have acquired many champions. One of them is more than a little motivated to see Ulster's champion fall."

"You have Aife, the woman with the ríastrad?"

"She and he have a history, you know," Queen Mebd said through a smirk.

"If pressed, he will defeat her, too."

"By the time Cú Chulainn faces my final champion he will have had to best all the

rest. He will be exhausted..."

I shook my head. "You should have consulted me about this matter..."

Queen Mebd laughed. "You think I fear you, thephantomqueen? We of Connacht do not revere the gods not because we don't believe in them. We do not revere the likes of you because we resent the notion that we should submit to your whims, simply because you claim yourselves to be divine. Because you imagine you are our superiors."

"You dare defy me!"

"Are you going to kill me for it?"

"That is not my way... but when your time comes, when you approach the cauldron of rebirth, I'll see to it that you return a slug!"

Queen Mebd huffed. "If such is even in your power! And if it is, so be it. As a slug, I'll defy you again! I've already bested you once, Morrigan."

The things I wanted to do to her... if I gave in to my rage. But it wasnotmy place to kill humans. I could empower her enemies. I could rise up kingdoms against her. I could make her life a living hell to the point she'd wish she was dead. But I couldn't kill her. Not directly. The best way to defy her now was to meet my beloved at the river's edge. He did not know what he had yet to face. Aife was strong. She was a match for him even if he was well-rested. But by the time he'd face her he'd first have to eliminate twenty other champions, perhaps even more. I didn't know, for sure, how many Queen Mebd had at her disposal.

But I couldn't allow him to die. Not after all I'd done to win him as my love, not after having touched his flesh, felt him pulse inside of me... I needed to save him.

He needed more than the ríastrad if he was to prevail...

I'd reinvigorate him... if only he let me. For, I cannot force a blessing on any mortal who does not bless me, in turn.

Maybe he'd scorn me. Maybe he'd hate me as a result. But I had to give him my power... I had to save his life. And if I did, perhaps in time, he'd love me still.

Cú Chulainn hadbested the twelfth champion Mebd had sent to challenge him before the maiden appeared. She'd offered to fight alongside him. Then, with a single flick of the wrist, she'd thrown him on his back. As she straddled him, though, he saw it in her eyes... she was the same creature who'd met him the night before. She'd appeared, before, as a faerie. Why, Cú Chulainn wasn't sure. But now she appeared as a maiden, offering him her aid... she couldn't be trusted.

He saw it as she straddled him, a blade pressed to his throat—as if to prove to him she was a capable partner in battle.

"You must be a witch!" Cú Chulainn shouted.

The maiden laughed. "A witch? I am so much more than that, young hero. But you have rejected my offer—an offer that might have been your salvation. For that reason, I tell you, the time will soon come when you will fall in battle. Your blood will be evermore a curse on the land—for it will be the blood of a warrior who spurned the invitation of the Morrigan."

A black cloud of smoke surrounded the woman. A black crow flew out of the cloud—and when the smoke dissipated the woman was gone.

Cú Chulainn returned to his feet. It was not the first time he'd encountered the Morrigan and, he feared, it would not be the last. Was it she who'd seduced him the night before? Cú Chulainn stomach churned at the thought.

And for the goddess to propose she become his lover? Cú Chulainn thrust his blade into the ground in anger. To spurn a goddess... he'd be cursed for it. But to accept the advances of the phantom queen, the wife of the Dagda? He'd never escape the good god's wrath. He was damned either way.

"Cú Chulainn, the hero of Ulster!" a man's voice spoke.

Cú Chulainn gripped his broadsword by the hilt and pulled it from the ground. Eventually, Cú Chulainn thought, Mebd's final champion will fall. Cursed by the Morrigan, or not, I will see this through.

Cú Chulainn's thoughts drifted to his encounter the night before. He'd known she wasn't human. He couldn't recall ever having met her before, yet she was alarmingly familiar. The woman's whose touch, whose desire, had coursed through his body like electricity. The one for whom his lusts had distracted him for only a night, a night that allowed Mebd to make her move.

All of this was the Morrigan's doing! Damn her for it!

Cú Chulainn grabbed his blade and, in ankle-deep water, charged the warrior who approached him at the edge of the fjord. Something struck him in the ankle. Cú Chulainn tripped, crashing headlong into the water.

He quickly turned and spotted an eel that had caught itself around his ankle. He punched at it.

The eel squirmed and made its way to the shore where it transformed into a wolf.

"Morrigan!" Cú Chulainn shouted. "You and your tricks!"

Mebd's warrior caught him from behind while he shouted at the Morrigan, now



howling at him from the river's shore. Cú Chulainn quickly grabbed the warrior and flung him over his shoulder until he had the warrior by his chest plate and held him beneath the water.

Another champion down...

Cú Chulainn leaped ashore and charged after the wolf as it made its way toward the groves beyond the fjord. The wolf was riling up a herd of cattle as if to force a stampede.

What in the name of the great god himself is she doing?

If the goddess loved him, as she claimed, why send a stampede after him?

Cú Chulainn tossed his broadsword aside and a single stone. He hurled it with all his might toward the Morrigan, toward the wolf, striking her in the eye.

She howled as she transformed yet again—this time into one of the cows. What she'd started as the wolf she finished as a cow—stomping around and riling up all the rest of the herd.

Cú Chulainn grabbed a second stone. This time, he hurled it at the Morrigan's leg. Cú Chulainn could hear the bone break when the rock struck it...

This time, the Morrigan disappeared.

"Like I don't have enough on my hands as it is," Cú Chulainn said to himself. "All of Mebd's champions and I must do battle with a goddess as well?"

Shaking his head, Cú Chulainn returned to the river's edge. He didn't know how many more champions Medb had for him, but he was certain it was only a matter of time

before the next one arrived.

It had never been my intention to torment Cú Chulainn—and in the middle of his battle with Mebd's champions, no less. But I had to get to him... I had to turn his heart...

Not that he might love me, but that his life might be spared... if he was going to survive the ordeal he needed more than he had. He needed me...

He just didn't realize it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:44 am*

First I spoke him a warning. I hoped my declaration of what might be his impending death would soften his hardened heart. I thought if I interfered in his battles, if he saw his plight, he might relent from his stubbornness and accept my aid. Yes, I wanted him to love me. But if he were ever to love me he had to live...

I tripped him up as an eel, I distracted him as a wolf and sent a stampede after him as one of the herd. And he still bested the warriors who came after him. He still wounded me...

I could heal myself...

Or I could use these wounds to my advantage...

Frightening him into accepting my aid was not going to work.

But he was tired...

He still had more champions to defeat...

And he was thirsty...

That's it! It pains me to deceive him this way, but I cannot think of another way to bathe my beloved in my power, to give him the strength he needs to fight off the rest of Mebd's champions... to stand a chance against Aife...

Cú Chulainn was exhausted. He still could barely believe the Morrigan appeared as a woman in hopes he would permit her to join him in battle. If she was the one who'd

seduced him the night before... how could he ever trust her? It was her fault, after all, that Ulster had fallen. And now she'd shown her true colors. She'd tried to trip him as an eel. She'd tried to cause a herd to stampede down upon him.

But he'd prevailed. And, at least for now, she'd given up.

Cú Chulainn strolled back toward the river. How many of Mebd's champions had he killed? Too many... he hated killing... he just wanted this to be over.

"Young man," a woman said as he passed by a herd of cattle—all of them were likely the offspring of Donn Cúailnge. "You look as though you could use a drink."

To turn down such an offering from an old woman would have been rude. Besides, Cú Chulainn was thirsty. Parched, in fact. And a drink would help him recover his strength. "I'd be delighted."

The woman took a mug and filled it to the brim directly from the cow's teat.

Cú Chulainn took a sip. It was delicious. It wasn't that the milk was, alone, particularly tasty. No better than one should expect from fresh milk. But he'd been fighting for so long it tasted better to him than any cup of milk he'd ever sampled.

He gulped the rest down.

"Bless you, good woman," Cú Chulainn said, smiling at her. He cocked his head as he examined the woman more closely... she had a lame leg. She was missing an eye. And she clung to her side as if she were in pain. These were the wounds he'd inflicted on the Morrigan... the cow's broken leg, the wolf's lost eye, and the eels bruised side.

"You!" Cú Chulainn exclaimed.

At that moment, the Morrigan shifted again in the form of the maiden he'd seen before. "With your blessing, I have blessed you in turn. The milk you drink is not of the cow, but it is my own."

"Your own milk?" Cú Chulainn nearly gagged at the thought.

"And with it comes my power that it should see you through the day, my love. For I am a goddess of war and death, and with my milk invigorating your frame, combined with the wolf who is within you still, not even Mebd's final champion will be able to defeat you."

Cú Chulainn cocked his head. "Thank you, I guess. But I have this handled..."

"But you do not know the final champion you must face, my love..."

"Why do you keep calling me that!"

"Because I've loved you for many years, Cú Chulainn. I've loved you even though your heart has so often longed for others... and I love you still. Pray, should you survive this battle, you might return my love and we might finally be together."

Cú Chulainn shook his head. "I have to return to my wife..."

"So long as you remain at her side, my love, your life will always be one in defense of Ulster. Yes, even now, as Ulster must evermore bend the knee to Mebd of Connacht, you will have no choice but to live a warrior's life. With me, I can give you what you desire. You can live an eternity as a god, as a god of poetry and verse! You can inspire the bards for generations!"

Cú Chulainn sighed. "Your offer is... generous... but I cannot. I have betrayed my vows already and I will not a second time, no matter how much I might desire it."

"My love... please... you must reconsider."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:44 am*

"Are you not the wife of the Dagda?" Cú Chulainn asked.

The Morrigan sighed. A tear fell down her cheek. "Not by choice, my love. And he has offered my freedom if I might earn the affections of a mortal, the very mortal whom I love... if I might be loved by you, Cú Chulainn."

Cú Chulainn placed his hand on the Morrigan's shoulder. "You do not need to appear to me this way."

The Morrigan nodded and returned to her natural form. "I only thought you'd find this form more pleasing. I've observed you often, I've seen the women who catch your eye."

"Why would you change yourself, your own natural beauty, for my sake?"

"It seemed to me you preferred women of a slighter frame..."

"I appreciate the beauty of a woman who embraces her truth... you are beautiful however you've appeared to me..."

"Even as the eel and the heifer?"

Cú Chulainn laughed. "In a manner of speaking... I suppose there was a majesty in those forms. But this is what suits you, my Morrigan. You are beautiful as you are..."

"If only you'd known me when I was but three sisters..."

Cú Chulainn shook his head. "I cannot imagine that you were any less beautiful then..."

"So you will have me?"

"I honor you, Morrigan. But I cannot betray my wife. And for that, I am sorry."

"As am I," the Morrigan said. "For today you must do the unthinkable... you must face the mother of your child. She is Mebd's final champion."

Cú Chulainn sighed. "I should have expected that I suppose. But alas, since my son has come of age perhaps I can bring myself to face her, finally. You've given me a great gift. I will prevail."

"Bless you, Cú Chulainn... my love... and if you should ever change your mind... you need only call on the nearest raven and it is likely that it will be I."

Cú Chulainn nodded. "Bless you, divine Morrigan."



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Three more of Mebd's champions. Cú Chulainn slew them each with ease.

Only one more... he was ready.

Before she arrived, I appeared to him a last time, washing one of the fallen warrior's blood-stained armor in the river. He nodded at me. It was meant to be a warning. As a bard, he'd know what the omen meant. I did not want him to be careless. It was meant to encourage him to fight with care, to rely on the power I'd granted him by the aid of the heifer's milk.

A howl echoed in the distance. It was her. Not as a human. She appeared in the ríastrad.

Cú Chulainn heard turned to me and smiled before grabbing his broadsword and raising it overhead.

"Come at me, Aife! You've always wanted vengeance! Now is your chance!"

In full wolf form, Aife continued to charge after him.

She stopped as Cú Chulainn prepared to swing his blade.

The one who stood there transformed again, now in human form. It wasn't Aife. It was not a woman at all!

Cú Chulainn couldn't believe what he saw... a young boy, not much older than Cú Chulainn had been when he first learned he had the ríastrad. His hair was short and red. His body, though, was built like Cú Chulainn's had been in his youth. He was young, tall, virile, and strong. The age was right. Could it be hm?

"My son?"

"My name is Connla. I am the son of Aife... and of a man who abandoned us before I was born."

Cú Chulainn dropped his blade. "I cannot fight you, my son..."

Connla shook his head. "You cannot call me son... and I will not call you father... even if it is your blood in my veins."

"I will not fight you."

"Then you will die!"

"If vengeance is what you seek, it will be yours today, Connla." Cú Chulainn unwound the wrappings he'd placed on his feet—it was what he preferred to wear when in battle—and seeing a large boulder proceeded to tie himself to it.

"What are you doing?"

"I will bind myself so that I might not, even if the wolf overtakes my form, fight back against you."

"Mother said you were weak..."

"Like I said, my son. I will not fight you."

"You must fight me, Cú Chulainn!"

"I am your father... please refer to me as such."

"I will not!"

"Then you can kill me however you see fit, my son."

"Fight me like a man!"

"Will my death make you more of a man, my son? I've lived a life I never wanted. The life of a hero, of a champion, a man destined for battle. But it is a fool who thinks by afflicting others with death he might come to live."

"Mother was right," Connla said. "You are pitiful!"

"Then it is within your right to end my life. For you are correct. I wronged you by abandoning your mother. I should have been there for you."

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A raven cawed overhead. Cú Chulainn looked up. He smiled. "She has come for me..."

"A stupid bird?"

Cú Chulainn laughed. "My goddess. She has come for me that I might love her, even in death... for she is the goddess of death and war. I suppose this end is fitting."

"You speak nonsense," Connla said. "Let me cut your bindings loose that you might face me and die a warrior's death."

Cú Chulainn smiled. "I did not want to be a warrior in life. I do not wish to be one in death. I only hope that this act brings you peace. You might not believe it, but I love you, son... I always have."

Those last words infuriated Connla. The rage boiled up within the young warrior, consuming his frame. The ríastrad overtook him, even as it had once done to Cú Chulainn that day he'd went out on the hunt... the day he killed the Fomorian.

Cú Chulainn screamed as Connla's jaws tore into his flesh. But he didn't fight. He recalled a verse of prose, he thought of the tale of Taliesin and Ceridwen. And he thought of those who'd loved him, and the goddess who loved him still. He didn't even attempt to rip apart his bindings.

With his last breath, Cú Chulainn made a plea... he could barely form his words. But the Morrigan heard him. She knew for what he asked.

The second he uttered his last syllable, one of Connla's claws sliced across Cú Chulainn's neck...

And he departed the only world he'd ever known.

Cú Chulainn's blood called out to me from the ground. He'd spoken words, but his blood spoke to me more clearly than his words ever could.

"I have heard your petition, my love," I said as Cú Chulainn approached the cauldron of rebirth.

"Then you will have agreed to my proposal?"

"You agreed to marry me should I only promise to bind the vengeance that courses in Connla's veins to your blood, your blood that cries out to me still from the ground of the earth."

Cú Chulainn nodded. "Might my death teach him to hate the battle even as I did, and may he be afforded a chance for another kind of life. Give him the opportunity I never had. But most of all, let him be free of vengeance."

"I will grant your request," I said. "But now, with his vengeance bound to your blood, which now soaks the earth, it will forever cry out to me, not on your son's behalf, but for the sake of the earth herself."

"At least my son will be spared..."

"You have failed, Morrigan!" I turned and, with Cú Chulainn at my side, we stared directly at the Dagda.

"I have not failed! Cú Chulainn has agreed to marry me!"

"Only in his death. He never loved you in life."

"But I did," Cú Chulainn said. "For just a moment, before my death... I saw her for her beauty. I chose to love her."

"Your heart still belonged to your wife."

I sighed. "Is this true?"

"I could never not love Emer," Cú Chulainn said. "Even if I treated her poorly. I always loved her."

"Then you see," the Dagda said. "You have failed to secure his love for yourself."

"Not true," Cú Chulainn objected. "The night before the battle, in the woods, I loved her then..."

"What you loved, then, was an illusion," the Dagda said. "Morrigan, will you now take your place at my side. Will you finally consummate our marriage?"

"I will not!" I said. "I would rather wander eternity alone than consummate our marriage, Dagda!"

"I will not elevate this mortal to godhood!"

I shook my head. "You never intended to allow me to love as I wished. I admit I made many mistakes in the pursuit of my love. But in the end... he accepted me."

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:44 am*

"He accepted you. He agreed to marry you on account of his love for his son. But he did not love you."

"What is love," Cú Chulainn asked, "if not a choice?"

The Dagda huffed. "Cursed be both of you!"

A bright cone of light flashed in front of me. Fear Doidrich emerged from the portal. How did he do it? Could a mortal dare enter the otherworld?

"What are you doing here!" I demanded.

Doidrich didn't answer. He turned and threw a bolt of magic, striking Cú Chulainn in the chest and binding him in place.

"Let him go!" I shouted.

Cú Chulainn screamed. I dove after him, but the magic Doidrich wielded repelled even me. I looked at the Dagda. "Please, good god, don't let him harm him!"

The Dagda nodded at Doidrich. Was this what they'd planned all along? Doidrich lifted his arm and threw Cú Chulainn's body into the cauldron of rebirth.

I clenched my fists and charged Doidrich a second time. But two strong arms pulled me off of him even as I attempted to rip the sorcerer's head from his body.

"It is too late, my phantom queen. Your beloved has passed through the cycle and

awaits his rebirth."

"Might the vengeance of his blood curse you, too, Dagda!"

The Dagda shook his head. "You still will not take your place at my side?"

"Never!" I declared. "He has entered the cauldron. He will be reborn. I will wait for my beloved..."

"You know as well as I do, my queen, that we cannot determine when the cauldron will see him born again."

"I'll wait an eternity if need be! Better an eternity waiting for my love than one spent at your side, Dagda."

The Dagda dropped his head. Doidrich, standing behind him, smirked. He apparently found all of this amusing.

I diverted my eyes. The only thing that disgusted me more than the Dagda was Doidrich and his smugness. But I would not exact vengeance upon him. I would not make of myself the very thing my beloved hated the most. When he returned, I'd find him. Whenever that might be. Even if it be a thousand years or more.

He'd have the chance at a new life no longer burdened by the mistakes of the one he's just lost. I couldn't be reborn, but that didn't mean I couldn't learn. It didn't mean I couldn't be a better deity, a more benevolent goddess, who worked to make the sort of world Cú Chulainn had always wished it was.

"Even as you wait for him," the Dagda said, interrupting my thoughts. "I will wait for you."



"Then we wait together, but still apart."

The Dagda took a deep breath. "Until then, you may rule as the Queen of Samhuinn. This place, the place of death. For you are still the goddess of death and war."

I nodded. Perhaps, even if just the goddess of death and war, I could do something to change the world... perhaps I could intervene in the affairs of mankind and pacify their lust for war. I'd do whatever I could to make a new world that didn't demand my beloved be a warrior whenever he emerged from the cauldron and into another woman's womb. I wanted to make the world a place that would praise him for his gifts of verse rather than compel him to fight. A place that allowed him to be the bard he'd always wanted to become.

And if vengeance cried out through his blood, if it cried out on behalf of the earth, I would respond and answer its cry with wisdom. A wisdom I'd never had if I had not learned the meaning of love, the meaning of real sacrifice, exhibited by my Cú Chulainn who gave up everything for love. Not for the love of me. I didn't deserve that. But for the love of his son.

And the Dagda was right—the sort of love he'd tried to offer me in the end, it wasn't the kind of love that satisfies. I'd have my chance to earn that love, I hoped, in the future. His rebirth gave me another chance, still... a chance I'd spoiled two times before. But now I knew what love was—more than ever before. It was more than a feeling. More than even a choice. It was sacrifice. The willingness to put the welfare of whomever you love above your own.

### Epilogue

I waited, one century after the next. I decided thousands of wars. I was there when Arthur fell to his son's own blade and when Mordred fell to his father's—both met me at the cauldron where their differences were finally put to rest. One day, they shall return, even as my Cú Chulainn would.

The Dagda still waited. And so did I.

One day, I'd see my beloved again.

So many years passed. So much bloodshed. Whenever one man struck down another in vengeance I could hear my beloved, my Cú Chulainn cry... his blood screaming from within the earth itself.

But it wasn't him. Not anymore. It was Vengeance. The vengeance he'd taken from his son by his love, by his sacrifice.

And it cried out to me so often.

I heard the cries of those faithful ones who were fed to the lions in Roman arenas. Then, I thwarted the crusaders who'd been born from their ancestors whom I once defended from the very empire whose banner they came to carry.

I preserved a remnant of druids and all those who believed in us... me and the Dagda, the Horned God Cernunnos, and others, we whom they now refer to as the "old gods." Despite many who sought to eliminate them, I ensured that those who

embraced the old ways still thrived in the shadows.

I responded to the cries of the enslaved as they endured the middle passage. I emboldened a young lawyer, a tall and lanky man with a predilection for funny hats, to overcome the odds and see the cruel and peculiar institution ended.

I presided over an armistice. I invigorated the hearts of the soldiers who stormed Normandy's beaches and liberated the death camps.

But I did not align myself with one nation over another. Even while one side achieved a victory I flew into the mushroom cloud, I led the souls of tens of thousands to the cauldron when their lives were tragically ended. They'd have another chance... just like my beloved.

I was there still when a reverend who knew me not had a dream. He, too, has seen my cauldron and I wish I could say he'd soon return... for the world needs to hear his voice again.

More than once I quieted the hands of Americans and Soviets alike as they nearly set the entire world aflame out of their hatred for and fear of the other.

Innumerable other conflicts, spanning the world, were guided by my invisible hand. But alas... now even the earth cries against humanity, choking on the indulgences of a species addicted to its own delusions of progress.

Even as the earth cries for Vengeance, begging me to answer her call. Still, there is hope. If they could succeed, perhaps the world will finally become a place suitable for my beloved's return.

Two children. A boy and a girl. Twins.

Born of the kind creature who'd once touched my heart at a time when I thought

myself unlovable. A creature whom I knew before I became the Morrigan. The children of Grainne and the druid whom my father sought to destroy...

I saw my father for the first time in more than a millennium, though for him it had probably seemed but moments. He spread his scaly dragon wings and took a deep breath, fire in his nostrils, as he emerged from the portal. He was after the druid... and I knew my father well. Anand said he'd never leave the children of his enemies alive lest they rise up to avenge their parents against him. I had to protect the twins.

Where was the boy? I didn't know. At least he was safe. But the girl... I could take her... I could raise her up and prepare her to become something more. Yes, I could use this girl to protect her brother, too. For these children, though they seemed as common as any children coming of age, were born of an ancient people. A community of druids... a people who honored the earth... a people who despied vengeance...

Yes, I am still the Phantom Queen of Samhuinn, the goddess of war and death...

But the war has changed.

No longer am I consumed with wars between clans or even nations and empires. Now there is one final war left to decide... the war between humanity and itself. Yes, I've seen world wars. But now the war for the world has begun... and I cannot remain silent.

For the blood that lingers in the ground, the blood of my beloved, cries out to me still. Perhaps my beloved is waiting... waiting for one who might conquer Vengeance once and for all... waiting for a world, one I intend to make, worthy of his true gifts. I'd do what I needed to do. I'd rely on these strange twins, the children of Grainne, and hope they can finally pacify the cry of Vengeance. I'd do it for the sake of the earth, yes, but especially for my Cú Chulainn. After all, when a god or goddess loves a mortal, such love never really dies.