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The Táin

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FINAL THESIS
FEATURE SCREENPLAY PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Student Name: Luke Hart-Moynihan

Thesis Logline: In mythic iron-age Ireland, an exiled king allies with a proud queen to steal a magic bull and retake his former kingdom, but his semi-divine foster-son stands in their way. Based on stories from the Irish Ulster Cycle.

The Táin

Title

A teleplay written and produced and presented to the faculty of
the Writing for the Screen MFA Program in the School of Film &
Television at Loyola Marymount University of
Los Angeles, California

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

Writing for the Screen

By

Luke Hart-Moynihan

Student Name


[Luke Hart-Moynihan \(Apr 27, 2021 17:05 PDT\)](#)

Student Signature

APPROVAL TO ADVANCE TO CANDIDACY

The following student has met all the criteria to advance to candidacy for an M.F.A. in Fine Arts with an emphasis in Writing for the Screen:

Luke Hart-Moynihan

Student Name

[REDACTED]

SCWR 690 Fall 2020 Instructor

[REDACTED]

SCWR 691 Spring 2021 Instructor

[REDACTED]

Graduate Director Signature

Date: May 4, 2021

The Táin

written by

Luke Hart-Moynihan

Based on the Irish Epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

EXT. OVER FOREST / PLAINS, ANCIENT IRELAND - DAY

A CROW circles high above the wild lands of Ancient Ireland; rugged hills rising above tangled forests giving way to green fields.

FERGUS (V.O.)
This land is cursed.

Images FLASH:

FERGUS (30s, chiseled) looks on in horror over massacred guests in his home...

CONCHOBAR (20, haughty) sneers as Fergus places his royal golden TORC -- an elaborate ring-necklace -- across Conchobar's shoulders...

MAEVE (25, wild-eyed) strangles her pregnant sister...

FERGUS (V.O.) (CONT'D)
And the earth cries out for blood.

OVER THE PLAINS

The crow drifts lower.

Far away, the afternoon sunlight GLINTS against distant CHARIOTS. The crow adjusts, moving closer.

Below, Queen Maeve leads a small retinue winding through a path between trees. The crow dives overhead, CAWING wildly, a warcry of the wilderness.

In his own chariot beside Maeve, Fergus turns and watches the crow pass out of sight into the trees with foreboding in his eyes.

As if on cue, a THOUSAND CROWS rise out of the tree crowns into the sky above. The furrow in Fergus's brow deepens as the crows pass over the charioteers, darkening the sky.

But the crows move much faster than the chariots. They fly swiftly over the low forested hills, diving into a...

PASTURE

Where a great bull, the DONN CUAILNGE, peacefully grazes, with godly horns, long and fierce enough to match the beast's incredible frame.

Dozens of other cattle graze about, small in comparison to the great bull.

But the CROWS come diving, and the beasts move seemingly as one. They rumble forward, slowly gathering speed.

A CROW lands on the shoulder of the Donn Cuailnge amidst the swirling murder. For a moment the bull pauses, as though listening.

Then he bolts.

The stampede is on. The hoofbeats of the herd echo into the earth, reverberating across the fields and forests back to the ears of Maeve and Fergus.

Maeve's eyes turn vulpine. She smells blood.

MAEVE

Go!

Her CHARIOTEER needs no second command.

The horses bolt forward. The chain of chariots races through the forest path.

They crest a hill, and in front of them lies a great plain, with most forests cut away. Another hill rises up in the distance, with a palisade-walled village on top -- the ancient hillfort EMAIN MACHA, the capital of Ulster.

Maeve pulls her charioteer to signal a stop. Her retinue halts behind her.

Hatred burns in her eyes. Hatred for this place and those who inhabit it.

Some of that hatred burns in Fergus's eyes as well, but tinged with longing and regret.

Below, the cattle led by the Donn Cuailnge flee at top speed toward the hillfort.

Fergus tears his eyes away to look towards Maeve.

FERGUS

Maeve... Do not follow them.

MAEVE

Why not?

FERGUS

Conchobar's men will expect a raid when they see the cattle startled. There will be too many. For now.

MAEVE

My husband will mock me.

FERGUS

There is another way. The bull grazes in Cuailnge. I know the man who keeps him, as kept as he can be... If we do not pursue him, he should return. We can wait there. Farther away from Emain Macha.

MAEVE

It is not my manner to turn back.

FERGUS

Death is not a better option.

MAEVE

If that is what you know... Lead the way.

Fergus nods and waves for the retinue to go back the way they came. He glances back one final time, towards the distant hillfort of Emain Macha, with the longing strengthening in his eyes.

Maeve waits, silhouetted against the sunset, staring also at Emain Macha, consumed with bitterness.

EXT. PASTURES OF CUAILNGE, BORDER OF ULSTER - DAY

DAIRE, a grey, wizened herdsman hammers a wooden fence post into the earth. He tests it to see if it moves. It doesn't.

He moves to the next post, a long line of fence posts stretching out behind him, waiting to be linked together.

He hammers in the next post. With every beat, a RUMBLING grows louder. Closer. He looks up to find the source: Maeve's dozen chariots coming straight towards him.

INT. DAIRE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Maeve sits next to Fergus in Daire's simple hut. Her MEN stand in the dark background. All hold rough bowls of steaming hot stew.

Near them, Daire's herdsman KEARNACH (35, burly, with a crooked neck). Fergus glances towards him warily. Kearnach notices, shifting to hide an ax strapped to his side.

DAIRE
 Apologies for the food. The
 hospitality of this house is not
 meant for a Queen.

FERGUS
 It's plenty.

Daire glances at Fergus appreciatively. Maeve raises her eyebrows, trying to contain her judgement.

DAIRE
 So... to what do I owe the honor of
 your presence?

Daire directs this to Fergus, but it is Maeve who asserts an answer.

MAEVE
 I have heard that the greatest bull
 in Ireland is the Donn Cuailnge,
 and that he can be found in your
 care.

A nervous, knowing look passes between Daire and his Herdsman.

DAIRE
 He can. Most of the time. The Donn
 Cuailnge goes where he wishes, more
 wild than tame. He wanders from
 pasture to pasture, herd to herd.
 No better bull is there for siring,
 it is true, but he only comes when
 he pleases.

MAEVE
 Is he near now?

DAIRE
 Kearnach would know better than I.

KEARNACH
 I saw him a few miles to the north,
 two days past.

MAEVE
 Could you bring him to us?

Kearnach glances towards Daire hesitantly.

DAIRE

A majestic beast he is, no doubt.
But what would you like to see him
for?

MAEVE

A proposition from me to you. A
loan of the bull. In return, fifty
yearling heifers, land, a chariot
of good making and whatever else
your... humble experience could
desire.

She surveys the hut with pursed lips, brushes her long hair
away with one hand and adjusts the cut of her dress, as
though in preparation to remove it entirely.

Daire gulps.

DAIRE

I will speak with the others who
tend these herds. We will see what
can be done.

He stands and disappears into the night. Kearnach follows.

Fergus exhales as they leave.

FERGUS

Strange thing, that. When I was
king, it was hard to find a fighter
stronger than that herdsman,
Kearnach. Conchobar's man, he is.

MAEVE

Strong or no, one warrior cannot
stop all of us. If they refuse, it
is only a brief inconvenience. We
kill them and find the bull
ourselves.

Her voice carries...

OUTSIDE

Daire and Kearnach stand near the doorway, hearing every
word. Daire pulls Kearnach away.

DAIRE

(whispering)
Tell the others to stay away. Ride
for Emain Macha.

(MORE)

DAIRE (CONT'D)

Tell King Conchobar that Maeve and Fergus come to take the great bull of Cuailnge.

Kearnach nods, turns, and strides away.

He unties horses from posts, hitches them to his chariot, and drives off into the night.

EXT. DAIRE'S HOUSE - DAY

Daire carries buckets of water towards the entrance of his home. Queen Maeve awaits him in the doorway.

Beyond the dark hut, Fergus joins the Men in shoveling manure.

MAEVE

The morning wanes. No herdsmen have returned.

DAIRE

Cattle wander.

MAEVE

What kind of man allows his prize bull to wander beyond his borders?

DAIRE

The bull is beyond our control.

Maeve's eyes narrow. Daire turns away, struggling to keep his cover.

MAEVE

How far to Emain Macha?

Daire freezes.

DAIRE

Maybe four days' journey.

MAEVE

And yet we rode within sight of Emain Macha only yesterday... Kearnach left last night, didn't he? And the other herdsmen? They could have reached the one who styles himself King of Ulster there by now.

Fergus spits.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

And if you, Daire, keep us here
with your lies, the usurper will
fall upon us by nightfall. Is that
the truth?

DAIRE

(shaking)

No...

FERGUS

Do not lie. Where are your men?

DAIRE

I do not know--

MAEVE

You take me for a fool?

Daire shakes uncontrollably. Maeve circles him like a hungry
wolf, closing in.

Daire knows the jig is up. He stands tall, defiant.

DAIRE

I heard the boasts. There was no
deal that would not be ended by
force.

MAEVE

It was known that the bull would be
taken by force if it wasn't given
freely. And taken it shall be.

Quicker than a cobra, Maeve strikes. She buries her knife in
the base of Daire's gut, twisting the blade. He gasps in
shock as he stumbles back and falls to his knees.

Without turning back, Maeve storms to her chariot and steps
aboard. Her charioteer nervously readies the horses.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

Take us away from this miserable
country.

Maeve's retinue all jump into motion, taking to their
chariots to follow her as she speeds away.

Fergus alone remains behind. He looks down at Daire as the
old man sputters on the ground.

Daire grips the knife that slowly kills him, eyes shut, teeth
clenched in pain.

Pity crosses Fergus's face as he crouches down beside the dying man. Daire's eyes plead with Fergus to end this...

DAIRE

Please...

FERGUS

When did you send the men?

DAIRE

At nightfall. With a message to
King Conchobar.

Fergus's eyes flicker in anger at the mention of the King's name.

FERGUS

You broke your word to us. To me.

DAIRE

There is no honor with Maeve.

FERGUS

I am your King.

Even in his death-throes, Daire looks up at Fergus with disbelief.

DAIRE

You are no king. You rage at kith
and kin for the sake of a whore's
backside.

Fergus's eyes harden with stern anger. Anger blends with pity as Fergus draws his sword.

FERGUS

For betraying your true king, I
sentence you to death.

Daire closes his eyes in relief and bows his head forward. Blood drips from his lips.

Fergus beheads Daire with a single stroke.

Blood soaks the earth.

The expanding pool fades, turning into ominous clouds above, dark, tinged with a hint of the same red --

EXT. EMAIN MACHA - DUSK

The clouds of blood darken the skies above Emain Macha.

King Conchobar (30 now, bearded, aged with the burden of kingship, heavily cloaked) stands in the doorway of the great hall, gazing out at the oncoming storm. His usual steely confidence is clearly disturbed.

The storm looms lower, to the edge of the horizon.

EXT. RUGGED COAST, TORR HEAD - DAWN

MACHA (hooded, ethereal, a spirit of nature, the namesake of Ulster's capital) stands on a wind-swept bluff overlooking the Irish sea.

The storm emanates from her, and she is the storm.

Her eyes roll back, as she murmurs in a trance:

MACHA
*...Enemies infest the fair fields
 Ravaging in packs...
 Dark one, are you restless
 Do you guess they gather
 Raging over Cuailnge...*

Beyond her, across the sea twelve miles away, another land rises out of the water: the southwestern tip of Scotland.

A CROW lands on Macha's shoulder.

Macha raises her arms as the winds rise. One finger of the storm breaks away, moving across the sea.

EXT. CLOCHAFARMORE FIELD - DAY

A single standing stone imposes over a field of tall grass. A CROW waits there.

At the edge of sight, Queen Maeve rides her bronze-plated chariot across the gently rising plain of tall grass. Her retinue follows, fanned out, snakelike.

Where the crow was, Macha now waits, still hooded, her face half-hidden in shadow.

Queen Maeve slows at the sight of the distant standing stone and Macha beside it.

As the Queen stops, Fergus catches up to the group at speed. He pulls his chariot alongside Maeve's.

Maeve spits.

With a last long look across the rolling hills, Maeve turns her chariot and races towards the afternoon sun.

EXT. BEACH - DUSK

Waves lap a thin shoreline of sand snaking along the base of steep hills.

A dinghy carries two young oarsmen, CUHULLIN (17, diminutive, with deadly calm eyes hiding animalistic intensity) and DIA (17, grown tall and strong) towards the shore.

Their paddles churn the water in synchronized rhythm.

As they approach the shore, Cuhullin rises to his feet and leaps into the shallow water to guide the boat to the strand.

Dia stands too, preparing to follow Cuhullin. A roguish grin crosses Cuhullin's face.

Without warning, Cuhullin flips the boat with shocking ease, sending Dia flying into the gentle waves.

Dia surfaces moments later, sputtering. Cuhullin laughs boyishly.

DIA

You dog!

CUHULLIN

Be careful, a dog will eat a fish.

Dia leaps forward, tackling Cuhullin into the water. Both laugh and scream like the boys they once were.

Beneath the waves, Cuhullin grabs a long string of seaweed, smearing it across Dia's face as they splash above and below the surface together.

Cuhullin's laughter ends as he sees how far the capsized boat has floated

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

The boat!

DIA

You've ruined all the food!

EXT. BEACH - DAY

An hour later, Cuhullin and Dia organize their meager life possessions on the sand before them.

Two swords. Spears. Leather armor. Slings. Cloaks. Hurling sticks. A sad-looking loaf of charred barley bread soaked by the sea.

And one weapon unique among the others -- a notched spear, with fin-like barbs along its shaft -- the *gae bolga*.

Dia gazes towards the weapon with a hint of possessive jealousy. Cuhullin notices.

CUHULLIN
(friendly goading)
Does your sword not suffice?
Unfortunate that Scathach taught
the *gae bolga* only to me...

DIA
I suppose we could always go back.

Cuhullin shakes his head.

CUHULLIN
Scathach, Aife, Uathach... The
women want my head.

DIA
I suppose I could always go back.

Cuhullin chuckles.

CUHULLIN
There was no more fame to be won
there. Home calls.

Dia frowns as he moves to collect his half of the items.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)
Where will you go?

DIA
I'll join my father in Connacht.
Emer waits there. Hopefully her
heart has grown fonder towards me
since I left.

CUHULLIN
Fonder towards you? Her heart is
mine alone.

Dia scoffs.

DIA
You have not seen her since you
were a child. You don't really
think she pines for you?

Cuhullin shrugs.

CUHULLIN
How could she not?

DIA
I will miss your humor.

CUHULLIN
Of course you will, for you have
none of your own.

DIA
Goodbye forever then.

Dia stomps a few steps away in jest, then turns back. He
smiles.

DIA (CONT'D)
Will you walk with me a little
while on my way?

CUHULLIN
I plan to go south. Laeg awaits me
there, with chariot and horses.
I'll follow the coast.

DIA
Then this truly is goodbye.

CUHULLIN
For now.

They embrace, clapping each other on the back. Dia makes a
joking last minute swipe for the *gae bolga*, rebuffed by a
laughing Cuhullin.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)
I will come searching for you,
sooner rather than later.

DIA
Soon.

Dia holds back tears.

DIA (CONT'D)

Be kind to any dogs that you meet.
You don't want to go building a
reputation.

CUHULLIN

I wouldn't want that. Certainly
not.

Dia moves away into the swaying tall grasses.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

And you, don't go picking fights
you can't win! I won't be there to
save you anymore!

Dia waves sadly, fading slowly out of earshot.

Cuhullin turns and faces the green hills before him. His eyes
fill with aching longing.

MACHA (O.S.)

Welcome home, Cuhullin.

The voice seeps from the earth itself. Cuhullin's eyebrows
rise as he searches for the source. Or did the voice come
from inside his own head?

He squints into the distance. Nothing stirs except the far
fading figure of Dia.

Nearby, on the branch of a bare ash tree, a crow watches over
Cuhullin as he gathers his belongings and walks on.

EXT. CRUACHAN - DUSK

EMER'S (17, Rapunzel-type) hair catches winds wildly blowing
as she strolls along grassy, ancient elevated earthworks.

The small man-made ridge curves into a wide circle a quarter-
mile in diameter, encoding a number of thatched, round wooden
buildings surrounding the central earthen mound.

Below Emer and the ridge, a wide, deep ditch separates the
grounds of Cruachan from the surrounding lands like a dry
moat, with a wooden fence on the inner slope.

Emer stares out over the lower rolling green hills, dotted
with trees and huts and grazing enclosures.

AILILL (O.S.)

Waiting for someone?

Emer glances over to see her stepfather approaching.

Too quickly, she shakes her head.

AILILL (CONT'D)

I come here too, waiting for your
mother Maeve. I know what it's like
to wait, pining for love.

EMER

Terrible feeling.

AILILL

Is it Dia whom you wait for?

Emer laughs.

EMER

No.

(thinking better of it)

Yes.

AILILL

Someone else?

Emer evasively avoids Ailill's gaze.

EMER

I miss my mother also.

Ailill scoffs, but leaves Emer to her secrets.

EMER (CONT'D)

Could I go to the cave of cats
today?

AILILL

Your mother wouldn't like that.

EMER

She is not here. And why would she
mind?

AILILL

Not all men are worth waiting for.
Many are dangerous... Men who would
take you, do terrible things to
you.

Emer grins at hearing the same thing said in so many ways.

EMER

That means little to me.

AILILL

If not for fear of your own safety,
have pity at least, for what your
mother would do to those who let
you go.

Emer looks at Ailill with annoyance bordering on disgust. She turns and walks away.

AILILL (CONT'D)

Emer...

She doesn't respond, continuing on. Ailill watches her go with suspicion.

EXT. CRUACHAN - NIGHT.

Fog fills the dark night.

Beyond the earthworks, a CHARIOT rides through the darkness, FLYING over the hills. The horses' hooves BEAT in perfect rhythm.

At the closed main gate, a SENTRY stands guard on a wooden platform. He squints into the darkness, eyes scanning to find the source of the hoofbeats.

The chariot leaves the main road, taking an arching path around the edge of the dry moat. The RIDER, (Cuhullin -- unrecognizable in the darkness) holds a long pole, three times his own height, bending in the windy night.

With a sharp turn, the chariot approaches the moat at speed.

The Rider crouches, lowering the pole. With a sudden strike, he plunges it into the earth in front of the moat, vaulting high into the air, easily arching over the ditch and the palisade wall, flying down into-

THE GROUNDS OF CRUACHAN

He hits the ground at speed, rolling to absorb the impact, then leaping into the air and sprinting towards the central mound.

In the distance, muffled shouts from the distant GUARDSMEN ring into the night as they attempt to identify the chariot still circling the outer enclosure.

The Rider melts into the darkness between wooden buildings as frantic Guardsmen raise torches, running towards the outer defenses.

He leaps up, catching the thatching of a sloped rooftop, and takes off leaping from thatched roof to thatched roof.

INT. EMER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Emer's ears perk up as she hears the commotion from outside. She leaps to her feet and throws a cloak over her shoulders.

With a THUMP, something lands behind Emer in the embers of a central firepit. She turns.

Cuhullin stands there. Emer's face breaks into a thrilled smile. She jumps into his arms.

EMER

How?!

Cuhullin doesn't respond. There's no time.

CUHULLIN

Come with me.

Emer nods quickly. She grabs a rough sack -- pre-packed! -- and follows him into the night.

EXT. CRUACHAN - NIGHT

Two guardsmen, FRAECH and LUGAID (20s) spring up wooden stairs to a watch-tower platform. They peer into the night, searching darkness to find the source of the noise of galloping hooves and chariot wheels.

Leaning against the wall nearby, they spy Cuhullin's vaulting pole.

FRAECH

Something is here. Something is inside.

Lugaid turns to a group of a dozen WARRIORS below. He gestures with his torch as he shouts orders.

LUGAID

To the gate. None enter, none leave!

BELOW

ETARCOMEL leads the group as they run towards the gate, spears in hand.

MAENEN the jester lags behind, trying to hide his cowardice while staying at the back of the group.

Behind them, Cuhullin and Emer move through the darkness, stalking their footsteps as they approach the gate. They slow as they approach the final hut inside the gate, crouching in the shadows.

The Warriors face the gate, weapons held at the ready to welcome an invading raiding party. As their breathing slows, the sounds of the chariot beyond the walls fade, then go silent.

CUHULLIN

(whispering to Emer)

On my signal, go to the gate. Open it, and run. Do not stop until you reach the chariot. I will catch up with you.

Behind them, the DIN of an army rising from slumber grows.

EMER

That is a death wish. The guards--

CUHULLIN

I will draw them away--

EMER

There must be another way--

But Cuhullin is already gone, stealing out of the shadows. He moves into the center of the gate path behind the Warriors.

CUHULLIN

Warriors of Connacht, what raises you from slumber?

All of them turn away from the gate to face the boy.

ETARCOMOL

Who speaks?

CUHULLIN

A wall jumper, a chariot rider, a spear thrower. I have come to steal away your greatest prize.

The Warriors level their spears at Cuhullin. Maenen laughs.

ETARCOMOL

A thief should not announce himself so, boastful boy.

Beyond them, Emer creeps from the shadows towards the gate.

Cuhullin twirls a sling in one hand.

CUHULLIN

Dance with me then.

Reaching the gate, Emer uses all her strength to lift the bracing bar. It creaks.

Maenen turns. With a shout, he sprints towards the gate to stop her. Before he takes three steps, he falls with a stone in the back of his skull.

But Emer still cannot open the gate; a loop of knotted rope circles the lock bar, preventing the gate from opening wide. Emer pulls an iron knife--

The warriors fall upon Cuhullin from all sides, but he laughs as he plays with them, brushing aside their blades with ease. He humiliates fighter after fighter, disarming them, using their own weapons against them, striking no death blows.

At the gate, Emer SLASHES her knife. The rope falls. She slips through the gate and takes off into the darkness.

Cuhullin disarms Etarcomel, takes his spear and pins another man's foot to the ground with it. Within moments, the most of the group lies wounded or unconscious around him.

Three Fighters who stood back now cower away from Cuhullin, trembling as they stand together between him and the gate.

He walks towards them.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

Go home to your lovers and we will
have no quarrel.

The Men move closer together.

Behind Cuhullin, reinforcements appear, Ailill with Fraech and Lugaid at the head of a larger group.

Cuhullin glances back, then forth to the crowded gate.

With a roar, he rushes the gate. The last three men scatter, and Cuhullin disappears into the night.

Fraech and Lugaid start to pursue, but Ailill holds them back.

AILILL
 No! We do not go rushing out in
 darkness... Man the walls. We send
 out scouts in the morning.

The reinforcements move away uneasily, following orders.

A hint of a smirk crosses Ailill's face as he looks back
 toward the gate.

AILILL (CONT'D)
 (muttering)
 And now we wait.

INT. CRUACHAN, GREAT HALL - DAY

Ailill, Lugaid, Fraech, Etarcomel, and other guardsmen stand
 around a table with a rough drawn map. They slouch and argue
 in low voices.

Returning from her excursion to Cuailnge, Maeve enters and
 approaches the harried group with powerful strides, pulling
 off a pair of knitted mittens. Fergus follows behind her.

MAEVE
 Where is Emer?

The men shift uncomfortably.

AILILL	LUGAID
She was stolen.	It seems she ran away.

Maeve stares between them in disbelief.

MAEVE
 If I were in the mood for jests, I
 would find the jester.

LUGAID
 He is dead.

AILILL
 Killed by the boy-thief.

MAEVE
 Little loss, that. What boy-thief?

LUGAID
 He came in the night. He did not
 give his name. A fine fighter he
 was, scattering the guards of the
 gate.

Fergus's brow furrows in suspicion.

MAEVE

And Emer was with him?

LUGAID

She ran for the gate of her own
accord while the boy made mockery
of our men.

MAEVE

I'm sure Emer has not gone far--

LUGAID

Her clothing and belongings are
gone.

MAEVE

Lugaid says my daughter ran, Ailill
says she was stolen. Who tells the
lie?

AILILL

If not for the boy, she would still
be here.

LUGAID

His chariot tracks lead to the east
and north.

Maeve squats down in anguish, sitting on a footstool. She
looks up at a tapestry of two bulls fighting on a wide field.

MAEVE

This is Conchobar's doing.

Fergus shifts his weight nervously.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

I returned here only to gather
armies to claim the greatest bull
in Ireland as my rightful property.
Now my daughter has been stolen.
Let us return to Ulster then.
Muster our armies. Fergus, gather
your exiles. We will march with all
of Ireland against Conchobar.

ETARCOMEL

It will be hard to convince many to
come for a raid over a stolen girl.

MAEVE

Though your family may long for the
day of your disappearance, that is
not so with mine.

Maeve moves towards Etarcomal with deadly intensity.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

My daughter is gone.

Silence falls.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

No war against Conchobar is
unprovoked. We will burn Emain
Macha and send Ulster into an age
of darkness. We will find Emer,
take the bull, and take Conchobar
too. He will grovel before me,
naked, begging for his life between
his screams as the weeks pass until
I snuff him out myself. When men
ask "who is the most powerful in
Ireland?" the wise ones will have
no delay. "Queen Maeve, of
Connacht" they will say, and not a
soul will question them.

The hall echoes with silence.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

Go. The days are lengthening. All
of Connacht must go. All of Ireland
too. The boy who did this will
suffer with Conchobar when we find
him.

The men begin to move. Maeve goes to the map, tracing a
finger from Cruachan in the west to Emain Macha in the north.

EXT. EDGE OF FOREST, ULSTER - DAY

Dia comes out from under the eaves of the forest into rolling
green fields.

His face sets into a steely mask of emotion as he looks into
the distance towards his childhood home; Emain Macha.

The snorting of cattle interrupts his thoughts.

The great Bull, Donn Cuailnge feeds a stone's throw away.
Beyond, dozens of heifers do the same.

Dia instinctively shies away, cowed by the awesome stature of the bull, framed by its massive otherworldly horns.

A chariot lies idle further away.

And beside the chariot, a body...

Dia takes a few steps, peers closer, then breaks into a run.

Kearnach lies in the mud, half-conscious, moaning weakly in agony. Dia crashes down beside him, stopping short as he recognizes the man from his childhood.

DIA
Kearnach... What has happened? Tell
me!

But Kearnach cannot hear or speak. Dia hurriedly inspects him for wounds, but finds none.

Dia lifts the big man onto his shoulders with relative ease. He carries him to the chariot and sets him on the drivers stand.

Taking a lash of leather from his pack, Dia ties Kearnach to the chariot platform. Dia takes the driver's stand and spurs the horses on towards Emain Macha.

EXT. NEAR EMAIN MACHA - DAY

In sight of the palisade gate, Dia brings the chariot to a stop.

A disturbing quiet, a lack of activity fills the air. Below the gate, more moaning bodies lie. A couple of children crouch over them, trying to understand what is happening.

Dia steps away from the chariot. He can't go forward. Conchobar would want him killed. And this curse afflicting the people seems something to be avoided at all cost...

Dia strikes the horse beside him, and the chariot trundles forward towards the gate.

Dia looks on, his nostalgia turned to horror as he backs away, then turns to leave this nightmare behind him.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

LAUGHTER rings through the trees. The creaking of a chariot's wheels fills the air.

CUHULLIN (O.S.)
 No pursuit stood a chance. No
 charioteer can match the great Laeg
 of Ulster.

LAEG (17, even smaller and more stringy than Cuhullin) smiles
 from the driver's stand as Cuhullin jovially slams his hand
 against Laeg's back.

Emer nuzzles against Cuhullin on the back of the chariot.

EMER
 You must have had a plan--

CUHULLIN
 I didn't. What you witnessed, fair
 one, was the force of man who flies
 with the wind... in spite of the
 wanting wingspan.

EMER
 (to Laeg)
 And how did you fall for his pretty
 words?

Laeg shrugs.

LAEG
 The duties of a friend.

CUHULLIN
 And what good is a skill if not put
 to use? No charioteer can match,
 say I. In Connacht tonight they
 will speak of hoofbeats in the
 dark. Speed which could only be
 matched by horses of the Sidhe, or
 the wind itself. Laeg came to show
 the world this.

LAEG
 We rode in darkness. None know my
 name. I came because of you, Emer.
 I came because of the way his face
 lit up when he spoke of seeing you
 again.

Cuhullin smiles as he drapes his arm around Emer, pulling her
 close. Emer leans in.

EMER
 We were only children... I thought
 you would forget me.

CUHULLIN
How could I forget you?

EMER
With time... rushing from one fight
to the next.

CUHULLIN
I thought I would need to fight
every warrior in Connacht only to
see you. I would be glad to have
done so. Now we have time together.
And together we will go from one
joy to the next.

Laeg rolls his eyes, chuckling.

EMER
Where will we go first?

CUHULLIN
Home. Emain Macha, if it still
stands.

The chariot descends towards a narrow river ford.

Across the water, the great bull, the Donn Cuailnge, grazes
silently. The chariot riders fall silent.

His herd stretches behind him, with no herdsmen in sight.

A crow stares down from its perch on a gnarly tree branch.

Laeg pulls the chariot to a stop...

LAEG
If this bull will let us pass...

The bull raises its head, staring across the water at them,
eyeing them as it chews its cud. An ethereal guardian of a
different land, sizing the riders up as threats...

Nonchalantly, the bull turns away, seeking greener pastures.

EXT. EMAIN MACHA - DAY

The hillfort of Emain Macha rises above the plains of Ulster,
with palisade walls centered around a circular central great
hall.

Cuhullin and Emer ride behind Laeg as the chariot approaches
the royal seat of Ulster.

EXT. EMAIN MACHA GATE - DAY

Laeg slows the chariot as they approach the gate.

Cuhullin peers up at empty lookout posts.

CUHULLIN

As warm a welcome here as at Rath
Cruachan.

Laeg snickers.

A BOY's head peeks out from the palisade watchtower platform
above the gate.

BOY

Who goes there?

CUHULLIN

Three travelers, long away, happy
to be home again.

BOY

What names?

CUHULLIN

This is Laeg, greatest of
charioteers, Emer, loveliest in
Ireland, and I am Cuhullin.

BOY

Cuhullin!
(to others behind the
gate)
Cuhullin is home! Open it!

The gate opens. Beyond stand only a few CHILDREN, covered in
filth, faces hungry, but thrilled to see their young hero.
The boy watchman rushes down from his perch.

BOY (CONT'D)

How have you come back? Where have
you been? How are you unstricken?

CUHULLIN

Stories deserve the time to be
told, my friend. Where are the men
who watch the walls?

The brief joy the children had at seeing Cuhullin vanishes.

BOY

Come and see.

EXT. GREAT HALL OF EMAIN MACHA - DAY

The boy leads Cuhullin, Laeg, and Emer up a gentle incline towards the massive central round hall of Emain Macha.

Around them, MEN and WOMEN lie scattered about on the ground, moaning in illness and pain. CHILDREN try their best to care for the afflicted.

The children STARE as Cuhullin, Emer, and Laeg pass them by.

INSIDE THE HALL

Hundreds lie on the floor. Murmuring and wailing fills the air, mingling with the buzzing of flies.

BOY

They fell ill just yesterday.
Anyone who was well enough to
stand, except for the children. It
got worse overnight. Can you help
them?

Cuhullin can't find words for a response.

He sees Kearnach (Daire's herdsman) lying before him, his head lolling to the side as beads of sweat frame his clammy face.

CUHULLIN

How the mighty are laid low...

BOY

His chariot horses brought him to
us this morning, unconscious.

Cuhullin tears his eyes away, looking left and right through the sickbeds.

BOY (CONT'D)

Will they die?

CUHULLIN

All men die... Can you take me to
King Conchobar?

The Boy points towards a central space. King Conchobar lies there on a low cot, his face sunken in the sleep of illness.

Cuhullin approaches the King, kneeling beside him.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

King..

The King's eyelids flicker. His lips twitch.

A little GIRL wrings a cloth in a vat of water, then spreads it on the King's forehead.

GIRL
He only mutters madness.

Laeg moves beside Cuhullin, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder.

CUHULLIN
This is not the homecoming I
imagined--

The King stirs. His eyes open. Piercing hazel.

CONCHOBAR
Cuhullin... You must hold them. We
are cursed. Demons roam. Shadow
spears to lay us low. Maeve marches
from the west. Beware the mast of
Macha...

The King's words fade to fevered murmurs.

GIRL
"Macha". "Macha" is the word he
whispers in his sleep. "Macha's
curse." Who is Macha?

Cuhullin and Laeg share a glance. The Girl is too young to know the full story.

Emer stands to the side with dread written on her face.

LAEG
Macha of the plain... The wolf of
the woods. The crow of battle. The
washer at the fords. Last of the
ancients of the *sidhe* to walk the
earth of Ulster.

GIRL
Has she cursed us?

LAEG
Some say she laid a curse on
Conchobar, for what he did to her.
But that should not be spoken of...

Cuhullin finds his eyes drawn towards a shadow by the door--
a VEILED FIGURE, waiting.

Emer's eyes follow.

All sound fades to a whisper of wind.

GIRL
Can you bring water?

The Girl's directness brings Cuhullin back. She holds out an empty bucket to him.

He blinks, glancing towards the Girl, then back towards the shadow of the door. The figure is nowhere to be seen.

He nods and stands, moving through the rows of the sick. The sound of retching fills the air as he reaches the entrance and moves...

OUTSIDE -

But there is no respite. Suffering surrounds him on all sides.

He feels eyes on him.

Turning, he sees the veiled one - Macha - staring right back at him.

She raises a single finger, beckoning him to join her. He knows better than to refuse.

From the doorway, Emer watches from the shadows as Cuhullin joins Macha.

Emer steps out to follow, but Laeg appears at the doorway beside her, gently holding her back. The grim look in Laeg's eyes confirms Emer's fears as they watch Cuhullin go together.

Macha turns and leads the way, back towards the...

OUTER EMBANKMENT

Where she waits for Cuhullin, looking out over the surrounding lands of Ulster; green hills of grass spotted with trees.

Cuhullin joins her there.

Macha murmurs softly, as though to herself.

MACHA

*Certain slaughter...
On the plains war
Grinds heroic hosts to dust.
The ravens groan ravenous
Among corpses of men.*

CUHULLIN

Your dark doom-riddles are little
help to these stricken ones.

MACHA

That is for you to decide. Queen
Maeve leads an army uncountable.
They will fall upon this place with
none to defend it, unless they can
be delayed.

CUHULLIN

Why are you doing this? Bringing
innocents to their knees, and the
King--

MACHA

Innocents? What was set in motion
cannot be undone. These men lie in
pains of their own making. Yet we
cannot let Queen Maeve win. The
land groans beneath the feet of her
host.

CUHULLIN

But you cursed the men of Ulster--

MACHA

And cursed they shall remain. Nine
days and nine nights. This task
falls to you, Cuhullin.

CUHULLIN

You wish for me to face them alone?

MACHA

Not alone.

She steps away from him, fading into the dark shadows of the
fortifications.

A crow rises up from where Macha stood, taking to the sky. A
thousand more rise from the trees to join.

EXT. PLAINS - DAWN

Queen Maeve, armed and armored, rides in a war chariot at the head of an army.

The rising sun glints off of uncountable spears.

Maeve's face is cold, inscrutable. The force behind her should bring her victory beyond all doubt.

Yet doubt still remains in her memory, reflected in the depths of her eyes.

Across the great rolling plain, a solitary man awaits the approaching host: Dia.

EXT. CAMP - DUSK

Fergus sits alone on a rock outside of his tent, sharpening a short knife.

DIA (O.S.)

"I shelter the miserable. Scourge
the strong. Watch over the weak."

Fergus freezes. His eyes squint. He spins.

Dia stands there with a grin as wide as his open arms.

FERGUS

Dia!

Fergus pulls his son into a bear hug. The weight of years apart washes over them.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

You've grown.

DIA

You've shrunk.

Fergus laughs. He claps Dia hard on the shoulder, with enough strength to send most men crumpling to the earth. Dia doesn't budge.

FERGUS

How did you find us?

DIA

I came by way of Emain Macha.
Something festers there. Men lie,
cursed, in agony. I saw.

Fergus's eyes shift, with hope giving way to unease.

FERGUS

Did Setana come with you?

DIA

We sailed together. Parted ways on
Ulster's shores, a fortnight past.

Fergus nods, thinking...

DIA (CONT'D)

Has Emer come with the host?

Fergus shakes his head, his gaze darkening.

FERGUS

A man came in the night. Or a boy.
He humiliated the guards of
Cruachan and stole Emer away. Less
than a fortnight past.

Dia takes a moment to digest this. They both know: it was
Cuhullin.

DIA

Setana...

Fergus reaches out to comfort his son.

FERGUS

Forget these troubles. You could
not have picked a better time to
return. We're going home. Our real
home.

Dia nods. He attempts to smile again, but he can't hide the
pain of losing Emer.

EXT. CALLIAGH HILLS - NIGHT/DAWN

The milky way shines brilliantly over a smooth-sloped hill of
stones, the ancient burial mound of Sliabh na Calliagh.

Maeve wanders alone. Her eyes reflect the last stars of the
night sky as they begin to fade into the deep violet
beginning of the dawn.

She turns towards the ancient burial mound a short walk away.
At the top, a veiled figure stands alone. Maeve squints and
moves closer. She closes the gap to the mound as it begins to
glow a deep orange from the first hint of the rising sun.

The figure stands still, waiting for her.

Maeve climbs the slag, the loose stones placed down in a time before memory.

Still the figure waits.

Finally, Maeve reaches the rounded peak. She comes to a stop facing the figure - Macha, a mere stone's throw away.

MACHA

Welcome, Maeve of Connacht.

MAEVE

Who are you to grace me with your presence?

MACHA

None but an old woman.

MAEVE

The *sidhe* are no place for mortals on Samhain.

MACHA

And yet here you have come.

MAEVE

You awaited me.

MACHA

I have long awaited you.

MAEVE

Have you the *Imbas Forosnai*, the light of foresight?

MACHA

Some things I can see.

MAEVE

Can you tell me where my daughter is?

MACHA

I cannot see her through the trees.

MAEVE

Then we will burn the forests.

MACHA

This will not help you find her.

MAEVE

Tell me then, what will become of her?

MACHA

Hers will be the greatest king.

MAEVE

Will she be queen? Will she rule long after me?

MACHA

This I cannot say.

MAEVE

What of the great bull of Ulster?

MACHA

It will be yours for a time.

MAEVE

And of these armies below, will I lead them to victory? What do you see of this host?

MACHA

I see it in crimson, I see it in red.

Queen Maeve shifts her weight uneasily.

MAEVE

Conchobar's men suffer a curse in Emain Macha, my messengers tell me. Does my host wade through rivers of their blood?

MACHA

I see it in crimson, I see it in red--

MAEVE

Wrath and rage and red wounds will come in war--

Macha's eyes roll up into her head.

MACHA

*I see a battle...
Across the sinister chariot wheel
The warped one deals death
His brow is full of victories--*

MAEVE

Who is the warped one?

MACHA

*The earth moans beneath him
Rising where his lifeblood falls
I see a great hound.
Crows peck at the necks of men...
Take heed, if you value the lives
of your host.
I see it in crimson, I see it in
red.*

The edge of the sun rises over the horizon, behind Macha, blinding to Queen Maeve.

Maeve shies away to shield her eyes.

MACHA (CONT'D)

*Total ruin at his touch,
Your warriors dead, torn corpses
Because of him
The Hound of Ulster*

The sunlight blinds. Maeve blinks as the sudden brightness fades into day. Macha is gone.

EXT. ENCAMPMENT - DAY

Maeve walks slowly towards her tent as though in a daze.

FERGUS (O.S.)

Maeve!

He hurries towards her as she does not turn.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

I've been searching for you. Where have you been?

MAEVE

I went to the *sídhe*. The mound,
Sliabh na Calliagh.

Fergus slows, keeping his distance, disquieted.

FERGUS

What did you see?

MAEVE

The sunrise. Prepare torches and axes. We will burn as we go.

EXT. FOREST - DUSK

Trees burn. Crows fly.

Maeve's army marches through the forest, hacking and burning as they go.

Fergus and Dia ride their chariots a little ahead of Maeve herself.

They exchange a disquieted look as the destruction spreads behind them.

INT. CUHULLIN'S BEDCHAMBER, EMAIN MACHA - DAWN

Cuhullin lies with still-sleeping Emer in the early morning.

Quietly, he slips away.

Across the room, he clothes himself, pulling on a red clasped tunic and fine leather armor over it.

EMER (O.S.)

So soon?

Cuhullin turns. Emer lies staring back at him, fully alert.

EMER (CONT'D)

You steal me away and leave me
before the week's end?

CUHULLIN

There is something I must do.

EMER

Take me with you then.

CUHULLIN

It will be dangerous--

EMER

More dangerous than breaking out of
Cruachan?

CUHULLIN

Thousands of men will come to kill
me.

EMER

Then we can flee together. We could
go across the sea--

CUHULLIN
I will not flee.

Emer rises from the bed, her eyes emanating pain.

EMER
I can fight--

CUHULLIN
I have only one chariot. It must be
swifter than any other for me to
fight.

EMER
I am swift.

Cuhullin takes Emer's hands in his own.

CUHULLIN
I'll be gone a fortnight, no more.
You will be safer here than with
me.

Without another word, he turns and leaves. Emer sinks back
onto the bed, devastated.

INT. TENT - DAWN

Maeve and Fergus lie together.

Maeve's eyes narrow in annoyance at Fergus as he broods,
staring away at the tent canvas above them.

MAEVE
Should I find another to lie with?
Perhaps my husband has a sword to
match yours.

FERGUS
You are the Queen. Do as you
please.

MAEVE
Why do you sulk?

FERGUS
You burn the land.

MAEVE
So sweet, your softness for Ulster--
-

FERGUS

Softness? I would kill Conchobar
and those who follow him. I would
take back the kingship and rule
again. But you have no right to
burn... Innocents need not die--

MAEVE

Innocents? Who is innocent? They
follow an evil King here, allowing
him to do as he pleases. What of my
daughter? Would you kill the thief
that took her?

FERGUS

If she was taken against her will.

Maeve slaps Fergus. Hard.

Fergus rolls away, rises to his feet, and pulls on his
clothing to leave.

MAEVE

I did not grant you permission to
leave.

FERGUS

And yet I go.

He pushes through the tent flap, out into the camp.

EXT. WAR CAMP - DAWN

Fergus strides away from his tent, tying his belt with his
empty sword sheath around his waist as he goes.

Men mill about, tending small camp fires, boiling pots of
water, sharpening weapons.

Maeve appears from Fergus's tent, angrily pulling heavy furs
over her robe.

MAEVE (O.S.)

Fergus!

Fergus slows to wait for her to catch up to him.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

Stop.

Fergus rounds on her.

FERGUS

(quietly)

A queen you may be, but this is not your domain. Do not forget to whom you speak. You would not want me for an enemy.

MAEVE

Enemy? No. None know better than I that there is no man like you.

It's true.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

That is part of the reason why we've come. I will have my bull. I will take back my daughter. And you will have your stolen kingdom returned.

FERGUS

It will not be easy.

MAEVE

If we move quickly, there will be none to stop us. Send for your son, Dia. He will take a troop of raiders east to search for the bull in Cuailnge. Tell him to burn Daire's house if the bull is not there. Leave it nowhere to hide, no home to return to. We will continue North towards Emain Macha with the rest of the army to reseal you there as king.

Fergus nods curtly.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

We should break camp. We can search for your sword again this evening.

EXT. HILLSIDE - DAY

Near the top of a tree, Laeg peers over the surrounding countryside.

With a loud THWACK, a small brown ball sails up into view, then arcs back down.

Below, Cuhullin keeps his eye on the falling ball, waiting with his hurley stick in hand, an elongated wooden club.

Quicker than a flash, he smacks the ball back up again. Immediately, he raises a spear and lets it fly.

The spear meets the ball midair, right in front of Laeg's perch on the tree.

Laeg shakes his head in loving annoyance.

CUHULLIN

What do you see?

LAEG

A vast host, many thousands.

CUHULLIN

How many?

LAEG

I cannot reckon.

CUHULLIN

Why am I counting on you to do this?

LAEG

Come and see yourself then.

Cuhullin obliges, scrambling up the tree with ease.

Taking up a perch across the trunk from Laeg, Cuhullin squints to the southwest.

Many miles away, the rolling hills and fields teem with the troops of Queen Maeve's armies. Enormous. Many thousands.

CUHULLIN

Huh. Hard to reckon, that.

Laeg scoffs, annoyed.

LAEG

Look there. Chariots to the east.

Laeg points.

Off the side of the armies, a narrow line of chariots crawl away towards the horizon, where the glimmer of the sea glistens at the edge of sight.

LAEG (CONT'D)

Raiders.

CUHULLIN
Off to Cuailnge... Do they think
that Emer is there?

Laeg shakes his head.

LAEG
The bull... The Donn Cuailnge and
his heifers make their home there.
They'll be tracking him.

Cuhullin ponders.

CUHULLIN
Where is the bull?

LAEG
I cannot say for sure. But he did
not come yet to Emain Macha.

LAEG (CONT'D)
So... Head off the army or take on
the raiders?

Cuhullin swings down effortlessly to a lower branch to begin
his descent.

CUHULLIN
The day is long enough for both.

EXT. ROLLING HILLS NEAR DAIRE'S HOUSE - DAY

Dia leads the line of two dozen chariots to the east over
rough hills and the edges of a forest back towards Daire's
solitary home.

CATTLE, aimlessly wandering, raise their heads from grazing
to stare at the chariots for moments as they pass by.

One by one, the Beasts' heads turn back to the ground to
continue their meals.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Cuhullin and Laeg creep through forest underbrush ahead of
their chariot.

Through the distant trees they watch as Dia's troop circles
the house, scouring the ground for tracks.

After a moment, Dia takes a torch and lights the thatching of the house on fire. The fire quickly spreads, circling the roof and sending black smoke billowing into the sky.

CUHULLIN

Can you make out their faces?

LAEG

Not from here.

From afar, they watch as the raiders fan out to search the surrounding fields and woods for tracks. Three men make their way towards Cuhullin and Laeg.

CUHULLIN

We shall see them soon enough.

But as Cuhullin readies his slingshot to cast the first stone, a ripple of movement catches his eye.

WOLVES streak through the brush. A strong pack, at least a dozen. Before the raiders can react, the wolves open their throats.

LAEG

Perhaps we are not needed here.

Cuhullin nods vacantly, in perverse awe at what he has just witnessed. A great She-Wolf -- leader of the pack -- lifts her head and stares straight back at Cuhullin as the pack feasts on the raiders' corpses.

CUHULLIN

Let us leave these for the wolves.
Most of Maeve's army will reach the
river by nightfall if we do not
stop them.

EXT. FOREST - FOG

Maeve and Fergus lead a line of chariots down a treelined path through impenetrable fog. A host of men on foot follows.

Out of the fog ahead, a low, flat standing stone looms in the center of the path.

On the stone, a narrow stem of willow wood lies twisted into an intricate double loop, a spancel to hobble the legs together of some mighty beast, like a giant pair of manacles.

Both charioteers pull the horses to a stop without a word.

Maeve glances from the manacles to Fergus. Recognizing the silent order, Fergus hops down and walks to the stone, lifting the twisted willow.

FERGUS

An inscription. "Come no further,
or I will hobble you with a spancel
fit for an army."

MAEVE

An odd thought, that. No spancel
loops could contain this army.

Fergus peers into the shadowy woods which impose on the narrow path. Shapes move in the mist.

FERGUS

All the same, better not to offend
the unknown...

Maeve opens her mouth to respond, but pauses as a crow flutters down to the standing stone, starting back at the two of them.

The crow swivels its small head as it looks between Fergus and Maeve.

It caws. Loudly. Again and again.

And from the trees, the caws echo back. Hundreds. Thousands.

The men behind Maeve shift and murmur, unnerved.

Maeve turns to two scouts beside her, EIRR and INDELL.

MAEVE

Our fastest chariots. Follow this
path. Return to tell us what awaits
near ahead.

The Scouts nod and set off.

The Crow takes off after them.

Its MURDER rises from the trees to follow.

EXT. RIVER FORD - DAY

With a powerful splash, a huge forked tree drops into the shallow river bed.

Cuhullin stands beside it, thigh deep in the water, breathing heavily from exertion.

Nearby, Laeg sits on the edge of the fresh stump.

CUHULLIN
Could you drive through that?

LAEG
A fork like that? No.

Cuhullin grins, satisfied with his work. He takes a step towards the near bank, but he stops as a Crow crosses past his head and gracefully alights on the forked tree in the ford.

The Crow CAWS. And again, thousands of CAWS echo back.

Cuhullin gazes up into the trees. Thousands of Crows stare back at him, waiting for their feast.

And through the distant fog, HOOFBEATS echo.

The chariots of the scouts, Eirr and Indell, appear at the other bank of the river.

They pull their horses to a stop at the water's edge, eyeing the blocked ford with trepidation.

Eirr spies Laeg across the way.

EIRR
Friend! Is there another way across
the river?

LAEG
A day's journey upstream.

Cuhullin steps through the tree branches to wade to the scouts' side.

CUHULLIN
Where are you headed?

EIRR
Who are you to ask?

CUHULLIN
A servant of King Conchobar. I
asked where are you headed?

EIRR
Your master will not be King much
longer. We head for Emain Macha
with Queen Maeve.

CUHULLIN
Shame, that.

EIRR
What is?

CUHULLIN
That you won't make it.

Cuhullin twirls his sling.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)
I have a message for your Queen...

The scouts' eyes widen in fear as Cuhullin lets fly the first stone. They know; the fight is already over.

EXT. FOREST - FOG

The men of Connacht bustle about quietly, slowly preparing to camp for the night, though not yet putting up tents.

Maeve impatiently taps the armrest of a large chair, specially brought for her and placed in the middle of the forest path beside the standing stone.

MAEVE
(calling over her
shoulder)
Fergus!

Fergus comes quickly to her side.

MAEVE (CONT'D)
We still have daylight left to move forward. If I turn around, I don't want to see a single tent raised. Can you make that understood?--

Before she can fully finish, POUNDING hoofbeats interrupt her.

Maeve leaps to her feet.

Out of the fog, the Scouts' chariots return.

The four horses sprint towards them at breakneck speed, with coats stained red with blood.

The headless bodies of the scouts ride in the chariots behind the horses, limbs flailing, torsos bound to the chariots themselves.

MAEVE (CONT'D)
We will not sleep here.

EXT. RIVER FORD - DUSK

Maeve and Fergus approach the river ford at the head of their army.

The men now march cautiously, weapons at the ready.

Ahead, the heads of Eirr and Indell rest on stakes, flanking both sides of the path as it descends into the river bed.

MAEVE
Have those removed. We can make camp along the river. Double our sentries. At least we can defend well enough against an attack from across the water.

Fergus nods to nearby men including Dia, instantly delegating. They get to work.

MAEVE (CONT'D)
Is this Conchobar's work?

FERGUS
A great fighter, he is. But not like him to come to the borderlands.

MAEVE
He sent a company then?

FERGUS
The inscription read with a single voice.

MAEVE
How could one champion think to stand against us?

FERGUS
One boy stole into Rath Cruachan and took Emer--

MAEVE
That was different. We were not there. Woe to him if we had been.

FERGUS
You might think differently if it is the boy I reckon.

MAEVE

The boy you reckon? You know who stole my daughter?

FERGUS

I do not know certain... But this boy... My foster-son. Setana was his birth name. When he was six years old, he killed a guard dog that set upon him. He promised to take its stead until another was whelped and trained. "Cuhullin" they called him then -- Culann's Hound. And later, "the Hound of Ulster".

MAEVE

And this is a man to be feared?

FERGUS

Still just a boy. But there is no better fighter in all of Ireland, except perhaps my son Dia. They would wressle, day and night, or play with spear and sword, one coming out on top, then the other. Dia would be stronger, except for Cuhullin's battle rage. For this, some call him the Warped One. They say he becomes more beast than man.

Maeve cocks her head, intrigued.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

They went together across the sea three years past, to Alba, to train with Scáthach the renowned teacher of warriors. And together they returned. Cuhullin walks in Ireland. Perhaps across that river-

-

With a THUMP, a body falls through the tent's entrance.

Fergus leaps to his feet and jumps to the entrance, drawing a small knife.

The eyes of a dead Guardsman stare up at him, transfixed, separated by a sling stone the size of a fist jutting into his skull.

Outside, Warriors shout, clamber out of their tents and jump to their arms.

Stones WHIZZ through the darkness, bringing down one man after another like massive hail falling indiscriminately from the sky.

Warlike shouts turn into shrieks of terror.

Brave men who stand in the open fall, while Cowards who lie hidden survive. Soon, all hide, and the storm of stones stops.

EXT. FOREST - FOG

Dia leads the reinforced remnants of his raiders through forest undergrowth.

Following gentle tracks, he comes to a halt, holding up his hand to signal to the others.

Movement ceases.

With a second signal from Dia, two scouts disappear off the back end of the group, creeping away to bring reinforcements.

The rest creep forward and fan out.

NEARBY

Laeg leads the horses to water. They won't drink.

A Crow lands on a branch nearby. It CAWS loudly, again and again, like an alarm.

Laeg glances towards the bird, with annoyance turning to disquiet as the cawing shows no signs of slowing.

Leaves RUSTLE in the undergrowth as wind WHISPERS through the woods.

The Crow dives off its branch, straight towards Laeg. Laeg ducks as the bird passes inches over his head.

With that, he knows. He sends a whistled birdcall into the undergrowth.

A bush rustles. Cuhullin rises from a crouched position, adjusting his clothing to cover himself. Eyes alert for danger, he peers into the fog trying to pinpoint Laeg's call.

A RAIDER looms out of the dark, bristling with weapons, creeping through the foliage.

Cuhullin pads softly behind him.

Two horses part the fog, led by Laeg. The Raider stands tall and lifts a spear, but Cuhullin pounces and snaps the man's neck.

Laeg and Cuhullin gesture towards each other for silence. Together they move faster, as quietly as they can.

But footsteps pound through the forest on all sides.

Spears fly out of the fog, passing between Cuhullin and Laeg, inches from their faces.

They run faster.

Ahead, THREE RAIDERS with a weighted net between them cut off their path. Cuhullin and Laeg turn, taking the horses with them, with the Raiders in pursuit, followed by many more.

Suddenly, they're running towards the river, then along it, then surrounded on all sides, with deep water behind them.

Spears and stones fly past.

Among the Raiders, Dia lets fly his own spear. Cuhullin ducks, almost too late. It grazes his cheek, dripping blood down his face.

Cuhullin closes his eyes. Something inside him stirs. A cornered animal. He lets out a guttural howl.

A stone hits him in the chest. For a moment, he seems to crumple, but leaps up with a scream as his face contorts, his muscles bulge, and a terrible shriek escapes his mouth.

Every vein swells out of Cuhullin's face and neck as he thrashes about, gnashing his teeth, becoming the embodiment of the Warped One.

He bares his teeth, sharp as fangs below his red eyes burning through the fog. A spear flies straight for his head, but he catches it and hurls it back with a snarl, charging after it.

Stones beat at him. Spears hit his armor, catching, blocked from going through, but still piercing the skin, serving to infuriate more rather than to wound him.

He reaches the first raider and picks him up, throwing him into the next.

He tears necks, breaks limbs, cracks skulls. Bodies pile up around him.

Still, stones and spears rain down.

Dia slings a stone through the fog that stuns Cuhullin, and other Raiders rush forward, throwing the weighted net over him.

Cuhullin struggles to stand, slashing at the net as the raiders run to retrieve their spears and strike the killing blow.

A growl punctuates the fog. The great She-Wolf -- with Macha's eyes -- leaps gracefully onto a mound near Cuhullin.

The Wolf howls. The woods echoes with howling in response.

A feral pack of WOLVES tears through the undergrowth. The remaining raiders flee for their lives.

Dia leaps into a tree, just out of reach of a wolf's clamping jaws. Dia climbs higher and higher as the SCREAMS of the men below slowly fade away.

EXT. WAR CAMP - DUSK

At the edge of camp, disembodied heads lie piled, some bearing the marks of wolves' teeth.

Maeve gazes at them, mesmerized. Almost sad, but not for the dead. For herself, for the delay this is causing.

Fergus stands beside her.

FERGUS

At this rate, our army will melt
away at his hands.

MAEVE

Can you find him?

FERGUS

I can try.

MAEVE

I want to send this Cuhullin an
offer. I will give him lands in
Connacht equal to his home. I will
give him the best chariot to be
found, and harness to equip him. Or
offer him his own home, with
twenty-one bondmaids and
compensation for anything of his
that we have destroyed. For his
part, he will take service under
me, and renounce the usurper he
serves now.

FERGUS

What of Emer?

MAEVE

Emer returns to me.

FERGUS

And if she refuses?

MAEVE

She will return soon enough.

FERGUS

Cuhullin is not likely to accept this.

MAEVE

He would be a fool. None could expect better.

FERGUS

Land, he has claims to. Women he takes as he pleases. What can you give that he does not already have at hand?

MAEVE

Peace.

Fergus laughs darkly.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

Please tell me the humor in that.

FERGUS

You think this boy desires peace? He lives for blood.

MAEVE

Then give him blood.

Fergus pauses, confused.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

Make the deal that must be made to buy us time, and to keep the men calm at night.

FERGUS

You may not like the terms.

MAEVE

I do not like the thought of one
boy cowing our whole army in fear,
as he does now.

Fergus nods.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

How will you find him?

FERGUS

He will find me.

EXT. WAR CAMP - DAWN

Fergus exits his tent into the misty light of early morning.
Pulling his belt tight, he nods towards his charioteer, and
they make final preparations for the day's riding.

Men quietly stoke fires and sleepily carry water. Today,
there is no urgency. No weapon-sharpening.

Fully armored, Etarcomol walks through camp with confusion on
his face as he approaches Fergus.

ETARCOMOL

Why do the men tarry?

FERGUS

Today, they stay still until we
know the enemy we face.

ETARCOMOL

How will we know that if we do not
move forward?

FERGUS

That is where I am going.

ETARCOMOL

Alone?

FERGUS

Alone is wisest now. Our enemy is
less likely to kill one man than
twenty or thirty together.

ETARCOMOL

I will come with you.

FERGUS

I did not ask you to.

ETARCOMOL

Anything is better than still waiting. And it would be a terrible blow to lose you, all alone in the wilderness.

FERGUS

I will not get lost in my own land.

ETARCOMOL

Unless the land has changed... Allow me to join you. Please.

FERGUS

Only if you promise not to speak if it comes to words.

ETARCOMOL

Easy enough.

FERGUS

Come then, I will not stop you. But I cannot promise to protect you if you go your own way.

Etarcomol grins.

ETARCOMOL

I would not ask it.

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Fergus and Etarcomol ride their chariots across an open field of tall grass.

ETARCOMOL

Do you know what it is we're looking for?

Fergus pretends not to hear, gazing away for any movement at the edge of the field.

Etarcomol frowns in annoyance.

ETARCOMOL (CONT'D)

(sarcastically)

Perhaps we watch for birds...

FERGUS

Yes.

And with that, an unkindness of ravens takes flight over near trees.

Below, racing through the waving grasses, Cuhullin's chariot flies behind his two horses. Laeg drives, crouched low, and Cuhullin stands tall at the back, his red tunic billowing out behind him.

The chariot turns and closes the gap to Fergus and Etarcomol, who shift their weight apprehensively and grip their spears tight.

Laeg pulls Cuhullin's chariot to a stop a stone's throw away.

Staring across the way, Cuhullin's mouth falls open in surprise.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

Setana. It cools my heart to know that you are home.

CUHULLIN

Friend Fergus... have you come to aid Ulster against this invasion?

FERGUS

I have come to aid Ulster... I am the invasion.

CUHULLIN

You fight for the foreigners?

FERGUS

I fight for myself. And you fight for the Usurper?

CUHULLIN

I fight for Ulster.

FERGUS

As do I.

CUHULLIN

And Dia?

FERGUS

He as well.

CUHULLIN

Why does the land burn then?

FERGUS

The land has burned since Conchobar stole the throne. Since he desecrated Maeve, and Dierdre, and Macha.

(MORE)

FERGUS (CONT'D)

Since he put aside the laws of gods
and men and massacred the sons of
Uisneach after welcoming them into
our home of Emain Macha.

CUHULLIN

No holy man is he. But how can men
follow Maeve, when she murdered her
sister with her own hands? Cursed
is the kinslayer.

FERGUS

That is another ill of Conchobar's,
taking sister after sister.

Cuhullin shakes his head and opens his mouth to respond, but
Fergus forges on.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

No matter that. We offer you a
proposal: lands more than you could
use. Bondsmaids. Payment for
anything of yours that has been
damaged.

CUHULLIN

I have no need for any of those.

FERGUS

Whatever you desire then.

CUHULLIN

In exchange for what?

FERGUS

Maeve wishes for the return of her
daughter, Emer.

CUHULLIN

Emer came willingly. She would have
come to me regardless.

Fergus sighs. He suspected as much.

FERGUS

Then for you to fight for us rather
than the usurper, Conchobar. Or to
fight not at all.

CUHULLIN

How can a warrior not fight?

FERGUS

A man who knows no end to fighting
is no more than a beast.

Cuhullin shrugs.

CUHULLIN

I am a beast then.

Fergus shifts his weight, flummoxed.

FERGUS

You kill men in the night, when
they are unprepared and not ready
for war.

CUHULLIN

Your armies invade Ulster when all
are stricken with illness and not
ready for war.

FERGUS

I return with an army to claim what
is mine.

Cuhullin nods towards Etarcomol in his chariot beside Fergus.

CUHULLIN

Tell me, does this one follow you
or Maeve of Connacht?

ETARCOMOL

Speak straight to me if you have a
question.

Recognition dawns on Cuhullin's face. He laughs.

CUHULLIN

You were at the gate of Cruachan a
fortnight past. I thought you
tasted enough of battle then.

FERGUS

Enough!

Etarcomol seethes.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

What would it take for you to not
slaughter in the night?

Cuhullin considers.

CUHULLIN

Tribute. One champion to fight me
each day. And Maeve's armies to
move only as long as the fight
goes, not a moment more.

FERGUS

We can accept this.

Etarcomol shoots a surprised glance towards Fergus, quickly
turning to suspicion.

CUHULLIN

I'll wait at the river ford for
first combat tomorrow morning.

FERGUS

Done.

Fergus nudges his Charioteer, who turns the horses to go.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

It grieves me to see you like this.

CUHULLIN

Likewise.

Fergus rides away, beckoning Etarcomol to follow.

But Etarcomol lags behind.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

What are you staring at?

ETARCOMOL

You.

CUHULLIN

You could take that in at a glance.

ETARCOMOL

So I see. A fine lad for graceful
tricks with wooden weapons.

CUHULLIN

For Fergus's sake I won't kill you.
If you hadn't his protection, you
would have had your bowels ripped
out by now and your quarters
scattered behind you all the way
from your chariot to the camp.

ETARCOMOL

You needn't threaten me. I'll be
the first of the men of Ireland to
come against you tomorrow under
this fine plan of single combats.

Etarcomol's Charioteer spurs on the horses, pulling the cart
around to follow the now distant Fergus.

CUHULLIN

That will hardly make for a fine
feat for me, even with only wooden
weapons.

It seems Etarcomol is already too far, fading out of earshot.

But...

ON HIS CHARIOT

Etarcomol hears this.

ETARCOMOL

(to his charioteer)

Pull around. Turn the left board
against them.

ACROSS THE FIELD

Cuhullin and Laeg watch as the chariot turns.

LAEG

(nonchalantly)

They turn the left chariot board
against us. The challenge is
made...

CUHULLIN

I can't refuse that. Drive to meet
him.

The chariots race toward each other.

Etarcomol readies his shield and spear. He sets his feet and
hurls the dart.

The spear WHIZZES across the field.

Cuhullin doesn't flinch as it passes inches from his face. He
twirls his sling and lets fly a stone in response.

The stone meets Etarcomol's chariot wheel. It splinters the spokes and the axle, sending the chariot flying apart into pieces.

Etarcomol and his charioteer tumble out of the crash as Laeg guides Cuhullin's chariot in a sweeping arc around them.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

Go away now. I don't want to wash
my hands after you.

Etarcomol draws his sword.

ETARCOMOL

I'll have your head or leave you
mine.

Laeg brings the chariot to a stop. Cuhullin hops to the ground with calm resignation on his face. He draws his own sword as he approaches Etarcomol.

CUHULLIN

Worse for you, that.

Etarcomol lunges forward.

With a deft twirl, Cuhullin deflects his first stroke. He removes Etarcomol's head with the backswing.

FERGUS (O.S.)

Demon spawn! Ingrate!

Cuhullin turns to see Fergus's chariot charging back towards him. He bows his head in recognition.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

Have you no honor? What kind of man
slaughters another at a parley?

CUHULLIN

A coward, no doubt. But this was no
parley. He turned the left chariot
board against me.

Fergus glances towards Etarcomol's trembling charioteer.

FERGUS

Does he speak true?

The charioteer nods.

Fergus grunts in frustration.

Cuhullin gazes down at Etarcomol's body.

CUHULLIN
A boastful man, he was.

FERGUS
Many are.

Without a moment's hesitation, Fergus pulls out two giant hooks attached to the end of knotted ropes.

He jumps down to Etarcomol's body and pierces each ankle with a hook.

CUHULLIN
I will wait at the ford at dawn for
the next one then. Send my regards
to Dia.

Laeg turns the chariot and drives Cuhullin away.

Fergus watches him go for a moment, then returns to his own chariot and departs, with the headless body of Etarcomol dragging on the ground behind him.

EXT. RIVER FORD - DAWN

Cuhullin wades in the river, stretches, yawns, and splashes water on his face.

Across the river, Fraech's chariot pulls to a stop.

Cuhullin appraises his opponent, unimpressed.

CUHULLIN
If you come any nearer, I would
have to kill you, and that would be
a pity.

FRAECH
I have come to fight, so fight you
must.

CUHULLIN
I don't wish to fight you.

FRAECH
Run away then, little man.

CUHULLIN
I'd prefer not.

FRAECH
You reached the ford first. You
have the choice of weapons.

CUHULLIN

You are a brave man. I will give
you that choice. What style of
combat?

Fraech tosses aside his spear and shield.

FREACH

Weaponless.

He pulls off his armor and tunic as he walks down into the
water. Cuhullin does the same.

They meet near the center of the river, with water nearly up
to their waists.

Fraech towers over Cuhullin. Cuhullin stares up at him with
pure unshaken confidence. The two circle each other.

CUHULLIN

Yield now, and I will spare you.

Fraech crouches low, readying himself for a fight.

FRAECH

I do not yield.

CUHULLIN

More's the pity. Are you ready?

Fraech nods.

Cuhullin wades straight towards him.

Fraech swings a hard fist for Cuhullin's head, but Cuhullin
ducks under, dives and tackles Fraech into the water.

Quicker than a cat, Cuhullin's feet find the river bed. His
arms loop around Fraech's neck and one leg, and he dunks
Fraech's head under water as Fraech's arms flail about,
helplessly attempting to batter Cuhullin.

For ten seconds Cuhullin holds Fraech's head under as
Fraech's arms churn the water.

Cuhullin relents, pulling Fraech up for air.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

Yield.

Fraech sputters, gasping for air, spitting up water.

FRAECH
 (grunting)
 No, that won't be said of me.

Unceremoniously, Cuhullin twists Fraech's head back underwater.

Fraech struggles and flails for nearly a minute more before his body goes limp.

Cuhullin releases Fraech's body. The body floats away, face down in the water.

In the trees above, Crows rise from the branches, taking flight as one.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Cuhullin wakes with a start.

Laeg sleeps soundly nearby, across the remains of a campfire.

Eyes peer out of the darkness. A cloaked figure stands at the edge of the clearing.

Cuhullin draws a knife.

The figure raises a hand, beckoning.

Cuhullin rises warily. He follows as the figure glides away into the forest.

EXT. FIELD OF CLOCHAFARMORE - NIGHT

Cuhullin follows the figure to the great standing stone of Clochafarmore. There, she pulls back her hood. Macha gazes back towards Cuhullin, her face reflecting the ethereal moonlight above.

MACHA
 Welcome, mighty one. Single-handed
 you slaughter the armies of your
 enemies.

CUHULLIN
 Laeg drives the horses.

MACHA
 How long can you fight?

CUHULLIN
 I can fight without rest.

MACHA

And how is this so?

CUHULLIN

I do not know. I thought you would know.

MACHA

Could it be true, what they whisper about you? Are you more than just a man? With the blood of the old gods... Are you Lugh's son?

Cuhullin shrugs.

Macha reaches out towards him with one hand and places the other on the standing stone.

MACHA (CONT'D)

Come, touch the stone.

Cuhullin does as he's told...

And the sky explodes in brilliant colors.

He looks around at a changed world.

The field is similar, but flowers of every color have sprung up from the ground, doused in summer sunshine.

Macha gazes back at him, her dark cloak gone, replaced by a light summer slip that waves in the breeze.

She smiles. Cuhullin grins back uncertainly. He looks away, taking in more of his surroundings.

CUHULLIN

Why have you brought me here?

MACHA

To see if it is true. To see if you are born of the gods. You see before you the Otherworld, Tir na Nog, the land of youth, hidden from mortal eyes.

All around, life flourishes, bountiful, beautiful. Except where darkness stains the sky.

Cuhullin points to the southwest.

CUHULLIN

And there? What stains the sky?

MACHA

Strife. Destruction. The lands
bleed together. Where Ireland
burns, this world burns as well.

Away to the north, a second stain darkens the brilliant blue
above...

Macha puts her hand back on the standing stone. The world
plunges back into darkness.

Mist rises from the ground. Macha smiles again.

CUHULLIN

Why are you helping me?

MACHA

My home burns too. But my help does
not come without a price. And if
you are that which I think you
are... I must ask it of you.

CUHULLIN

What might that be?

MACHA

You will know, when the time comes.

The mist encompasses both of them, blocking out all else.

MACHA (CONT'D)

Sleep well.

And with that, Cuhullin blinks. His eyes open and close,
adjusting to the light, as he lies back where he fell asleep.

INT. MAEVE'S TENT - NIGHT

Maeve inspects a rough cut of pork, rotating it on the tip of
a knife.

Fergus stands nearby, waiting for the inevitable storm.

MAEVE

Flavor is a strange thing. Too much
fat, and the meat becomes difficult
to eat alone. Too little, it
becomes more effort than it is
worth.

Maeve tosses the meat to a dog, wolfhound pup, lying near her
feet. The pup laps it up.

Fergus flinches as his stomach gurgles hungrily.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

Are you an old man, Fergus?

FERGUS

Old?

MAEVE

Has your hair turned grey? Has your
step slowed? Has fat grown too much
on your belly?

FERGUS

Age affects us all.

MAEVE

Does cowardice too?

FERGUS

Many, yes.

MAEVE

Are you a warrior then, Fergus? Or
are you just a cowardly old man?

FERGUS

You speak in anger--

MAEVE

For a week, your words have led us
to this. Nothing. Stasis. And a man
to die each day. Are you a fighter
Fergus? Are you a champion? A
challenger awaits you. Will you
send lesser men to die in your
place?

Fergus's jaw tightens. He shakes his head.

EXT. RIVER FORD - DAWN

The wheels of Fergus's chariot cut deep into the muddy ground
as the horses strain down the path towards the river ford.

Fergus, dressed in the splendid colorful outfit of a warrior-
king, rubs his hands against his face and shows a tinge of
angst, then sets his face into an inscrutable mask.

Across the river, Cuhullin waits.

With a sorrowful look towards his charioteer, Fergus steps down to the ground, steeling himself to his fate as the chariot comes to a stop.

FERGUS
(softly)
Thank you...

The Charioteer nods back, holding back tears.

Fergus takes a deep breath and walks to the river to meet his fate.

At his side, Fergus's sword sheath hangs empty.

CUHULLIN
You must be under strong
protection, friend Fergus, to come
against me with no sword in your
scabbard.

FERGUS
It would be all the same if I had a
sword in it. I wouldn't use it on
you. Yield to me now, Cuhullin.

CUHULLIN
Yield to you? Why should I yield to
anyone?

FERGUS
No foster-son should kill his
foster-father. And I come unarmed.

CUHULLIN
It is foolish to come unarmed to a
duel... Shall we fight without
weapons?

FERGUS
Little value in that. I know I
cannot win. Yield to me, or kill me
where I stand.

CUHULLIN
I cannot yield.

Fergus nods, accepting his fate.

Cuhullin weighs a spear in his hand, lifting it to his shoulder.

For a moment Cuhullin turns, silently asking for advice from Laeg, who stays with the chariot behind him.

Laeg has no advice to give.

Cuhullin reaches back to cast the killing throw... But a crow descends before his eyes, wings aflutter, facing Cuhullin in the path of the throw.

Cuhullin lowers his spear. The crow glides to perch on a stone in the river. Cuhullin stares. He thinks.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

(to Fergus)

If you will yield to me another time.

FERGUS

Another time?

CUHULLIN

I will yield to you, if you will yield to me when we meet again on the field of battle. Then I will not have to kill you.

FERGUS

Agreed.

CUHULLIN

Until then...

He nods to Fergus.

Laeg pulls the chariot forward and Cuhullin hops on board.

Together, they retreat away from the river, out of sight.

Fergus exhales, hardly believing his luck.

MAEVE (V.O.)

Why didn't you chase him down?

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Maeve glares at Fergus from across a low table.

FERGUS

I had no weapons to match his. So I struck a deal. We have until tonight to advance unmolested.

MAEVE

And what have you given him?

FERGUS

I said I would yield when next we
face each other if he asks.

MAEVE

Cowardly, this seems.

FERGUS

If you speak so, then go meet him
on the field yourself.

Maeve brushes past this.

MAEVE

Go. We won't let an opportunity go
to waste. We march until dawn
tomorrow.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Cuhullin's eyes open as he lies on the forest floor, swathed
in blankets.

Again, Macha waits for him at the edge of the campsite.

Cuhullin stands and dutifully follows her.

EXT. CLOCHFARMORE FIELD - NIGHT

Macha leads Cuhullin wordlessly back to the tall standing
stone.

Together, they place their hands on the rough surface, and
again, the kalaedesopic light takes them to the Otherworld,
similar to our own but hauntingly beautiful.

MACHA

The first payment of my price has
come due.

She steps forward, shedding her cloak as she closes the gap
to Cuhullin.

Macha reaches up and cradles his face with one hand, guiding
it down to her own. She kisses him once, then again.

He hesitates for one moment only, then pulls her close as she
embraces him, guiding him down towards the earth.

INT. MAEVE'S TENT - NIGHT

Maeve stares at the short standing stone that her royal tent has been set around.

Firelight flickers against faded carvings chipped into the stone, spiraling outward like a map to a world beyond human thought.

Maeve picks up a spear and drives it into the earth with all her might, screaming with pent-up rage.

Fergus pulls back the tent flap, uneasy from the sound.

The spear sways back and forth. Maeve raises her head, barely acknowledging Fergus.

MAEVE

As the sun rises, the greatest army
in history will stand as still as
this stone. Are there truly none
who can defeat this boy?

FERGUS

Likely so.

Maeve sinks down to the ground.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

There is only one who stands a
chance. My son, Dia. But he would
have little wish to fight his
foster brother.

MAEVE

Would he make a coward's bargain
like you did?

FERGUS

My son is no coward. Neither am I.
Look to your husband. Has Ailill
gone to fight?

MAEVE

Ailill searches for my daughter.
And if you are no coward, prove it
to me.

FERGUS

I already went to fight.

MAEVE

That is not what I ask of you now.
Our agreement with the boy was for
my armies not to move. But you and
your men are men of Ulster.

(MORE)

MAEVE (CONT'D)

Take them north, to Emain Macha.
And bring me the bull.

FERGUS

This seems like trickery.

MAEVE

For a King to return home? Without
the armies of Connacht, you are no
true invader here.

FERGUS

Who will guard you?

MAEVE

Guard me?

FERGUS

I would not want to leave you
alone--

MAEVE

I am surrounded by guards, for what
little good they do. Leave Dia if
you must.

Fergus nods.

FERGUS

There are many warriors at Emain
Macha. If they rise to fight, my
men will be outnumbered manyfold.

MAEVE

Take only the fastest chariots
then. Draw them out to face our
army in the open field.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

Prepare your men.

EXT. WAR CAMP - NIGHT

Fergus leaps onto his chariot in pouring rain.

MAEVE (V.O.)

Leave tonight under cover of
darkness.

Hooves pound muddy ground. Dozens of chariots follow Fergus
into the night.

EXT. OTHERWORLD COLOCHAMORE FIELD - DAY

Cuhullin's eyes open.

Golden light fills his sight as he sees Macha sitting before him, with the rising sun behind her enveloping her in a halo light set against the tall solitary standing stone.

Birds sing. Grasses sway in a gentle breeze beneath a perfect blue sky.

Cuhullin sits up, marveling at how light his body feels after days of combat.

He looks to the southwest. The stained sky remains dark there, though lessened from before.

CUHULLIN
The stain fades.

MACHA
Rains wash away the fires.

CUHULLIN
I must go.

He rises.

MACHA
Where?

CUHULLIN
I must fight.

MACHA
Stay awhile.

CUHULLIN
Maeve's armies await me.

MACHA
Let them wait.

CUHULLIN
All the same, mornings are for fighting. I made an agreement.

He saunters past her towards the stone.

MACHA
A trick awaits you. Look to the river when your need grows dire. I will be with you there.

She steps close to him, gazing up into his eyes, interlocking her fingers into his.

And in an instant, the light of the otherworld fades into the darkness of early dawn.

Cuhullin is alone.

EXT. RIVER FORD - DAY

Cuhullin stands alone, his feet covered by rippling water.

With a thundering of hooves, dozens of chariots cross the nearby hill.

Skirmishers spring out of the bushes on both sides of the river, sending a rain of spears towards Cuhullin.

He dodges with grace and speed, slinging stones back at his attackers.

The river rises.

The chariots close in to the river. The first wheels touch the water, sending it splashing in all directions.

Cuhullin watches them come, many against one. Surely too many to withstand.

And the river rises. A great wave rears up with vengeance, racing down the low-set riverbed, spilling over both raised banks in angry tumult.

It hits the chariots with the force of a stampede of bulls.

They topple and flounder, utterly overwhelmed, the raging river drowning out the screams of men.

With a deft flick of the wrist, Cuhullin sends a stone hurtling to fell the last man standing.

EXT. WAR CAMP - DAY

Dia marches through camp. Fury boils just beneath the surface.

He throws back the royal tent flap and stomps inside.

INTO QUEEN MAEVE'S TENT

Where Maeve slices open a prime cut of a breakfast roast.

She glances up, eyeing Dia with the same interest as she eyes her breakfast.

DIA
You sent a company?

MAEVE
Yes. Is he dead?

DIA
You sent a company after agreeing to single combats?

MAEVE
There are no rules in war. I am sorry for any grief you may have for your foster-brother--

DIA
Grief? He slew them all. And we have broken our agreement with him.

Maeve's face falls. For the first time, a hint of fear creeps into her eyes.

MAEVE
Have none returned?

Dia shakes his head.

MAEVE (CONT'D)
Then their deaths are on your head. You could have chosen to go in their stead.

A loud THUD echoes from outside the tent, followed by an anguished groan.

Dia rushes...

OUT OF THE TENT

Where a guard lies on the ground, coughing blood. A long spear rises above him, embedded in his chest.

Dia kneels to comfort the man.

Maeve steps beside him, gazing at notched writing along the spear shaft.

MAEVE (CONT'D)
(reading)
"One mistake is all I will allow."
(MORE)

MAEVE (CONT'D)
Send one man to the ford again
tomorrow."

EXT. PLAINS NEAR EMAIN MACHA - DAY

Away from his resting troops tending to a stolen herd of cattle, Fergus walks up to the crest of a gentle hill.

The plains surrounding Emain Macha spread out to the edge of sight.

A young warrior, BUIDE follows at Fergus's shoulder.

BUIDE
Why is the land so empty? Where are
Ulster's armies?

FERGUS
We will learn soon enough.

Far away, a deep bull roar echoes across the hillsides.

FERGUS (CONT'D)
The bull calls. We must have taken
his heifers.

EXT. WARCAMP - DAWN

Maeve exits her tent, haughty.

Nearby, Dia speaks with a circle of men, champions as evidenced by their fine weaponry and bright cloaks.

MAEVE
Who fights today?

Dia turns. The men avoid Maeve's gaze.

DIA
None will volunteer.

MAEVE
Draw lots.

The men shift their weight nervously as Maeve turns and leaves.

EXT. RIVER FORD - DAY

Maeve watches from afar as a solitary champion, the COWARD, trembles as he walks down to the river ford to meet Cuhullin.

MAEVE
(to Fergus beside her)
Who is this one?

DIA
He is a son of--

MAEVE
I don't want to know his name. Is
he a fighter?

Dia remains silent.

Down in the water, Cuhullin disarms the coward in moments and begins to beat him with the flat of his sword blade.

MAEVE (CONT'D)
I suppose not.

The coward turns to flee, racing back up the gentle slope towards Maeve and Dia, terror in his eyes.

Cuhullin laughs from the river.

The coward stumbles on his last few steps before reaching Maeve. He bends over, gasping for breath from the effort.

Maeve lifts a spear.

The coward doesn't see. He's vomiting.

Maeve watches in disgust.

The vomiting ends. The coward rises up and turns to face his Queen.

And she hits him with a spear in the gut.

Without a word, Maeve mounts her chariot to ride back to camp, past her watching retinue.

Dia looks down at the dying man. A reflection of Daire's death.

MAEVE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Leave him!

And Dia turns away.

EXT. RIVER - EVENING

Cuhullin reaches down into the clear flowing water, washing grime from between his fingers.

Laeg leads the horses to water nearby.

CUHULLIN

I did not see Fergus among the
watchers today. I wonder where he
was?

LAEG

Perhaps he took the long way. Back
through the mountain pass.

CUHULLIN

Our agreement was that Maeve's
armies would not move.

LAEG

Is Fergus one of Maeve's armies?

Cuhullin shrugs.

CUHULLIN

I suppose Conchobar tricked him
with such a distinction.

He ponders.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

It would warm my heart to see Emer
tonight. And if Fergus has gone the
long way it would be no harm to
check--

LAEG

It's a full night's ride. Come
morning, you would need to fight
without sleep.

CUHULLIN

As my enemies do each day, lying
awake for fear of me. We must know
how the people of Emain Macha fare...
Whether the curse upon them has
lifted.

LAEG

If you wish.

CUHULLIN

Prepare the chariot. I'll join you
in a moment.

Laeg nods and leads the horses away.

Cuhullin relieves himself into the river. As he finishes, his hair stands on end. He feels eyes on him as he turns, searching through the darkness.

Macha emerges from the shadows.

MACHA

Is that how you thank the river
which brought you victory today?

CUHULLIN

It was a mighty sight. I mean no
disrespect, I only follow the calls
of the flesh.

MACHA

Come with me then.

CUHULLIN

I cannot.

MACHA

Cannot? You already have. Come away
and leave this world behind.

CUHULLIN

Emer waits for me, the most
beautiful of mortal women.

MACHA

Mortal she remains. Whatever joy
she brings you in this world will
be fleeting. Come away with me for
a life of joy without end. You are
not of this world Cuhullin. The
power of the ancient ones flows
through you.

CUHULLIN

What do you want from me?

MACHA

The earth sighs with relief in your
protection. The fires of war are
quenched, and flowers rise from the
graves of warriors. Rule with me.
Together, we can hold sway over all
the spirits of Ireland, with your
power added to mine. Forget sweet
Emer. Stay with me tonight, and
every night.

CUHULLIN

And who would know the name of such
a king? Some few druids and
whispering poets? No, I will not go
to rule the shadowlands, to be
slowly forgotten by those who walk
under this sun. Emer waits for me.
And battles remain to be fought,
day and night, for the whole world
to learn my name.

MACHA

You would spurn me? The one who has
helped you, guided you? Without me
your corpse would lie in the grass
today, a feast for carrion.

Cuhullin scoffs.

MACHA (CONT'D)

You doubt me? Do you know why the
great fortress of Ulster is called
Emain Macha? The twins of Macha?

Cuhullin shakes his head.

MACHA (CONT'D)

Did Conchobar never tell you of the
birth of your horses? Those
swiftest of horses that pull your
chariot?

Again Cuhullin shakes his head

MACHA (CONT'D)

They are my children.
The men of Ulster mocked me. And
now they fester with my curse upon
them. A great tribe laid low,
because they dared to insult me, to
mock me in my birth pains, as
though I were an animal to laugh at
for their entertainment. Tell me,
do you mock me?

CUHULLIN

I do not mock you.

MACHA

Then stay--

CUHULLIN

Why do you resist Maeve?

MACHA

I resist any who burn this land,
any who trample life under the
wheels of a thousand chariots.

CUHULLIN

This plan seems poor, if the
Ulstermen would do the same.

MACHA

Their actions brought about their
punishment. But soon the pains of
Ulster will end. They will rise up
for the great battle, and Maeve
will meet them there at Emain
Macha.

CUHULLIN

Then what is my part in this?

MACHA

You are the defender of Ulster.
Stay with me. Stay with one who
understands your true nature.

CUHULLIN

I defend Ulster only to bring about
the final battle, if what you say
is true.

MACHA

This is the way of the world.

CUHULLIN

So be it. You say I cannot be
satisfied with Emer. Neither could
you be satisfied with me alone. For
this world is my world. I am of it.
And tonight, I must go to Emer.

With that, he marches past the goddess.

Macha turns to watch him go. Her face fills with pain and
loneliness.

EXT. DIA'S TENT - DAY

Dia sits, sharpening a sword against a whetstone.

Maeve marches towards him.

MAEVE

You wished to marry my daughter?

DIA
Once, I did.

MAEVE
What would you have given?

DIA
Anything.

MAEVE
There is only one thing still left
to give--

DIA
She chose another.

MAEVE
Kill Cuhullin. End this struggle. I
will grant you your heart's desire.

DIA
I cannot fight Cuhullin--

MAEVE
You're the only one who can. Every
day, more face him. More die. I've
heard it said that none have your
skill. And none know Cuhullin like
you do.

DIA
Love comes before war.

MAEVE
He stole love from you.

Dia doesn't respond to this. He looks away, with the truth of
Maeve's words hitting closer than she knows.

MAEVE (CONT'D)
If you cannot defeat him... no one
can.

Dia stares back at his sword.

MAEVE (CONT'D)
It would be a shame for the
greatest warriors in Ireland to
never test their strength against
each other.

INT. BEDCHAMBER, EMAIN MACHA - NIGHT

Emer lies awake, staring into the darkness of the room.

Shadows beneath her eyes reveal the strain of her new life.

Moans of pain and illness fill the night air from the cursed warriors.

The door creaks in the darkness.

A figure looms up over Emer. She glances up in fear...

Cuhullin's face appears in the darkness. He smiles a sad smile to Emer. They kiss, their lips gently brushing against each other.

They whisper.

EMER

An eternity you've been away. Did you find another woman?

CUHULLIN

There is none of this world to compare to you.

Cuhullin kisses Emer again. The agonizing moans bring them back to reality.

EMER

Will you stay?

Cuhullin shakes his head.

CUHULLIN

I must go before dawn. Your mother's armies await me each day for single combat.

Emer turns away, fighting back tears. Cuhullin tries unsuccessfully to console her.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

Soon it will all be over. We will have years--

EMER

Or you will die, and I will be sold like cattle.

CUHULLIN

That will not happen. I promise.

EMER

Take me with you then.

CUHULLIN

I cannot.

Emer turns away, shaking her head. She lies back down and tries to make herself comfortable.

Cuhullin sits beside her for a moment, pondering. He slowly eases down to lie beside her, staring up at the ceiling.

The moans of agony continue as they struggle to fall asleep.

Darkness turns to purple haze as the hours pass.

Cuhullin rises, tiptoes away, and with a final glance towards Emer, steals away out into the time before the dawn.

Emer's eyes open, filled with loneliness.

EXT. RIVER FORD - DAWN

Cuhullin sharpens his sword.

Laeg watches him uneasily. Cuhullin glances up, but rather than speak, they simply share in a sense of discomfort.

The ground shakes. Maeve's army crests the ridge across the river, with the weight of its feet sending tremors into the earth.

Maeve leads a retinue of chariots down towards the river.

Dia rides by her side. The dawn sunlight glints off of his golden helm.

He takes the final approach to the river alone.

Cuhullin awaits him there, his face growing grimmer with Dia's every step.

Cuhullin looks up to the sky. Dark clouds loom from the west.

Dia comes to a stop at the edge of the riverbank. The foster-brothers stare at each other across the flowing water.

CUHULLIN

Here is a long way from across the sea.

Dia nods, but he's having none of it.

DIA
They say you stole Emer.

CUHULLIN
Yes. Body and heart.

DIA
What of the women of Alba? Uathach?
Aífe? Schatach?

CUHULLIN
Them I loved also. The love of one
does not diminish the love of
another.

With this, Dia's gaze softens. Something swells between them.
Dia breaks eye contact, looking down at the water.

DIA
And what if others do not see it
that way?

CUHULLIN
It would not change the truth.

DIA
You know why I am here.

CUHULLIN
You've come to cross swords with
me.

Dia steps down into the water. He steadies himself, finding
his footing on the uneven stones of the riverbed.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)
You are coming to disaster. For
your love, I will ask you one last
time to turn back.

DIA
You waste your breath. Is it
warriors' work to be shy or meek?

CUHULLIN
You have the choice of weapons. You
reached the water first.

DIA
Do you remember the very last feats
we learned under Scathach?

CUHULLIN
I remember them well.

Dia displays his weapons; eight thin throwing spears and a shield.

Laeg hands Cuhullin similar weapons.

Cuhullin steps into the water.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

You'll never have the girl you
dream of. The promise of Emer is a
snare set by Maeve.

DIA

Prepare to face your first defeat.

They raise their weapons.

A Crow descends from the trees, hovering in the air between them. It moves first towards Cuhullin, then to Dia, settling to a rest on Dia's shoulder.

Both stare at the crow. The crow stares back at Cuhullin. Cuhullin's brow furrows, belying the slightest hint of fear. The bird rises, crying out to the sky. Thousands of crows CAW back in response.

Dia and Cuhullin lock eyes again. Ready.

Dia casts the first throw.

Faster than sight, it lands with a THUD near the center of Cuhullin's just-in-time raised shield. The point pierces all the way through, barely missing Cuhullin's hand and arm.

Cuhullin stares at the spearpoint quivering inches away from his open eye.

Cuhullin lowers his shield to see Dia, but Dia hurls two spears in quick succession.

Cuhullin ducks under one, and blocks the second with his shield, but the force of it sends him stumbling for new footing in the river bed.

Cuhullin seems to fall, but as elegantly twirls to cast a first throw of his own as he does.

Dia has no time to dodge.

He takes the spear on his shield, and it sends a crack running from one end to the other.

The remaining spears fly like a bee swarm across the flowing waters.

With his final throw, Dia's spear shatters Cuhullin's shield. They stand, panting, weaponless, both unharmed.

DIA (CONT'D)
I had the first choice. You choose
our next weapons.

CUHULLIN
Stabbing spears.

Dia nods. Both go to their respective chariots to retrieve their new weapons, one broad spear and one new shield.

They meet back in the center of the ford.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)
Dia, dearest of brothers, I am
going to miss you.

DIA
You make much of yourself, but the
fight is still yet to come. I'll
have spiked your head when the cock
crows.

They circle, and the spear-fight begins.

For every move Cuhullin has, Dia has a match.

Cuhullin jumps, trying to stab over Dia's shield, but Dia ducks beneath him and strikes a glancing blow at Cuhullin leg. First blood.

Blood streams down from the flesh wound, spiraling in mesmerizing patterns in the water below.

Cuhullin breathes deeply, focusing on his worthy opponent.

With savage energy, Cuhullin unleashes a frenzied assault. Splashing water obscures the clashing weapons as they hammer at each other.

Dia spins away. Both now drip with blood from multiple wounds. Both shields are dented and cracked.

With a snarl, Cuhullin strikes again.

Dia deftly dodges. The spear hits a boulder jutting out of the water with all of Cuhullin's strength behind it. The spear shaft shatters in his hand.

Holding only a shield, Cuhullin turns to face Dia again.

Rain begins to fall.

DIA (CONT'D)

This is no fair fight. Let us break
for a while.

Cuhullin nods, relieved.

They stand awkwardly for a moment. To return to their own
sides of the river, they must pass each other.

The rain shower turns to a downpour.

Dia limps forward. Cuhullin shifts his weight to let Dia
pass, but both pause for a moment. They look at each other,
less than an arm's length away.

And in the middle of the river, they embrace.

Tears stream down their faces, mixing with the rain and the
river and the blood of their wounds.

They pull apart.

CUHULLIN

There is no one that was ever born
for whose sake I would do you harm.
Never to this day did I find
braver, or hear of one.

DIA

If we part now without finishing
the fight, think of my ill-fame and
shame at Cruachan before Maeve and
all the folk of Connacht. You know
that each of us must come to the
sod that is our last bed.

Dia turns away and slowly labors to his bank of the river.

Cuhullin watches him go, then returns to Laeg on his own
side.

LAEG

What weapons now?

CUHULLIN

Swords.

Laeg retrieves Cuhullin's sword from the chariot.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

I don't wish to harm him, but it
would be shameful to be defeated.

LAEG
You cannot lose.

Cuhullin sits, bruised and battered, staring across the river. Doubt creeps into his eyes.

From the chariot, Laeg lifts a short, thin spear, with terrifying jagged barbs running along its entire length: the *gae bolga*.

LAEG (CONT'D)
Scathath taught you identically,
except for use of the *gae bolga*. If
ever there was a time to fight with
it, it is now.

CUHULLIN
There is only one *gae bolga*. The
fight would not be fair.

LAEG
No fight is.

CUHULLIN
This one must be.

Cuhullin stands, grabs his sword and shield, and heads back to the water.

Dia meets him in the center of the river. They stand apart, resting, waiting.

The downpour becomes a deluge. Rain pummels the river, sending spray high all around with the sound of endless rattling drums of war.

Finally, Dia shrugs.

DIA
We're all the same dead.

He steps forward and slashes at Cuhullin. Sword meets shield, and the final fight begins.

Elegance and brutality meld into one as the two greatest warriors of the ancient world slash and parry up and down the river ford, from bank to bank and back.

Their breathing matches the rhythm of the blows.

And the rhythm of hoofbeats...

A simple chariot races towards the river ford from the north bearing a solitary rider -- Emer. The rain beats at her as she drives the horses forward.

Far away still, she spies the great duel in the river. With eyes filled with fear, she leans forward and drives the horses harder.

She approaches the ford at top speed, with no intention of slowing...

But a wall of wings descends from the trees. Emer's horses rear back in fright and the chariot comes crashing to a halt.

Cast through the rain, Emer hits the ground, hard.

She blinks, stunned, filled with adrenaline. She tries to push herself off the ground, but grimaces in pain from the effort.

A crow lands in front of her. Emer motions to shoo it away. It spreads its wings imposingly in response.

Two other crows land beside the first. The crows stand before her, staring at her, daring her to get up. Thousands more swirl above.

Emer shrinks back, cowed.

In the river, Dia and Cuhullin fight on. For every parry, another blow lands only partly deflected.

Red wounds cover both warriors. Their eyes fill with blood.

Cuhullin leaps, trying to strike over Dia's shield, but Dia casts him away into the water.

Cuhullinn scrambles to his feet and leaps again, but Dia strikes him with such force that he goes flying, falling on his back.

For a moment, he lies there, seemingly broken. Then, snarling, Cuhullin leaps to his feet again.

His whole body convulses, his muscles bulge, and his eyes turn red as a warp spasm takes hold.

Cuhullin charges at Dia with animalistic, superhuman strength, beating him back, raining blows from all sides with unimaginable force.

Cuhullin smashes Dia's shield and Dia crumples back into the water.

Cuhullin leaps forward, fully captivated in his battle frenzy, striking to kill...

But as his blow falls, Dia twists away and turns his sword, point up. The point meets Cuhullin's groin.

Cuhullin howls in pain and falls away, scrambling on hands and knees in the flowing water. The warp spasm starts to fade as fear crosses his face and one eye loses its red color.

CUHULLIN

Laeg!

On the riverbank, Laeg grabs the *gae bolga* and sprints upstream, floating the spear out into the water.

In the ford, Dia closes in for the kill. Cuhullin pushes himself up against a rock to stand against him.

Their swords cross one last time, then Dia buries his deep in Cuhullin's chest.

Cuhullin gasps. Blood gushes from the wound, staining the river crimson.

Dia stands over Cuhullin, gulping in air... shuddering.

The *gae bolga* floats by in the blood-stained water near Cuhullin's feet. One foot reaches out and grasps the short spear with its toes.

With a final kick, Cuhullin sends the *gae bolga* into Dia. The spear transfixes him from groin to neck.

Dia's eyes tremble with shock and delirium. He falls, and Cuhullin falls with him, holding Dia in his arms.

Tears fall from both of their faces, again mixing with blood and water.

DIA

My heart is all blood. I have not fought well. Setana, I am fallen.

Cuhullin weeps.

CUHULLIN

Courage has a brutal core.

Cuhullin holds Dia as Laeg sprints into the river...

The water sprays high.

The world fades into twisted darkness as primordial images blend together:

EXT. NEAR EMAIN MACHA - DAWN

Figures loom out of the morning mist. Spears rise.

The Donn Cuailnge bull watches as Fergus's men surround it. It searches left and right, but there is no way to escape.

Fergus binds its legs with a spancel.

AT THE HILLFORT --

Wolves watch from the edge of the wood as Children lead a retreat of the still-recovering people of Emain Macha into the surrounding forests.

Many still cannot walk, piled together on swaying chariots. They fade into the shadows of the trees.

IN A FOREST CLEARING

Laeg and Emer weep over Cuhullin's body as they try to tend his gaping wounds.

Darkness again. The visions end.

EXT. EMAIN MACHA - DAY

Fergus stands tall in his chariot as it moves slowly across a field towards the gates of the silent fortress of Emain Macha.

Behind him, a row of chariots await the outcome of the upcoming parlay.

Fergus's chariot comes to a stop within shouting distance of the tall gate. He breathes deeply.

FERGUS

I am Fergus, King of Ulster, come
home at long last to reclaim what
is mine. Let the usurper Conchobar
come forth.

His words echo against the tall palisade walls.

Not a living soul can be seen or heard.

Fergus takes another deep breath.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

If this gate remains shut in silent
cowardice, I will open it by force.

The WHIZ of a slingstone answers him. Stones and a few light spears bounce away, poorly aimed, weakly cast, but dangerous nonetheless.

Fergus's charioteer spurs his horses into action. A glancing blow from an errant slingstone spurs them in their flight.

As he rides away, Fergus glares in disgust back at the silent citadel.

The waiting line of chariots parts in the middle to accept Fergus back into their midst, between two disguised trenches dug to flummox a swift-charging army from Emain Macha.

A Scout approaches Fergus.

SCOUT

News from the Queen.

Distracted, Fergus nods as he gazes back towards the palisade walls of the elevated hillfort.

SCOUT (CONT'D)

Your son Dia went to fight the
Warped One.

Fergus's face falls as the shock comes in waves. He turns slowly to face the scout, to know if it is true..

SCOUT (CONT'D)

A death blow he dealt to the Hound
of Ulster.

Fergus's eyes widen with a bubble of horror mixed with hope...

SCOUT (CONT'D)

But Dia fell in the river ford
alongside him.

FERGUS

Both... dead?

The scout nods.

And the hope bursts in Fergus's eyes. He shudders.

Fergus pulls a torch from a firepit and turns back towards Emain Macha.

EXT. EMAIN MACHA - DAY

Flames dance on the thatched roof of the central hall of Emain Macha.

Fergus stares in a trance.

He holds no weapon, but his hands are stained red with blood.

A body lies nearby. Small. No more than a child. Hand still clutching a long knife.

Fergus's men stumble about in a frenzy, laughing as they rip open chests of furs and jewels.

A boy stumbles out of the great hall, coughing from the smoke.

He falls to the ground, retching. Fergus stares.

FERGUS

Where are the others?

The boy gasps for air.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

Where are the warriors of Ulster?

BOY

They fled. Only us few stayed behind. We are the warriors of Ulster.

The boy bows his head, coughing, retching again.

Fergus stares about him, as though seeing the inferno of destruction for the first time. He breathes harder. He screams.

He screams again.

He rips off his golden torc from his neck and throws it with all his might into the blaze of the great hall.

As he gazes up at the flames, tears stream down his face.

EXT. EMAIN MACHA - NIGHT

Maeve rides her chariot ahead of her army to the main charred gate of Emain Macha.

The Scout awaits her there. Fergus is nowhere to be seen.

Only a few vacant-eyed Guards sit near the entrance to the hillfort.

Maeve stares around at the charred ruins with mounting excitement.

MAEVE

Take me to the bull.

EXT. TREELINE - DAWN

Mist gathers at the edge of a forest. In the distance, wisps of smoke still curl above the wreckage of Emain Macha.

Footsteps crunch through windblown leaves.

Conchobar steps out of the forest. Warpaint covers his face and neck in garish patterns.

His army appears behind him, like wraiths whose time for vengeance has come, rising out of the mist.

They walk out of the treeline towards Emain Macha like an endless wave. Unhurried. Inexorable.

EXT. STOCKADE, EMAIN MACHA - DAY

Maeve gazes at the Donn Cuailnge bull, secured with endless ropes and straps between two trees.

Maeve moves towards the bull. Her face trembles with greed and excitement.

The bull releases a deep guttural growl of dissent, trying to stomp and lean away from Maeve's touch, but unable to move through the bondage.

An excited grin crosses Maeve's face.

OUTSIDE THE ENCLOSURE

Men hurry through the wreckage of burned buildings and their own hastily pitched tents, grabbing weapons and mustering towards the ruins of the main gate.

Fergus marches past the commotion to the bull's enclosure entrance. Dark circles surround his sunken, dulled eyes.

He opens the gate to the enclosure and pauses.

Maeve sits atop the great bull, smiling a twisted smile as the bull groans in discomfort.

Finally, she notices Fergus staring.

MAEVE

Have you ever seen a beast like this?

FERGUS

The beast was mine, once. I had a wife. A kingdom. A son. Now I have nothing. Where is my son?

MAEVE

Your son is the man who felled Cuhullin.

FERGUS

My son... My son...

WAR-CRIES echo from the battle plains beyond the ruined hillfort.

FERGUS (CONT'D)

(trancelike)

The armies of Ulster are at hand.

Maeve pays no attention to them, focusing on the pulsating muscles of the bull beneath her.

MAEVE

Slaughter them. Then bring Conchobar to me.

FERGUS

Their strength is returned. Many heroes have come to fight for them. And my son is dead by your command--

-

MAEVE

Your son was born to die. He met a warrior's end of glory--

FERGUS

He died in a stream, killing his brother--

MAEVE

It was fate--

FERGUS

You are a heartless woman. There is nothing left in this world dear to me. It is summer without blossoms, cattle without milk.

MAEVE

Men without valor? Conquests without a king?

The WAR-CRIES rise louder.

MAEVE (CONT'D)

Go meet them in the field.

FERGUS

Why?

MAEVE

Your men call for you. Conchobar calls for you. Would you deny the usurper?

EXT. BATTLEFIELD OUTSIDE EMAIN MACHA - DAY

Chaos.

Chariot wheels churn mud under screaming beasts and the cries of wounded men.

Swords and spears rise and fall rhythmically as though the battle were a symphony of slaughter.

Crows fly high above the field.

Conchobar deals death left and right in the muck.

The men of Ulster have the upper hand, drawing blood to match the red of their battle-cloaks.

Maeve's armies waver. Some few flee the field, away to any side.

Over a hillside, glowing with the light of the rising sun, Fergus appears on his swift chariot.

Like a sun-god, he charges into battle.

Scythes on the chariot wheels spin furiously, tearing into the masses of Ulster's armies.

The men of Ulster scatter, leaving only Conchobar in the chariot's path. He stares down the charging horses.

With one fluid move, Conchobar sidesteps the chariot and swipes his sword at the horses' legs. They go down screaming as the chariot throws Fergus.

Fergus hits the ground with a roll, springs up, and adds to the slaughter. None can stand before him.

The tide shifts. Fergus's presence emboldens Maeve's forces, and the men of Ulster waver.

Fergus and Conchobar hack their way towards each other.

Their swords cross. Rage flies between them, hotter than the sparks from their weapons.

But before either can strike a mortal blow, the earth shakes beneath them.

Thundering hooves.

The great Donn Cuailnge bull charges over the nearby hill top, followed by a herd of bellowing cattle. Maeve clings onto its back for dear life.

The bull leads the stampede straight through the battle, trampling countless warriors into the mud.

Fergus and Conchobar are driven apart, both fight to stay on their feet.

As quickly as the stampede began, it ends, with the last of the cattle galloping away.

Fergus glances around at exhausted warriors falling back to fighting. He searches for Conchobar again, slaying without mercy as he wanders the field.

The men of Ulster waver and some begin to flee.

Fergus finds Conchobar. Again, they fight each other with unmatched rage. Fergus gains the upper hand, but Conchobar is not out-matched. Conchobar evades one killing blow and strike's Fergus's sword out of his hand.

Like animals, they fall on each other in the muck; punching, wrestling, biting, head-butting.

They roll over again and again, choking on the wet earth. Fergus ends up on top, with his hands compressed around Conchobar's throat.

CUHULLIN (O.S.)

Fergus!

The hoarse voice hangs in the air.

Time stops. Fergus looks up.

Laeg and Emer ride together, bearing up the half-conscious Cuhullin in the chariot with them -- too weak to fight. Too weak to even stand on his own.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)
Release King Conchobar.

All fighting ceases.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)
I retreated from you once. You made
an agreement to retreat from me in
turn. I call upon you to fulfill
your end of the bargain.

Fergus lets King Conchobar go. Conchobar rolls away, sputtering.

Fergus stands slowly, coming out of the daze of battle. All eyes on him.

FERGUS
(to all)
I am your king.

No one moves. No one bows. No one acknowledges.

King Conchobar laughs.

EMER
Are you a man of your word, Fergus?

Fergus looks around at the one last time, surrounded by rejection. He gazes back towards the ruins of Emain Macha, knowing that to him, it can never be restored.

He nods and walks away. Maeve's army trickles after him.

Seasons pass as the dusk gives way to night.

EXT. RATH CRUACHAN PASTURE, CONNACHT - DAY

Maeve paces outside the enclosure of Ailill's bull, under the gloom of a cloudy winter sky.

The trees stand bare, their fallen leaves turned red and gold fading into tall brown grasses below.

A crowd gathers behind Maeve; Ailill and the silent court of Rath Cruachan. They wait.

Inside the enclosure, Ailill's bull snorts and stomps. It senses doom approaching.

Maeve's lips thin, as she bitterly seeks the sweetness of victory in the aftermath of her army's defeat in Ulster. She turns to Ailill and whispers...

MAEVE

And once again, I am the
wealthiest.

Ailill furrows his brow; put out by Maeve's obsession... and put out by his own.

Fergus, with a beard of weeks or months since the final battle grown on his face, guides the great Donn Cuailnge bull to the entrance of Ailill's bull's enclosure.

The gate opens. In walks the Donn Cuailnge. The gate shuts behind it.

The two bulls stare at each other, snorting and stomping the earth.

Fergus moves to stand at Maeve's side. Ailill eyes him jealously.

The bulls charge at each other. Their horns meet with the sound of thunder.

Maeve watches, her knuckles whitening as she grips the enclosure wall.

The sounds of the struggle turn ever more gruesome, and all remaining color drains from Maeve's face. Hushed gasps ripple through the crowd behind her.

The bellowing of the bulls ends with whimpering wails.

Inside the enclosure, Ailill's bull lies dead. The Donn Cuailnge stumbles away and falls, legs broken, mortally wounded. The blood of its rival drips from its horns, mixing with its own.

With a final heaving sigh, the Donn Cuailnge collapses to the earth with the sound of a thunderclap.

Ailill moves forward to stand at Maeve's other side.

AILILL

I suppose our wealth is even again.

He leaves without waiting for a response.

Maeve stares at the ruinous end of her goals.

A crow flutters down to the enclosure wall. It stares at the bodies of the bulls, then glances towards Maeve. Maeve stares back.

The Queen turns to leave, but pauses as the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Something is watching.

Macha stands where the crow was.

MACHA

Much you have taken. Now I must ask something of you.

The Queen turns, afraid.

MACHA (CONT'D)

One task remains undone.

Maeve's fear turns to intrigue.

EXT. FIELD NEAR EMAIN MACHA - DAY

Cuhullin (recovered) gazes wistfully toward a game of hurling. Boys run up and down a massive field, swatting a small stitched ball with hurley sticks -- long flattened bats of wood.

LAEG

Will you play?

Cuhullin shakes his head.

CUHULLIN

There is no challenge in it.

LAEG

Of course not for you... Favored by the gods.

CUHULLIN

Not all of them.

MACHA (O.S.)

Cuhullin...

A YOUNG WOMAN (with Macha's clear eyes, but in an altered form of irresistible beauty) approaches the pair.

CUHULLIN
Have we met before?

The Young Woman laughs, somewhere between flirtatious and omniscient.

MACHA
I would remember the likes of
you... Your fame spreads far and
wide.

Cuhullin's eyes narrow for a moment as he strains to remember, or recognize.

MACHA (CONT'D)
I have come to ask you a favor. May
we speak alone?

Cuhullin turns to Laeg, who shrugs.

Cuhullin nods and moves to walk with the young woman.

MACHA (CONT'D)
There is a raid on the lands of my
home. A band of men came in the
night, driving off the few animals
we had.

CUHULLIN
This is a matter for the King.

MACHA
I spotted the men from afar. Some
men of Emain Macha I thought I saw.

CUHULLIN
King Conchobar does not take well
to accusations against his own--

MACHA
That is why I've come to ask you.
They camped not far from my home.
They will move slowly today. If you
would just come with me and see--

CUHULLIN
Brigands and outlaws they may be--

MACHA
They would stand no chance against
you.

Cuhullin ponders this escape from boredom. Away from the field of play he spies Emer in the distance, back turned, picking her way through tall grasses way with a basket.

Sunlight glints off of her hair... but Cuhullin's eyes are drawn back towards the smiling woman in front of him.

CUHULLIN

I will get Laeg to prepare the horses.

MACHA

Could you come alone?

Cuhullin's eyes narrow with suspicion... or excitement. He nods.

EXT. STREAMBED - DAY

Cuhullin and the Young Woman ride together on his chariot.

CUHULLIN

Your home is farther than I bargained for.

MACHA

Only a little past this river. But first, I have business of my own.

CUHULLIN

What business?

The Young Woman traces a line along Cuhullin's neck, smiling a disarming, enchanting grin. And enchanted is he.

MACHA

It will be over in a moment.

Without another word, the Young Woman leaps off of the slow-rolling chariot and disappears into the trees.

With a grunt of frustration, Cuhullin pulls the horses to a stop. He steps down and grabs a patch of soft earth, rubbing it between his hands in the gentle breeze.

Birds caw. Crows flock far above.

Cuhullin looks up. The trees impose.

Moments pass. Minutes.

Cuhullin sits aimlessly on a low stone, scratching at the earth with a stick. The horses shift nervously. One whinnies.

Still no sign of the Young Woman. Cuhullin stands again.

CUHULLIN
(to horses)
Wait for me.

He follows her path into the woods. His armor remains hanging against the side of the chariot.

EXT. STREAMBED - DAY

An OLD WOMAN (again with Macha's eyes, yet in a new form) bends over a narrow stream, washing clothes underwater. Nearby, smoke rises from a small fire with a spit of meat set over it.

Cuhullin emerges from the trees.

CUHULLIN
Old woman, have you seen a
beautiful girl?

MACHA
Many. None such as myself.

Cuhullin snorts appreciatively.

MACHA (CONT'D)
The day is lonely. I would be happy
to enjoy company such as yours.

Cuhullin wavers.

MACHA (CONT'D)
Come, sit. A man such as you must
have hunger. Eat.

CUHULLIN
Have you already had your fill?

MACHA
I will eat after.

Cuhullin crouches trepidatiously by the fire, inspecting the meat-spit. A fly buzzes near. Cuhullin shoos it away.

MACHA (CONT'D)
Eat.

She commands this time.

Risen to her feet, the Old Woman obscures the washed clothes in the tall grasses between her and Cuhullin.

Between her gaze and his hunger, Cuhullin's appetite gets the best of him.

Ripping off a piece of meat, he chews wolfishly and swallows. He takes a second bite, chewing slower, then stopping. He pulls a half-eaten stringy sinew out of his mouth.

CUHULLIN

What meat is this? It is not goat,
pork, or beef.

MACHA

A hound. From Ulster.

Cuhullin blinks. He carefully puts the half-chewed piece on the ground.

CUHULLIN

Are we not in Ulster?

MACHA

We are. It is my home.

CUHULLIN

Mine as well.

The Old Woman slides a pitying glance towards Cuhullin.

She lifts the clothes from the grass -- not clothes, but leather armor...

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

Those are not your clothes.

...Cuhullin's armor.

MACHA

No. It is the armor of Cuhullin,
who will die today.

The trees shake behind Cuhullin.

He turns to see that every branch is filled with crows.

Turning back, Cuhullin sees Macha is gone. Only his armor remains piled where she stood, and a length of fine rope beside it.

He steps forward and lifts the armor and rope, pulling it on with a sigh.

Cuhullin's stomach gurgles. He clutches it, wincing in pain, then doubling over. He tries to breathe deeply, but his face only drains more of color.

He shivers as his lips fade from red to a shade of deep purple. Nervously, he struggles up the incline beside the stream-bed and looks again at his surroundings.

A field. A tall stone.

Cholafarmore field. The tall stone where Macha brought him to the Otherworld.

And beyond, chariots and spear-tops.

Maeve and Fergus ride side-by-side there, a small army behind them.

Cuhullin draws his sword and leans on it.

CUHULLIN

Is this how you would come against me? Poisoned before battle?

MAEVE

Poisoned?

CUHULLIN

The hag's meat... Dog.

MAEVE

Fitting for the Hound of Ulster, to eat one of his own.

CUHULLIN

Fergus, is this how you would have me meet my death?

FERGUS

All men must face their end, Cuhullin. How you meet it is your own decision.

CUHULLIN

Never let it be said that I brought dishonor to my family.

Fergus nods sadly.

FERGUS

Alas, you killed your own foster-brother Dia through trickery. Dishonor is yours.

MAEVE

You stole my daughter and today abandoned her. Dishonor is yours.

A single crow flutters down and lands on Maeve's shoulder, blinking. It shifts its head and caws.

CUHULLIN

Enough. Who will fight me?

Fergus steps forward.

CUHULLIN (CONT'D)

I would rather not face you,
Fergus.

FERGUS

You must.

Both hold spears at the ready. They lift and cast them at each other.

They release.

Cuhullin's throw is weak, low and wide.

Fergus's hits home.

Cuhullin kneels on the ground, panting, bleeding. The spear shakes, protruding from his gut.

He crawls slowly to the standing stone. With a groan, his hands close around the curled rope from Macha.

He pulls himself up to lean against the stone, rising to his feet as the earth wheels around him...

Heaving, he ties himself to the stone, knotting the rope around his waist so that he can die standing.

CUHULLIN

I will strike down anyone who comes
against me.

Maeve's retinue simply stands and stares. Tears roll down Fergus's face.

Cuhullin gasps for breath and groans as he bows his head.

The sun speeds overhead past many clouds. It rises to its zenith and quickly swings low to the western horizon.

Cuhullin's eyes open, drifting back into consciousness.

The evening sun casts brilliant orange light. In Cuhullin's dying sight, the colors begin to turn to those of the Otherworld.

Still, his attackers keep their distance, waiting.

At Cuhullin's feet, a dark rose blooms. Next to it, a crow walks, peering up at Cuhullin.

Cuhullin smiles as he dies.

The crow flutters to his shoulder. There it stays, glancing about, claiming its territory.

Maeve and Fergus approach Cuhullin's lifeless body as the sun passes below the horizon.

Fergus falls to his knees before the body of his foster-son. He weeps, cradling what is left of Cuhullin.

With a single flap of her wings, the Crow leaps off of Cuhullin's shoulder. Fergus watches as she rises higher and higher, strong again.

She turns north, over lush green hills. As one, the murder of crows rises to follow her as the night sky fades from orange to purple to starry black.

FADE OUT

END