

The Exile of the Sons of Uisneach (Deirdre and Naoise)

One night, King Conchobar of Ulster was having a feast in his great hall. His storyteller Feidhlimidh had a captive audience among Conchobar's men while his wife served drinks, even though she was heavily pregnant. She toiled on through the evening until the men had drunk themselves into a snoring slumber.

Feidhlimidh's wife was overcome with tiredness and began to make her way towards bed. Suddenly, a piercing scream came from the woman's womb and echoed around the hall. Conchobar's men were on their feet in seconds, standing shoulder to shoulder with swords in hand ready to face the source of that fearsome scream.

Sencha, the most level-headed man in the hall, calmed the men of Ulster and ordered Feidhlimidh's wife brought to them at once. Feidhlimidh asked his wife what the terrible sound was, but she was as bewildered as he.

“No woman knows what her womb bears”, she replied as tears flowed down her cheeks, fear coating each word she spoke.

The druid Cathbadh felt pity for the woman, but had no words to comfort her for he could foretell the child's future.

“The child you carry will be the most beautiful woman ever to live in Ireland. Her curled, fair hair, eyes of the clearest emerald green and deep red lips will captivate the hearts of high kings and be the envy of high queens. Her name shall be Deirdre and she will cause slaughter amongst the warriors of Ulster.”

Cathbadh then placed his hands over the woman's womb, and feeling the child move within said, “Although this child is pure and beautiful, she will bring trouble on all who love her.”

With that, Feidhlimidh's wife felt the pangs of labour and later that night gave birth to a girl. Recalling Cathbadh's prophecy, the men of Ulster all rallied for the child's death but Conchobar forbade it.

“I will raise this child and keep her for myself”, he declared, and none dared oppose him.

Deirdre was reared in a remote woodland with only Conchobar, her foster parents and her nurse Leabhacham for company. Conchobar would not allow anyone else to see her until he had made her his wife. Cathbadh had indeed been correct in his vision, for Deirdre was growing into the most beautiful young woman in Ireland, and Conchobar was completely taken with her.

One cold winter's day, Deirdre was watching her foster father skin a calf outside. Just then, a raven swooped down to feast on the blood that soaked into the snow-clad ground.

“My true love would be a man with those three colours”, Deirdre remarked in a dreamy air. “He would have hair as black as a raven's wing, cheeks flushed with the colour of blood, and skin as white as a falling snowflake.”

Leabharcham overheard her.

“You're in luck”, she said. “There lives a man nearby with those exact colours. His name is Naoise Mac Uisneach and he is one of the Red Branch Knights.”

After learning of Naoise, Deirdre spent days searching in the woods, hoping to spy him for herself through the trees. She did not have to wait long before she stood face to face with him. He was just as she had imagined and she was determined that they would be together. Naoise knew who she was and tried to reject her, but Deirdre was head-strong and bound him to her with a kind of sorcery. Naoise's brothers Aindle and Ardán arrived recalling Cathbadh's prophecy and tried to talk sense to him.

“All of Ulster will be up in arms because of this”, they said. “Even so, you will not be disgraced while we are alive. We must leave Ulster at once and take Deirdre with us.”

Even though they were all warriors of great repute, the sons of Uisneach all feared Conchobar's wrath and so they left Ulster that night, concealing Deirdre from everyone they met. For a time they found protection with the Kings of Ireland but Conchobar pursued them wherever they went. Soon they were forced to leave Ireland for Scotland.

Deirdre, Naoise and his two brothers Aindle and Ardán lived off the land in Scotland for as long as they could, but in the end were forced to ravage towns and villages to survive. The Scotsmen wanted to drive the new arrivals out, but their king was more lenient. He saw the advantage in having the great sons of Uisneach swell his ranks and so they were allowed to stay as hired soldiers.

The sons of Uisneach kept Deirdre hidden for fear the King of Scotland would lay eyes on her and want her for himself. However, tales of Deirdre's beauty soon reached the king's ears and he wanted to know if there was any truth to them. To satisfy his curiosity, he sent a steward to find her. The steward carried out his task with great care, creeping as quietly as a mouse to Deirdre and Naoise's house so that he would not be noticed by the sons of Uisneach. Upon seeing Deirdre sleeping in her bed, he rushed back to the king.

“She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen”, he exclaimed. “There is no woman alive more fit to be your queen.”

The steward was ordered to speak to Deirdre on the king's behalf, asking her to leave Naoise and become his queen instead. She refused, and told Naoise all that had happened. From that moment on, the sons of Uisneach knew that they would never be safe in Scotland again and so they found themselves fleeing once again, this time from the King of Scotland.

News soon reached Ulster that the sons of Uisneach were in danger of their lives from the King of Scotland, and the men of Ulster tried to reason with Conchobar.

“Let them come home”, they said. “These great sons of Ulster would not die in a foreign land because of the evil of one woman.”

Conchobar remained deep in thought for a long time. Finally he nodded, saying “Very well, let them come home to Ulster”, hiding a wry smile behind a clenched fist. The men of Ulster celebrated and the sons of Uisneach wept with joy when they received the message. Naoise however was still wary of Conchobar, knowing how deeply he had wounded his pride, and asked Fergus Mac Roich for protection when they arrived home.

Fergus and his son Fiachna, together with Dubtach, and Conchobar's own son Cormac all agreed to protect the sons of Uisneach. A promise from such honourable warriors of Ulster calmed Naoise's uneasy nerves and he finally agreed to make for home.

Now Conchobar was a treacherous man, and thoughts of revenge had been simmering in his mind for so long that the idea of the sons of Uisneach setting on Ulster's soil in peace was enough to make his blood boil. As soon as he heard of Naoise's arrangement for protection from Fergus as they travelled to his court at Eamain Macha, he began scheming to divert Fergus' attention.

Fergus, Conchobar knew, had one point of weakness. He was bound by an old oath that meant he could never refuse a drink if it was raised in his honour. So, on Conchobar's orders, all the men of Ulster strove to invite the sons of Uisneach and their protectors to great feasts on their arrival home. It wasn't long until Fergus fell behind the group, being obliged to feast where the celebration was in his name. Dubhtach and Cormac stayed with Fergus, but the rest of the group continued as they had vowed not to eat until they were at Conchobar's own table. Only Fiacha now remained as the group's protector.

Soon the travellers arrived outside Eamain Macha and there they were met by Eogan Mac Durtacht, King of Fermag. Eogan was a one time enemy of Conchobar, but Conchobar had made an offer of peace to Eogan on one condition: he was to kill Naoise Mac Uisneach.

A terrible slaughter ensued, as Eogan Mac Durtacht led his men in a violent charge against the sons of Uisneach. Eogan himself greeted Naoise by striking a spear-point deep into his spine that broke his back. Fiacha desperately tried to defend him but was killed instantly, while Aindle and Ardán were hunted down and killed by their brothers of Ulster under orders from their king. Deirdre, her hands bound behind her, was taken to Conchobar.

When news of the dishonourable slaughter of the sons of Uisneach reached Fergus, Cormac and Dubhtach, they unleashed their own revenge. In their rage, three hundred men of Ulster were killed, including Maine, Conchobar's son and Fiachna, Conchobar's grandson. The next morning, three thousand Ulster exiles were marched by Fergus to Connacht to seek protection from King Ailill and Queen Maebh. Such was their rage at Conchobar's treachery, that for 16 years they raided and plundered throughout their own native Ulster.

So it was that Cathbadh's prophecy of slaughter amongst the men of Ulster was fulfilled.

As for Deirdre, her fate was to remain with Conchobar for one year. At first, Conchobar delighted in gloating over her and mocking her foolishness, but Deirdre showed no reaction to the taunting and Conchobar soon tired of it. She did not laugh or smile even once and her face was always downcast. One day, in a moment of pure frustration, Conchobar said to her, "What do you hate most of all that you see?"

"Why, that is simple", she said, "You! You and Eogan Mac Durtacht!".

"Well then," Conchobar replied with spite, "You shall spend the next year with Eogan."

Deirdre was packed off in a chariot the next morning to Eogan Mac Durtacht. As she was leaving, Conchobar sneered at her, "You swore that no two men alive in the world together would have you, but now you are like a sheep cornered by two rams". Deirdre, unwilling to let Conchobar have the upper hand, flung herself from the chariot at the place where Naoise was buried. A large rock made smithereens of her head, and she died.