

Deirdre agus Mic Uisnigh - English Translation

A graphic novel by Colmán Ó Raghallaigh

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P1

This is how Deirdre was born.

It happened one night that Feidhlimí Mac Daill, storyteller to the King, gave a great banquet ...

The good and the great of Ulster attended, amongst them the king, Conchubhar Mac Neasa himself...

DING!

"Your health, great majesty. Your presence honours us."

P2

"Long life to you, Feidhlimí!"

The best of food and drink was laid before them until all were inebriated...

Though his wife is pregnant Feidhlimí shows little regard for her...

"Woman of the house. Refill those goblets. It's not often that the King of Ulster pays us a visit."

"As you wish."

(Ugh! I'm exhausted!)

Finally...

ZZZZZ!

(I must lie down...)

P3

As she slips quietly away to bed the child in her womb utters a loud scream...

ÁÁÁÁÁÁÁÁÁÁÁÁÁÁÁÁ!!!

???!!!

"Did you hear that?"

"What was that noise, woman?"

"I don't know. The child, I think."

Cathfach, the druid, appears, to investigate...

"Mmm..."

P4

In the course of the night a daughter is born to the wife of Feidhlimí.

"Nnnnngh!"

And Cathfach makes a dire prediction...

"Slaughter and destruction will come to Ulster because of this child... unbridled jealousy because of her beauty... decimation of a noble family because of her haughtiness... and desolation on Eamhain Mhacha itself. Indeed, you are misfortune to all who gaze upon you."

P5

Hearing this, all present are seized by fear...

"Destroy her!"

But...

"Stop!"

"Do not be alarmed. I shall bring her with me and have her raised and educated so that in due course she may become my wife. But what shall she be called?"

"Henceforth she shall be known as Deirdre..."

And so it transpired...

"Won't you make a pretty queen for me some day, Deirdre, strolling together on the green lawns of Eamhain Mhacha..."

NNNNNGH!

P6

That evening Leabharcham, the King's handmaid, appears...

'You sent for me, your majesty?'

'A question for you, Leabharcham. Will you raise this Deirdre for me until she reaches womanhood?'

'I will, majesty. She shall be like my own child and no one shall set eyes on her from this day forward.'

Thus was Deirdre raised, with her teacher and her wetnurse in the darkest depths of the woods...
...until she became the most beautiful of all women from the western to the eastern world.

P7

One freezing day in the depths of Winter it happened that her teacher slew a calf for food...

A raven alighted...

...and commenced to drink the blood...

"I would gladly give my heart to the man who bore those three colours... hair like the raven, blood-red cheeks and skin like the snow.."

"Luckily, my dear, such a man is to be found not a stone's throw from us, Naoise Mac Uisnigh, a hero as brave as any on the face of the earth. But if the King were to hear of it, it would be a sad day for all of us."

"I shall not rest until I have seen him. Keep an eye out and let me know as soon as you set eyes on him."

P8

ÁÁÁÁÁC!

But seeing the raven's beady glare upon her, and the crimson blood upon its beak, she is seized by fear and foreboding, and remembering the words of Leabharcham, she flees back into the fortress in fear and in terror.

P9

Soon afterwards Leabharcham spotted Naoise mac Uisnigh alone on the ramparts of Eamhain Mhacha.

"Now is your chance, my dear, but be careful, I beseech you!"

And so Deirdre hurried to see the wonder...

(Surely, you were right, Leabharcham!)

???

"That's a fine heifer I see before me!"

"There should be fine heifers where there are bulls"

"But haven't you the bull of the Province, the King of Ulster himself!"

"If I had my choice, I'd have a young bull like yourself!"

"Leave me alone, woman. I don't like what you're saying!"

But his objections are to no avail...

P10

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Exactly! You're nothing but trouble since the day you were born. Now, be off out of here!"

'By my cloak, but these are surely the ears of a coward if you don't take me out of here with you!'

"Leave me alone, I tell you!"

Too late...

"Well now, Naoise mac Uisnigh, you have no choice but to go with me."

"No! What will I do now? I'm doomed if the King hears about this."

"I'm truly sorry, my dearest. It was only in fun. I didn't mean any harm."

Soon Naoise begins to recover himself...

"Look, there's no way out now. You must go back for a while and I'll come to you later. But first, I must speak with my brothers, Ainle and Ardán."

P11

Downhearted and dejected Naoise seeks out his brothers to tell them what has befallen him...

(What have I done?!!)

...and they are horrified.

"What madness or misfortune overcame you? The Ulstermen will surely kill us now because of you!"

"We'll have to flee because of your stupidity!"

"It's too late to change things now. But listen, there's no need for you two to leave. It was my mistake."

"Have sense, Naoise. We'd be the first to fall. We'll just have to get out of here before Conchubhar hears what has happened."

P12

The following morning, deep in the woods, they came to meet with Deirdre.

She bade farewell to Leabharcham then, and their parting was like the parting of soul and body.

"Deirdre, my child, I wish you luck and happiness. I shall long for your safe return."

"My blessings go with you, my child!"

'Let's go!'

And so they set off, one hundred and fifty warriors, one hundred and fifty women, one hundred and fifty hounds and one hundred and fifty servants, and Deirdre along with them.

P13

At first, they spent some time on the run in Ireland, constantly on the move... from the Red Waterfall southeast to Howth, then northwards again

A strong and sturdy fighting force they made, and it was said of them that they were they were the noblest and bravest warriors in all of Ireland

But all knew well that the most difficult part of their mission still lay before them

...and they passed neither night nor day without being constantly on guard against the Ulstermen...

P14

The sons of Uisneach had not long taken flight before Conchubhar ordered their capture and declared a reward for whoever would bring back the princess or tidings of her...

But the sons of Uisneach knew that only too well, so they made no delay but boldly went on their way.

And so keenly did the men of Ulster pursue them that they they could not rest by night or by day...

P15

The sons of Uisneach then conferred among themselves but they were unsure as to what to do next.

"We have no choice, brothers, but to flee to Scotland for a while. At least we shall find some rest there."

Now Naoise was as skilful a seaman as ever set foot upon a deck. And having readied his ship he hoisted her billowing sails

It wasn't long until they were ploughing the bluegreen waves throwing sand before them and white froth behind, until they reached safe harbour on the coast of Scotland.

P16

After seeking the protection of the King of Scotland, they were granted refuge. To ensure that Deirdre would remain unseen and that they might not be killed on account of her, they set up their camp far from the King's household.
"We'll be safe here for a while, I think."

P17

Unfortunately...
It happened that the King's steward was passing that way early one morning...
...and being an inquisitive man he peeped into the hut where Naoise and Deirdre lay sleeping. Returning quickly, he woke the King.
"What's wrong with you, idiot?"
"I'm sorry, your majesty, but in the company of Naoise son of Uisneach I have seen a woman worthy of the King of the western world. Why not kill Naoise now, and have her for yourself."
"I will not. But you must go to her every day from now on and tell her of my regard for her and that I would have her as my Queen."

P18

However several days later the steward returns with his report...
"She refuses to listen to a word I say."
"Very well, then. We'll have to try something else to test the mettle of these Irish warriors."
And from that day forth...
...the sons of Uisneach were thrust into battles and dangers of every kind in the hope that they might perish.
But such was their strength and courage that they remained unscathed.

P19

Finally...
"Enough! Gather the men tonight and we'll take them by surprise at dawn while they're still sleeping."
But shortly afterwards, unknown to the King, the steward approaches Deirdre with a warning...
"This is your last chance. If you don't give in to him, you will all die."
And...
"That treacherous King has decided to destroy us, Naoise."
"The dirty coward! We must get away quickly."
"Better to run than to die, they say..."
"That is not our way, but this time we have no choice."
So Naoise and his companions decide to make the first move and quietly slip away under cover of darkness...
...sailing to a small island on the Scottish coast.

P20

Meanwhile in Ulster, Conchubhar was addressing the nobles...
"It seems to me that those three great heroes of the Gael, the sons of Uisneach, Naoise, Ainle and Ardán, have been away from us too long, and it is my desire that they return."
"Indeed, only that we were afraid we should have said that to you long since, your majesty, for there are none braver, stronger or more noble than those three."
"But who shall go for them?"
"I believe that Naoise is honour-bound to come to Ireland with one of only three..."
"Conall Cearnach mac Aimhirgin..."
"...Cú Chulainn mac Subhaldaimh..."
"...or Fearghas Mac Róigh."
(And for good measure I shall find out which of the three is most loyal to me.)

"Send for those three now."

P21

One by one Conchubhar speaks to them but they are less than pleased with his proposal.
"What would you do, faithful friend, if having brought back the sons of Uisneach under your protection, something were to happen to them, which of course, it would not!"

"I would destroy every living Ulsterman."

"!!!"

"I would have your head on the point of my spear."

"I would not harm you or your family but the rest of Ulster would fall by my hand."

So it is Fearghas who gives him the answer he is seeking...

(You shall carry out this task for me, Fearghas!)

P22

"You shall go for the sons of Uisneach, Fearghas. Set off tomorrow and bring them home with you. And when you return proceed directly to the fort of Borrach mac Cáinte."

And give me your word that you will not allow the sons of Uisneach to stop until they have reached Eamhain Mhacha that night."

"You have it, my lord. As long as they are safe, I shall do as you command."

"I have gone surety for the safety of the sons of Uisneach. Will you join me in that bond?"

"Why not? You are a truthful and honorable man, Fearghas."

"But can the same be said of Conchubhar? Something is not right in all of this..."

"But, he gave me his word..."

P23

No sooner have the heroes departed than Borrach mac Cáinte enters from the adjoining room where he has been concealed during all of this.

"Come in, Borrach, my friend. Tell me now, do you have a feast for me?"

"Indeed I do, your excellency. I can prepare one without delay, but I fear I might not be able to bring it here to Eamhain Mhacha for you."

"Fair enough then, give it instead to Fearghas mac Róigh when he returns with the sons of Uisneach, for he is under obligation never to refuse a feast."

"It shall be done."

(Indeed! The moment of revenge is getting nearer!)

P24

The following day Fearghas sets out for Scotland with his two sons, Iollann Fionn and Buinne Borbrua.

As soon as he lands he calls out in a loud voice...

"Hello, Naoise!"

Naoise and Deirdre are playing chess.

"I think I hear an Irishman's voice."

"No. That's a Scottish voice."

"I hear another shout."

"And another."

P25

"Why are you trying to deceive me?"

"A dream I had last night, my love. Three birds came to us from Eamhain Mhacha and their mouths full of honey. But three mouthfuls of our blood was what they took back with them. Fearghas has come with a message of peace but if you go back betrayal awaits you."

"Too long have you been in exile, my friends but Conchubhar himself has sent me for you. You will be under my protection with my pledge to guarantee your safety."

"I'd believe you, Fearghas, but Conchubhar is not to be trusted."

"My words and my pledge are your fortress."

"Indeed they are and we shall go with you. One sight of home is better than all of Scotland!"

P26

The following day they arose early and soon were under sail...

...green ocean before them and white froth in their wake...

"Welcome home, my friends."

... until they came ashore near the fortress of Borrach mac Cáinte.

"Listen, Fearghas, I have a feast for you and you may not leave it until it is finished."

"Damn you, traitor, for well you know that I have given my word that I would bring the sons of Uisneach to Eamhain Mhacha directly."

"Whatever about that, I am placing you under obligation. If you are a true hero you must stay here whether you like it or not."

"Look at that for treachery! Ignore him and come with us for this rotten churl knows nothing of honour or nobility!"

"I cannot refuse but my sons shall go with you on my behalf."

"That will suffice for no one has ever defended us in battle or in conflict but ourselves alone!"

P27

"Could we not spend the night on Rathlin island and wait for Fearghas to rejoin us?"

"We cannot do that. But do not fret, you will not be betrayed."

At that, great exhaustion and anxiety take hold of Deirdre. They then continue as far as Siabh Fuaid, where she falls asleep and is left behind...

Noticing her absence Naoise quickly returns in search of her.

"Why did you remain here, princess?"

"I fell asleep and saw a vision... you three without your heads and Buinne Borbrua still with his, but offering no help to us."

Soon...

"Truly, I hate what I see now, a large cloud above our head and it a cloud of blood. Listen to me now, go to Dundalk tonight where Cu Chulainn is, and wait under his protection until Fearghas returns."

"I tell you we are not in danger, nor do we need to do such a thing."

P28

And so they proceeded until they saw the gates of Eamhain Mhacha before them.

"My advice to you now, Naoise. If you are admitted to the house where Conchubhar himself and his nobles are, then you will be safe. But if you are quartered in the house of the Red Branch, treachery and harm will befall you all."

"The King bids you welcome and aske me to tell you that the house of the Red Branch has been made ready for you and the best of food and drink awaits you."

"Very well, we'll go there."

"What did I tell you? This is only the beginning..."

"Shut up, woman. We're sick and tired of your whining. We fear nobody, living or dead!"

But the sons of Uisneach are not inclined to eat or drink in that place...

"Let us play chess. It will make us feel better."

"You are right, my brother."

P29

Later that evening in the King's residence at Eamhain...

"Who shall go and bring me tidings as to whether Deirdre has retained her form and beauty?"

"I shall go, your majesty, and bring you that news."

(For there is no one living that I cherish more than Naoise... and Deirdre is like my own daughter to me.)

"Welcome home!"

"How lonely it was without you, but I always knew you would return!"

"Leabharcham, it's wonderful to see you!"

"Well then, what news have you for us, after all our travels?"

"The same old story, I'm afraid, and not a good one either, for tonight treachery and harm will befall you in Eamhain. But listen well, keep all doors closed and windows locked and if the enemy comes, defend yourselves well."

Then she returns to Conchubhar with her report...

"The three fleetest of foot and hand and greatest of deed and feat in Ireland or Scotland or the whole world have come back to you... but as for Deirdre, her beauty is no more and no trace remains of her former shape or self."

(You won't pull the wool over my eyes that easily, Leabharcham... Not a single word do I believe from you, old hag.)

(I think I shall seek a second opinion.)

"Hey Tréandorn, do you know who it was that slew your father?"

"Indeed, I know it well. It was Naoise mac Uisnigh who did it."

"Go then, and find out for me whether Deirdre has retained her form and beauty, for she is with Naoise."

P30

Arriving at the fortress Tréandorn finds the windows and doors barred before him and he is gripped by fear and anxiety.

(Better not to disturb the sons of Uisneach. They are angry. But wait! Here is an open window...)

Then...

"Naoise, who's that?"

"TRÉANDORN????!!!"

"Be off, spy!"

"Arrrgh! My eye!"

"Well?"

"Deirdre is the finest and most shapely woman on this earth and Naoise shall surely be king of the world if she is left to him."

"Enough! It is time to be rid of the sons of Uisneach."

P31

ÁÁÁÚÚÚ!

Now the Ulstermen surround the fort in battle formation...

"Fire!"

But no sooner has the building been set ablaze than Buinne Borbrua comes charging forth, slaying scores before him...

ÁÁÁÁRGH!

"By my conscience, the son of Fearghas will not fail the sons of Uisneach..."

UISSSSSSSS!

But though he quickly quenches the flames, Conchubhar proves a sly and wily trickster...

"I shall give you terms, Buinne. A fine tract of land, the ear of the King himself and my advice should you need it."

"I'll accept that."

"Do you hear that? Just as I predicted."

"Shame on you, you traitor, you are just like your father!"

P32

Enraged by this, Iollann Fionn wreaks terrible slaughter on the Ulstermen...

He brings a lighted torch out onto the green...

"By my conscience, as long as I have a sword in my hand, I shall never abandon them!"

Then...

"Fiacha, my son..."

"You and Iollann Fionn were born on the same night and it is his father's weapons that he carries.

Now you take my weapons and use them well!"

"I will, father!"

Ding!

Fiacha and Iollann join in combat...

But a sudden foray from Iollann leaves Fiacha pinned helplessly beneath the edge of his shield.

"UCH!"

P33

Nearby, Conall Cearnach hears the roaring of the waves...

"The King is in danger. I must hurry to his aid..."

And striking without warning from the rear, he drives his spear into the back of Iollann.

"Urrrgh! Who has struck me from behind?"

"I, Conall Cearnach, and who are you?"

"I am Iollann Fionn, son of Fearghas. You have done a miserable deed to one who was protecting the sons of Uisneach."

"Is that true?"

"Of course it's true."

"Alas! But I shall have the head of the prince as recompense for that deed..."

"Don't. I am the son of Conchubhar."

Now Iollann throws his weapons into the fortress...

"Use them well, Naoise. I'm finished..."

And Conall departed...

...leaving the son of Conchubhar without his head.

P34

Ardán then emerged...

...to quench the flames...

...and to drive the Ulstermen away from the fortress.

And Conchubhar himself exhorts his men...

"Finish them off. There are only three of them!"

AAAAARGH!!!

But the sons of Uisneach make short work of them.

...and until the grains on the sandy beach are counted or the leaves of the trees or the grassy dewdrops, or the stars in the sky, it will never be known or numbered how many perished by their hands in that place.

"More power to you, my heroes! A marvellous feat... but remain strong for we are still in danger."

The sons of Uisneach clustered together then and making a fortress of their shields...

...they leapt over the walls with Deirdre safely in their midst.

P35

But...

"Cathfach, they're getting away! Use your magic on them or Ulster will be destroyed forever! And I give you my word that I shall not harm them!"

Cathfach does as the King has requested...

Sssssssssssssssssss!!!!

As great waves rise all around them their weapons fall away from them and they find themselves being swept back to the feet of the King himself...

"Sons of Uisneach, I remember well the wrong you did to me."

"Now, who will take off their heads?"

At first no one is inclined to do such a deed but then...

"I, Maine Lámhgharbh, will do it, for these are the three who slew my father!"

"!!!"

P36

It was then that the sons of Uisneach showed their courage for all to see...

"Kill me, Ardán, first, for I am the youngest."

"No, kill me, Ainle, first."

"Wait, I have a broadsword given me by Manannán. Strike all three of us at once and get it over with."

"Very well!"

The bent their heads then and with one great sweep...

...the deed was done.

"Uch!!!"

Horrified, Deirdre falls into a stupor and is taken from the scene...

...and the men of Ulster uttered three great cries of lamentation in memory of the three bravest men of deed and action who had ever lived in Ulster.

Alas!!!

But as for Conchubhar, he showed no sign of shame or remorse.

P37

That same night as the guards lay sleeping, Deirdre slipped quietly out to where the horses were. And...

...set her face for Dundalk, to seek out Cú Chulainn.

"He betrayed us. I knew he could not be trusted."

Hearing her story, Cú Chulainn is seized by a fit of anger...

"Alas! But who carried out this vile act, princess?"

"Maine Lámhgharbh, son of the king of Scotland."

"Wake up, Laoch, and ready the chariot quickly! We have work to do!"

And so they travelled in haste to Eamhain Mhacha...

P38

The gates of Eamain Mhacha are closed before them...

...but Cú Chulainn leaps over the wall.

And... brings in Laoch and Deirdre.

"Where is the coward who slew the sons of Uisneach?"

"I, Maine Lámhgharbh, am that man and I would do the same again every day for the rest of my life if I had the chance."

"Yours will be a short life then, you coward!"

UISSSSSSSSS!

"UCH??!!!"

"He who seeks out danger must also perish by it!"

And without another word they left that place.

P39

Then Fearghas Mac Róigh ordered every part of Eamhain Mhacha to be set alight at the same time.

And the household of the King, both men and women, were put to the sword without mercy.

And never was there such a struggle from the eastern world to the western world as what happened in that place. And such was the noise of battle that the ground trembled beneath their

feet, making hard ground soft and soft ground hard, and they fought like lions until the shadows of night fell.

When all was done and the dead avenged, Fearghas and three thousand of his followers set out for Cruachain Aí in the province of Connacht, where they were welcomed by Méabh and Aillil.

P40

It was not long until Cú Chulainn and Deirdre came to the place where Naoise lay

"Where the heart is, there must your feet bring you."

And loosening her hair, she wept loud and long for her lost love...

"I am Deirdre, desolate,

without malice, come to the end of my life;

now that he has left me, better

I should not linger..."

No sooner had she uttered those lines than her heart burst in her breast and she fell dead beside Naoise...

"Lay them down together now. They can never be separated again."

What Cú Chulainn ordered was done and two rowan trees grew in that lonely place and with the passage of time entwined together...

END