

Atticus Retells *The Wooing of Étaín*

Author's note: This what I originally wrote in Chapter 8 of HUNTED, but its length turned out to be the sort of thing that stalls a narrative and I had to edit heavily. This 13-page version was cut down to two in the final manuscript to keep things moving, but I thought mythology buffs might enjoy the more detailed version.

“Various versions of this tale were immortalized as *Tochmarc Étaíne*, or *The Wooing of Étaín*. But while those tales were surprisingly close to the true events, they were written centuries later and speak of feats impossible even for magic to achieve, while I was a contemporary and present in Ireland at the time. Some of this I heard from the Druid at the court of the High King, some from Airmid, and some of it was told to me by the Morrigan, who heard it from Aenghus Óg and Midhir. Here then is what really happened, and your introduction to Midhir of the Tuatha Dé Danann.”

[Celtic Doggie Dingbat]

In the days that we now call “days of yore” to make those days seem more magical than these days, Midhir was a skilled sorcerer married to an equally skilled and rather jealous sorceress, Fúamnach. However, as many men did and still do, he had difficulty with the concept of fidelity. He yearned for the touch of another woman—a rare beauty named Étaín, daughter of a regional king named Ailill. By many accounts, Étaín was the most desirable woman in Ireland, and they probably would have claimed

she was the finest in the world except that Irish people in days of yore pretty much considered Ireland to be the whole world. I know I did.

Normally a woman like Étaín would be inaccessible for a married man such as Midhir, but his half-brother, Aenghus Óg, wielded more than a little influence in matters of the heart. Thinking he would discuss his longings with Aenghus and perhaps solicit aid, he decided to pay his brother a visit at his estate, the Brug na Boinne—though the residence itself they call Newgrange these days. Now the recorded version will tell you that there were two groups of children fighting nearby as Midhir arrived, and being an absolutely spiffing sort of chap, he hurried in to break it up. And the tales say that in the course of this act of goodwill, he accidentally got a stick in the eye and the whole thing popped right out. Holding his eye in his hand, he went up to Aenghus and said, “Hey, bro, could you see your way to finding me a doctor?”

But that is not what happened. I had quite a different report from Airmid, who heard it from her father, Dian Cecht, who attended Midhir afterward. As he approached the home of Aenghus Óg, a single group of boys asked him for any spare food he might have. Rather than be charitable or even refuse in a polite manner, Midhir told them he’d already paid their mothers for their services. They attacked him with sticks and stones after that, and apparently they not only break your bones, but pop out eyes. Midhir was a much better sorcerer than he was a fighter, and taken unaware and unarmed by a larger force, he couldn’t avoid injury.

Of course, according to the old rules of hospitality, Aenghus was at fault, for he had allowed a guest to come to harm on his property. Midhir’s supreme dickishness was not at issue. So Aenghus got the finest health care available at that time, the healer Dian

Cecht, to fix Midhir's eye. But that didn't expunge Aenghus's debt to him, and Midhir knew exactly what he wanted: Étaín.

Aenghus succeeded in securing King Ailill's goodwill and Étaín's hand for Midhir, though it involved major landscaping projects within the bounds of Ailill's kingdom, and Aenghus also had to pay Étaín's weight in gold. And then, according to the custom of the time, he lived with Étaín at Brug na Boinne for a year and a day, a guest of Aenghus Óg, officially marrying her and effectually divorcing his first wife. The year-and-a-day rule served to bind and unbind people from all sorts of contracts.

But Midhir was spectacularly stupid about how he informed Fúamnach of the change in their marital status. In a fit of batshit insanity, he took Étaín to his home at Brí Léith, where Fúamnach still waited, and introduced his new wife to the old one. Why he thought this might have been a good idea, no one can say.

It did not go well.

Fúamnach was polite enough at first, but once she realized Midhir was serious about the shiny new wife, she lost rational thought. She invited Étaín to sit down, and once her guest did so, she fetched a rod of rowan wood enchanted with wild magic and struck Étaín in the head. A normal cudgel would have sufficed to guarantee a concussion and quite possibly crush her skull, but due to the wild magic in the wood, Étaín was transformed into a puddle of water.

"Ha! Snog *that!*" Fúamnach said.

Actually, she didn't say that. She said some other things that were quite a bit more impolite, but then tried to convince Midhir that she was much better at the act of love than a puddle of water and she wouldn't mind demonstrating if he was in the mood.

Midhir brutally rebuffed her, revoked her welcome from his house, and refused to leave the puddle that had once been Étaín. Fúamnach packed her things and stalked away to resume living with her foster parent, a wizard who had taught her how to harness that wild magic. She was confident that Midhir would have no satisfaction from a puddle—but she was equally determined that Midhir should have no wife but her.

The thing about wild magic is that its effects are difficult to predict. She hadn't killed Étaín after all.

Midhir thought at first Étaín was lost forever, so he wept and remained by the puddle, keeping a sort of vigil and watching it slowly evaporate. But then, as it dried up, something solidified and eventually flopped around with life: a large worm writhed on the floor. In short order, it spun itself a cocoon, and soon afterward, an enormous purple butterfly emerged from it, as beautiful amongst insects as Étaín had been amongst humans. Midhir knew it was his love. At this point, the old versions of the story say that she exuded a pleasing odor and cured disease by circling around people's heads and other such nonsense—the equivalent of unicorns pooping rainbows. The butterfly landed on his shoulder and he cooed at it and promised that he would figure out a way to solve the problem. Midhir's magical strength, like Fúamnach's, lay in spells of transformation, but he'd never tried to turn an insect into a human before and knew it would require study and experimentation before attempting it on Étaín.

He passed seven months in the constant company of this butterfly; it attended him wherever he went. Eventually, word of this reached the ears of Midhir's estranged wife. She paid him a visit and immediately understood that her rival still existed, and the fact

that Midhir showed more love to a six-legged creature with a proboscis than to her really burned her britches.

She summoned a storm to blow away the butterfly that now held such sway over her husband's heart. Midhir, for his part, summoned a stream of profanity that is still legendary today. It didn't succeed in bringing Étaín back, but it did convince Fúamnach to leave him alone for a while. She had accomplished her aim in any case: If she couldn't have Midhir, then no one would.

Étaín remained storm-tossed until, seven long years later, she landed, completely exhausted, on the shoulder of Aenghus Óg. Having heard from Midhir about the exquisite purple butterfly, he didn't smoosh it and thereby prevent all the crazy shit that was to follow afterward. Instead, he protected the butterfly and reassured it, telling Étaín that she was in good hands now and everything would be well in short order. He laid some protective wards around her, some of them also composed of wild magic, and nursed her back to health. When she appeared to be a much healthier insect than when she first landed on him, Aenghus sought out Midhir, quite correctly assuming that he would want to see Étaín again and restore her. But on his journey, Aenghus was spotted by Fúamnach, who spied the purple butterfly on his shoulder and realized that her old enemy had resurfaced. She summoned another magical windstorm and poor Étaín was blown away once again.

Aenghus Óg was every bit as disappointed as Midhir. He told his brother what had happened—that Étaín had briefly come back, only to be whisked away again on the wind—and Midhir, in his rage, expressed a wish that Fúamnach might meet an untimely

death. Taking him at his word, Aenghus Óg hunted her down and killed her. Midhir was not sorry to hear of it.

Étaín, meanwhile, rode the winds for seven more years before landing in a large flagon of mead that belonged to a warrior's wife. The wife didn't see the butterfly and swallowed her, and Étaín, rather than being digested, made a miraculous leap from stomach to womb thanks to the wild protective wards of Aenghus Óg. She was transformed into a fertilized egg, and nine months later was reborn into the world and renamed Étaín. She had no memories of her previous life, but once again grew up to be the most beautiful woman in Ireland.

Once she reached her majority, the new High King of Ireland at that time, Eochaid Airem, was unmarried and asked for tribute to be sent to Tara. The various kings refused to send tribute until he was married, so he sought a bride and sent his minions abroad to discover the finest lady walking the isle. They found Étaín, and he quite naturally fell in love with her and she had no reason to refuse the High King. They were married and for a brief time peace reigned. Except that Eochaid's brother—whose name coincidentally happened to be Ailill, the same as Étaín's sire from the first time she'd been born—fell in love with Étaín and began to waste away because it was unrequited. He was pining, in fact, and probably rubbing himself raw in the bargain with fantasies about Étaín's naughty bits.

Eochaid had to leave his stronghold to tour Ireland and visit all the regional kings, where he'd be feted and entertained by bards and given gifts. He mourned his brother's illness, and left Étaín with him to minister to his needs and see to his funeral should it become necessary.

While ministering to him, Étaín could not help but notice that Ailill drank in the sight of her rather hungrily and quickly pitched a tent underneath the sheets, if you know what I mean. She inquired after the cause of his sickness, and he claimed that he would heal if she would but show him a shred of affection. Étaín, being a kind soul, wished him well and urged him to heal for her sake. He improved over the next few weeks, but wasn't a hundred percent by a far stretch. More like seventy percent. He told Étaín a taste of her sweet, sweet love would effect a full cure, and she agreed to meet him on a hill outside the king's house.

At the arranged time for their rendezvous, she met someone she thought was Ailill and they made urgent noises at each other under a cloak of furs. The next morning, Ailill wept at the sight of her and apologized for not attending the meeting. To his eternal shame, he had fallen asleep.

Étaín was certain she had not made the beast with two backs with a sleeping man the previous night, so if it hadn't been Ailill, then who? She kept these thoughts to herself, however, forgave Ailill his beauty rest, and arranged a second meeting.

That meeting went precisely as the first; she met a copy of Ailill and enjoyed getting hot and slippery with him, only to discover the next morning that Ailill hadn't been there after all—unless he had been enchanted to forget the encounter. She arranged a third meeting with him, because somebody was sure keeping those meetings, and if nothing else, she was enjoying the sex.

But this time, after the lovin' and under the silver light of a crescent moon, she asked the doppelganger who he really was. He dropped his disguise and revealed himself to be none other than her long-lost love, Midhir. He had found her once more, and with

the help of Aenghus Óg, had forced Ailill to pine for her, and then sent him to sleep each night so that he'd miss the planned tryst.

“I have no idea who you are,” she said.

“We loved each other not so very long ago,” he explained. “We can love each other again.”

“I have no memories of this.”

“You have three nights of memories now. Be mine again, even if you believe it is for the first time. Be my wife.”

“I cannot leave Eochaid.”

“Of course you can.”

“Very well: Secure his permission—get his consent—and I will go with you. But not before.”

“It shall be so,” Midhir said. “For you I would do much. You will see.” And thus began the very serious wooing of Étaín. Midhir had Aenghus release Ailill from his pining so that he would recover, and then he prepared himself for a long game.

When Eochaid returned from his tour, he was overjoyed to see his brother well when he expected to find him dead. He also took great joy in getting reacquainted with his wife. But it was not long before he met with a surprise before breakfast.

Upon waking one morning, Eochaid discovered a richly dressed warrior waiting for him on his terrace. He'd never seen the man before, but as he did not appear hostile, he bid him welcome. The warrior introduced himself as Midhir of Brí Léith. He had golden hair, not dark or red, and wore a purple tunic. His spear was something of a showpiece, and he hefted a fancy shield encrusted with gems.

“What brings you here?” Eochaid asked.

“I’d like to play a game of fidchell,” Midhir said. In modern translations of the story you will see it described as chess, but chess did not become popular in Europe for another twelve centuries. The Irish game of fidchell was played on a slightly smaller board, only seven squares on a side rather than the eight we use for chess. One player was the king and had a bodyguard, and he set up his pieces in the center; the other player was the usurper and attacked from the edges. The king had to reach one of the edges, and the usurper had to make sure he never escaped.

“I enjoy playing,” Eochaid replied, “but only for stakes.”

“Very well. I stake fifty sexy horses.” Well, I suppose that’s an unfair shorthand. Back then Irish spent a great deal of breath on their gifts and wouldn’t limit themselves to a single adjective. So “fifty sexy horses” means that Eochaid took his time describing how fine the horses were so that Eochaid wouldn’t think he was putting up fifty half-dead nags. It was a form of bragging, too—domesticated animals in great shape required plenty of land, so by emphasizing how fine they were, Midhir was truly emphasizing how rich he was.

Eochaid agreed and absolutely destroyed Midhir at fidchell. Midhir thanked him for the game, packed up his fidchell board and left. The next morning he appeared again with the promised horses.

The High King of Ireland was mightily pleased to see them and was impressed with their quality. Midhir asked to play another game.

“For what stakes?”

This time Midhir put up fifty sexy boars, and once again had his ass handed to him by Eochaid Airem. This continued for some time, with Midhir pissing away his wealth like a gambling addict at a casino. He lost fifty gold-hilted swords, fifty ivory-hilted swords, fifty sexy cows, and so on. Fucker had fifty of everything.

Eventually an advisor to Eochaid noticed the influx of wealth and inquired after it. The High King explained, and the advisor said, “My king, this is no mere warrior afflicted with boredom so severe that he must seek out games of high-stakes fidchell. This is a being of magical power with something to prove. You should take advantage for the good of the realm.”

“How do you mean?”

“Set him great tasks to complete. Improve our land.”

Eochaid admired this plan. He could improve Ireland and take credit for it and all he had to do was win a few more games of fidchell.

And thus he forced Midhir to plant a forest here, clear a field of stones there, and build a causeway through a nasty bog. Each time, Midhir exhorted Eochaid to set no watch, to let no one out of doors until sunrise. Eochaid agreed, but then sent one of his men out to spy on Midhir anyway.

The man reported that Midhir accomplished these great deeds with the help of the Fae, and he was surely one of the Tuatha Dé Danann.

Midhir returned to Eochaid’s stronghold on the heels of the man’s last report, face flushed and much vexed.

“You have done me wrong,” he said. “You agreed not to let anyone out at night, yet sent your own man in spite of me. Do not deny it. He was seen and even now is standing there before us both.” He pointed at the king’s man.

“Be incensed if you wish, but I will not return your ill will,” Eochaid said. “Be welcome and further be praised for the great work you have done. Will you not accept some refreshment?”

Midhir calmed down, accepted food and drink, and suggested another game of fidchell.

“What shall the stake be this time?” the High King asked.

“It shall be whatsoever we wish. A favor to be named later.”

Eochaid could not refuse him after being caught in his deception, so he agreed to these very dangerous terms. And this time, Midhir defeated him soundly.

“I have lost my stake,” Eochaid said. “What would you wish?”

“A kiss and embrace from Étaín,” Midhir said, and smiled.

Eochaid Airem’s blood ran cold as he realized that Midhir had been after his wife’s honey pot all along. He had thought the man would wish for all his wealth returned, but nothing so simple as a kiss and embrace of his wife. Still, what could he do?

“Return in a month,” he said, “and you shall have what you wish.”

Midhir bowed and took his leave, and Eochaid immediately sent out a call for men at arms. He never intended to let Midhir within reach of him again to ask for payment of his debt. He surrounded his stronghold twice around with men on the appointed day, hoping thereby to prevent Midhir from gaining entrance, but it was all for

naught. Midhir simply cast camouflage on himself and snuck past the guards, appearing suddenly before Eochaid in the midst of his palace.

“What was promised is due,” Midhir said. “Even as that which I promised you was given.”

Étaín blushed upon seeing him.

“There is no shame here,” Midhir said. “Have I not wooed you properly now? I have given the finest treasures of Ireland for you, struggled at the mightiest labors. Should we not now be together?”

“I promised to go with you if you should secure my husband’s consent,” she reminded him. “And that you have not done.”

This was of course news to Eochaid, but he was quick to jump in. “That is correct! You do not have my permission to take her. But the kiss and the embrace, you may have even now, in front of me, and that which was promised shall be given.”

Midhir smiled and put his arm around Étaín, and then used his sorcery to transform them both into swans. They flew out through the skylight, leaving Eochaid and all his men looking like fools. Witnesses saw them flying toward Síð Ban Find, and so the king girt himself for war and rode to the faery mound. Midhir and Étaín were not there, though he destroyed the síd and churned the earth looking for her.

Marching with a small army and determined to find his wife, he traveled around Ireland, digging and razing every síd he could find, certain that Midhir must be hiding in one of them.

Eochaid had a Druid in his court, of course, and that Druid advised him in diplomatic phrases that what he was doing was exceedingly stupid shit. For one thing, as

soon as he left, the owners of all the destroyed síde would simply have the local elemental restore the land. And for another, Midhir was a powerful sorcerer of the Tuatha Dé Danann and, if he wished, could turn the High King of Ireland into a newt. But Eochaid's pride was a wall that no amount of reason could scale, and he continued unsettling the síde of Ireland for years, obsessed with finding Étaín. Eventually he found the right síd: He came to Brí Léith, and once he set about destroying it, Midhir appeared. Though most beings would hear this story and agree that Midhir had taken Étaín from Eochaid without his consent and without her consent either, the brother of Aenghus Óg didn't see it that way. He got up in Eochaid's grill and accused *him* of wrongdoing.

“Why do you offer me violence?” he said. “You abused my goodwill by setting me onerous labors. You sold your wife to me, and yet here you are, ruining my home.”

“I sold her not! She is not yours. Render back to me what you have stolen.”

Midhir considered a few moments and then said, “Return to your stronghold. I will bring her tomorrow.” And thus they parted.

Midhir kept his promise and brought Étaín to Tara the next day...except he also brought forty-nine other women enchanted to look just like her. He presented fifty Étaíns to Eochaid Airem and bade him choose his wife. They all claimed to be the true Étaín, for there was little downside to being the queen of Ireland. And so Eochaid had a difficult choice to make.

He chose one, proclaimed her his queen, and Midhir withdrew with the forty-nine disappointed copies.

Eochaid fathered a daughter with his queen and was happy for a year and a day. Midhir ruined it all on the day after that, a Thursday that was otherwise quite fine.

He came to Tara, smiling, and asked if Eochaid was satisfied.

“Quite satisfied.”

“And so am I. Did you know that Étaín was pregnant when we took wing together all those years ago? She gave birth to a daughter—your daughter, though the child was never told this. And it was she that you chose, in the likeness of her mother, to be your queen. You are married to your own daughter, and have lain with her and brought forth issue with her. And you have given me Étaín once again. So you are paid for trifling with the Tuatha Dé Danann.”