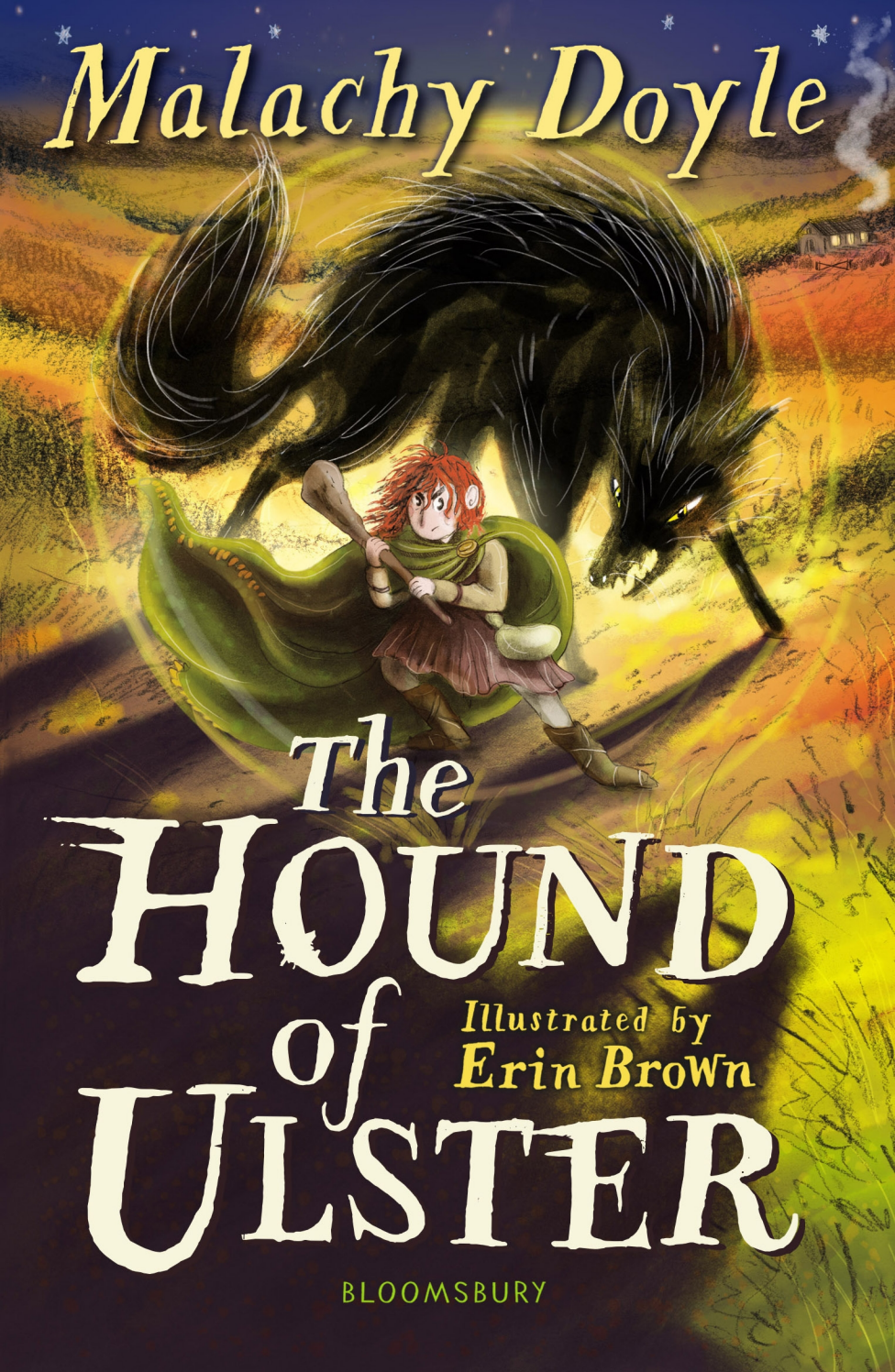
Malachy Doyle
The HOUND of ULSTER
Illustrated by Erin Brown
BLOOMSBURY

The HOUND of ULSTER

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To Louis Isaac Cuchulainn,
he of the bark most tuneful

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Chapter One
Setanta's Dream

Setanta always liked to dream big.

"I'm going to be famous," he boasted to his mother, when he was only six years old. "I'm going to be a Red Branch Knight!"

"Don't be silly, child," said his mother, laughing. "For one thing you're too young, for a second you're too small and for a third we can't afford weapons."

Setanta was sad, then, but his mother put her arm around him. "Only the children of nobles become warriors, love," she told him. "The great king of Ulster, Conor Mac Nessa, would never have one such as you! You'll grow up to be a shepherd, like the rest of our family. Now fetch me some wood for the fire and put such thoughts from your mind."

But Setanta wouldn't give up on his dream. His father often spoke of the band of young people that the king had brought together at Emain Macha, the Red Branch headquarters, to train up as his champions. The young warriors were great hurlers, and specially chosen for their skill at games and sports.

So Setanta made himself a hurley stick from the branch of an ash tree, and found a round stone to use as a ball. As well as the hurley, he made himself a javelin and a spear, a shield and a sword, and he spent every free moment

practising, until he was sure that he was just as good as the famous band of young warriors.

Then, one night, when his father was preparing to take their sheep down to the market in Emain Macha, Setanta crept up behind him.

"Could I go with you tomorrow, Father?" he asked.

"It's too far, child," said the man. "You'll get tired, and I'll have to carry you."

"I won't," said Setanta. "I can run for miles."

"It's too busy," said his father. "I'll lose you in the crowd."

"You won't," said Setanta. "I'll stay close by."

"I've too much to do," said his father. "It's hard enough work keeping the sheep together, without having to watch out for a rascal like you."

But Setanta's mother took pity on him. "Oh, let him go with you! He'll have to learn how to drive the sheep one day, so now's as good a time as any."

Setanta ran over and hugged her, for this was the moment he'd been dreaming of.

He hardly got a wink of sleep all night and, by the first light of dawn, when his father came to wake him, he was already up and dressed.

They had a quick bite to eat, gathered the sheep, and set off on their way. It was a long journey,

sure enough, but Setanta ran on ahead of the flock, playing at games to shorten the way.

He whacked a stone into the air with his hurley, as high and hard as he could, tossing the stick after it. Running forward, he caught the hurley, held it out and trapped the stone on it. The whole way to Emain Macha, Setanta did this. He never tired and he never dropped the stone, not once.

When they arrived in the town, Setanta saw the king's warriors, every one of them, practising their skills on the green. So, with a whoop and a holler, he ran to join them.

For now was the time to prove that the child of a shepherd was good enough to become a warrior of the mighty king.