

I

THE WITNESS



Eochaid Muinremuir (YOH-kheth MUHN-reh-vur) had been cursed to witness, and in the long peace of the home he had let himself half-forget what the witnessing was for — and that, he would think afterward, was the god's cruelest mercy: that he had been allowed, for a few hundred years, to mistake his sentence for a life.

He kept the night watch still, as he had kept it since the founding, the deathless druid sitting the dark hours at the edge of the ring of ancient stones while the home slept. But the watch had gone gentle across the centuries. There had been no enemy worth the name in a long age — the wild kept, the slope-folk sheltered, the wolves ranging the green country and coming home to the antlered seat that held them all to a single point. The home had become, against every expectation of its blood-soaked founding, an ordinary happy place, and Eochaid had become, against every line of his curse, almost content to keep it. He should have known better. He had had more reasons than any creature alive to know better. But contentment is the one lesson the long-lived never quite learn, because the alternative is unbearable, and so they learn it again and again and are surprised by grief again and again, deathless and foolish both.



The home, in this age, was four hundred years deep and more.

Fergus mac Eirc (FUR-gus mak AYRK) still held the rooted seat — the antlered throne of oak and shed antler that the Fair Folk had let him buy with everything, on the founding night none of the home but Eochaid still remembered firsthand. He had not aged a day since a glen ran red in a century the slope-folk could not now name. He had become, across the long keeping, the thing the young king who emptied that glen could never have imagined: patient, gentle-handed, slow to the all-of-it that had once damned him, a lord who said no to himself a hundred times a day and counted it the only penance worth the name. The home loved him the way a valley loves the mountain over it — permanent, sheltering, a little terrible, there before the grandfathers and there after the grandchildren.

The pack had thinned and grown and thinned again, the way a pack does across four centuries — some lost to the hide, the slow gentle leaving Garnait (GAR-natch) had taught them all to dread; some new-come, true-blood children grown into their change and never aging after. Of the old ten that walked west out of the glen, a few remained. Domangart (DOV-an-gart) still told the tales, darker since a green hollow took his daughter, deeper for the darkness. Talorc (TAL-ork) still kept his fluent silence, the most eloquent wolf in the home with the least voice. The surviving cousin still held to the man, steady, alone, missing the half of himself that had gone into the wood so long ago that only Eochaid still remembered there had been two. Brennus (BREN-us) still kept the eastern gate, the first Warden, four hundred years at his post, and still, on certain nights, went and lay at the edge of the hazel hollow and grieved at the true grave of a child the home had buried at the false one — and still no one but Eochaid knew why, and Eochaid still could not say.

And there was Alpín (AL-peen).



Alpín was the heir, though no one had said the word aloud, the way no one had said it aloud of Garnait four hundred years before — the home's blood ran true to its old habit of choosing in silence and announcing nothing. He was true-blood, born in the home generations down from the founding, come into his change at the edge of manhood and not aged past it; he had Fergus's stubbornness gentled by four centuries of the home's slow patience, and something else besides, something that was his own and that Eochaid watched with the wary attention he gave to anything he could not quite read.

"You are doing the thing," Alpín said, coming up to the seat in the dark — he kept odd hours, the heir, he had taken to sitting the late watch with the old man, which no one else did, which was itself a kind of answer to the unasked question of who would have the seat. "The staring-into-the-dark thing. Grandfather-of-grandfathers, you have the face on. Fergus says when you get the face on, a wise man checks the larder and sharpens the spears."

"Fergus says a great many things about my face. He has had four hundred years to develop opinions on it." Eochaid did not turn from the dark. "And he is right, as it happens, which he finds tiresome and so do I. I have the face on because I have felt something, these last nights, that I have not felt in a long age, and I have been sitting here trying to decide whether I am an old man frightened by a change in the weather or an old man who is correctly afraid. They feel the same from the inside. That is the trouble with my gift. It has never once told me which kind of dread I am having until the dread arrives in person."

"What have you felt."

Eochaid was quiet a moment. The gift had been stirring for three nights — the old stir, the glen-stir, the one he had not felt since before the founding — and he had learned, across a long life, exactly how much to say to the young and exactly how much to keep. With Alpín he had found himself, lately, keeping less, because the boy was going to have the seat, and a seat is easier held by someone the old man has not spent his youth lying to.

"There is a king in the south," he said. "A great one. Greater than any since the legions — and like the legions, he rules lines onto the world and calls the ruling holy. I have felt his reach growing for years and said nothing, because it was far, and the far is not yet the near, and an old man who cries the sky is falling every time a southern king grows fat soon teaches everyone to stop listening. But these last three nights the reach has changed. It has turned. I cannot see toward what — the gift goes dark down the years the way it always has — but I can feel the turning, the way you feel a great beast in the dark shift its weight from one foot to the other and know, without seeing it, that it has decided to move and has only to choose the direction. The beast has decided to move, Alpín. That is what I have felt. And I have a cold notion, which I will not call a seeing because it has not earned the name, that when it chooses its direction, the direction will be us."



Alpín sat with that a while — he sat with things, the way Garnait had, the way the home's best always did. "We have been safe a long time," he said finally. "The whole of my life. The whole of everyone's life but yours and Fergus's and the few old ones. I know the founding tales — the glen, the road, the bargain — but they are tales to me, grandfather-of-grandfathers. Stories Domangart tells. I have never seen the home in danger. I do not think I quite believe, in the meat of me, that it can be. It has always simply been here."

"I know," Eochaid said, and there was something in his voice that made the young man look at him. "That is the thing I have been sitting here grieving, these three nights, before the danger has even arrived. Not the danger. You. All of you. That you have had four hundred years of safety so complete that you cannot believe in its ending — and that I can, because I remember the founding as a thing that happened to me and not a tale, I remember when this home was a glen full of the dead and a god walking in it, and I have never once in four

hundred years stopped knowing that what was made can be unmade.” He looked at the heir, the boy who would hold the seat, with the particular tenderness of a man looking at someone he already grieves. “You asked what I felt. I will tell you the whole of it, since you are going to have the seat and a man should not inherit a throne without knowing what sits under it. I feel that the long peace is ending. I feel that the thing my whole cursed existence was bent toward — for I was not made deathless to keep a happy home, Alpín, whatever I have let myself pretend these gentle centuries; I was made deathless to witness; the god told me so in the glen, that I would watch and remember and never be permitted to die of the watching — I feel that the thing I was made to witness is finally, after four hundred years, coming up the road toward us out of the south. And I feel that I will see it whole, because that is my sentence and my gift has never once failed to make me keep it. Go to sleep, sister-son's son's son's son, down all the greats I have stopped counting. Sleep while the sleeping is good. The beast in the dark has shifted its weight. And an old man who has been wrong eight times in nine is very much afraid that this is the ninth.”