

I

THE KING'S MEAT



The hall at Dunadd (DOO-nat) smelled of wet dog, scorched barley, and the particular green smoke of alder that would not dry no matter how long you stacked it, and Fergus mac Eirc (FUR-gus mak AYRK), king of Dál Riata (dawl REE-a-ta), sat at the head of it with a cracked tooth he had been worrying for three days and two sons who would not stop arguing.

"It was my spear," said Garnait (GAR-natch).

"It was your spear in my hand," said Domangart (DOV-an-gart), not looking up from the boar he was carving, "which makes the kill mine by every reckoning ever reckoned."

"That is not a reckoning." Garnait leaned across him to jab a finger at the meat. "That is a thief's prayer."

"Cernunnos (ker-NOO-nos) hears thieves' prayers the same as kings'. Likelier, in fact. Kings bore him."

"You would know what bores a god," Garnait shot back. "You've put half this hall to sleep yourself."

Down the bench old Talorc (TAL-ork) wheezed the ruined laugh that was the only laugh left to him since a Cruithni (KROO-hin-yuh) spear opened his throat eleven winters back, and the wheeze only encouraged the two of them, the way it always did, the old fool. Talorc could not speak above a whisper and had not been able to for over a decade, and he had discovered in that time that a man who cannot talk becomes a connoisseur of other men talking, and these two were his favorite entertainment in all the world. He pointed at Garnait, then at the boar, then drew a thumb across his ravaged throat, which everyone understood to mean either you are killing me or finish him off, the joke is dying too, and possibly both.

"See," said Domangart. "Talorc agrees with me."

"Talorc cannot agree with anyone. It is his single virtue and the reason I keep him." Fergus did not look up from his ale. "Talorc, blink twice if my son is a thief."

Talorc blinked, very slowly, four times, and grinned like a wolf.

"That is four," Garnait pointed out.

"He is hedging," said Fergus. "He has lived at this court thirty years and learned that the safest answer to any question a king asks is more than was requested. You could learn from him, the both of you, if either of you ever shut your mouths long enough to hear a man who can't open his."

The boar in question turned on the spit and dripped into the fire, and it had been, until recently, a genuine problem: it had eaten three villages' worth of barley they could not spare and put a herdsman named Aedan in his grave with a tusk through the thigh and a week of fever after. Fergus had ridden three days through bog to be rid of it and had then, to the open astonishment of three hundred men, thrown no spear at all. He had stood back. He had wanted, just the once, to watch his sons do a hard thing well together without his hand in it.

They had not done it together. They had done it the way they did everything — in a contest neither would admit to having entered — and Domangart had got the killing blow in by the simple expedient of using his brother's spear while his brother was shouting at a dog. Which was, Fergus privately thought, exactly the kind of low cleverness that kept a man alive, and exactly the kind he did not want sitting in this seat after him. He had said nothing. He was good at saying nothing. It was, he sometimes felt, the chief labor of kingship: the enormous daily quantity of things a king thinks and does not say.

“The boar,” he announced, “is mine, because everything in this hall is mine, including the pair of you, and I will give the best cut to whichever of you stops talking first.”

That bought one breath of silence.

“Then it’s mine,” said both of them at once, and then turned and looked at each other with the pure betrayed horror of men who had accidentally agreed, and Talorc laughed so hard he had to be thumped on the back by the man beside him, and Fergus felt — against the cracked tooth, against the green smoke, against the long grinding arithmetic of a kingdom forever one wet summer from starving — something perilously like joy.

He marked it. He had taught himself to mark such things. He was somewhere past forty — no one had counted closely since the plague-summer when they burned the year-tally along with the bodies — and in those years he had buried two wives and a small daughter and more men than he let himself number, and he had learned the one true thing he believed grief had to teach, which was that happiness never announced itself at the door. It came sideways. It came in a warm hall on a wet night with your sons making fools of themselves over meat, and the whole art of a life was noticing it while it sat beside you, because you would have no trouble at all noticing it once it had gone.

“You let them kill it alone.” The voice came at his shoulder, low, pitched for him only. Eochaid (YOH-kheth) had come up behind the high seat without a sound, the way he always did — an old man who moved like a young one and watched like a thing older than both. “Three days, and you never lifted your hand.”

“I lifted it repeatedly. There was ale in it each time. Witnesses will confirm.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean.” Fergus did not turn. He was watching Garnait carve — the boy’s big careful hands, the frown of concentration that was his dead mother’s frown, line for line, so that some evenings the sight of it took the breath out of the king like a blow he had not seen coming. “I wanted to see them be men without me standing over them. I will not always be here to throw the spear.”

“You are the king. You will always be here. That is the chief inconvenience of kings; they cannot even die conveniently.”

“Kings die more often than most, grandfather, in my experience, and at worse moments. I have a kingdom that loses its harvest every third year and two sons who between them have one sensible head and cannot decide which of them is keeping it. One of them sits in this seat after me. I would like him ready. That is not too much to ask of the Horned One, I think, given everything else he has declined to give me.”

He had meant it lightly. He realized, too late, that Eochaid had gone very still, and that the stillness had been there a moment before the joke, waiting under it.

“Why,” Fergus said, “are you whispering at my shoulder like a bad conscience? You have had a face on you for three days. I have a cracked tooth and a face on my counselor; the gods are spoiling me.”

Eochaid was quiet a moment longer. The firelight did him no kindness — it never had — finding every year in his face and then a number of years that did not seem to belong to any life a man could have lived and walked away from. “I have been dreaming,” he said, “of the high glen. The one above Loch nán Eala (lokh nan AL-a). The wintering ground, where the great herd goes.”

“I know the glen. We ride for it inside the fortnight — you, me, three hundred starving men, and every empty creel in Dál Riata — because the barley failed a third year running and that herd is the only larder the Horned One left us. You were at the council. You fell asleep, but you were at it.”

“I was not asleep. I was dreaming with my eyes open, which at my age is a great economy of time.” He did not smile. “I dream we ride into that glen, Fergus. And I dream we

do not all of us ride out. And between the one and the other there is a thing I cannot see the shape of — only that it is large, and it is old, and it is angry in a way that has nothing to do with us and everything to do with what we mean to do to it. So I will ask you a plain question and I would be grateful past saying for a plain answer. How many head do you mean to take from that herd?”

“As many as three hundred men can carry down a mountain.”

“That is not a number. A number has edges. Give me one with edges.”

“All of them, if it comes to that.”

He said it lightly too, and heard, even as it left him, that the old man did not receive it lightly — and some contrary thing in Fergus, the same thing that had let his sons kill the boar, the same thing that had set him in this seat when steadier and better-born men stood nearer to it, made him say it again, and harder, with the edges the old man had asked for. “All of them, grandfather. There are six-score head in that glen and three thousand mouths in this kingdom, and I have done the only reckoning that has ever mattered, which is not whose spear and not whose prayer but how many of mine see the spring. If the glen must be emptied to fill the pits, I will empty the glen. And if there is a thing in it large and old and angry, I will tell it to its face that I would rather it angry than my people in the ground, and it may take that up with me, or with the Horned One, or with whoever it likes.”

The hall had hushed around them in the way a hall does when the king's voice changes key. Garnait had stopped carving, the knife still in the meat. Eochaid looked at his grandson — his sister's son's son, the last living branch of a line the old man had carried in his head, name by name, back through nine generations of the dead — with an expression Fergus would spend four hundred years trying and failing to forget.

“I believe you would,” Eochaid said, very quietly. “That is the whole of what frightens me. Not the herd. You.”



Later, when the fire had sunk to a red eye and the hall was a floor of snoring men and the hounds had crept back to the warm ash to lie among the boots, Garnait found his father at the door, looking out at the rain coming down the way it always did, finding the same holes in the same roof it had found every wet season since the hall was raised.

“You meant it,” the boy said. He was not a boy. He was two-and-twenty and a hand taller than his father and had killed his first man at sixteen and wept about it after, privately, where he thought no one saw — Fergus had seen — and the king could still not look at him without the ghost of the infant who would sleep only if walked the length of the hall and back, the length of the hall and back, the whole black first half-year of his motherless life. “About emptying the glen. You meant it.”

“I meant it,” Fergus said to the rain.

“The old man's afraid.”

“The old man is always afraid. It is his gift and his trade. He has been afraid of every sunrise since before I had teeth, and he has been right about perhaps one in nine of them, which is a poorer record than a wet finger held to the wind.” Fergus heard the unfairness in it as it left him, and stopped, because the boy was looking at him and the boy did not deserve a lie even a small one. “He is right more than one in nine,” he admitted, to the rain. “That is the trouble with him. If he were a fool I could love him in peace.”

Garnait was quiet a while. He was the quiet one; Domangart said a thing the instant it arrived behind his eyes, but Garnait turned a thing over first, and looked underneath it, and the turning-over was the very reason Fergus had decided — told no one, not the boy, not the old man, not the gods — that this son would have the seat. “Then don't take all of them,” Garnait said. “Take what we need. Leave the breeding does, and the young of the year, the

way grandfather says the old kings did. The pits don't have to be filled to the lip. They have to be filled enough."

"And next year, when the rain comes again, and the year after that, and there is no herd left in the glen because we chose to be gentle in a hard season — what then? Shall I leave them a kind word in the empty pits to chew on?"

"Then we'll be hungry next year." The boy did not rise to it. That was another of his mother's gifts in him; she had never once let Fergus pick the fight he was reaching for. "We are always going to be hungry some year, father. That is the kingdom. That is the whole of the kingdom, under the gold and the songs — a long argument with the rain. I would rather be hungry with a herd still standing in that glen than full to bursting with it emptied and grandfather's large old angry something come down off the mountain to collect what we owe."

Fergus looked at his son a long moment in the grey wet light from the door, and felt the two things this boy always raised in him at once, the pride and the exasperation, which had long ago stopped being two things and become one feeling that wore two faces, like a coin. "When you hold this seat," he said, "you may leave every doe in Alba (AL-a-pa) alive and name them each after one of your father's mistakes. You'll not run short of names."

"When I hold this seat, I will." Garnait almost smiled — almost, the careful way he did everything. "Is that you telling me I'm to have it, then? Over Domangart?"

"That is me telling you to go to sleep before I change my mind about both of you and leave the kingdom to Talorc."

"The people would follow him," Garnait said. "He's the only honest man at this court. He can't lie; he hasn't the throat for it."

"Go to sleep, Garnait."

The boy laid a hand on his father's shoulder — a moment, no more, the most either of them ever allowed themselves, this family of men who loved each other in the language of insults because the other language had been buried with their women — and went to find his place among the sleepers. Fergus stood on in the doorway a while, listening to the rain, thinking of a glen full of stags and a grandfather full of dread and a son who would spare the breeding does, and he decided, the way he decided everything that ever mattered — alone, in the dark, against the counsel of the only two souls left alive who loved him — that he would take what the kingdom needed off that mountain and not one head past it.

He decided it. He stood in his own doorway with the rain in his face and decided it, and meant it down to the floor of him; and had he held to it, the whole long history of the world that came after would have been a different thing, and a smaller one, and a great deal less drenched in blood.

He did not hold to it.

But that is the next of it, and the glen, and the morning the world ended. This was the night before — the warm hall, the arguing sons, the boar on the spit, the old man's dread, the one hand on the shoulder in the dark — and it is worth the long marking, every detail of it, because it was the last night any of them was only a man and not yet a monster, and not one of them knew it, which has been the way of last nights since the first night the world was made.

He stood in the door until the rain thinned and stopped, which it did, at last, somewhere in the grey before dawn. He took that for a mercy. He would learn, within the fortnight, to take nothing the sky offered as a mercy ever again — but that morning he did not yet know it, and he watched the clouds tear open on a cold clean sky, and he thought: good. Dry weather to ride in. He did not go to his bed. There was no use in it now; the decision was made and a made decision does not sleep. He waited for the hall to wake, and for the grain-pits to be

counted, and for the day to begin its work of proving him right or wrong, and he did not yet know which it would be, though the old man, three walls away, lay awake and did.