

THE GEIS OF WOLVES
BOOK ONE
THE LONG EXILE



a novel of the cursed line of Dál Riata

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— A FREE SAMPLE: THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS —

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.

II

THE LEAN YEAR



The rain had stopped before dawn, as Fergus had watched it do from the doorway, and by full morning everyone in Dunadd had agreed it was the cruelest thing the rain had done all season — because rain you could at least be angry at, and a clear cold sky over a drowned country only made the drowning easier to count. The king had not slept. A made decision does not sleep, and his was made, and so he had stood in the grey watching the clouds tear open, and then, while the hall still snored behind him, he had gone down to learn exactly how right or wrong he was.

He walked the grain-pits before the hall was properly awake, because a king who wants the truth about his stores must get to them before the steward does. The steward was a careful, decent man named Coll (KOL) who had served three kings and learned from each of them a slightly different way to make a bad number sound survivable, and Fergus loved him and trusted him and did not believe a word he said about barley. So he went alone, in the grey, and knelt at the lip of the first pit, and reached down into the cold of it, and brought up a fistful of last year's grain, and let it run through his fingers, and did the arithmetic that no steward's kindness could soften.

It ran out wrong. It had been running out wrong for three years, but a man can carry two bad years on his back the way he carries a wound he has decided to ignore; it is the third that finds the floor of him. Fergus crouched there with the cold grain in his fist and felt, under the king, the plain animal arithmetic of a creature that has understood, at last, that there is not going to be enough.

"You'll catch your death down there," said Coll, who had of course followed him, because a good steward sleeps with one ear on his king. "And then where would we be. Garnait on the seat inside the year, leaving meat in the glens to please the deer, and Domangart selling the cattle to buy a harp."

"Domangart cannot play the harp."

"That has never once stopped him buying one." Coll lowered himself to the pit's edge with the care of a man whose knees had served three kings too. He did not look at Fergus. He looked at the grain. "It's worse than I told you in council."

"It is always worse than you tell me in council. That is what council is for. You tell them the number a kingdom can hear, and then you find me at a pit at dawn and tell me the number a king has to."

"The number a king has to," said Coll, "is that we do not reach the spring. Not all of us. Not on what's here. We reach the spring on what's here and what comes off that mountain, and not otherwise, and I have run it nine ways and I cannot make the tenth."

Fergus let the last of the grain fall back into the dark. "Then we'll have the mountain," he said.



He did not go straight back to the hall. He went down instead, through the lower gate and along the track to the steadings under the fort, because a king who is about to ask three thousand people to follow him up a mountain ought first to walk among them and remember what he is counting, and because Fergus had a private rule, never spoken, that he would not make a decision about his people from a height. He made them from the height; he confirmed

them from the mud. It was the same rule, in the end, that would later kill him, but he did not know that, and on this morning it served him well.

The first steading belonged to a widow named Una (OO-na), and Una was at her door wringing a hen's neck with the brisk competence of a woman who had done unpleasant necessary things her whole life and had stopped expecting help with any of them. She saw the king coming and did not stop wringing.

"Herself," she said, by way of greeting, to the hen.

"Una."

"You've come about Aedan (AY-than)." The hen finished. She set it down. "If you've come to tell me he died well, save it. He died of a pig, lord. There is no well in dying of a pig. I have had three nights to make my peace with the manner of it and I have not managed and I'll thank you not to gild it."

Aedan was the herdsman the boar had killed — the boar now eaten, the boar Domangart had stolen the killing of — and Fergus had not, in fact, come about Aedan; he had not connected the widow to the death until she said the name, which shamed him, because a king ought to carry his dead better than that. He stood in the cold and let the shame sit on him, which was the only honest thing to do with it.

"I did not come to gild it," he said. "I came because I am walking my steadings before I ask a hard thing of them, and yours is the first on the track. I did not know it was yours. I am sorry for Aedan, who I knew a little, and who once carried me across the Add (AD) on his back when I was a boy and the river was up, and dropped me in it halfway, on purpose, and laughed. He was not a careful man. He was a kind one. I would rather have the kind ones, on the whole, though they cost more."

Una looked at him for a moment, and something in the set of her loosened, not into grief — she had no more grief to spend that morning — but into the smaller, tired thing that comes after. "He never told me that," she said. "The river. He told me he taught the king to swim. The version where he saved you."

"There is always a version where Aedan saved someone. It was his best story and his only one and he told it about half the men in Alba."

"He was a terrible liar."

"The worst I ever knew. Talorc cannot lie because the gods took his throat; Aedan could not lie because the gods took his sense. Between the two of them I have had more truth at this court than any king deserves." It surprised a sound out of her that was nearly a laugh, and Fergus let it lie there a moment before he went on, gently, because he had not come only to mourn. "Una. I am going to take the able men up the glen above Loch nán Eala inside the fortnight, after the herd, because the barley has failed us a third year and there is no spring on this side of that mountain. I will take whoever can walk and carry. I would not take your boy —"

"You'll take my boy." She said it flatly. "He's fourteen and he eats like a forge and he'll carry his weight and yours. You'll take him, lord, and you'll bring him back, and that is the whole of the bargain, and I'll not pretend there's another shape to it. There isn't. There's never been another shape to it for the likes of us. The king goes up the mountain and our boys carry the creels."

"I will bring him back."

"Men say that." She picked the hen back up. "Then they come home with a different number of boys than they left with, and they look very surprised, as if no one could have foreseen it, as if the mountain were a thing that had never once eaten a boy before. Go and walk your steadings, lord. Ask your hard thing. We'll do it. We always do it. That is what we are for." She went inside, and the door did not slam, which was somehow worse than if it had.



He walked the rest of the track with that sitting in him.

It was not new, what Una had said; he had known it since before he was king, the iron arithmetic under the songs: that there were those who decided and those who carried, and that the deciding was done in halls and the carrying was done on mountains, and that the two did not weigh the same when they came home. But knowing a thing and being told it to your face by a woman wringing a hen are different sizes of knowing, and the second is the one that follows you up a track.

He found his sons at the cattle-fold, which told him most of what he needed to know about the morning, because there was no reason for either of them to be at the cattle-fold except to be near the other one while pretending not to be. Domangart was sitting on the rail. Garnait was counting the cattle, which they both knew the herdsmen had counted at dawn, but Garnait counted things when he was unsettled the way Domangart talked.

"Thirty-one," said Garnait. "We had forty at Samhain (SOW-in)."

"We ate nine," said Domangart. "That is not a mystery. That is a winter."

"I know we ate nine." Garnait did not look up from the count. "I am not counting to find the nine. I am counting because thirty-one is what is left to take us to a harvest that is going to fail, and I would like to know the shape of how thin we are before father comes and tells us we're going up the mountain."

"Father is already here," said Fergus, "and pleased to find his heir doing sums at a fence like a worried steward. Coll will be flattered. He's been looking for an apprentice with no sense of his own dignity."

Garnait did not rise to it. He turned, and Fergus saw the question in him before he asked it, the careful turning-over. "How many are we taking up?"

"Every man who can walk and carry. Una's boy among them. She told me I'd take him before I could tell her I wouldn't."

"And how many head are we bringing down," Garnait said.

And there it was, the same question from the night before, asked in daylight at a cattle-fold by a son who had spent the dark hours turning it over and had not changed his mind, which was the thing Fergus most admired and least wanted in him. "We had this argument," he said.

"We had half of it." Garnait set down the tally-stick at last. "You sent me to bed before the half I cared about."

"We bring down what we need," Fergus said.

"That is what you said last night." Garnait stepped away from the cattle and faced him. "And then you stood in the door after I'd gone — don't, I saw you, I always see you, you think you brood in private and you brood like a beacon — and you decided something, and I would dearly love to know whether it was the thing you told me or the thing I'm afraid of."

Fergus looked at his son, and at his other son on the rail gone uncharacteristically silent, and at the thirty-one cattle that would not see a harvest, and he found that he did not, in the clear cold light, entirely know the answer. He had decided, in the door, to take only what was needed. He had meant it. And under the meaning, where Garnait's eyes were now, there was the other thing, the thing the boy was afraid of, the thing that had been growing in Fergus through three failed harvests like damp in a wall: the conviction, cold and total and seductive as all the worst convictions are, that need was a bottomless word, and that a king who left mercy in the glen for the deer would bury the children who needed the mercy more.

"It was the thing I told you," he said.

It was not a lie when he said it. That was the thing Garnait would have cause to remember. His father was not lying. His father believed it, standing there at the fold, believed

he would take only what was needed and leave the breeding does — and the believing held all the way up the mountain and three-quarters of the way through the killing, which is the cruelest place for a good intention to break, because by then it is too late to have meant it and too late to undo it both at once.

But that was a fortnight off. At the cattle-fold, in the clean light, the king put a hand on each son's shoulder — a thing he did so rarely that Domangart actually startled — and said, “Thirty-one cattle, two sons, one mountain. We have done more with less. Go and tell the steadings it's the day after the next market. And Domangart —”

“Father.”

“Leave the harp.”

“I don't have a — who told you about the — it was Coll, wasn't it. That withered —”

“Leave the harp, buy a creel, carry your share. You can serenade the stags on the way up. Perhaps they'll lie down and save us the trouble.”

And Domangart, who could be wounded by anything except the one thing he was actually bad at, laughed, and the morning turned, the way mornings do, away from the cold pit and the widow's door and back toward the ordinary business of a kingdom that did not yet know it had a fortnight left of being only a kingdom. They went up to the hall. There was bread, such as it was. The sky stayed cruel and clear. And somewhere above them, sixteen miles north and four thousand feet up, in a glen above a loch named for swans, six-score stags grazed the frost-burnt grass and did not know they had been counted either.

It was only later, after the steadings had been told and the creels counted and the long day spent itself, that Fergus noticed the one face that had not come to him about the glen. Eochaid had not argued the count, nor blessed the going, nor done any of the dozen small things the old man did when the king set his hand to a hard thing. He had kept to his cell. And a grandfather three walls away who goes quiet when a king readies a mountain is not resting, Fergus knew; he is dreading, and saving the dread for the dark, when he can deliver it without an audience. So when the hall slept again that night, Fergus went to find him — because he had had enough, that day, of being told the cost of things by everyone but the one man whose telling he could not laugh off.

III

THE GRAIN ROAD



Before he rode to any glen, Fergus rode the grain road, because a king who is about to gamble a kingdom on a mountain owes it to the kingdom to look at it first — not from the seat, where it is a sum, but from the saddle, where it is faces.

He took only Talorc, who could not gossip about where the king had been, and the two of them rode the long track that ran the cantreds of the inland shore, steading to steading, the road the grain went down in fat years and did not, this year, go down at all.

It was worse than the pits had told him. The pits told him a number; the road told him what the number meant. At the first steading a woman was boiling the green tops of nettles because the nettles were free and the barley was not, and she fed her children the broth and ate the leaves herself, and called it soup, and her children believed her because children believe their mothers about soup. At the second a man had killed his last two laying-hens, which a man does not do in spring unless he has stopped believing in the summer, and he would not meet the king's eye over it, ashamed, as though the hens' deaths were a confession.

"You should not have come, lord," the man said. "There's nothing here to feast a king."

"I did not come to feast. I came to count." Fergus looked at the bones of the two hens. "And I have counted, and I will not insult you by pretending I have not seen what I have seen. You killed your layers."

"I'll get more in the—" The man stopped. He had been going to say in the summer, and could not, because he had stopped believing in it, and a man cannot lie to a king's face about a thing the king is looking straight at. "Aye," he said instead, which meant: there will be no more hens, lord, and you know it, and I know it, and the kindest thing you can do is not make me say it.



At the third steading was Una, and Fergus had not known it was Una's until he was in the yard, and by then it was too late to arrange his face.

She was the widow of Aedan, the herdsman the boar had killed — the boar his sons had hunted, the boar that had started the whole reckoning that would end on a mountain — and she was wringing a hen's neck when he rode in, the brisk competence of a woman who has done unpleasant necessary things her whole life and stopped expecting help with any of them.

"Herself," she said, to the hen, by way of greeting the king.

"Una."

"You've the look of a man come to ask a hard thing." She did not stop wringing. "You've all the look of it, the whole ride down — don't think the road doesn't talk, lord, you and the mute one going steading to steading, a king counting his hungry. We know what counting means. It means someone's to be spent. So out with it. What's the hard thing, and which of mine does it want?"

Fergus had meant to lead up to it. He saw there was no leading up to it, not with Una, who had buried a husband to a pig and had no patience left for a king's preamble. "I am taking the able men up the high glen after the great herd," he said. "Within the fortnight. The barley's failed a third year and the herd is the only larder the gods left us. I'll take whoever can walk and carry. I would not take your boy —"

"You'll take my boy." Flat. Final. The hen finished; she set it down. "He's fourteen and he eats like a forge-fire and he'll carry his weight and half of yours besides. You'll take him,

lord, because you need every back that can bear a creel, and you'll not pretend you came to spare him. You came to take him with my blessing instead of without it, because a king who takes a widow's only son with her blessing sleeps better than one who takes him without. That's the hard thing. Not the taking. The wanting to be thanked for it."

It was so exactly true that Fergus had no answer to it, and Una watched him have no answer, and something in her hard face shifted — not to softness, she had no softness to spare that spring, but to a kind of tired fellowship, one person who carries things recognizing another. "Ach," she said. "You'll bring him back. Men always say it. I'll not make you say it; the saying's a curse, it tempts the gods to prove you a liar. Just — bring him back, lord, and don't say you will, and maybe between the not-saying and the gods' contrariness he'll come home. That's the whole of a mother's theology in a hungry year. Don't promise. Just do. Now get off my yard, you and your silent friend, before my neighbors see the king's counted me and decide I'm marked for something."



They rode on, and Talorc said nothing, because Talorc could say nothing, but he rode close, which was his way of saying a great deal.

"You heard her," Fergus said, eventually. "The wanting to be thanked for it. She saw it in me before I'd seen it in myself. I told myself I rode down here out of duty, to look my hunger in the face. And she's right — there's a part of me came down to be forgiven in advance. To gather up the blessings before the cost, so that when the cost comes I can tell myself they let me. That's an ugly thing in a king, Talorc. To want absolution for a thing you haven't done yet and mean to do anyway."

Talorc made the gesture that had become, between them, a whole sentence: hand flat, tipped side to side. True. And ordinary. All kings do it.

"That does not make it less ugly."

Talorc tipped his head: no. But it makes you no worse than the rest, and a little better, because you at least see it.

"A little better than the rest of a bad lot is no great height to stand on." Fergus looked back down the grain road, at the steadings strung along it like beads, the nettle-soup and the killed layers and Una's hard mercy. "I am going to take the herd, Talorc. All of it, if it comes to it — I can feel that in me already, the all-of-it, sitting under the only-what's-needed like a stone under moss. And every face on this road is a reason, and not one of them would thank me for the reasoning if they could see the whole of it. Una asked me not to promise. I'll keep that much. I'll not promise her boy home. But I'll know, all the way up that mountain, that I came down here first to collect their blessings like a man stocking a larder against his own guilt — and that the larder will not be enough, because guilt is the one hunger that no amount of being-forgiven-in-advance has ever once filled."

And they rode back up to Dunadd in the failing light, the king and the man who could not speak, past the hungry steadings of a kingdom that did not yet know it had a fortnight left of being a kingdom — and Fergus carried the faces up the mountain with him, every one, and they did not stop him, because the faces were the very reason he would not be stopped, which is the oldest and saddest mechanism of every great wrong ever done by a man who loved his people: that he did it, in the end, for them, and could show you their faces to prove it.



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