

The Omens

Struggling up the mountain side, Eoghan paused to assess the remaining ascent. A little farther and he would reach the peak. A flash of darkness overcame him, and he clutched the rockside to allow the token to rush through his consciousness. Darkness clouded his sight once more, and he could discern the familiar faint glow at the precipice of the mountain. As if he were floating, Eoghan moved closer to the light, as he always did in the dreams, and it became a roaring fire. The flames rose high and filled the void of black, illuminating a flurry of snowflakes as they whirled toward the earth, and the same sculpted figure he had dreamed of for months stood motionless beside the blaze. Embers swirled in the air, too, winking out into nothing above the hooded statue.

Shaking the remnants of the vision away, Eoghan labored across a sharp bank of rock as his breath roiled around him in the frigid air. The snow threatened to freeze his eyes shut, and he shuddered against the bitter cold. He couldn't stop now, though. Not after what he had seen in the dreams.

He continued to struggle up the narrow path, winding up the precarious cliffside until it dropped away without warning. The journey had seemed endless before now, his destination finally in sight. Eoghan had traveled from across the western Valley, far from the looming Lochrannoc range beyond the villages of the eastern Valley People. After weeks of the nightmarish dreams where death, destruction, and the great wasteland loomed, Eoghan told only his most trusted advisors of what he had seen and of the hooded sculpture atop a distant mountain. They agreed it was an omen; he must

find the idol and receive whatever message the gods wished to tell him so that they may prevail against Atylas and the Baolach Talamh. Eoghan left that night.

They were slowly losing ground to the Baolach Talamh and their cancerous leader. The men could not continue in the same way for much longer. Once he decided to pursue this idol and determine the gods' favor, Eoghan realized the visions became clearer as he journeyed through the villages, asking who may know where to find this statue.

Eoghan grasped the final ledge, and with an anticlimactic heave, he rolled across the crag and grunted in satisfaction. Laying there to catch his breath, his ears caught the sound of wet wood hissing behind him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and a shiver ripped up his spine as he turned to look for the stone effigy of the gods. The snow beside the fire was unoccupied. The statue was gone.

Scrambling to his feet, Eoghan frantically circled the fire in search of the idol. He fell to his knees where the statue should be, defeated, and closed his eyes.

“What did I do wrong?” he whispered to the earth. Turning his face to the sky, Eoghan slumped back and asked, “Gods, I beg of you, tell me how I can stop him!”

A solemn voice addressed him. “The gods are silent tonight, but I welcome you, King Eoghan.”

Eoghan jumped to his feet and crouched low. The cloaked statue from his recurring dreams stood by the ledge, face shrouded in darkness. The figure took a step toward the blazing flames and her face came into view. A woman.

By the gods...

Eoghan's eyes narrowed as the pair assessed one another across the fire's apex. Eoghan slowly stood straight, shocked to find the Great Mage he had heard so much about in recent months. From village to village he had traveled asking where the gods' statue stood, hunting for the answer through the whispers and lore of the Valley People below. For generations, the Mage was feared, respected, and revered by the Valley People. She was a legend; she was the light. No matter what was said, it was known that the Mage protected them all. In each new place excitement and fear in their eyes, and they all said, "Ask the Elder, he will know."

"Ask the Elder, she will know."

"Ask the Elders, they will know."

Each time, the answer was the same:

"Go to the mountain. She will help you."

The Elders honored the Great Mage and were grateful for her. Each told the story of how the Mage saved their ancestors from a pestilence that smothered the land and ruined the crops.

A traveler wandered the paths and heard there was no food. The scourge had taken it all from them; they must leave or starve.

One day, a great emerald dragon appeared and scared the valley people from their homes. They fled to the hills, praying the beast would spare their homes and livestock. The dragon circled the fields, burning the dying crops and razing the wasteland to nothing more than smoking earth. The dragon was gone as quickly as it came, and the valley people were distraught and confused. Why had the beast only burned their fields while sparing the livestock?

Time went on, and the dragon was forgotten. The villagers worked the scorched earth, unwilling to leave their precious lands and determined to survive. Their crops thrived in the soil, and the

famine was over. The dragon had saved their ancestors by burning the pestilence from their fields, enriching the soil with ash, and their crops grew once more. Each Elder reverently looked to the sky over the Lochrannoc at the story's end and closed their eyes.

“The dragon lives in the mountains and returns from time to time. It circles the great sky, watching us work our fields, then glides away. It protects us because she protects us. She will protect you, too. Go to the mountain. She will help you.”

The thought echoed in Eoghan's mind as he watched the Mage with caution. The Elders had neglected to tell him the statue from his dream was, in fact, the Mage.





And she had been waiting.

“I am no king,” Eoghan finally replied.

“Hmm,” she mused, looking up at the milky sky. The curve of her chin was cast sharply in shades of black and copper from the shadowy flames. “I was promised a king... So, what could I offer the not-king instead?”

He wasted no time. “Great Mage, I have only one request of the gods.”

He knelt once more across the fire from her and bowed his head reverently. Laying his hands palms up on his thighs, he waited. The wind whipped at his hair, face, and hands, but he did not move.

“You’ve come far for one request, not-king. What could weigh on your soul so terribly you must search for the gods to answer it?” She stood and crossed the distance between them, tracing a hand around the air of his head like a halo. As she drew his energy into her fingertips, she could feel his purpose.

“I have dreams, Mage. They plague me...”

“What dreams, not-king?” she whispered.

“I dream of many things: death, a great wasteland, and more, but only one repeats... a hooded figure by a blazing fire during the deepest snow. It is always just out of reach—I cannot see the face, but I feel the gods’ presence when I dream. Then there is war, and I see Death spread his sinister cloak across the land. I know I must find the statue and listen to the gods, but I am always searching, and the destruction looms over me so heavily I wake without breath.”

Eoghan paused and made a decision. He must do whatever he could to stop Atylas and the Baolach Talamh. He raised his chin and pleaded with the Mage, “The visions will not cease... Please, will you help me? I must find the idol.”

The Mage closed her eyes and felt the fire flare between them as Eoghan spoke. She saw what he dreamt: the coming wasteland, the carrion of death. She saw it in the skies, the fire, the seas... Death loomed across the valleys of the land, sparing none. She had known her fate for so long now and had given up her entire life for an entire lifetime of patience and watchful anticipation, unsure of when it would come to pass, yet always ready. Something older than time itself stirred in her chest and as the gods’ will had come to pass, the omens stirred.

“You seek an idol, you say?” Her voice was soft, enticing. She had seen the war; she had seen this man face the Baolach Talamh. But she needed to know more. She knew he would come—and he had—but the auguries had shrouded his fate so deeply she could not tease even the edges of the inevitable to light.

“The idol will connect me with the gods and protect my people. I wake from my dreams and feel

this figure will save my people from something terrible.” Eoghan’s voice was incredulous. Yet here he stood, humble and hopeful. She prayed he would not fail her. That he would not fail them all. He looked up at the Mage then, who was standing above him, and she saw the fear deep in his eyes.

What man wants to die in the end?

“There is much left for you in this life, nothing. Come. See.”

The Mage stretched out her hand in response slowly, calmly. Eoghan rose to one knee and rested his forehead in the soft curve of her palm. Her skin was warm, and it sent a molten wave of heat through his body as the snowflakes melted around them without a chance to land.

He was standing above his body then, watching himself kneel. Eoghan could see through the Mage’s eyes. He knew her name to be Saoirse as clearly as he could feel her cloak grow heavy and sodden from the snow. He also sensed a hidden unease commingled with tense anticipation, and those feelings became his, too. The auguries came on strong, striking Saoirse and Eoghan’s connection with a sharp jolt of energy as she drew out the strands for him to see. The future stretched out in their mind’s eye: flashes of image, sensation, and sounds that led to a final scene with Saoirse by his side. The augury flickered as their ghostly hands reached for each other, and a heavy shadow thrust the land into darkness. A horrific, grating animal sound somewhere between a scream and iron striking against iron ripped through their mind and Saoirse felt Eoghan’s fear become her own. Another wave of heat coursed through the exhausted shell of Saoirse’s body and their connection as it was broken. He gasped, removing his head from Saoirse’s palm. Her palm hovered beside his face, unsure.

“Saoirse,” he breathed in wonder. She gave him a small smile of comfort.

Eoghan sighed heavily, feeling weak from the relief. After countless days, weeks of struggle and searching, his dreams and his nightmares had pushed him here. Surviving on sheer will alone through the grueling climb, Eoghan had persevered, knowing he must find a way to defeat Atylas. His fate now lay at the eclipse of sleep and waking, a twilight of existence suspended as the sun cracked open the edge of the night sky across the horizon.

The Mage’s magick enveloped them both in a warm womb of truth, and he was sure of his purpose. He shuddered and squeezed his eyes tightly, breathing in the sweet winter air and rich, loamy earth.

“Now you need not ask, for you already know,” Saoirse whispered and slowly caressed his brow. His head remained bowed as she lowered her hood. His heart pounded with anticipation.

“Saoirse,” he whispered again, hoarse. He looked up reverently. Her long dark hair rippled in the mountain winds, highlighting rounded cheeks and stoic eyes—eyes the color of the earth that spoke of time beyond her existence. Her lips parted briefly before a smile curled the corners of her mouth.

“At last you have come,” she crooned.

by Elizabeth Trepanier