

Baleful Strangers

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Cover By Fernando JFL

Preface

To those who downloaded this, whether you donated or not, thank you.

Special thanks as well to Erica Murphy and Jill Peterson for believing I could do this in the first place.

If you were sent this by a friend, I hope you enjoy what they gave you. If you do, please consider leaving some form of interaction on my [Itch.io page](#). Donations are appreciated, but posts and click throughs are a good alternative if you don't have the means to donate. You can also find the link to [Fernando's ArtStation](#) there as well.

Without further adieu, please enjoy.

One

*At dawn they come with roll of drum.
With axe and sword, they come, they come.
With fleet so vast it scrapes the banks,
From kingless lands, of heathen ranks.
The serpent sons of maiden queen,
Come strong with vigor yet unseen.*

--Bjorn, Bear of the Kennebec, first stanza.

Nauna wrinkled her nose as she examined her sixth patient of the day. He ran a moderate fever, was fatigued, and had been working in the wetland like the others before him. Nauna grew agitated the longer she examined the man before her. She had been telling the loggers for weeks that with more trogs appearing in the marshes, they should find a new lumberyard or wear thicker pants; however, each time, she had been ignored in order to meet Sergeant Grimwold's demands. Now, Nauna and her sisters saw a new infection almost daily, such as the one before her. Nasty even by trog infection standards, the means of entry being a shallow cut along the back of the patient's calf, no more than a few millimeters deep, but oozing something awful and turning the surrounding skin white. She knew as well that it hurt tremendously to walk on, as he had been carried here by a few friends. But while bad, it was in no way untenable.

"Randi, how much ointment do we have left?" Nauna asked, directing her voice inside the nearby hut to another woman who was busy grinding herbs into paste.

"Enough," Randi replied.

"Helpful," Nauna grumbled as she pushed away from the examination table and made her way inside.

Their home was nothing too luxurious. Like the rest of the village, function came far ahead of comfort. Ergo, there were no separating walls; just a large open area with a dirt floor that served as a combined kitchen, dining room, bedroom, and mixing station. Lit by whatever meager afternoon light managed to shine through the sheets of grey moving across the sky and into one of three windows placed on the cardinal walls of the hut.

Randi was still at work at the mixing station beneath the eastward window. She was the oldest of the sisters at twenty-five and shared many of the same features as her sisters, green eyes and brow hair: although Randi's was longer, like their mothers, stopping around her shoulders; it was curlier than Nauna's as well, and she kept it pulled back behind her head in a ponytail most of the time to keep it out of her round yet slender face. Nauna, in contrast, had much shorter hair, stopping just below her ears with not as many curls. She had also inherited their father's sharp eyes, making her appear less inviting than her sister. Randi was also taller by about an inch, which meant all of Nauna's clothes – previously Randi's – hung low.

Nauna entered their hut and made a beeline for a large jar on a shelf beneath the mixing station. She pulled it out and slammed it on the table, rattling Randi's work and drawing her attention from the corner of her eye.

"Problem?" Randi asked, turning her head slightly to be face-to-face with her sister.

In response, Nauna lifted the lid off the jar and leaned it toward Randi. Inside, illuminated by the midday light streaming in from the window just above the missing station, is a greenish, thick ointment around the jar's

lower third, along with a little wooden spoon rattling against the jar from the force of Nauna shifting the container.

"This enough in your book?" Nauna snipped at her sister, letting the jar fall back on its base before scooping the ointment into a little clay pot.

"It's enough to get us through the day. Then, once Yrsa returns, we'll make a little more than last time."

"Or, we stop handing it out by the jarful. Mistress said it only takes three applications, and we're giving them six."

"Mistress said that three applications are the minimum dosage. They should keep applying it for three more days to prevent the infection from returning."

"Right, or they could just listen and—"

"Nauna. Guests." Randi said as Nauna's frustrated whisper grew into an angry growl that started to attract attention outside.

Nauna quickly composed herself, angrily scooping six days' worth of ointment into the jar before closing it and the main jar up.

"Well, if that's the case, Yrsa will need help carrying everything back because we're going to be up all night. Again."

Nauna left the hut, small jar in hand, before her sister could respond – not that she would. On her way out, she grabbed her basket and hood from the wall, throwing the hood on as she stepped back out into the biting autumn air. She stopped briefly by her current

patient, tossing the jar of ointment and instructing him to apply it directly to the wound and cover it for three days. She then stopped herself, took a breath, and corrected herself to say six. With that done, she took off toward town.

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Nauna and her sisters lived in a natural clearing just outside the town center, facing one of the deeper parts of the marsh surrounding them. Said depths were beyond the back of the hut and more akin to a small lake, as most of the growth that chose to grow there kept to the edges of the water. In all other directions, the terrain was more varied and uneven: swampy marshes of mud and great pine towers set upon islands of solid land that sometimes rose above the banks of the seasonal riverbeds; their vast and spiraling network of roots exposed to the world in some places, like sprawling wooden cages. When they first settled in this place, small animals or the Síogaí – the fair folk of the forest – could be found there. Now, these natural apartments lie empty, and the reason for their vacancy spans all around Nauna as she walks to town.

A great wooden wall surrounds the village, cascading through the trees and water, insulating the townsfolk from the wicked creatures of the marshes. Six weeks ago, it was nothing more than a series of wooden stakes jutting up from the mud to give bobcats and trops pause for thought; now, it was a ten-foot-tall barricade adorned with carvings of woodpeckers, eagles, and wildflowers. The first and last thing Sargent Grimwold had conjured since arriving from over the mountains. Nauna hated it. From the moment the walls snapped together, encasing them, she hated the sight of the thing and the uneasy feeling of being within them. She passed

through a small thicket between her hut's clearing and the village proper that the loggers spared as none of them could be felled without crushing either a hut or a portion of the wall, granting Nauna and her sisters a small veil of privacy from the rest of the town. As she passed through this glade, she entered the village proper.

The village was set around a rise in the bog; upon this hill sat a large cloth tent, and sprawling between its base and the walls was a hive of activity. Hammers pounded all around her, either on wood, driving nails into beams, or on crude anvils, making more nails. Men carried planks and beams on their shoulders between work sites, with young boys scurrying after them carrying tools. While women took game from Trappers to butcher, tan, and cook, with the fires, pots, and racks overseen by one of the village girls. All working together to expand the village from a meager collection of overturned boats to a proper settlement.

The only ones not currently at work are the young men, no older than Nauna, each with an old spear in their hand and a hand-me-down sword on their belt, each wearing various bits of leather armor. Between the dozen or so guards Nauna passed, they had maybe six complete sets in total, and if they were to slap six complete sets together, there'd be little consistency between them. Apart from a little eagle with its wings outstretched, burned into some part of the armor. The deeper she went into town, the more she saw that eagle, and not just on shoulder guards and breastplates. But on houses, on toolboxes, and on food sacks. The moniker belonged to the Oberon of Regalhorn, Emperor of the High Fey, who sat on his throne in Raptors Rest far to the northeast; however, while the Oberon is leagues away, his good Sergeant Grimwold watched from the tent atop the hill.

The moniker disquieted Nauna, as it transformed once-familiar faces and places into strangers with new, unknown motivations, incentives, and allegiances. As for every friendly smile or warm hello, there was a hushed whisper or glancing judgment. Nauna did respond in kind to those in the former. But the latter camp stuck with her, growing more notable the more she found Oberon's Eagle in places it wasn't before. She started to linger, drawn to the whispers of the town as she made her way to the town gate. Because of this, her attention was caught by one of the butchers who was lamenting the poor catch of the trapper before her.

"Two rabbits, Darel? That's barely stew makings for six."

"Aye, I know, Mirren. But the damn things are slippery and not afraid of the water. Between us and the trogs, I think what's left of the buggers moved on."

"Damnable trogs. Pox on that Silver Harlot for fostering such loathsome creatures." Mirren spat as she went to work skinning the rabbits.

"Don't go blaming stories now, Mirren."

"Swamp gas finally made you go dull? Skanks' come to finish the job her kin started in Frolgard. Be done with it, too, were it not for the good sergeant and his men."

"Regardless," Darel said, trying to move past the topic. "I'll have to move further afield now; here's hoping the trogs pissed off as well."

"I'll add it to my prayers. Good hunting, Darel."

Darel turned away from the butcher's stand and left, waving to Nauna as he noticed her on his way out.

Nauna waved back and was thankful he didn't call out to her, allowing her to go unnoticed by Mirren, the butcher. She continued on after that, picking up bits and pieces of conversations, mostly mundane and of little import. But the day's topic kept returning to the trogs and their supposed mother and master, the Silver Lady, with the conversation turning very dark very fast when it did. As Nauna eavesdropped on a rather paranoid conversation in that collection, her attention fixated elsewhere; she felt someone tap her shoulder.

She jumped at the touch and spun around, ready to defend herself, relaxing only when she saw who it was. Before her was Speaker William, he who negotiated with the Síogaí, one of whom sat on the old man's head. She was Ambassador Holly, or so she proclaimed; the Wee Ones have a terrible habit of playing games with humans, ones only they find amusing.

Holly was no bigger than an infant's doll and wore a simple sundress fashioned from a yellow leaf. She had long red hair that dropped down over her translucent glass-like butterfly wings and hung in bangs above her slender features, from which a pair of curled antennae sprang. William, on the other hand, was a little old man without a hair on his head apart from his white beard, which wrapped around his round, friendly face, and was dressed in a soft green tunic with a fur cape laid about his shoulders for warmth; holding himself aloft with the help of an old, knotted piece of wood he used as a walking stick.

"Apologies, child, I did not mean to startle," William said, his voice strong and clear despite his age.

"It's fine, Speaker," Nauna said, her focus still on

the conversation behind her. "Is there something you need?"

"Afraid so. The old hands are getting stiff again. Do you have a moment to loosen them?"

"Let me see."

William reciprocated and laid his hand, the one not gripping his walking stick, in Nauna's, while Holly huffed at Nauna's lapse in manners. A mistake she rectified as the conversation behind her moved to a more private location to finish what they were discussing.

"Good afternoon to you as well, Ambassador." She added, feeling around Williams's palm, noting how stiff the old man's joints were; applying pressure to certain areas, bringing the joints back to life.

Holly smiled coyly, satisfied with the attention. "Good afternoon to you as well, darling. How's the family doing?"

"They're doing fine," Nauna replied, still a little sour at Randi for this morning. "Did Chrispen's move go well?"

Holly puffed her cheeks and blew the air out quickly as she gathered her thoughts. "Well enough," Holly said, as she settled on an answer, exasperated by the effort. "Bettles can be so stubborn at the worst of times. He would have stayed rooted in that log even if Grimwold torched it. Only moved 'cause he didn't want to be trouble for you."

Chrispen had been Nauna's neighbor. A Wee One like Holly, but with a stag beetle's horn and matching chitinous armor. He had lived in one of the trees near Nauna's hut and had helped the sisters in the beginning

by showing them where to find useful herbs and roots out in the marsh while also avoiding the trogs. That was, of course, until Sergeant Grimwold arrived.

The Síogaí do not enjoy the company of their High Fey cousins, and there is little love for the Wee Ones in the Realm, something the High Fey are keen to remind the Síogaí; so they keep their distance. When Nauna and her people first arrived, dozens of Holly's kin floated about. Now, they rarely showed themselves: with Holly being one of the few brazen enough to still come to town. Comforted by the certainty that Chrispen was safe, Nauna allowed herself a moment of relief. "Pass on my thanks to him, would you?" Nauna asked as she finished up with William.

"But of course, darling. Anything for keeping this bag of bones together." Holly said, patting William on the head as the old man laughed at his own expense.

"That's all I can do for you now," Nauna said as she let go of William's hand. "I have to go find Yrsa. But Randi or I will be back tomorrow to finish up."

William, elated to have one working wrist, was grinning ear to ear. "Bless you, child. You and your sisters."

As the old Speaker and Holly left, Nauna realized how long she had lingered in town when the sun started its westward descent into early evening. Remembering why she came to town in the first place, she raced to the main town gate, hoping that she wouldn't be stopped this time. Said hope was quickly dashed once she heard one of the gate guards call out to her as she approached. Nauna breathed deep, cursed her luck, and as she approached the gate, she replied, "Afternoon, Seamus."

Like the other guards his age, Seamus was armored in patchwork. He, however, had a proper chain shirt under his well-weathered leather breastplate. The Sergeant had given it to him as a gift for being one of the first to take up Oberon's emblem, which Seamus proudly bore on his right shoulder guard. Yet that was not the end of the many little deviations in his attire, such as his grandfather's red and black checkered sash that he wore across his chest. He was also without his helmet, laying the metal cap down by his feet, allowing the red bird's nest he called hair to flutter about in the wind, masking his eager green eyes. While these added a nice human touch to the young guardsmen, they did not distract from the eagle on his arm.

Both guards were taller than Nauna and Randi, too, by about a foot. But Seamus had always been on the lean side since they were kids, so he didn't cut a very imposing figure. His compatriot, whom Nauna didn't recognize as he was one of the only true strangers in town, was a soldier of the Realm under Grimwold's command; clad in chain and plate with a green tunic accented by gold trim laid over the armor, unifying his attire and demarking him as a servant of Grimwold's house. Nine others like him came with Grimwold over the mountains, scouting about the town and marshland, killing trops while they hunted for a more impressive trophy. He was much more imposing than Seamas, with cold, stiff eyes that peered out from under his sloped kettle helm, shielding his bricklike face from the daylight. Nauna's father told her stories about such men when she was young. His opinion was not glowing, and the kindest thing he called them was War Dogs, holding them only slightly higher than common killers and thugs; never making light of their prowess in their station. Such a warning came to Nauna's mind as the War Dog loomed over her like a proper

sentinel while Seamus smiled playfully beside him, trying his best to cast away the uncomfortable air that was beginning to settle around them.

"Good afternoon to you as well, Nauna. You off looking for Yrsa?"

"Yes: with all the work we've had, we're going to need more than what Yrsa can carry back by herself," Nauna said, hoping to speed the encounter along.

"Then I better not keep yah. Tell your sisters I said hi when you—"

"Hold on, Seamus." The War Dog intoned, cutting in, his voice as stiff and joyless as his face. "You know the rules; check her."

Seamus looked over to his companion pleadingly, his smile not as wide as before but still present. "Come on, sir, I know she doesn't have an emblem. But her sister had nothing on her, and I've known Nauna for years; I seriously doubt she's in league with Famorians."

The War Dog only turned his head slightly to look at Seamas, fixing his sharp little eyes on him, causing the young man to flinch. "Check her, or I'm reporting you to the sergeant."

Seamus's smile faded completely, tensing at the mention of the sergeant, but his energy did not drop or shift. He put his hands up in mock surrender and approached Nauna. "Fine. Sorry for the holdup, Nauna."

Nauna didn't reply, making the pat-down more awkward than it already was. Thankfully, Seamus was quick about it, and it was done in a matter of seconds. Once finished, he stepped back into position and

mockingly gave his counterpart a thumbs-up, which he took as sincere and moved out of the way for Nauna. Once the way was cleared, Nauna slipped past quickly: quick enough that she didn't hear Seamus wish her luck as she passed him.

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Beyond the town walls, a weight lifted from Nauna's shoulders, and she could breathe again. She distanced herself from the village, and soon, the trail lost its shape, blending into the surrounding bog. Unhindered, Nauna ventured off the proper path, by way of a deer road, delving into the pine barrens and the swamp around them. She kept a keen eye on either side of her path, scouring over what little brush there is for anything of use and pitfalls hiding under the water's edge; accustomed to the usual dangers that lurked within and vigilant for areas that might suck her in if she was not careful. What worried her, however, was the lack of foraging to be found. This path should have had enough to satisfy their needs until winter, especially after they started tapping the deer trails to supplement what they left growing along the road. With how stripped both looked and remembering what she had overheard Darel say in town, she began to feel uneasy and picked up her pace.

"Yrsa. Yrsa!" Nauna called, careful not to shout too loud or draw unwanted attention.

"Here," came a sheepish reply.

Nauna tuned towards the reply and soon found her sister knelt beside one of the pines, digging around its roots. Yrsa was the youngest of Nauna's sisters, having just turned twenty, but still by far the smallest: about a head shorter than Nauna, with not much luck getting any.

bigger. Her hair hung flat over her shoulders, going no further, and she was the only sister with freckles splashed across her upper cheeks just below her big, round eyes.

"Whatcha doing here, Nauna?" Yrsa asked curiously as she broke through to the tree's root system.

"Need more than what you can carry back. But from the looks of it, there might not even be enough for half a basket."

"No, I got a full basket but picked everything clean. Sorry."

Nauna let out a frustrated sigh, "Not the problem at the moment. Come on, we'll check the west side; see if anything –"

Something in the distance had moved.

"Nauna?" Yrsa asked, concern rising in her voice.

"Get up slowly," Nauna whispered.

Yrsa complied, getting back to her feet slowly and adjusting herself to see what her sister saw. About thirty feet out, rising from the muck like a reanimated toad thawing in spring, was a trog. Mud from the bog slinked off its pale, inverted triangular body as it rose to its complete height, a full head and shoulders taller than either of the sisters, with its skin pulled so tight over its bones that the sisters could count each individual rib in the monster's chest. However, its emaciated appearance was deceiving, for even in its haggard state, it was still possessed of lean muscle and knife-like claws, as well as its most petrifying asset – as when the beast whipped the last of the mud from its flat head, it opened its rancid

maw of jagged teeth with an angry hiss; unleashing a cloud of ghoulish stench that the sisters could catch even at this distance. Akin to the first blast of stale, putrid, moldy air that rushes from a flooded and collapsed crypt as it is rediscovered by civil society. The smell caused a nauseous sensation to rise in the sisters' stomachs. They needed to move before the foul odor spread further, or worse, the creature noticed them.

The trog appeared confused: hunched, and lumbering about in small circles, twisting its body side to side, throwing its dangling arms about as if they were streamers as it searched madly for something. Thanks to this erratic search, the monster missed the sisters on the first pass. Yet Nauna wasn't prepared to chance another. Even in its sorry state, the creature had a wild air about it; foam and spittle frothed from its mouth, the monster's eyes growing sharper as its ravenous hunger pushed aside sense and fatigue. Something to sate its desire was on the wind.

Slowly, the trog became more and more animated, whipping itself about like a snake, tasting the air with its long, lashing tongue. Nauna grabbed Yrsa by the wrist as the monster gradually picked up their scent; slowly pulling her back along the path she had come. As she did, the trog remained blind to their presence, but more trogs began to reanimate from their bed of muck. Soon, four trogs milled about in the marsh in a similar state of frenzied hunger, and the chances of discovery grew with each waking, starving monster. "Yrsa," Nauna whispered, "when I say so, run back to the village and get the first guard you see. Don't look back, understand?"

Yrsa nodded as she and Nauna kept backing away from the pod of trogs forming before them, unaware of the one rising directly behind them.

Yrsa nodded as she and Nauna kept backing away from the pod of trogs forming before them, unaware of the one rising directly behind them. Nauna began counting down from three, but she had hardly gotten to two before she and Yrsa bumped their backs into the trog.

"Don't panic," Nauna said before shifting her grip on her sister from her wrist to her hand, squeezing it tight. The trog's reaction was slowed, as it had just awakened, and its starved senses had not yet been electrified by hunger; its vision was not yet a clear picture either: just a collection of uncertain blobs, devoid of shape and blending together. Yet there would be no hiding; the creature felt and smelled the sisters, and knowing a meal was so close accelerated the frenzied process. Its breathing became shorter and quicker; spit dribbled down from the trog's mouth, splashing against the sister's heads and faces as its long jaw slowly unhinged like a snake's, unsheathing its rows of crocodile teeth and gradually building a greater belch of its putrid miasma. Its arms, still useless ribbons, twitched to life as its jaw wrenched open.

Careful not to move or breathe, the sisters closed their eyes to shield themselves from the spittle. Nauna caught but a whiff of it as it escaped the crease of the monster's lips, and she nearly vomited. At this distance, it was as if she were beside a hot, wet, rotting corpse that had just begun to break down; were the trog to open its mouth fully, she and Yrsa would no doubt be petrified by the overwhelming smell of rot and decay. Glancing to her side, she noticed the monster's inert arms and, without a second thought, darted to one side, pulling Yrsa along with her, barely escaping the miasma and the snap of the monster's jaw that followed.

As the trog's massive mouth clamped down around

nothing, it took a second for its starved mind to register it had missed its mark, allowing the sisters time to flee. But as it snapped in the direction the sisters ran, it flew into a complete frenzy as hunger and rage shot the monster awake. Its arms flicked alive, and with a croaking bellow, the trog began to pursue the sisters, pulling the other trogs behind it as the cry reached their ears. Yet, as it started after its escaping prey, it caught Nauna pointing back at it, and suddenly, the creature's left side, above its waist, went numb and flaccid once more. The loss of a limb went unnoticed by the trog. It only continued to barrel forward, with two thoughts bouncing around in its hollow skull: *"Kill. Eat. Kill. Eat. Eat! Kill!"*

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Nauna and Yrsa broke back through the forest to the main path. Trampling the undergrowth as they went, thorns and brambles catching exposed skin or soft fabric, their skirts billowing behind them. Although clumsy, the trogs were on the warpath, hunched forward and alert, lumbering swiftly with clawed hands splayed at their sides. Nauna glanced back at the approaching horde, encouraging Yrsa to keep her eyes ahead as she did; as each time Nauna checked, the trogs gained ground, unaffected by the muck that slowed the sisters as they made their escape. Then, just before they broke back onto the main road, Nauna misstepped and sank into the mud. Trapped in the muck, she panicked; the seal wouldn't let her go. Yrsa overtook Nauna as she fell into the bog trap, stopping quickly to try and pull her sister out. But her efforts were in vain; the marsh had her and would not let go easily.

"Yrsa, go!" Nauna shouted as the trogs gained more ground behind them.

"But—"

"Go!" Nauna shouted again, ripping her hand from her sisters.

Yrsa took two steps, tearing up as she did so, before turning and running onto the main path, screaming at the top of her lungs for help. Nauna, meanwhile, managed to look back at the rabble of trogs, seeing the crippled trog in the lead, fury dancing in its cold little eyes. From a distance, Nauna knew she could still escape if she got lucky and threw her whole body into pushing herself up and out of the bog. As Nauna shifted her weight, her leg slowly started to come free, rising out of the muck at about an inch at a time; however, the rabble was nearly upon her when her leg popped out of the ground. She quickly scrambled to her feet, but the paralyzed trog lashed out its arms and caught her, only now realizing that it had but one working arm.

The trog's claws squeezed around Nauna's arm like a vice, growing tighter as she fought to free herself. The other trogs encircled her; even if she could free herself, they'd rip her apart. That didn't stop her from struggling. As the trog pulled Nauna in, she tried to quiet her mind as dozens of related and unrelated images flashed before her eyes: struggling to focus on the vision of the monster seizing up before her. Then, the creature's pull slackened, and at first, Nauna thought she had done it – then something wet splashed the back of her neck.

She turned and found a new player had entered the stage; a man, no older than thirty, with a thick tunic, a leather breastplate, and a vest layered over one another.

The man's trousers were baggy, tucked into his boots, and held in place by a belt, thick as a tree branch,

bearing a silver buckle. Strapped just below his tailbone, hanging from his belt, was a dagger, the companion to the curved short sword – more akin to a large knife than a standard short sword in design – that had sliced through the trog's arm, freeing Nauna. The same sword that then severed the trog's head from its shoulders, splattering into the mud with a wet thwack.

The other trogs and Nauna were momentarily stunned. A lapse in action that the stranger used to his full advantage. He leapt at another trog, diagonal to the one he just slew, piercing its heart before drawing his blade from the monster and effortlessly riposting the claws of the other three as they woke back up, always keen to keep either himself or his sword arm between the rabble and Nauna. With each riposte, he sliced a clawed hand from its monstrous body, leaving many trogs unable to prevent their heads from being hewn from their necks. Finally, he was down to but one trog, who had been quick enough to avoid losing either its head or its hands in the exchange.

The monster stepped back from the man, crouching low as it circled him and Nauna, searching for a way in. But as the beast turned and turned, all it found was the cold bite of the stranger's sword and the immediate embrace of death soon after. Sense returned to the monster's mind once more; spurred by the clanking of metal bodies in the distance growing louder, the beast was pushed to its final decision: it ran.

As the monster grew smaller in the distance, the stranger sheathed his sword and offered the hand that had just ended four lives to Nauna.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice a lot calmer and soothing than Nauna expected.

"Yes, thank you," Nauna replied, getting to her feet without taking the man's hand.

In the blur of combat, Nauna was unable to get a good look at the man's face or other minor details of his attire; each and every one perplexed Nauna. Despite his fighter's physique and evident skill, his eyes lacked the sharpness one would expect from a killer. Instead, they seemed sleepy and calm, as if at any moment the man might nod off or lose interest in the current conversation. He was clean-shaven and ruggedly handsome, with a mane of ill-kept auburn hair that looked as if he cut it himself without a mirror. Nauna's savior was also remarkably unscathed, with little scarring on his person besides the calluses on his hands. But what drew Nauna's attention the most was the sword strapped to the man's back. It was far nicer than the one he had at his side, with a polished black handle molded to resemble antlers, silver inlay, and a brilliant pale blue gem set in the cross, along with several leather straps lashed over it, keeping the blade bound to its holster. This sent a chill down her back that she couldn't parcel as excitement or fear, and before Nauna could get the chance to question herself or her savior, Yrsa arrived with Seamus and his War Dog counterpart in tow.

"Nauna!" Yrsa exclaimed as she wrapped herself around her sister. "Don't make me do that ever again!"

Nauna let her sister stay locked to her, burying her face in her side, looking up momentarily, and catching a glimpse of the stranger's face. "Who's this, Nauna?"

"Yes, who indeed." The War Dog repeated.

His attire, looks, and the make of two of his blades gave him away as a Slangebarn, the people of the Inland

Sea: Overlegen; followers of Ericka the Free Spirit Maiden, masters of whatever river they chose to cross. A semi-nomadic people, sailing from place to place, selling what they found along the way or offering their sword arms to the highest bidder; however, few men of the north travel alone unless they are of ill repute, and that villainous sword on the stranger's back did nothing but foster paranoia in the War Dog, fueling his following statement. "Speak, Slangebarn. Who are you to travel without company?" The War Dog demanded.

The stranger didn't reply right away, choosing instead to size up the War Dog and, in the process, caught sight of the town walls off in the distance. When he saw the walls, Nauna noticed the man's chest heave as he breathed in and out steadily, as if he were calming himself, but the growl in his exhale betrayed it as frustrated, not soothing. Nevertheless, the wanderer did not break eye contact with the War Dog until he decided to give his name, turning to Yrsa to do so.

"Skrymer Ultgard. A pleasure." He said with a smile, causing Yrsa to look away sheepishly. He then returned to the War Dog with the same air of charm and wit but now with a more biting edge. "Forgive me for intruding, sir knight; I was unaware his excellency had taken a liking to mud and mosquitoes."

"You have not answered me, stranger."

Skrymer clicked his tongue in disapproval and felt the sword on his back grow colder. He ignored the chillingsensation and pressed forward, unaffected. "Yes, trouble that. Fraid I don't have a good excuse, besides being unpleasant, as you can no doubt tell. Does nothing, I know, to make me look like the principled type. But I assure you, I want as little trouble as I can muster."

As the War Dog interrogated Skrymer, Nauna watched from the sidelines, focusing on the black blade strapped to her savor's back. The weapon unnerved her. It reminded her of the wicked weapons wielded by the villains in her mother's stories. Those who had communed with dark, perverse powers and shunned the love and guidance of the High Queens. A faint buzz came to her ear the longer she watched him, like that of a mosquito humming about her ears. She batted around her, thinking the little blood suckers had merely descended to feed on her. The buzzing didn't diminish.

"What brings you to this place then?" Questioned the War Dog.

"Chasing rumors, mostly. Although I wasn't expecting to find anyone out here," Skrymer replied, yet Nauna noticed the twinge of dissatisfaction in his tone. "But long as you're here, you might be of some use. Talk east of the Claws say a medicine woman called The Silver Lady squats in these parts. That true?"

Upon hearing her name, everyone around Skrymer went stiff for different reasons. Seamus steadied himself for what's to come next; Nauna and Yrsa strengthened up like dogs at some unusual sound while the War Dog narrowed his eyes. "Seamus." The War Dog said, low and flat, drawing his sword. "Confiscate his weapons."

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Seamus eyed the pile of trog corpses about Skrymer's feet, then snapped to Nauna and Yrsa and finally to the War Dog. "Sir, let's not jump to conclusions. He's saved one of our own. He may very well be like-minded."

"That was an order. His weapons. Now." The War Dog growled, causing Seamus to shrink.

He complied and approached Skrymer, who didn't react as he undid the clasps on his belt sword and dagger; however, when he went to undo the black blade on his back, Skrymer animated in a flash and snatched Seamus' hand before he could lay a finger on the strap across the stranger's chest. Nauna pulled Yrsa back, and the War Dog took a step forward, yet Skrymer didn't do much at all in response. Seamus' heart started to race; he had heard heaps of stories about the fighting men of the north: how they are as fast as lunging snakes and as strong as bears. How some can kill a man in full plate with just their bare hands or fly into a rage so potent they'll fight on even after decapitation; and while he knew some of those stories were not but hot air, they all seemed painfully real the longer Skrymer held him. Once all the players present had made their move, the Northman spoke calmly but firmly.

"I will go willingly. I will go without what you have taken; I will go quietly. But I will not go without this. The hilt is bound and cannot be drawn. It is but decoration."

A tense silence fell upon them as the two men stared each other down. Neither man twitched nor backed down, and again, that perplexing sensation of either awe or terror slipped back into Nauna as she held her sister tight, ready to run at a moment's notice. Then the War Dog broke, and his sword was lowered – but only

when it was returned to its housing did Skrymer release Seamus' wrist.

"Good; we can still see reason," Skrymer said more to himself than anyone else. "Sorry about that, friend." He added as he patted Seamus on the shoulder.

Seamus forced a smile but didn't say anything to him, turning instead to Nauna and Yrsa.

"Are the two of you coming back to town?"

Nauna took another look at the stranger who saved her, now thoroughly concerned but equally fascinated with him. "It would be best, or Randi will come looking as well."

"Ah...there's the upside," Skrymer mumbled happily as he overheard her.