

Hag Hollow

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Piorin stretched his arms toward the top of the bed, but he couldn't reach it. His nanny grabbed his tiny hand and hoisted him up onto the soft, cold linen.

"I will never be a warrior," Piorin said. "I'm too small."

"Maybe one day you'll be big and strong; sometimes, norgs grow in spurts." His nanny smiled widely. "You may become a brave warrior yet. And you will be a wise warrior; you will remember to always bring your sword and pony wherever you go."

Piorin giggled.

"Don't laugh," the nanny said and ran a hand through his brown hair. "There are things out there who eat norgs. And whatever you do, never go into the western swamps. In them are snakes and harpies. But worst of all, there are hags who will gobble you up."

Piorin loved his nanny's stories, but even as a child he did not believe in hags. And besides, as a member of the House of Bayne—the most ancient and powerful clan in the Kalamar Forest—his parents expected absolute bravery out of him.

When his nanny went missing on Piorin's thirteenth birthday, he mourned in private. His father Filosha already looked down on him for his tiny size, and his mother Branwyn thought him too emotional. He cried into his bed—the bed where his nanny told him her stories.

When Piorin reached puberty, and he hardly grew at all, he received the unfortunate nickname of Shortspout—which followed him everywhere he went, and even the scullery-maids and servants used it against him. His parents, who wanted a powerful warrior as a son, seemed the most disappointed in his stature. All this made him miss his nanny all the more.

Still, the traditional ceremony took place when Piorin turned seventeen. In a small clearing in the wood, the servants lit torches. The dancers performed a pavane to the sound of pipes and drums. The partygoers ate a feast of venison and hard cider. Pink and blue ribbons draped from the trees, and the norg-children danced around maypoles.

At sundown, Piorin waited in the center of the clearing. His father walked up to him and handed him a sword. The clan blacksmith had named it Elvathan: "Death to Enemies." The clan sorceress had dipped it in eldritch waters while hot, and woven the blade with intricate magic: spells of ivy and scrub-brush and green growth; spells of harsh sunlight and pricking thorns and choking vines. The clan priest named him Pirosha—"sha" being a title equivalent to the human "sir"—and his father brought him a handsome silver pony, which Pirosha named "Luna," or, in their language, "Light."

“You are a man now,” said his father, whose beard by now had turned gray. “Serve me well. You will lead armies against the spiders and the harpies. You have trained all your childhood with the sword; now you have one of your own. You have no brothers or sisters; you are the only one who survived to adulthood. Therefore, you must carry on your mother’s and my lineage.”

Pirosha nodded.

Eirin, high priest of the earth-god Peong, stepped forward as his father turned and walked back. “It is an honor to die in battle,” he recited. “But it is a greater honor to live in victory. Remember this throughout all the wars you wage, all the lands you conquer, all the innocents you save.”

Piorin knew the speech was only ceremonial; norgs no longer fought each other, nor did anyone die in battle. The House of Bayne already conquered the whole forest.

The priest continued the rehearsed, ceremonial speech that had not changed since its inception. “When Lord Bayne crossed the great snowy mountains and wandered to this land, we drove the harpies from the forest and into the western swamps. When the Big People from the south tried to conquer us, we made a treaty. Once the people called us dwarves; now, that is improper, for we do not live under earth nor do we create great works of iron. We are thin, and we shave our beards. We are the norgs, the dwarves of the forest. Remember this always.”

“I will,” said Pirosha.

That autumn, when the lush green oaks turned to shades of red and orange and brown, and the air turned chilly, Pirosha’s father grew ill. At the same time, rumors spread that strangers had entered the Kalamar Forest. There were rumors in Lockland, the land-between-two-streams, that a Gray Ghost wandered the woods, singing a captivating song and drawing people out of their homes that were never seen again. Some said a dark spirit had possessed the lord of Honeymead Village, who had fallen into a delirious state and given mad orders. And when Pirosha heard the Gray Ghost singing in Bayne’s Dain—the chief province of Kalamar—he decided to act. He fetched his pony from the stables, got his sword, and was just about to leave through the gate when his father’s bodyguard stopped him.

“Your father wishes to speak with you,” they said.

Pirosha grudgingly obeyed, going into the stone-hewn fortress where he and his family lived.

Lord Filosha slumped lifelessly in his throne, yet he still spoke. “Do not leave, my son,” he said. “Do not go into the forest and chase after the Gray Ghost.”

“Why not?” said Pirosha.

“Because I said so. Is that not adequate reason, shortsprout?”

The name hurt him and was unlike his father, but he dared not question him. “I suppose it is, milord,” said Pirosha. “But I do not understand.”

“You need not understand,” said Filosha. “Only know that it is against my wishes for you to fight the Gray Ghost.”

“Father,” Pirosha said, “how did you know that’s where I was going?”

Filosha flashed a yellow smile. “I know many things, young Pirosha, that you will not begin to imagine.”

Pirosha shivered. His father seemed not himself.

That night, a captivating voice filled the forest. Pirosha listened from his bedside window.

*Come to me, and dance, and sing
Come to me and honor your king
We bask in joy, and you should follow
For a male has been born in the Hollow!*

Pirosha tried to make sense out of the song, but it was futile. Pirosha never heard the song in his life, and his court minstrel knew hundreds of songs. The ethereal voice only caused the garden-snake of unease to wriggle in his stomach.

After a little effort, he fell asleep.

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In the morning, Pirosha heard that a mother and two children had wandered off into the forest that night, northeastward into the wilds toward Summervine, and not returned. He determined at that moment that he had to disobey his father, or he would not be serving his first priority: the realm itself. He slipped into the forest and evaded the guards.

Into the oaks, he rode on his pony Luna: deep into the chilly, red-gold forest in the cold light of dawn. He had to get to the bottom of the song, and the mystery of the errant Gray Ghost.

He rode the pony northeast as fast as it would take him. About two miles in, the scent of something cooking hit his nose. It was a foul, rancid smell. He followed it fast and drew his sword, and at last came to a forest clearing. There, a cauldron boiled above a burning fire. Next to it was a woman in a gray cowl, humming as she stirred the pot. She was huge—the size of one of the Big People, if not taller. She began sniffing.

“I smell the flesh of a norg,” she said. “His musk is royal. Granny Nightshade might gobble you up, but she will cook you well. And you will be ground-up and served as mash to the holy gullet of newborn Lord Milkweed. What greater honor is there in all Varda?”

Pirosha drew his sword quietly out of its eelskin sheath. Then he raised it above his head, and prepared to charge.

It was then that Pirosha realized Granny Nightshade had, instead of nails, long claws that extended from her fingers—razor-sharp claws that looked like they could tear the skin off a norg’s bones. He couldn’t see her face, and he didn’t want to.

Pirosha charged as his heart thundered inside his chest. At last he was within striking distance of Nightshade; he hacked downward with his sword—and her claws, hard as steel, blocked effectively. Then she pushed him hard, sending him flying off the pony. He hit the ground with a painful thud.

“Ah, I can see you now,” said Nightshade. “You are small, even among the norgs. Making mash out of you wouldn’t satisfy Lord Milkweed; he is a hungry baby and craves much raw flesh.”

Pirosha stood up. Despite his fear, a growl escaped him; he didn’t mind norgs calling him small, but a witch? He charged again; with one swipe of her claws, she cut his arm.

“You are brave. You would have made a good warrior. Too bad today is your death-day.”

“How do you know that?” Pirosha said.

Nightshade let out a squawking, gooselike laugh. She grabbed the folds of her cowl. “Because no norg can handle the wondrous nature of my appearance.”

“Try me!”

The cowl dropped. Pirosha’s heart went up into his throat. She was naked; her skin was wrinkled and bluish-purple. Her breasts were small and disfigured. Her eyes—her eyes!—they bulged, mismatched in size: bloodshot, yet deathly hungry for flesh. Moles, warts and boils covered her sharp, jutting face; and yellow teeth were thin as needles and twisted.

Pirosha screamed and shielded his eyes, falling onto the floor. The blood from his arm collected around him. If he had looked at her for more than one second, his heart would have ruptured. “Never have I seen such ugliness!” Pirosha screamed.

Granny Nightshade laughed bashfully. “Oh. Thank you.”

“You will haunt my dreams forever.”

“You shouldn’t flatter me so!” she said. “I could force you to look at me for longer... then you would die. But I won’t do it. Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Because I like you, young norg. You are bolder and stronger than any norg I’ve met. You are much stronger than your father, whom I possessed...”

“What do you want from us? Why did you come?”

“The child, Milkweed, has been born,” said Nightshade. “I have crossed the border to announce it. He is Hag-Odam, the one who will lead our race to dominate Kalamar. When he is grown, all my coven will come. We will hack and burn the forest, and reshape it into our image. My deed is done; I have announced Milkweed’s birth to all; and I will return in seven years, when the holy child has come of age. If you wish... pay your respects in Hag Hollow.”

She vanished, flying away in the pot on wings of shadow.

When Pirosha returned to Bayne’s Dain, the clan physician bound his wounds, yet they could not heal the memory of the uncloaked Nightshade.

As he wrapped the bandage tight, the physician said without much regret, “Your father died this morning.”

Pirosha went to his bedroom. He shut the door as hot tears streaked from his eyes. He would never get the chance to prove his worth to old Filosha. He would never get the chance to win his father’s respect and love. The hag had sent him plummeting into death.

At the funeral the next day, Pirosha’s wellspring of tears had run dry. But a fire kindled in him. He would avenge his father. He would go into Hag Hollow, into the swamps, and he would slay the queen hag. Either that, or he would die trying.

The next day, he went to the clan sorceress. She outfitted him with charms: a pentacle to ground him in the earth; a steel Cerne’s Cross for the blessing of nature; a star amulet to protect him from the Hag’s Eye; and a dozen rings to grant him the sorceress’s protection. She performed a ritual of smoke and incense, read him wise sayings from the Book of Earth, and anointed him with oil.

Piorin left the estate in the care of his mother. Then, once the magic was finished, he hopped on his pony and rode west... west into the forbidden swamps, the land his nanny told him never to visit.

At the eaves of the Murk Swamps, he hesitated. Harpies lived in the swamps: hideous, winged creatures and masters of poison. Yet when Pirosha’s ancestor, Lord Bayne, defeated them, they made a truce: norgs could go into the swamps without incident, as long as they didn’t make trouble. Killing a norg without good reason would be an act of war. Yet often those who went into the

swamp never returned, though no war had waged between the harpies and the norgs for a hundred years.

Still, Pirosha forced himself to enter into the thick, watery growth. He crossed the bridge into the river and reached an overused, hole-covered path. He cut through thick, thorny growth and entered the swamp. Above him hung a canopy so thick that Pirosha felt he walked from day into night.

Here he would inquire for directions to Hag Hollow.

The first “village” he came to in the dark recesses was a collection of huts from which smoke and the scent of roasting crawfish floated out. The walls of the huts were made of clay and sticks; the roofs, dried yellow reeds. Signs hung above some of the huts, which Pirosha couldn’t read although they were in Dwarf script, and read like a conglomeration of hissing noises; the harpies had no writing system of their own prior to contact with the dwarves.

Feeling his heart race as the harpies moved toward him—the raven-winged, predatory females and the wingless, scrawny males—Pirosha touched the hilt of his sword. Met with sharp hisses, he removed his grasp. “Hello,” he said. “Do any of you speak Dwarvish?”

“Me do,” a black-haired harpy woman said in a thick, spitting accent. “I am Mina. I am wise-woman of Mugrat Village. Only wise-woman in leagues.”

“I inquire for directions to Hag Hollow.”

A few harpies gasped. Then, dead silence.

“You look smarter than you talk,” said Mina. “Hags are ravenous. Hags have been robbing children of ours. Eating them in their swaddling clothes. No one help us harpies. Hag Hollow is deadly. You will not survive, not with the most amulets in the world. Not clothed in the sun, not clothed in the stars. Male-hag has been born; a feeding frenzy has started to feed him. Bad times. Dark times.”

“I repeat myself,” said Pirosha. “I inquire for directions to Hag Hollow.”

“Fool, you are,” said Mina. “We harpies do not care whether you live or die. However, if you are eaten, one of us will not be. I will lead you to Buckwort Village. Hag Hollow is four leagues up Barkflower Path, and one short walk west into the swamp. We call the hollow Heart of Darkness because it is a source of all evil.” She paused. “I will lead you to Buckwort. I see you are brave. Even the harpies honor that. I hear in your part of world... the males are warriors. Queer... I never heard of such things. But I will lead you, brave-male.”

“Thank you, Mina,” Pirosha said.

They ate a full meal of barely-cooked crawfish. Then, after grabbing a crude iron knife, a sling, and a few stones, Mina took off down the path and Pirosha followed her on his pony.

They rode on. They passed through the muddy, overgrown bog and Pirosha occasionally thought of taking some of the large pink or orange swamp-flowers to brighten his day; however, Mina told him they were “deadly poisonous.”

As he rode poor Luna, Pirosha wondered at how a harpy was helping one of the norgs. None of the norgs back home would believe it. But there was a saying attributed to Lord Bayne: “Nothing brings two together like a mutual enemy,” referring to the First War.

At dusk, they came to Buckwort Village. Mina shrieked. Pirosha looked ahead. The entire village seemed to have sunk below the muck; the dozen huts were half-submerged, as if someone or something had drawn them into the mud with a spell. Skeletons—picked clean of meat—floated in the water.

“Tiacka save us!” Mina cried.

A whimper escaped Pirosha, and suddenly the amulets hanging around his neck felt heavy as millstones.

“The hag-baby will eat us all!” Mina howled.

“Hush! Hush!” Pirosha said. “You’ll draw attention to us.”

“Sorry,” she whispered. “This is the biggest city I know. All dead! All dead! The great wise-woman Hiskwort taught me here. She is sure dead.” She turned to Pirosha, cheeks streaked with tears. She shrieked again.

“Hush!” Pirosha growled. “Someone will hear you.”

But she kept sobbing loudly. Something green began to rise out of the water.

Pirosha took off on the northward-leading path and galloped away as Mina’s agonizing death-cries filled the swamp. Guilt seized Pirosha, yet he knew that if he stayed back to protect Mina they would both die and the hags would never be stopped.

As he rode up the path, hands shaking, he shut his eyes and prayed that Peong would grant him protection.

Pirosha knew that sleeping was a terrible idea. He rode up Barkflower Path as night fell. As the swamp grew pitch-black and completely unnavigable to norg eyes, Pirosha realized he had not brought torch.

What a fool I am!

Then lights appeared all around, granting dim illumination. It became evident that the orange swamp flowers had begun to glow. Eventually Pirosha's eyes adjusted and once more, the land became visible. He took a few deep breaths, then coaxed Luna on.

At the marking Mina described, he hopped off Luna. He did not want anything to happen to her; to Pirosha, animals were always innocent and using them for warfare was always cruel. He brushed her mane, and bade her a quiet night and to run off.

He hesitated. After ten seconds of waiting, he took a trembling step into the thicket. He felt eyes watching him at all corners, but he knew it was just his imagination. At least, he told himself he knew. As he walked westward—west toward the long-set sun—he prayed without cease, eyes nevertheless open. He drew his sword out quietly. He made sure not to step into any noisy pools or crunching leaves; hags could not see very well, but they had a much better sense of hearing than norgs or even the Big People—especially the Big People.

As he made his way through the tangled brush, torchlights appeared in the distance. He crept toward them as silently as he could. Then something in the water caught his eye: green, yet a lighter color green than any plant he had ever seen. He looked down, observing in the dim light, and saw it was not a plant but something bigger.

It was the size of one of the Big People, wrinkled and green. It was a creature—a woman!—with algae for hair and needle-thin teeth, shut eyes and folded hands. It was a Sea Hag, a hideous lady of the water, and if Pirosha made a single movement, she would sense him and drag him under.

Trembling cold seized him. He shut his eyes and waited, praying to the dear gods that she wouldn't smell him—after all, she was under water—or that he wouldn't move and she, sense the tremor of his step.

When he opened his eyes, she had floated by. Pirosha swallowed his fear and walked toward the illumination. He prayed every second that he would not run into another Sea Hag, floating in the swamp and waiting for a meal to snatch. When his nanny had warned him not to wander beside lakes as a child because of Sea Hags, he hadn't believed her. Now, he did.

At last he came to Hag Hollow. For once Pirosha could see the night sky and the billions of stars. Hags of all kinds, much taller than Pirosha, had joined hands in a circle and were dancing as they sang a song in their grating voices:

*A child was born on Midsummer's Day
A male child, a hag-child—Lord Milkweed, I say!
His eyes are bright scarlet, he's hungry for bread
Bread made of crushed-bones! From the best bones he's fed!*

Every variety of hag Pirosha knew danced in the circle: the gray Death Hags who fed on life force, who appeared when a person was about to die; the purple Night Hags whose ugliness could kill (thank Peong, Pirosha did not look at them closely); the green Sea Hags; the blue Dream Hags who

appeared in nightmares; the white-and-red Pox Hags who caused ravaging disease; and many more, of other colors, that Pirosha did not recognize.

At the center of the circle lay a green baby with bloodshot eyes, gnawing a bone in his already-grown teeth. A pile of bones sat at his feet.

If he had not been green-colored, and a norg-eater, Pirosha would have considered Lord Milkweed the most beautiful baby in existence. Pirosha's nanny had told him hag males were as beautiful as their mother and lovers were hideous. Their powers of magic vastly exceeded any other of the hags; yet they only lived to age 33.

Despite his efforts at silence, a whimper escaped Pirosha. He hesitated again, then took an awkward step forward toward the muck... and a coarse hand caught him by the scruff of his collar.

"Hello, Pirosha," said the voice of Granny Nightshade.

Nightshade brought Pirosha into the center of the dance circle, right next to Lord Milkweed. Pirosha shielded his eyes so that he could not view the death-inducing ugliness of Nightshade.

"Why must you be so evil?" he said. "Why must you eat, and eat, and eat? I came here to defeat you, but now I know that it is impossible. You Big People are far too strong for me... I am little even for a norg." A hot tear streaked down Pirosha's cheek.

"Hush, hush now," Nightshade said like a mother to her child. She cradled him in his arms, which sent a fiery streak of anger through Pirosha's body.

Pirosha clenched his teeth and made an effort to channel his rage. He grabbed Nightshade's neck and tried to squeeze, to either strangle her or die in the effort. It was no use; her neck was thick as bone.

Pirosha sighed in frustration. "My nanny was right! I should never have gone into the swamp."

"Yes, your nanny was right," Nightshade said. "So why did you disobey her?"

"I disobeyed her because you hags threaten to end our lives in Kalamar. You killed my father... you kill, kill, kill! Eat, eat, eat!"

"You are brave," Nightshade said. "You will go down in history as the bravest norg who ever lived. You will have many adventures in your lifetime."

"What are you talking about? This will surely be my last adventure!" Pirosha said. "And so be it! I will die knowing that I tried to stop you."

The hags kept dancing round the green baby.

“There are things out there that think of children as snacks,” Nightshade said. “And whatever you do, don’t go into the western swamps, for in them lies death.”

“Wait!” Pirosha said. “My nanny said that! So long ago I’m surprised I can remember. And you—were you watching me my entire childhood?”

“Not watching,” Nightshade said with a knowing smile, and Pirosha grew angrier. “Know that it is I who birthed Lord Milkweed. The spirit of nature chose me out of all my sisters. I will not harm you, Pirosha. I do not plan on it. I, Nightshade—high mother of the Murk Coven, second only to Granny Yaga in power—will not let you come to harm tonight.”

“I will kill you or die trying!”

“You may try!” Nightshade said. “But you won’t, and you can’t, nor will you die trying. Tonight was the greatest test of your bravery. I will not let Kalamar come to harm. I will be your guidance. I wanted to test your mettle. And you have proven yourself brave! Brave enough to come into the swamps where your nanny told you not to. Brave enough to face Hag Hollow.”

“Did you kill my nanny?”

“No,” Nightshade said. “She and I are the same; I was, and still am, your nanny.”

“Liar!”

“I disguised myself in the form of a norg; I was sickeningly beautiful in that form. By your father’s seed I grew pregnant; I lay pregnant for three years; young Milkweed clawed inside me ceaselessly.”

“You killed my father.”

“Only so that you would be rightful Lord of Kalamar.”

“I didn’t ask to be Lord of Kalamar.”

“It is your destiny.”

The hags sang a little louder.

Pirosha grabbed his pentacle and cried out, “I call upon you, Lord Peong, to protect me!”

Nightshade grabbed all his amulets, tore them from his neck, and cast them to the floor. “Do not try to use magic against your nanny!”

“You are not my nanny.”

“I am. And when you need my guidance—and you *will* need it in the troubles ahead—come only to Hag Hollow and know that I will not let my sisters eat you. Nor my son, and your brother, blessed Milkweed.”

“You killed all those harpies!”

“When we have satisfied Milkweed’s craving for raw flesh, we will stop the killing,” Nightshade said. “Until then, it is nothing less than necessary.” She paused. “Are you ready to return to the place of your birth? The killing is done in Kalamar; no more norgs will be harmed. You will be safe, but only for a while. Trouble will fall upon the land, and it will not be borne of hags, but by those you call the Big People.”

It dawned on Pirosha that he could not defeat Nightshade. If he could not beat her, he may as well accept her mercy. “So be it!” Pirosha cried. “Take me back to Kalamar, my home. I cannot imagine having a more frightening nanny...”

“It lies on you to protect Kalamar from the Big People.”

“So be it, nanny... and...”

He hesitated and looked at the green baby, gnawing on a bone.

“Brother. Nanny Nightshade... and Brother Milkweed,” Pirosha finally said, before the hag queen spirited him off in the wings of the night and delivered him onto his father’s bed.

Read more about the norgs in “The Halfling King: Enchanted Forest, Volume 1” and “Mushroom War: Enchanted Forest, Volume 2.”