

## mōdor

Gren leads the way around the snake's nest and deeper into the swamp, broth water bubbling as he and Ma weave through the alder carr and race the setting sun. Ma could never grow accustomed to the breadth of the swamp: sprawling wilderness spreading itself thick across any uninhabited space. In the past, Ma and the villagers had shunned the land, its foliage too compressed and land too severe to traverse. But now, Gren and Ma wade through the water, each movement slow and syrupy through the humid air. Reeds tickle her waist as they reach the small clearing in the middle of the swamp: their home.

Gren works carefully, sharpening his spear on a stone as Ma begins the fire. Her son's hands are scabbed and chapped: not well-watered like the cattails or the swamp grass. Hands unfamiliar to a boy of barely seventeen summers. Ma looks down at her hands as she tends the fire; they're the same. Cracked and bloody. Beggar's hands.

"They've grown," Gren grunts between heavy swings on the rock.

"Oh?"

"Hired an outsider. There are at least fifty new men."

"We've been making an impact."

Gren smiles slightly. "Yes, I guess we have."

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The first men they captured died slowly. Tied up with coarse rope like game, Gren had dragged their bodies from the Great Hall, deep into the charred remains of the abandoned village. Blood and dirt melded into a black muck, coating the mens' entire bodies. Initially, Ma had been startled by their wounds: a perforated shoulder, a blood-soaked brow. Gren had never been one

for violence, often abandoning the village hunts as soon as duty allowed. Finding excuses to miss his sister skin and gut the game. Never watching Ma cook the meat. Her sweet, gentle boy.

Now, with raw knuckles and tendons bursting from his forearms, Gren stared down at the men. Eyes hard. The pair shouted syllables that meant nothing to Ma or her sweet boy. Were they threats? Pleas? Swears? Pressure built in Ma's chest with each sound, expanding her ribs and threatening to crack the bones. Suddenly, without thought, she grabbed a stone from the ground and brought it down hard on one man's skull. *Crack*. Blood splattered on her face, but she kept going, his screams becoming more distant with each blow. His partner kicked away, shrieking like a wounded animal, scooting desperately through the dirt with tied limbs. Gren turned to the side and retched.

Ma buried the men in all their glory: golden rings on fat knuckles, woven shirts on sweaty chests, long pendants around necks. She never touched their treasures, for they belonged in the ground. Down, down, down, in the earth from which they were stolen. These pale ghosts of men knew only how to steal. How to take. She buried them by rotting stumps and crispy grass. By stones skinned of moss during the fires and carcasses of animals too slow to escape the destruction. An offering of sorts: to the forest and her creatures, she presented the men who had killed.

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Ma watches the fire as the sky trades its pink hues for black. As she looks at her boy sitting across from her, she can't help but notice the damage. Gren's body is stamped with reminders of the raiders. A long mark on his bicep. A crooked third toe. The most prominent: his left eye

draped in deep purple scar tissue. Gren notices Ma's gaze and unwraps a cloth from around his belt. Placing it over his eye, he begins to knot it behind his ear. Ma reaches out in protest.

"Let it breathe," she says.

Gren's mouth forms firm lines on his face.

"I don't want you to look at it."

Truthfully, Ma doesn't want to look at the wound. Gren's eyelid was thoroughly ravaged by the burn: flesh peeling and unhallowed. When Gren was born, he had been soft and pink, chin round and cheeks plump. Now, strife had plastered Gren's skin to his skull, bringing out the sharpness of his jaw and hollowness of his cheeks. Aging years in a matter of months.

Ma makes herself meet Gren's good eye with gentleness: "It will heal cleaner this way."

He nods, dropping the stained cloth to the ground. It lands next to a troupe of ants struggling to carry the sunken body of a cicada. Gren stops and watches them work. A straggler creeps up his fingers and over his knuckles to keep up, Gren holding still until it has crossed.

Her sweet boy.

Her flesh and blood.

Ma smiles and wants to touch his cheek, but Gren stands. There is work to be done.

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When the raiders built the Great Hall, the trees fell and the forest screamed. Polished silver hatchets hacked out bits of woody flesh until the majestic beings could no longer stand. As they plummeted to the dirt, birds fled their branches and rodents abandoned their high reaching homes. Cheers from the raiders. Hundreds of corpses were hauled away with ropes and refined

into the hall. Desecrated with gold. Discolored with jewels. The hall stood ugly against the ruins of the forest.

After the fire and the terror, Ma had insisted on burying the dead. She stood in the center of their smoldering village and watched her daughter's blood drool into the dirt. Bodies scattered like falling trees: bodies of sisters and brothers she had been born alongside in the birthing tent, of babes she had watched age alongside her two children. She couldn't look away from their flesh branded with the bootprints of the raiders, trampled as if they were nothing more than dirt. Ma's eyes were stuck, gazing inside: at their insides. She could see Onela's splintered ribs poking through her chest like yearning branches. The innards hanging lazily out of Wig's open abdomen. The pulpy muscle of Theo's thighs.

Falling to her knees next to her daughter, Ma released a throat-burning scream. She screamed and screamed and screamed until Gren ran over and held her firmly. The only survivors: they had been the only survivors. Guilt flooded Ma's heart as she looped her fingers through her hair and pulled hard with each sob, begging for an explanation for the destruction. A reason for the carnage. She couldn't bear to look at the blood or the wasteland that was once her village, that was once her home.

Gren untangled Ma's fingers from her hair and pressed her palms to the earth. Eyes steady despite their weeping, his tears were silent and strong as they cut through the grime on his skin.

"They live on," he said. "In the earth."

Ma knew that her brethren would become new trees and flowers and wildlife, but she wasn't satisfied. She could have fought harder. Flaied harder against the grasp of the bandit as

he pulled Halga away. Kicked his metal-clad chest with more force. The raider had laughed when her toes crumbled against him, cutting Halga's throat so quickly Ma only saw her daughter fall to the dirt, clutching her neck. Ma had wanted to peel back the plate on the raider and decimate the delicate flesh inside. But instead, he stabbed Ma's stomach with his sword and left before she even hit the ground.

As Ma lay unmoving in the mud, she focused on Halga's desperate fingers and gurgling breaths. Her eyes wide with a type of fear Ma had never seen. She reached out with shaking fingertips to her daughter, stretching until her muscles threatened to tear from the effort.

Just out of reach.

Ma felt heavy as the mud clung to her hair and her skin, pressing her deeper into the earth as the gurgling ceased: Halga's last breath.

Vision blurry from tears and blood loss, Ma watched the trees and her people fall. She felt her roots growing and the world becoming small behind her eyes, until there was nothing left.

It took Ma and Gren three hard days to bury the bodies. They pierced the earth with loose stones and charred pieces of wood that had survived the burning, but they mostly used their hands. Hands washed in the lake between burials. Hands that despite the water, were never clean. Fingers caked in juices from melting flesh. Tired hands, aching from pushing through the dirt to the hidden earth below. From prepping an eternal bed for every relative, friend, and neighbor they had ever known. Broken hands.

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“It’s time for me to go,” Gren says as he stands and surveys the land.

“How many will you bring back this time?”

“I’m not sure. Two. Maybe three.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Ma was always nervous when her boy left. She wasn’t afraid to be alone in the swamp, for fear for her life had left long ago; she worried for Gren. She dreaded the colonizers would finally anticipate his scattered pattern of attacks, leaving her son to die in the dirt. Alone. Ma knew that with each attack, the closer she and her boy moved towards death. Their blessings were finite, and each attack had a cost.

But she knew her sweet boy was strong and smart, his years in the village giving him an advantage on the ruined terrain. These colonizers didn’t know the land, nor did they care to learn about the ridges and the rivers. Gren used their ignorance to his advantage, snaring them easily by unscalable cliffs and roaring water. A quick kill. He would often take down ten men or more on his own during the night, the patrols often ill-equipped to deal with his advances. Gren knew to take some home for Ma, and those men weren’t as lucky.

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The killings became easier over time. Ma learned about the body: where to pierce if she wanted the deaths to be quick and where to slice for a slow bleed. She searched each man’s face for the raider from that day, a cold desperation taking over each time she spotted Gren trudge up the hill. Each day absent of that face made Ma’s rage stronger. Each kill more meaningful.

She spoke softly to the men, knowing they couldn’t understand her questions, knowing she would never understand their answers.

She would jam her stone dagger into a beefy shoulder: “Did you find pleasure in killing my daughter?” The man would often cry out. Ma savored the crinkling of skin around the blade, often twisting upon impact. Watching the wound open into something bigger than itself.

“What did it feel like to tear down the forest?” Stone removed quickly, the man would howl as his flesh coated the weapon and was forced into the outside world. Ma would always hold the dagger up to the men. She liked to watch their faces contort at the sight of themselves on the weapon.

The final blow: “Will your gods forgive you? Because ours will not.” Ma would plunge the stone into an eye and pull up for the explosion. Skull peeling away from brain.

Over time, Gren learned not to retch.

Ma and Gren never touched women or children, focusing their rage on the warriors. On those who had sold themselves to the great-ring giver and builder of that lofty house. His followers chanted his name each boisterous night filled with feasting and revelry. As they defaced the land, they cried loudly, “For Hrothgar! For Hrothgar!” claiming the ruins in his name. After years of conquest and greeted by an abundance of forest and old age, Hrothgar’s mind turned to hall building. He settled here and his men went to work, tearing down the trees and their people. Processing the trunks. Building a great mead-hall meant to be a wonder of the world forever: Hrothgar’s throne room, the base for his God-given goods, and dispensary of treasures.

Ma and Gren did not understand the foreigners’ tongue, but they knew enough to recognize this name.

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Ma waits for Gren's return with light eyelids. She never surrenders herself fully to sleep when he's gone, content with floating through stages of consciousness; she feels secure this way. Ma is still learning how to connect with the swamp's creatures and give back to her new home: eating swamp berries and Basswood buds over game. Befriending the squirrels and the slugs instead of consuming them. Hunting men has turned Ma and her sweet boy away from meat. Now, as she waits for Gren's return, she listens to the hum of the swamp. A new type of chatter: she is relieved to be surrounded by life again.

Her boy always returns before sunrise. Sometimes in the sweetness of dark. Sometimes in the blush of daybreak. But he always returns before the sun.

Steady light warms Ma's eyelids as she brushes away the mosquitoes and grabs her spear.

"Just in case," Gren had told her during the first hunt, pressing the weapon firmly into her palms: a gift from the trees and etched with his love. She felt more comfortable with the smallness of her sharpened stone, but Gren insisted on the larger weapon. She always kept it near when he was away, in case of ambush. In case of the return of that warrior's leather gloves and armored chest. Hoping she'd never need it. Knowing she eventually would.

Ma makes her way quickly through the swamp, tucking under crooked trees with light toes in the murky water. Cold bones. A familiar feeling. There's a seizing in her chest as her heart tumbles over itself with each step. She tries to calm it with slow, steady feet, but it continues to race. Ma stops and leans on her spear for support, trying to get enough air.

Hidden in the underbrush, her eyes meet the Great Hall: gold laughing in the sun. But there's something else, something new outside its doors. She squints and sees the haphazard cross made of coarse wood and rough edges. The horizontal piece tips upward, unstable.



She forces her eyes to stop flickering.

Stay still.

His head lolls forward as if he's asleep. Loose and heavy like when he was swaddled many years ago on her back. Long hair now cut in careless tufts. His hair. His beautiful hair that had grown long and strong since his thirteenth summer, marking the beginning of his transition from boy to man. It had been a hot summer, the hottest in Ma's lifetime, but her sweet boy had loved it.

Ma continues to stare but she doesn't understand.

She can't understand their depravity.

Their insatiable appetite for destruction.

Ma's sweet boy is glistening, shining in the sun.

Skinless.

His body is deep red: muscles and tendons slowly dripping, liquid pooling at his feet like a bloody shadow. He's held in place by his elbows and hands, arms pulled taut on that crooked wood, tightening the threads of his muscles. Elbows and hands pressed hard to the wood, pierced with shining steel. Holding him up. Nailing him down. Skinned: like an animal.

Ma joins the underbrush as it sways slowly in the wind. Breath hot and moist. Cheeks wet. Her throat bubbles and all she wants is her baby, her baby, her sweet baby boy, and Ma is dropping her spear and running, arms outstretched to her Gren. Her feet flatten the tall grass until she's there, beside him. Gren's eyes loom down at her, the left finally visible without the burnt skin and she gazes up at the two holes where his nostrils had been. Fluid splashes down on her like rain, sticking to her cheeks and trickling slowly down with her tears. Ma's hands are on him

and she's pulling, pulling, pulling at the horror before her. He's sticky. Flies jump from ripe flesh to Ma and back. Buzzing incessantly. Ma continues to pull and scream, pull and scream as the buzzing picks up speed. She has to get Gren down, get Gren down now. Her fingers plunge deep into muscle and tendons weakened by the morning sun.

From inside the Great Hall: footsteps, gathering voices, and clanging. Ma barely hears the noise until the men are surrounding her and the body falls. Her breath is oppressive in the morning air as she tries to lift up Gren. Taking both his arms, she pulls. His left arm slides loose of its socket and she tumbles backward, limb in hand. The group laughs, leaning on their weapons. They're too humored by the old swamp-wench to perceive her as a threat. Too fascinated by her dark skin, strange clothes, and foreign tongue. Too entertained to strike her down and stop the show.

Ma's whole body trembles as one man steps forwards: a stranger. She looks up at his blue eyes and they are hungry for the entire world. He reaches toward her and Ma lurches back in the dirt, screaming, crawling, clutching the disembodied arm. She sees the stranger's hands and knows he has done this, immediately recognizing the blood under his nails and in the creases of his palms. They're like her hands, hands, that despite the water, are never clean.

Her vocal cords strain against the power coming from her chest as she releases sounds she never knew were inside her. The stranger steps forward again and Ma stumbles to her feet and runs. Without looking back. Back through the tall grass and the underbrush until she is splashing through the swamp and the frogs are groaning at the carelessness of her feet.

She falls to her knees: hands, face, and chest stained.

She cradles the arm, clutching what is left of her boy.

Her sweet, baby boy.

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Ma is back in the underbrush before dark. Songs littered with the slamming of mugs and cheers float from the mead-hall and through the wasteland. The raiders celebrate the death of her boy; they will call him a descendant of Cain, hell-bent on destroying the Great Hall for sport. A man with a disfigured face and body scattered with burns, he will be retold as a monster.

Grendel: they will speak his name for years, calling him the foulest creature to have ever crawled the earth and will celebrate the man who vanquished him. A fearless man. The ultimate hero.

Ma waits until she can only hear the Nightjars cooing. Legs steady, she makes her way from the underbrush and through the tall grass. Fireflies floating, the light kisses her cheeks as she passes: goodnight, good luck. Her grip tight on the etched staff of her spear, she moves beyond the empty cross and barren ground, entering the Great Hall without a sound. She is among the raiders. Mead benches pushed to the side, the men lay in drunken slumber. At their heads rest polished timber-battle shields, and on the bench above each man: a towering war helmet, a woven mail shirt, and a great shafted spear. To Ma, the men all look the same with their white skin and golden hair.

Ma is silent, weaving her way through the heavy snores fueled by gluttony and celebration. Senses dulled from overindulgence and hubris, believing they have nothing to fear after vanquishing the monster. She looks for the stranger, the one who stole Grendel's skin and cut his hair. The stranger with the hungry eyes.

He is not among the sleepers.

Breathing steady, Ma squats like the bullfrogs of the swamp and looks closely at the face in front of her. He wears weathered leather for skin and light lines around loosely closed eyes. She places a hand gently over his mouth and draws back her other arm. As the spear meets his chest, one of the spots Ma has learned is best for a quick kill, his eyes fly open and she catches the scream in her hand. He is afraid as he meets death.

The next man dies quietly, never opening his eyes in time to realize his fate.

It's the eighth man that struggles. Kicking over his shield, the timber crashes to the floor and the sound bounces throughout the hall. Ma's breath quickens as the men stir, some slowly, still weighed down by their drunkenness, others jumping to their feet without hesitation. Yelling. The clanging of swords at the ready. Her spear still lodged in the kicker, Ma whirls around and pulls a scrawny man to his feet, grabbing his sword along the way: metal at his Adam's apple. The raiders scream and jeer but they keep their distance from Ma and the man. Her hand is slick on the hilt, arm shaking from the weight of the iron, but she holds steady. Ma backs away slowly, daring the raiders to follow as the man's gurgles of fear press back against the blade.

They don't.

She moves purposefully through the Great Hall and into the tall grass. The man lets out a shriek among the fireflies and Ma doesn't hesitate to press hard, creating a shallow warning slice on his neck. He is quiet, but his whole skinny body trembles until they reach the underbrush. Ma can't navigate the swamp with the man despite his lean frame, so she presses one final time and lets the man drop. Blood spurting back on her. She finally looks at her captive, breath catching in her throat.

The man's face is smooth, still waiting to be marked with signs of age.

Jaw clean and narrow. Eyes big.

He can't be older than fourteen summers.

Ma feels the bile burning her throat as she stands next to the boy. Fear and shame crash around her and Ma sinks to her knees next to the boy. Her chest tightens, beginning to fill with the same oppressive pressure she felt this morning. It mercilessly constricts her lungs, air entering and leaving in shallow puffs, unable to fill completely. She finally releases the sobs, the sobs that rattle her chest and allow her to expel the bile from her throat. She heaves next to the boy: saliva, vomit, and tears mixing around her mouth as she touches his hair, his cheeks, his empty eyes. Ma can't understand why the boy was dressed for battle. Why he was sleeping among the raiders. Her rage turns inward: why hadn't she realized. The shriek in the grass was one of a boy, not yet a man. She had held his thin frame against her body, feeling its incessant trembling. It was a familiar feeling; Ma knew what it was like to hold Gren when he was a boy. Knew what it was like to hold a scared child to her breast.

But in her rage, had chosen to ignore it.

Ma hears the shouts from the Great Hall, but can't move. The earth has claimed her and her knees knot themselves to the ground. She tries to wipe the red away from the boy with her hands, but she only smears the blood deeper into his skin. Desperately, she grabs a handful of leaves and tries again, but the action only makes the body look like Gren's. Like Halga's. Like all the bodies that day, sunken in the mud within the ruins of the village. Stained and broken.

She hears the footsteps before she sees the torchlight. His face is obscured by the fire until he is upon her, sword drawn and tip at Ma's heart. The stranger with the hungry eyes. He looks down at Ma kneeling in the ferns next to the sleeping boy.

Ma remembers when Gren was a boy. During the village hunts, she would often catch him in the woods, watching the deer and the squirrels and the rooks from afar with eyes full of wonder. Full of appreciation for life. When she would prepare the animals for meals, he would never stay, finding excuses to miss his sister skin and gut the game. Her sweet, gentle boy.

She stares at the boy in front of her.

His eyes still open, she gently presses them closed.

She closes her eyes, too.