

Branded

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A sample from page 27-47

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It's almost dark by the time I get home. Both mom and dad are working late so the house is totally empty, waiting for me. The porch light above the door is the only indication that the house is not *completely* abandoned.

My first stop is the barn. I expect that our guest is long gone, but you never know. Perhaps he has enjoyed our hospitality and decided to stick around? I've never been one of those people who absolutely has to have a pet, but I think it'd be pretty cool to have a fox living in our yard.

The slope in front of the barn door is slick and muddy but I hop from rock to rock and land with relatively dry feet on the stone stoop. Judging from another set of tracks, my mom was not so lucky. I'm about to open the door when I realise something: the muddy footprints on the stoop are too fresh to be hers.

I stand with my hand on the door handle and look around, place my own foot down beside the footprint and compare. The pattern is thick, like something from a military boot or hiking shoe, and a little smaller than mine. I was never a boy scout and don't know anything about reading footprints besides what I've seen on TV, but I don't have to be a bush ninja to know that there's something here that doesn't add up.

My mother never wears shoes like that to work and, in any case, she left for her shift hours ago. Which means that someone else has been here, and not that long ago either.

The large barn door slides open slowly and I peer cautiously inside. It's too dark to see anything so I fumble for the light switch while looking around for a pair of fox eyes in the dim light. The fluorescent lights flicker and then come on one by one and I stand there gaping.

The cage is gone. The feeding dish that was right next to it lies smashed on the floor. Plastic boxes, bags of cement, garbage and burlap bags are strewn all over the place. The pile of boards that it took me two hours to stack looks as if it's been toppled by an earthquake. Nothing moves.

Taking slow steps, I walk further into the barn. "Hello. . .?" Don't ask me why I open my mouth. The last thing I want is for someone to answer.

I spot the twisted remains of the cage on the steel casing of a wrecked tractor in the corner, and I stop and rub my eyes. It looks like the incredible Hulk was let loose in here, creating wall to wall havoc, but I don't see a green monster or any other living thing.

"What the hell. . .?" I whisper to myself, only to make the silence a little less deafening. "Is someone here?"

No one answers. I take out my phone and am just about to write a message to my mom when I hear an unfamiliar car driving up in the yard. *Was everything ok in the barn when you left?* I hit send before peeking out at the car.

It's the kind of modern four-wheel drive that you mostly see in cities, with dark windows and only a few spatters of mud on its sides. From what I can make out, there's only one person inside and whoever it is takes a long time before getting out.

Finally, the door opens and a big guy in a suit climbs out. I immediately think *bodyguard* and *civil policeman*. There's something about the way he looks around that makes me half expect him to touch his ear bud and say that everything is clear, the helicopter can land.

He doesn't, of course. Instead he walks over to the house and peeks into the window beside the front door, tries the doorknob and takes a few steps back when he sees that the door is locked.

I remain where I am. He suddenly doesn't seem like a policeman any longer and my mind starts to spin off other theories. Maybe he's a thief? I suppress the thought as quickly as it comes. No one would steal a pile of furniture, would they?

After trying the main door of the house, the man quickly crosses the yard toward the barn. I study him from the semi-darkness as he comes closer. He looks like he knows where he is going and what he is looking for and the closer he gets, the more uneasy I grow. Should I hide? Go outside and meet him?

He's mere steps away from the door when I make up my mind. I take one large step out of the darkness and pull the door half shut behind me. "Hi," I say, hesitantly. "Can I help you with something?"

He stops abruptly, surprised. For a second it seems like he didn't expect anyone to be here. He looks to be about forty years old, clean shaven with short, dark hair.

"Are you lost?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No. I'm quite certain I'm in the right place. Do you live here?"

"No, I just like to go sneaking around on other people's farms. We have a Facebook group if you want to join."

He draws his lips in tightly. A look of irritation flashes in his eyes but he forces a smile. "Funny. But you are right, it probably seems a little strange, me just showing up like this."

"A little."

"My name is. . . Hansen. Jon Hansen. I work for a debt collection agency."

This makes me wonder, both because I can't imagine what business a collection agency might have here but also because the way he introduces himself seems off, somehow. I realise he clearly senses my skepticism, as he puts his hand into his jacket and pulls something from his pocket. A smartphone.

"Here, I have an ID," he says and takes a step closer to show me something on his phone. The screen lights up as he runs his thumb over it. I look down suspiciously and see a spider-web-like, glowing pattern spreading outward from his fingertips. He places his other hand on my shoulder in a friendly sort of way, but holds on tightly when I try to squirm away.

"Hey, let go. . ."

But I don't have time to say anything else before he presses his thumb to my throat and my entire body turns tense and stiff. Luminous spiderweb streaks cross in front of my eyes and I cannot get any of the muscles in my body to obey. My heart hammers in panic as my knees hit the ground

and I collapse forward, face-first into the mud. I want to jump up, yell, fight, but can hardly even gasp for breath as I lie here.

Hansen, or whatever his name is, steps over me and shoves open the barn door. I try to make a fist, to clench my teeth together, and to force my lungs to work, but nothing happens.

"I am here," Hansen speaks into the darkness. *"Show yourself."*

His voice is already fading from my consciousness. I am usually able to hold my breath for much longer than this, but my panic squeezes all of the air out of my chest and I can feel everything going dark.

Perhaps it is because I am about to pass out that I feel a gust of cold air from the barn. I don't know for certain.

It's cold. Dark. I am not breathing, but a sparkling mist rises from everything around me. Surrounded by shapes I don't recognise, I struggle forward, dig my fingers into the frozen earth and stones and creep slowly toward the cold light far ahead.

Voices. A woman and a man. The man is speaking a language I don't know, and the woman

...

"The High Ones will wait no longer. The wolf howls and the serpent writhes in the deep. The time has come."

The man speaks again. They understand one another, but his words are hard and meaningless to my ears. Did he just ask a question?

The light. It is closer now. My fingers are bleeding but I keep crawling. I hope they won't see me.

"No," says the woman, I hear her voice only faintly now. "The Pathfinder. . . badly hurt. . . not dead yet. . . take care of him."

Is that me? I don't know. I don't know what they want with me. I almost don't even know who I am.

I must escape.

Sharp stones scrape my abdomen. Only my front legs are obeying now.

Front legs? I pause for a split second at the strange thought, but have no time to dwell on it.

I must get away.

The light is blinding. Cold and white like a car's headlights. I stiffen.

I wake with a headache in a cold, bright room that I don't recognise. For a moment I can't for the

life of me figure out where I am, but then my brain kicks into gear: the hospital. Curtains, rolling nightstand, rickety metal bed, the works.

How long have I been out?

I sit up and try to remember what happened after I got home, but everything is fuzzy.

“Aahhh. . .” I shouldn't have done that. I hold my head as the room spins around me and there's a pounding in my ears as if the walls were screaming.

“Eirik? Oh, finally! You're awake!”

I lift my head slowly and glance toward the door. My mom marches over to my bed just as she probably does hundreds of times a day to her other patients at work, and sits down on the edge with a worried look. “How are you feeling?”

“My head hurts. Or. . . I don't know. What happened?”

“I was hoping you might be able to tell me,” she replies as she takes my pulse and holds a hand to my forehead. “I found you on the ground outside of the barn, soaking wet and cold as ice. Don't you remember anything?”

I push her hand away and press my own against my forehead, trying to push my brain back inside again. Drawing a complete blank. “I came home. I remember that the barn looked trashed, but after that. . . no. Nothing.”

She wrinkles her forehead and sits up straight. “You haven't been taking drugs or anything, have you?”

“Huh? No!”

“Take it easy! I have to ask, you know that. That's the most likely explanation, after all.”

“I haven't taken any drugs,” I say, annoyed. “Not yet, anyway. Do you have any Ibuprofen or something?”

She smiles. “You are at a *hospital*, Eirik. What do you think? I'll go ask the nurses.”

She stands up and is gone for a short while but returns again soon with a nurse who looks

me over and asks how I'm doing before handing me a few pain killers and leaving again just as quickly as he came.

“So, since we're sitting here. . .” Mom sits down beside me and measures me with her mother-look. “. . .when were you going to tell us about your tattoo?”

I look at her dumbfounded. What is she talking about? It's not that I haven't thought about getting one, but I haven't acted on the thought yet.

“Don't try to deny it. On your chest. Is that some kind of gang symbol?”

“Gang symbol? Are you nuts? I don't have a tattoo, mom. What are you talking about?”

“You don't?” She raises her eyebrows and gives me a discouraged look. “I saw it myself, Eirik. How dumb do you think I am?”

“I don't have a tattoo!” I repeat. “How many times do I have to . . .?”

She leans forward and pulls the collar of my hospital gown to the side. “Then what would you call this?”

I roll my eyes downward and take a look, wondering what in the world she's going on about now. And there, right in the middle of my chest, is a mark the size of my hand. “What the hell. . .?” I whisper, my eyes flashing up. “How did that get there?”

“Eirik. . .”

Mom gives me a stern look, but it doesn't seem important to me now. My first thought is that it's some kind of sick joke, that someone must have drawn it on me while I was blacked out, but I have no idea who would have done that. I rub my fingers over the imprint. If someone drew it on me, that would mean that it must have been with a marker or something. But it doesn't rub off. Every single thin line of the spindly symbol is clearly and sharply embossed onto my skin.

“But. . . I don't get it. I mean. . . I have never. . .”

I peer up at her with a confused look and meet her gaze. The irritation in her expression turns to concern in only a few heartbeats.

“Are you joking with me now?” she asks quietly. “This is not funny, Eirik. Do you seriously mean to say that you don't *remember* getting a tattoo on your chest?”

I hesitate. Don't know what to say. On the one hand, it scares me that I don't know where this mark came from, but on the other. . . I feel just fine.

The blinding headlights switch back on in my head and I picture endless months of tests and uncertainty.

“No, I ... someone must have drawn it on me,” I try. “It's probably just a marker.”

It's clear from her expression that she doesn't trust what I say, but she still pulls a handful of wet wipes from her bag. “We'll find that out soon enough,” she says.

The wipes are cold and clammy against my skin. I can't see the mark very well, but her face tells me all I need to know. The mark won't come off. She scrubs so hard at it that I have to grasp the edge of the bed to brace myself, but when she removes her hand, the colour of the marking is unchanged.

I swallow nervously and look down. “It's not possible,” I whisper. “Mom, you see that, don't you? A tattoo would be completely red and swollen if it was new. This. . . it must be some other kind of special marker or something?”

“Or else you've had it for awhile now.”

“I haven't!” I insist. It feels a bit like there's a parasite clinging to my chest, and now panic starts to creep in. “Just ask Khalid! Ask anyone in my class! We had gym class today and there wasn't anything there. I remember that! Do you think I went and got tattooed in the afternoon and that it's all healed up by now?”

She meets my eyes and holds the look for a long time. I can see she doesn't believe me but she sighs and lets it go. “Ok. Relax. We'll figure this out. Just. . . lie down and get some rest and I'll go talk with the officers on duty again. Ok? Do you want anything?”

I sink back into the bed and shake my head. “Just hand me my phone,” I mumble.

As soon as she's left the room, I fold back the hospital gown and snap a photo of the mark. But it doesn't make any more sense when viewed from the right angle. The figure looks like a line drawing of a star with one-two-three-four. . . nine arms. At the end of and along each of the nine lines are various rune-like shapes, but there's no pattern to them that I can see. The symbol looks like it could be something I doodled in my notebook during a particularly boring lesson.

Only, how did it end up tattooed across my chest?

I swipe my thumb across the screen to go online and tense up for a moment. The lines spreading outward from my thumb remind me of something, but I can't recall what it is.

The mobile coverage in this room isn't great, but after awhile I manage to google the symbol in the hopes of finding something similar online. Unfortunately, the search engine is more concerned about my skin than about the mark which produces a lot of uninteresting results. Still, by the time my mom returns, I've discovered that the symbol is a so-called *galdrastafur* — “magical staff” in Icelandic. Google can also tell me that an Icelandic pop singer has a similar tattoo on her arm and that there are a disturbing number of people out there who believe in runic magic. A few of them are disconcertingly proud of their own skin colour, but most of these believers seem to be completely normal people with an above average interest for handcrafts and viking lore. I can't claim to be much wiser.

“They didn't find anything on the CT-scan,” mom says.

I put down my phone and look up at her. “What does that mean? That's good, isn't it?”

“It means there's no cerebral haemorrhage, at least. Your blood work is good too. Blood sugar, toxicology, blood values. . . everything is as it should be. No narcotics either. Yes, I know that's what you told me, but you could have been drugged without knowing it. In any case: They're going to keep you here until tomorrow to be certain, and maybe have a few more tests done then.”

“So, they aren't sure what's wrong either. Hurray.”

“Not yet. But the most important thing is that they keep you under observation tonight and

tomorrow morning you'll more than likely be sent back home.”

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I don't mind being “sick” and staying home from school on the following day, but of course they don't leave me alone. My dad works from home just in case I pass out again and my mom lectures me sternly about not sitting in front of my computer for too long. She'd probably prefer me to stay away from the screen completely, but that's an argument we've had before.

The weird thing is that I feel just fine. At times I even forget about the strange marking scrawled across my chest, and the only lingering pain is a bit of soreness left over from various shots and needles.

So much for your lead, I text to Khalid. It's game on all day long here.

Khalid: Argh! Damned sneak! I knew you weren't sick.

Me: I'm better now, but yesterday was ... weird. I passed out and ended up at the ER. Got a CT and everything.

Khalid: Shit! What happened?

I hesitate before replying, start up the game in the meanwhile and log in. I begin playing where I almost died last time — deep in the forest with a monster on the loose nearby — but this time I play it smart and pull back. Some missions will have to wait until I'm more experienced.

Me: Not sure. I feel better now, but ...

Khalid: But?

Me: I have some kind of memory lapse. And I woke up with this:

I send the photo and wait. It's not long before the phone pings his reply.

Khalid: That symbol looks familiar. Where did you find that?

Me: Duh. Right where it is. I woke up with it, I said. But I have no idea how it got there.

Khalid: Yeah, right. Did you skip ahead to the Arandil-mission or something?

Me: What do you mean? What is that?

No reply.

Me: Hello ...?

He remains silent. Khalid is usually good at hiding his phone in class but it's possible our math teacher spotted him texting. Or maybe he's actually trying to pay attention to the lesson. I push my phone to the side and concentrate on the game instead.

The Arandil mission? I scan my memory but it doesn't sound familiar. It's not in the game log either, but Google comes to the rescue once again. I skip all the links and go straight for the game wiki article:

Arandil, daughter of Jarnil. Elven hunter and warrior, archery and long-knife specialist who can instruct on these and other woodsman skills. Potential fellow journeyman for all role types and partner for both sexes.

That's not very helpful. I skim the article quickly but don't learn much more about what Khalid wanted to tell me about this character. However, since he's not responding and there's nothing better to do. . .

After a quick lunch and a chat with dad to ensure him that I'm doing just fine, I return to my PC and set my course for the part of the game world where the wiki claims this elf lady is imprisoned. It takes me hours just to make my way there. The journey is long and I am forced to pass through several enemy controlled territories on the way. Normally I would spend days covering a stretch like that just to glean information about histories and other useful things, but this time I'm too curious and in a rush.

Gjallarvik, according to what I have read online, is the largest harbour city and the richest, most complex location in the game. My character arrives by boat at dusk. There is still a bustle among the harbour streets and a row of longships and smaller boats fill the screen as the tiny fishing vessel on which I've hitched a ride glides past. Wooden dragon heads, round shields and bearded

men clothed in wool, leather and fur adorn the ships and the harbour, and as the camera zooms out and raises its scope up toward the city, I can see many of the same elements repeated up there too. Even though there's more stone and taller houses than I think the real Vikings ever built, it's not hard to imagine that their cities may have looked like this if they had lasted another few hundred years.

I go ashore and take a look around, get lost amongst the narrow alleyways and at first end up in the completely wrong part of the city. The streets are dark and as I walk I have the constant nagging feeling that someone is going to jump down and attack me from the rooftops. I gave up trying to use the rooftops myself in this game. It can be done, but it's so awkward and clumsy that I prefer keeping my feet on the ground.

After becoming totally lost, I stop at a crossroads and use one of the latest tricks that I learned while on my way here. My character kneels down in the middle of the street and scribbles a few runes in the ground. Soon, the greyish field around me on the mini map is replaced by a detailed street plan complete with symbols for stores, possible missions, and interesting characters and places. I take off sprinting in a random direction to try to get as much out of the magic as possible before it runs out. My character dodges through the streets, colliding with horses, walls and street merchants at a break-neck pace and I wonder how people would have reacted if some madman had really stormed through in the manner that I am now doing.

In the shade of a high wall, I finally crash into the wrong person. An old lady falls to the ground as I race onward but by then the locals have apparently had enough. A small gang of them surrounds me and cuts me off from the street. They aren't happy. After that, there's yelling and shoving and it's not long before the city guards are called in. Great start.

“Hey, relax,” I mumble to the screen. “The lady was walking in the middle of the road!”

But, of course, it's not possible to talk your way out of the situation. I try to withdraw, but they follow me and in the end I get fed up and hit back. One of the local heroes falls to the ground

and the others scream angrily. The music shifts and a small cluster of red pinpoints pops up on the screen.

Crap. Alright, bring it on!

I lean forward in my chair, shifting my gaze rapidly from one enemy to the next and trying to keep my back free. The first attacker bears down with only his fists and I press the parry button and watch my character dodge both he and the next guy. The third man has a club and bats his way through my armour. For a brief moment, my character totters backwards and doesn't react to my pressing on the button. I swear as two more enemies add themselves to the mix, each of them taking a sizeable chunk out of my health bar.

Time to break out the big guns. A few quick keystrokes and I choose my weapon and raise a rune shield. The next attacker gets an axe in his head as soon as he's close enough. Take that! I swing the axe left and right, but my joy is short-lived when I see how little it helps. Why do normal street thugs have so many health points?

I pound on the mouse button, pushing this way and that and trying to leap over a cart to escape, but in vain. I take three of them with me but then it's all over when one of the city guards suddenly clubs me from behind. My character collapses and, with the thudding sound of the club, the screen goes dark.

I glance at the clock, decide that now might be a good time for a break before I reload the last saved game, but as I stand up, the game takes me by surprise. Instead of the usual *game over*, the display fades into a new scene. A prison cell. My character is barefoot and stripped of all his gear, but still alive.

I guess the purpose here is to find a key or lure a guard or something like that in order to escape from prison. I've seen it before, even if they usually only insert these kinds of scenes into more important parts of the game. It's rare that you'd *actually* get thrown in jail for a random street

brawl.

Sitting in front of my screen, I take a virtual look around. The cell that my character occupies is one of many and I can hear a variety of voices swearing and mumbling from the neighbouring cells. Only the cell beside me is quiet. At first I think it must be empty, but then I notice a vague shadow outlined against the wall on the other side of the bars separating the cells from each other.

The figure is a thin woman with long, dark hair in a thick braid hanging down her shoulder, concealing her neck. When I move closer to the bars, she lifts her head and gazes at me. There is a gleam in her eyes and as the camera zooms in on her, I notice her pointy ears.

“What are you staring at? Haven't you ever seen an imprisoned elf before?” says the voice in the speakers.

Three possible responses flash onto the screen and I consider for a moment before choosing the friendliest one: “I simply noticed someone in the same situation as myself. Why are you here?”

“They say I killed someone.”

“Are they right?” my character continues. I don't even have to do anything.

She smiles grimly. “Not this time. I am on the hunt for a murderer, but now I have been blamed for his deeds. They found me on his last victim's farm and hastily judged that I was the perpetrator.”

I get to choose another response. I forgot to turn on the subtitles so I'm not *totally* sure who I am speaking with yet but I strongly suspect that I have found the woman I'm looking for. After a brief consideration, I click on one of the responses: “Tell me about this murderer that you seek.”

“Why? Did they put you here to question me?” She regards me with suspicion for a moment before relaxing again. “No, they enjoy their interrogations too much for that. Why are you here, in fact?”

A new choice. I decide to take the rather truthful route: “I was in a brawl. I thought I would

wake up in the gutter but... here I am.”

“They’ll let you go with a fine and a warning, then. Hmm. I wonder whether you might be willing to help me with something. . .” She inches closer to the bars and crouches down. “This murderer I’m seeking. . . I don’t know what kind of being it is but he has taken the lives of several magic users and I doubt that he will leave off now. It is only a matter of time until he kills again. I need someone to help me find him, or at the very least, to uncover proof of my innocence so that I may get out of here and continue the search myself.”

“And how might I do that? Are there any leads to follow?” I select. I don’t feel like going into all the small talk and instead go straight for the questions about the main mission.

“It is simple. There is a fire hawk circling above the city. When you get out, climb up to the highest cliff or rooftop that you can find and call the hawk to you. Her name is Urdsága. When she hears her name, she will know that I have sent you and will help you find the true murderer.”

I click on the next question out of old habit. A bit of extra information always comes in handy: “What else can you tell me?”

“Only this: be on your guard. All of the victims thus far have had sorcery on their side, but not one of them have been able to stand against him. This is no mission for the inexperienced,” she warns. I have to grin at the obvious hint. I’m not exactly ready for this quest but I can always leave it for later, when I’ve had a chance to build myself up.

My character does not seem to notice. “But what does the killer want with them?” he asks.

“It seems as though he’s after something that they have. Many of them were rumoured to be guides or gatekeepers, people who know the way to the realm of the gods, and other realms besides. At the sites of all the murders , it appeared as if the killer had been looking for something, a key or a map for example. With the latest victim, I think maybe he was after her spirit animal. I caught a glimpse of an animal hiding under the feed shed just before they beat me unconscious.”

So that’s where the traces are leading. Find the hawk and return to the scene of the crime to

more closely investigate the feed shed. The last choice I am given is whether or not to accept the mission. The whole situation seems a little phony to me and I don't quite get why Khalid would mention this character at all, but in the end I say yes, I'll see what I can do.

“Make haste,” she says and grabs my character's arm. The imploring gaze in her eyes vanishes as quickly as it came and she adds: “It won't be many days now before they execute me. It would be good if you could return before then.”

Then the conversation is over and the close-up of the two characters is once again replaced with the normal game screen. The rest of my imprisonment is routine. I lose a bit of my money and end up on the city guards' watch list, but only a few minutes later I am a free man once again.

On a closer look at the overview map, I realise that the distance I've traveled is not as far as I first believed. A chain of mountains divides the land just near Gjallarvik and the area that I started out from only a few days ago is directly on the other side of the mountain. I haven't yet spotted the hawk that the elf mentioned, so I set my course outside of the city to find a path up the side of the mountain. Fortunately, my destination is clearly marked on the map, so finding the path is not particularly difficult.

What presents more of a challenge is the pack of wolves that I encounter at the foot of the mountain and the lawless gang hiding out in caves further up. Both types of enemies are more tenacious than I would like, and I die three times before I'm able to find my way to a viewpoint and summon the damned bird.

When it finally shows itself, it comes circling down out of the sunlight so the only thing I can see at first is a glowing outline toward the sky. It lands on a nearby rock and measures me up and down with its predatory gaze. Then, new destinations appear on the map and the fire hawk goes into my arsenal in the form of surveillance help from the air whenever I might need it. Bonus!

I put the hawk to good use on my way down from the mountain and manage to avoid the majority of enemies that stand between me and my next goal: the latest crime scene.