

When the Banshee Knocks

Prologue

The Meeting (1940)

There's an unmistakable cowboy swagger in his step. His leather-soled boots *clack* against the porcelain floor, his full-length brown coat swishing with each one of his foot strikes.

“How's Quinn?” the eight-foot-tall Fedora-wearing man asks as he stares down at his friend. Shoulders rolled forward, the giant clumsily lifts his feet and keeps pace with the grey-haired man beside him even though it's clear the wrangler's quickened his stride. The cowboy shoves his hat back as he looks up at his long-time friend, Varg.

Doran says, “He's fine. Fine.” The old man grumbles. His eyes stare at the sea of white-haired locks of men and women that look like foam in ocean waves. Some attendees have their hair long and flowing, others have their locks trimmed down, and still others have it pulled back in ponytails or braids. It's a good turnout. But Doran knows some couldn't attend because appointments couldn't be missed or rescheduled.

It's been years since the war ended. Now is the time to set clear guidelines on how to proceed. Doran shakes his head that words he'd said years ago were never taken seriously. He might as well have pleaded his case in a graveyard.

Varg's red-rimmed eyes bulge at Doran, “He must have missed you during the war.”

The attendees are gathered in a circular room with porcelain floors and gold walls. Placing a hand on his belt buckle, Doran rests it there before crossing his arms and leaning against the wall.

Above them, spirit Banshees swirl in the dome. So, this meeting doesn't include only the Banshees working now but also those who did the job for hundreds and sometimes thousands of years? It could be a good thing, could be a bad thing. "Old dogs, new tricks," Doran whispers.

"Doran?"

"Yeah," Doran says, looking around.

"Did Quinn miss you?"

"I guess so."

"You guess so?" Varg says, dropping his shoulders to get a better look at Doran. The shadow from Varg's hat makes his jawline longer, round eyes rounder, and makes him *look* more intimidating. It's Varg, though, the gentlest giant Doran's ever known. So, instead, it's as if Varg's trying to use a drug to draw out the truth from him.

"What do you want? I don't know if he did or didn't." Sighing, he says, "Sorry, Varg. I came back, and things were different between us."

"Is he in the war now?" Varg leans closer to Doran and whispers. A dark-haired woman, the only one in the gathering, appears in a sequined purple coat and steps into the center of the room with her golden-haired, blue-eyed brother, Talos, by her side.

"Yeah," Doran says.

"And he's also started to work for us?"

Doran nods as other Banshees pass by, gives a quick wave of his hand, interjects the odd, "Hello," and says, "How are you doing?" to them. Everyone moves swiftly, entering the room, taking whatever seats are available, or standing when there is none. Before long, Doran knows he has no choice. He must answer Varg's question.

Varg stands, hands relaxed at his side, and slouches forward. Shaking his head, Doran's voice cracks when he says, "Yeah, he's working for us. And he's in the war."

It's uncommon for Varg to be so quiet. The silence makes Doran look up to try to figure out what Varg might be thinking.

Varg's cheeks flush pink. "This gruesome war has taken so much from everyone," the giant bends forward, head drops, as he stares at his feet. "The bullets, bombs, the loss of life—the brutality, it's too much. What's the point of it all?"

"Well, Varg," Doran says, "it's not our first." His gaze locks on the giant's thin hair that pokes out from under his hat.

Varg takes his hat off and runs a hand over his thinning white hair. "I know," he says. "The last one was different, though. It brought with it its own nightmares for us and the humans that survived, no doubt. This one—" shaking his head, he says, "—it's as if the humans have shrugged off all sense of their humanity. And poor Quinn needs to see all of it from both sides." Placing the hat back on his head, he leans closer to Doran and says, "How old is Quinn?"

"I think he's around seventeen," Doran says, shrugging. He can't think about Quinn right now. Well, can't think about all that Quinn has to deal with and how his situation could be worse than for any Banshee. Glimpsing over at Varg, Doran notices the tilt of his head, the rose color in his cheeks, bloodshot eyes, and the spine that's been bent forward so long. Doran can't remember the last time the giant ever stood tall. And it worries him.

Doran's eyes gather with tears. Coughing, he clears his throat.

The dark-haired woman in the sequined purple coat says, "Everyone, take your seats." The room darkens. The spirit Banshees come together and shine brighter above Sabine and Talos. "We are here to discuss the war. And what, if anything, should be done to ensure we do not face a similar situation in the future."

Sabine circles the center of the room like a shark and its prey. Her eyes rest on each of the Banshees. "In this room, we need honesty about your situation. And given the current world

circumstances, if the workload we are experiencing is manageable—particularly for those Banshees who are assigned the more troubling cases.” Sabine’s voice quivers on the last word.

“This will end,” a pale-faced woman says from the back of the room. “It always does.”

“There have been concerns that what happened years ago could happen again. That the work we do is too painful for Banshees to sustain for long periods. A worry, if you will, that some Banshees are being torn apart on the inside when witnessing the most gruesome deaths.”

“They are weak!” a male Banshee cries.

Silence falls on the room. “No, they’re bloody not!” Doran shouts. “Even Banshees have limits as to how much grief we can bear. That’s why we had the war!”

“That was one Banshee! We have done this work for thousands of years. And only one Banshee could not handle it and was corrupted by the grief!” some female giant cries from the other side of the room.

“Order!” Talos booms. His arms clasped behind his back, he’s a man of few words. When he speaks, though, everyone listens.

Doran stares at Varg. His face becomes the same color as the porcelain floor under their feet. And his black hat doesn’t make him look darker, only whiter now. There’s grumbling, whispering, hands covering mouths as Banshees lean into one another, sharing their opinions.

Do they agree? Or disagree?

“Who would be in favor of rotating people out? That we change the workloads from time to time?” Sabine asks as she paces around the room while glancing at Doran.

Crystal waves a manicured hand and says, “We have been trained to handle the cases we do. It is not simply a matter of showing up and placing a hand on the top of a person’s head. You must know how to console without being involved and show humans where they may find their inner strength.”

Doran shakes his head, “No disrespect, Crystal,” Doran says as he waves a hand at her, “but for my team, we have accidents and murders, the most terrible human deaths,” Doran says.

“Have you ever seen an animal die at the hands of its master?” Crystal’s eyes shine with the glow from the light, “And—when there are children who are powerless to stop their father or mother from committing the act? Do you know how painful it is to witness and how challenging it is to try to comfort the child and the poor creature?”

“You’re right,” Doran says, “that must be hard, as well,” Doran croaks as he puts his hands in his leather coat pockets. His mind fumbles. He hadn’t thought of that. “So, rotation of assignment might be a good idea. We can train each other. Learn what needs to be learned from one another. And then we all get a chance to see the deaths where someone dies where they’ve lived a long, good life, and are loved.”

“You are only concerned because your half-human child has been assigned to your group. Fearful that he might not be able to cope,” Stavros says, glaring at Doran from the other side of the room.

Leaning forward, Doran extends his finger, waving it at Stavros, and says, “My son has nothing to do with this!” The heat on Doran’s cheeks burns. He grabs his hat and holds it by the rim as he looks down. When he finally stares at the crowd, everyone’s quiet, and all eyes rest on him. “All right, it might have something to do with Quinn,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “But it’s no coincidence,” holding his hat in his hand, he flaps it to the crowd as he moves to the center near Sabine and says, “the war started because it was someone from my group who gained powers when they witnessed violent deaths. Hell, I know how I feel after watching person after person get beheaded, or shot, or who drowns, watching children—”

“Perhaps, an open forum isn’t the right way to go.” Sitting in the back, Arthur stands up wearing his tuxedo and top hat and crosses the floor. “As we can see from this meeting, some make

judgments against those who are struggling, so a private meeting with Sabine or Talos to discuss any emotional hardships might be best. That way, there would be no shame as some of you are inclined to judge those who care too much about humans,” Arthur’s eyes lock on Stavros. “And those who might be able to handle more of the workload can do more for a short time. Leave it open to see if there are Banshees who would be interested in changing subjects. While Crystal,” waving a hand in Crystal’s direction, he says, “is not inclined . . . there might be interest from others. Still,” glancing at Doran, Arthur says, “some of us might be able to pick up more of the burden.”

The golden hall glimmers and the audience falls silent. “It is a good recommendation. And it might be the best we can hope for,” a robust boom comes from above the living Banshee’s heads. The Elder of the Banshee ghosts, Sabine and Talos’ father, says, peering down at his children.

“Yes, Father,” Sabine and Talos say.

“So, we are in agreement? There will be one-on-one meetings to discuss challenges, or if there is interest in exploring other assignments temporarily?” Sabine says. “And we will leave it to each Banshee to decide what, if anything, needs to be changed or done?”

There’s a sea of swaying heads up and down.

“Nearly unanimous, from my count,” Sabine and Talos’ father says, “with perhaps, only a dozen that disagree, and others who are indifferent.”

“So, we have a majority,” Sabine says as she stands beside Doran.

There’s nothing else he can do. “Yeah,” Doran says.

“It’s a win,” Varg says.

Doran and Varg squeeze together so they can fit through the door as everyone shuffles out or flies off in different directions.

“I know,” Doran says.

“Do you think it will be enough?”

“I don’t know,” Doran says as they watch the Keeper of the Giant’s Causeway realign a rock and force it deeper into the ground beneath the ocean. With one foot, he steps on it and hops on it a few times.

The North Atlantic Ocean casts a wind that howls as wildflowers sway in the breeze.

“We should be grateful to get what we did,” Varg’s voice gargles as the two old friends look out over the ocean. “I never get tired of this.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Hesitating, Doran asks, “Where you off to?”

Varg’s eyes redden. “Poland.” He takes a breath in, almost as if he’s trying to be revived by the water. Doran doesn’t say anything because there’s nothing he can say.

“And you?” Varg asks without taking his eyes off the ocean.

Doran’s arms are crossed in front of him. It’s a terrible job they have. It helps, though, so they do it for the humans. “London.”

“Ah . . .” Turning, Varg extends his hand, “Well, I’d better be off.”

With that, they shake hands, and Varg clutches his Fedora as he rises into the cloudy sky, and with a thunderous clap, he’s gone.

Doran kicks the ground with his boot, says, “Oh, hell!” and rises and flies south before he turns east toward London.