

A&U

Story Collectors & Bounty Hunters

Story #4

Agnes and Ulfur entered Midgard, landing on a stretch of beach filled with black sand. Ulfur recognized from the landscape that they were back somewhere on the shores of Iceland, but which side of the island they were on was beyond his memory. He left the directions to Agnes, always.

“I wish we had some sort of insignia to pin to our cloaks,” Agnes said as they walked along the beach.

“What do you mean?” Asked Ulfur.

“You know, something to show our importance.”

“To who? The Hidden Folk don’t care and the humans wouldn’t know what it meant anyway.”

Agnes pouted. “But detectives around the world will soon be flashing their badges when working a case, showing off their prestige.”

“I don’t care what the future holds in store for humans, Agnes, you know that.” Ulfur surveyed the land around them. A tiny turf house sat in solitude in the distance.

“You should care, Ulfur.” Agnes said, with a warning tone in his voice. It was nothing new, Agnes loved to dangle juicy details of the future in front of others, taunting them to ask for more before denying their requests. His reply would always be: *No one can truly know what the future holds, that sort of information would be dangerous.*

The truth was, Ulfur had never met another Hidden Folk who could see into the future as far or as accurately as Agnes could.

“There’s the house up there,” Agnes confirmed.

“Tell me again what our instructions were.” Ulfur only half paid attention during their briefing meetings. He was required to serve in the Seelie Queen’s guard as a representative of the kingdom of Alfheim. Agnes was conscripted as a member of the Seelie Queen’s court.

They had been paired up because of their centuries-long friendship and worked naturally together. Agnes paid attention to the little details while Ulfur provided the intimidation.

“Our mission is to confirm whether or not a true Selkie was involved and ensure she is no longer in danger. Collect the story and go. There are no other Hidden Folk involved this time.”

“Good, this should be quick then.”

They walked across the beach and up the grassy field to the door of the little house. Agnes knocked, while Ulfur stood back a few steps. Their strategy was to have Agnes greet and persuade the human in question to talk, while Ulfur was visible in the background in case there was resistance.

A man with a bushy brown beard answered the door. His trousers were short, and his eyes had dark circles around them as if he had not slept in days. He was not much taller than Agnes, who was small compared to most humans at about five feet tall.

“What do you want?”

“There’s a rumour in the countryside that your wife has gone missing and you had something to do with it? We’re here to uncover the truth. May we come in and talk?” Agnes used his smooth, calming voice that nearly always got him his way with humans.

The man looked at Agnes with tears forming in his eyes. He gestured for them to come inside.

Ulfur detested the homes of humans. They were far too cramped, with strong odours lingering in the rooms. The turf houses of the Icelanders were particularly uncomfortable for Ulfur. Their tallest rooms averaged six feet in height, while the hallways were usually lower. At nearly seven feet in height, Ulfur had a difficult time moving through the rooms, preferring to wait outside. But Agnes had invited them both in, so he had to brace himself for what waited within.

The man led them into the main living space of his home where he took a seat in a wooden chair and gestured for the two of them to sit on a wooden bench. Ulfur held his breath as the timber groaned under his weight, releasing it only when he was sure the bench would not break. The man seemed not to notice. He was lost in thought.

“Are you or are you not, Gudjon of Myrdalur?” Agnes began his investigation.

The man nodded.

“And is it true that your wife is missing?”

The man nodded again.

“Do you know where she went?”

“Yes.” The man whispered, “But you would not believe me.”

“We’ve seen a lot of unusual and strange things, Gudjon. Why don’t you test us.”

The man said nothing.

“If you don’t tell us anything, then the rumours will only spread further. Some believe you are responsible for her disappearance.”

The man’s eyes grew wide in surprise.

“I did not hurt her.” He exclaimed. “She just left.”

“You’re telling us that your wife just left you? And yet you’re certain no one has harmed her?”

“Yes.” The man sighed, heavily.

“How can you be so sure? Most men who can’t find their wives imagine the worst scenarios or have at least one suspect in mind.”

“Unless you killed her.” Ulfur interrupted Agnes.

Agnes shot him a warning look, not to interfere.

“I did not kill her, I swear. She left, she just went out...” His voice trailed off as his gaze looked out the window towards the sea.

Ulfur could not see the future, nor cast spells with a look, but he could sense the true emotions of creatures around him. He knew the man was not a killer, he could sense that, but that did not mean he was good.

“So, she left the island? By sea?” Agnes continued.

The man nodded again.

“You’ll need to elaborate here, Gudjon. There’s no way she could have gone far in a fishing boat and there are no nearby ports for merchant ships to stop. Without the details filled in, this case looks pretty clear, and it does not look great for you.”

The man hesitated, his eyes darting between Ulfur and Agnes, then he whispered. “She was a selkie.”

Agnes leaned in close as if in disbelief. “You married a Selkie?”

The man blushed.

“You must tell me everything. How did you convince her to take off her seal skin?” Agnes asked with enthusiasm.

Ulfur did not need to listen to the story. He knew that humans only ensnared the interest of a supernatural creature by trickery or force. But Agnes loved gossip, and with a bit of help from his persuasion powers, the man began to talk.

Gudjon claimed that he came across a colony of Selkies, sunning themselves on the beach one day. He noticed that their seal skins were just lying in a pile on the sand. He thought he’d take a chance and steal one of the skins. He snatched one that he thought was small enough to be female, and took it back to the turf house, locking it away in a wooden

trunk. At dusk, he went back to the beach, and sure enough, a lone female stood there, crying silently while watching the waves hit the sand. He admitted to feeling a pang of guilt, but when he saw how beautiful she was he decided he had to have her as his wife. He comforted her and brought her home, pledging to one day help her find her family again. But he never told her that he was the one who had stolen her seal skin and that he had locked it away in his trunk.

The seal woman married him and bore him several children. The others in his district wondered where such a strange beauty could have come from, but none of them suspected her true origins, or so the man claimed. And his Selkie wife had been wise not to tell anyone the truth either. The man really believed that they were a happy family, but then one Sunday she insisted on staying home from church, claiming to feel ill. When he returned home with their children, they found the house empty. The wooden trunk was open and the seal skin was gone.

He immediately ran down to the beach to try and stop her, but it was too late. She was long gone. Her clothes lay in a neat pile on the sand and she was nowhere to be seen.

“When was this?” Agnes asked.

“About a week ago.”

“Do you still have the clothes?”

The man nodded. He stood up and went to the large wooden trunk in the corner of the room.

“I have no reason to lock anything up anymore.” He said as he opened the lid and pulled out a simple grey dress, apron, and black, knitted shawl.

Agnes examined each article of clothing carefully while the man shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “What happens now? Will you help me find her?”

Agnes looked at him with pity. “Well, in the old days the Selkies would probably come to punish you for kidnapping one of their kind.”

The man’s eyes widened with fear.

“Or, the Queen of the Hidden Folk might arrest you and put you on trial in her court for crimes against a magical creature. But luckily for you, the Queen hasn’t set foot in these parts in hundreds of years.”

The man’s colour drained from his face, and sweat began to bead on his forehead. Ulfur could tell he wasn’t sure whether Agnes was spinning a yarn or telling the truth.

“We’ll take these to the magistrate and explain that all the evidence points towards the sea. You won’t be charged with her murder, and we won’t mention your little story here either, but don’t be surprised if rumours start to spread.”

The man looked relieved.

“Thank you.” He said.

“Don’t thank us. If it were up to me, I’d hand you over to the Queen of the Hidden Folk myself.” Agnes scooped up the seal woman’s clothes and flashed a playful grin at the stunned man.

Ulfur got up from the uncomfortable bench and approached the man. He leaned over, bringing his bright golden eyes close to the man’s face.

“You may be off the hook for murder, but you’ll always be guilty of keeping a woman captive against her will. You better hope her Selkie family is as forgiving as we are.”

Satisfied with the level of terror in the man’s eyes, Ulfur pulled away, leading Agnes out of the small turf house, back into the dreary grey daylight.

Once they were out of earshot of the house, Ulfur scolded Agnes.

“You should not have mentioned the Queen. We’re here to end influence in Midgard, not stir up fresh beliefs.”

Agnes smiled coyly. “Lighten up Ulfur, that man already believes in us, he just mistakenly thinks he can act without punishment.”

“Well, he can, thanks to the Queen’s decrees. While we’re stopping Hidden Folk from getting involved in human affairs, we’re simultaneously stopping our enforcement of respect and protection for our kind.”

“Yes, but he doesn’t need to know that. Besides, I thought you were on my side with your little speech at the end.”

“I was driving *your* point home.” Ulfur insisted. “Men like him are despicable. He deserves justice, but that justice belongs to the Selkies, not us.”

“Those Selkies should have known better than to leave their skins unprotected.” Agnes shook his head in disapproval.

“The strange thing is, Agnes, that man really believed he loved her. And yet he kept her from her true self, he stopped her from being happy. How could he not see that?”

“Creatures of all kinds do crazy things in the name of love,” Agnes said, giving him a knowing look.

Ulfur ignored his comment. Together they walked in silence until they reached the faint dirt road leading to the village. It was a relief to smell the fresh ocean air and hear nothing but the wind, blowing past them for a while. Then Agnes broke the silence with a hushed voice.

“You know, there are those in the shadows who believe we should not be pulling out of Midgard, but that we should claim even greater influence.”

Ulfur looked at him in surprise. “That’s nonsense, Agnes.”

“I don’t mean going to war with them. Or physically conquering them, no, the idea is to infiltrate their power structures and wield influence to our benefit. To keep these humans in check.”

Ulfur was a bit taken aback by his friend’s information. Going against the Queen’s decree was treason, and Agnes was as loyal as they come.

“I had no idea you cared so much about politics.”

“Oh, I don’t. Honestly, I have no interest in power. But I do love spending time amongst humans. They’re so amusing, so much fun with their brilliant ideas and hopeless optimism. I don’t want to give them up.”

“That is where you and I differ. I would be happy to go home and never set foot in Midgard again. You know I’m only doing this as my duty to the Elf Council, to represent Alfheim in the Queen’s conquests.”

“Don’t be so self-righteous. You and I both know that you’re really here because you’re hoping to find *you-know-who* before another team does. And even though I know you’ll break the code to help her, I could not ask for a better partner to work with.”

Ulfur scowled. Agnes always knew his secrets, and he hated that.

“Shall we get this part over with?” Agnes asked, shifting the bundle of clothes under his arm.

“Do we just tell them it was a drowning?”

“Yes, that sounds about right.”

“May as well get it done and go home.”

Off they went to find the magistrate to pass on the information about Gudjon of Myrdalur’s missing wife.