

A&U

Story Collectors & Bounty Hunters

Story #1

Ulfur trudged through the little creek, uncaring that the glacial water splashed his legs. His elven boots kept his feet warm and dry. He could see the small turf house up ahead, small trails of smoke escaping the grass-covered roof. A few other turf houses were just visible in the distance, making up the village of Bakkagerði in North-East Iceland. It was hardly a village by Ulfur's standards but for such a sparsely populated nation, it made sense.

He paused on the other side of the water to let his companion catch up. Agnes insisted on riding an Icelandic horse, a short and powerful breed, and often lagged behind as the animal carefully picked its way amongst the treacherous lava rock and wet grasses.

"How do you always get so far ahead? Don't you ever tire, you big brute?"

"Are you talking to me or the pony?"

"Don't call him a pony, you'll offend him!" Agnes made a dramatic gesture of covering the horse's ears as he said this. "You only wish you could ride. It's too bad they don't make them tall enough for you."

"Let's just get the information and get out of here."

"Tsk, Ulfur, you don't need to show such disdain. These people are doing the best they can. They merely cling to us to give them hope."

Ulfur shook his head. He loved the thick forests and blue skies of his home kingdom of Alfheim, in the realm of Yggdrasil. He hated visiting the realm of Midgard, especially Iceland. In the shadow of the roaring power of the island itself, the people lived in abject poverty. Their tiny homes were always cramped, damp, and smelled of sheep dung, sweat, and smoked meat. Where some of his kind pitied the humans, he held a deep disdain for them. He saw how they treated each other, especially the poorest among them. He saw what they did to unmarried women who became pregnant. So many of their struggles were

blamed on his kind, the hidden ones, or huldufólk as the Icelanders said it. And so often his kind was foolish enough to attempt to intervene. This intervention of elves in the world of humans was the catalyst for the Seelie Queen's quest to stamp out all interference.

Ulfur and Agnes were merely pawns in the Seelie Queen's game. They were bounty hunters, posing as story collectors. Well, the latter part was partially true since they were supplying heavily edited versions of the stories they heard to emerging writers in Reykjavík who were compiling the country's folklore into a book.

"Agnes, let's get the story and go home. No milk, no tea, just facts."

"Oh Ulfur, you know I never turn down tea."

Ulfur couldn't help but laugh. He and Agnes worked well as a team. Agnes was skilled at buttering people up to get the truth out of them while Ulfur was the strength. Ulfur was not dumb, he just preferred directness over gossip. While Ulfur was better at rounding up guilty elves, Agnes had a way of getting humans to talk.

Ulfur allowed Agnes and his horse to lead the way across the field towards the small turf house. It was always better when Agnes went first. When humans first spotted Ulfur, they tended to shrink away as quickly as they could. His size was intimidating for them. He was a giant to most of them, being roughly seven feet tall in human measurements, while Agnes was a mere five feet and four inches, far closer to the average human height of the time.

"Hello? Anyone here?" Agnes called out. A stray sheep ran across the yard, but no people were visible.

The weather was fair for Iceland. The clouds were light grey and the wind was mild. They'd purposely made the journey on a Sunday when all the occupants of the dwelling would be at church and only the woman in question remained behind.

Agnes called out again, and this time a woman appeared around the back of the home.

"What do you want?" She asked gruffly. "The family won't be back until this afternoon."

"We're looking for a woman called Gudrun, is that you?" Agnes asked.

"What's it to you?"

"We heard it mentioned that you recently had a peculiar encounter."

Gudrun laughed. "You might say that. So, you're here to gaze upon the magical cloth? It'll cost you."

"We're here for the story, nothing more." Ulfur attempted to say in a gentle voice.

Gudrun's eye grew wide as she looked him over.

"I'm the one who helped her. She gave it to me. If you think you can steal it, you'll be sorry!"

"Dear Gudrun, don't mind him. He's really a cuddly lamb beneath all that brawn. Of course, we'll pay to see the cloth if you'll please tell us everything you remember about the visit."

Gudrun smiled, clearly won over by Agnes's charm and enjoying the attention.

"Well, it was a day sort of like today. It was just me here while everyone else was at church. I had finished the chores, fed the animals, milked the ewes, and was preparing dinner inside when a woman knocked on the open door."

"When was this?" Agnes asked.

"Three Sundays passed. Gosh, it's hard to believe it's been three already. Well, so this woman knocks on the door. When I left the shadow of the pantry I could see her in the daylight. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Her hair was like a raven's, so black and shiny and long. And her clothes were much nicer than what we wear around here. She wore greens like the moss on the stones. She didn't have any jewelry or ornaments, but she was so polished looking she had to be something special, I just knew it.

"She asked for a cup of buttermilk. She was thirsty and hungry and delayed on her journey, she told me. I happily gave her a cup. As she drank it I asked for her name, but she ignored me. So I asked again, but she simply finished the milk and handed the cup back to me. She thanked me profusely and made to leave, but I asked her again. I so wanted to know what name such a stunning woman might have."

"And so you could ask neighbours if they knew of her, no doubt." Agnes added.

"Yes, of course, that too. So I asked her a third time, and this time she smiled at me, not with pity, but admiration. And she said. *You are a curious woman and persistent. For this, I will tell you my name. They call me Borghildur. And for your generosity, I give you this cloth in thanks.* Then she hands me a fine piece of green linen cloth with a golden eagle stitched into the corner. I'll go fetch it so you can see with your own eyes."

The mention of the golden eagle perked Ulfur's interest. If the design was correct, it could only belong to one elven family, and based on the description of the woman, he knew exactly who it was.

"You okay there Ulfur?"

Ulfur shook his head. "I'm not looking forward to the end of this case."

"Why not?"

Before Ulfur could respond, Gudrun was back with the cloth. It was a fine piece of green linen. And the eagle was just as Ulfur knew it would be. A golden stitched eagle in flight. His stomach flipped over.

"Wow, this is gorgeous." Agnes let out a low whistle. "Guard this well dear Gudrun."

"I do."

"What happened next? After she gave this to you and said her name."

"She left, headed towards the Alfaborg over there. That's how I knew she was one of the Huldufolk. No one else had ever seen her or heard her name before."

"That large stone over there?" Agnes asked, pointing in the distance.

"Yes, that one."

"Sounds like an incredible story," Ulfur said, signaling Agnes to wrap things up.

"Hey, you two aren't from around here, why did you want to hear the story?"

"We're collecting interesting and peculiar stories around the country. You might be in a book one day, dear Gudrun."

"If you need more stories, take the road south and ask about Naddi. That's a creature you'll want to hear of."

"Thank you, dear, here's your money. And thank you so much for your time."

Gudrun nodded and headed inside with her cloth and coins.

Ulfur deliberately walked slowly to talk with Agnes as they left the turf house.

"So, you know who we're dealing with?" Agnes asked, eyebrows raised with intrigue.

"I'm afraid so." Ulfur nodded. "Sounds a lot like Lauga's daughter."

“Isn’t Lauga your Queen?” Agnes asked with a giggle.

“No, we don’t have a Queen like you Seelie Monarchists. We have a council of equals. Lauga sits on the council, just as I used to.”

“That’s just as awkward.” Agnes grinned. “So what do we do? Report back to my Queen or talk to Lauga first?”

Ulfur thought for a moment.

“Neither, we need to find and talk to Borghildur first.”

“But that means breaking our vows to The Quest. We’re sworn to track down and bring in lawbreakers”

Ulfur scoffed. “Since when do you take vows seriously?”

“Good point. But we can’t leave until we hear the story about Naddi. I’m dying of curiosity!”

“Fine, it’s on our way back anyway.”

“Excellent. Now, try and keep up.” Agnes said, urging his horse to trot away.

Ulfur just shook his head and followed.