

A&U

Story Collectors & Bounty Hunters

Story #3

After traveling for several days through the northeast of Iceland, Agnes and Ulfur returned to the Hidden Realm empty-handed for the first time in months. Part of the story was that fewer and fewer Hiddenfolk were interfering in human affairs. Those that were meddling knew to be smart about their actions to avoid getting caught. Their only target had been Borghildur, but Ulfur had convinced Agnes not to track her. The laws would catch up with her eventually, but Ulfur did not want to be the one to bring her in.

Their plan was to spend several weeks in the Seelie kingdom, stocking up on supplies, training for the next bounty hunting season, and taking a break. Mere days after their return, the Seelie Queen had summoned them both to her castle for their next mission, dashing any of the plans to relax. While Ulfur was in the dark about the details of their mission, Agnes seemed to know more.

“Why are we leaving so soon, what happens on Epiphany?” Ulfur asked Agnes, as they walked along the snow-covered path to the castle of the Seelie Queen, home of the Seelie Court.

“Really Ulfur, you don’t know? You’re over a thousand years old and you really don’t know?” Agnes asked in disbelief.

“I’ve never had much interest in what goes on in Midgard, unlike you Seelies.”

“Not all Elves would agree with you. In the old days, Seelies and Elves would visit Midgard on this night. While the humans were celebrating either the end of the Yuletide season or the true birth of the Christian savior, depending on the region, we would celebrate alongside them. Sometimes we revealed our true nature and they would sing songs to honour us. Other times we blended in, unseen and undetected.”

“And did you attend many of these parties?”

“You know how much I love parties. Ulfur, can you imagine, parading through the winter countryside on a starry night, following the Seelie Queen herself? Dancing around a bonfire in a seaside village, having humans sing alongside you? For once, not fearing you or trying to outsmart you?”

Ulfur smiled at his friend’s fond reveries. The experience he was describing sounded terrible to him.

“When did these celebrations stop?”

“I think the last Queen to ride was Queen Breenai in the late 1600s. The world of humans was beginning to shift and the ties between our worlds began to slip away. It wouldn’t be long until the accords were drawn up by her successor.”

“What happened next?”

“Well, no tradition stops abruptly. Bands of Seelies and Elves still visited communities, but the pomp and celebration dissipated. Rumours began to spread of malicious creatures taking advantage of the human celebration. Rather than taking part in their festivities they would loot homes or lure humans away to danger in the dark. Many folk tales surrounding the Epiphany are still told today with roots in the activities of a few bad hiddenfolk.” The glee in Agnes’s eyes dissolved.

“Is why the Queen wants to see us?”

“Sort of, yes. There is a clandestine group of Seelies that take pride in disrupting the bonfires in the villages of Iceland. They know the humans there are highly superstitious. These ‘Dark Seelies’ as they call themselves, take great enjoyment from taunting them. Our job is to stop the Seelies and bring them in. Queen Domnalla has been trying to do this for years.”

“What makes this year any different?”

“We have you, for once thing, and I have successfully been welcomed into their ranks.”

Ulfur laughed. “You? Agnes, you’ve got to be joking.”

Agnes pulled a fake pout. “What do you mean? I’m a great actor.”

“You’re very dramatic, yes.” Ulfur shook his head in disbelief. “How do you know that they trust you? I mean *really* trust you?”

“I joined five years ago,” Agnes explained. “I’ve participated in the past five raids so they would truly trust me. Now, is the year to finally take action.”

Ulfur was stunned. Agnes was far better at keeping secrets than Ulfur gave him credit for. Five years had gone by and he had not suspected Agnes of any gang involvement. And he thought he knew most of Agnes's secrets. He was wrong.

"So, do you know the plan?" Ulfur asked, trying to accept the reality of his friend.

"Sort of. We'll be at the village as planned. I'll take my place in the gang while you watch the events from a hidden place. You won't be alone. A team of Seelie hunters will be there hidden as well, as a backup. When the chaos begins, we take them down one by one. Simple as that."

Ulfur could already spot a dozen cracks in the plan, but he held his tongue for the moment.

"If it is so easy, why do we need to meet with Her Majesty?"

"She wants to ensure you are loyal to the cause," Agnes told him.

"Me? She's questioning my loyalty? After how many bounties you and I have brought in?" Ulfur forced himself not to raise his voice. He was offended by the questioning of his loyalty. In his opinion, all portals to Midgard should just be sealed. Cut the realm off completely rather than waste time hunting down violators of the accords.

"She wants to know that you'll fulfill the mission, even if Elves turn out to be there. Would you be loyal to our Kingdom or would you be loyal to your kind?" Agnes glanced at Ulfur's scowl before adding, "This is all her words, not mine. You know I trust you with my life!"

"I know, Agnes, I'm not mad at you. Of course, I'm loyal. When I joined the hunters I made an oath." The hunters had only one goal: hunt down and bring back any hidden folk who interfered with human affairs, for good, bad, or indifferent intentions.

Neither of them spoke for a few long minutes. Ulfur was lost in his thoughts, while Agnes seemed to be working up the courage to say something.

Ulfur paused in his tracks. Snow was starting to fall in thick flakes, settling in their hair and eyebrows.

"Whatever you want to say, Agnes, just say it."

"Well, if Borghildur shows up, would you turn her in or let her go?"

Ulfur did not answer. If any other elves showed up in support of the rogue Seelie gangs, he would turn them in without hesitation. But Agnes was right, if Borghildur was involved in any of this, could he in good conscious turn her in?

“Of course, I’ve already given you my approval and support, one hundred percent. But she wants to ask you, face-to-face.” Agnes added.

“I’m loyal to the Crown, Agnes.” Ulfur smiled at his friend, who seemed relieved to hear his declaration.

They continued walking, the large iron gates now visible in the distance. Ulfur was lost in his thoughts. He was preparing himself to lie boldly to the Queen’s face.