

Once the dogs had reached the forest, they turned off the main path. Herfod stilled his mount and listened to them yapping amongst the barren trees, which were mostly hardwood in this section. He could just see a few animals hopping through the snow, their ears flying up and down and their tails up like stiff banners, clots of ice balls waving behind. Herfod realized he couldn't rush his horse through the deeper snow. Peasants searching out fallen branches for firewood had created the path he was currently on. There were smaller trails throughout the trees, but none were safe for galloping. He lifted off his mount and settled on the packed snow of the path. He knotted the reins of the horse on the pommel.

"Mind your footing," he warned Ridiug's stallion.

The horse whickered, and Herfod darted in between the trees, trusting the mount to make its way at a safer pace, but he charged down the paths at a reckless velocity, leaping across huge expanses of snow and onto further tracks whenever he thought the other would bring him closer to the dogs. Presently he caught up to the shortest of the animals, this one struggling in a drift and yapping over its dilemma. Herfod paused long enough to wade over and toss it onto the nearby trail, then charged on after the main pack.

The dogs had begun to yelp excitedly further into the forest, their combined clamour no longer receding. It was possible that Lumpy had found his quarry. Herfod had a belated worry over the friendly deerhound at this point. He'd neglected to mention that she should treat the hunted as potentially dangerous. He hoped she kept her distance from the elves.

Within a minute, he'd come within a hundred yards of the pack. He halted on a trail and peered about intently. He'd been wrong. There was no sign of the quarry. The dogs were milling about the trees, angling back and forth in the snow, hunting for the scent, but unable to locate a new trail. He surmised that the men had likely heard the dogs, doubled back on their tracks and climbed a tree. He slowly searched the expanse for a low branch from which the elves would have leapt up.

His borrowed mount at last trundled up on a small trail behind and to the side of the one he stood upon. He heard the stallion snort, then whinny in surprise. Herfod whirled about and beheld two short, slender figures on the beast's back. The horse reared. The elf to the fore kicked it forward, but Herfod barked at the animal to stand fast. The stallion instantly planted its feet and remained stationary.

Startled, the elves sat the stallion, unmoving for an instant. Then they leapt off and backed from the horse. The eldest pulled a sword from a scabbard over his back. The blade at once began to glow, a rippling shine

that made the metal seem otherworldly. The youngest turned sideways and confronted the dogs converging on them. He, too, withdrew a curved weapon from his back harness, and this also began glowing in his grasp.

“Hi now, dogs! Stand your ground!” Herfod shouted at the curs. “Lumpy! Back off, girl!”

The dogs abruptly halted their charge and stood staring at the quarry in perfect silence. Into the stillness, the youngest elf spoke to his father.

“That must be the one your mother took up with,” he remarked in elvish. “Apparently he’s an animal charmer as well as an insidious demon.”

“She shouldn’t have sent him,” his father replied. “I’ll not brook this insult. Since he’s chosen to delay us, he dies with us! The curs as well!”

“I’ve a witch that can reattach your testicles,” Herfod said bluntly, calling to them in their native language. “No need to be hasty about keeping your appointment with the Ancient Power.”

With a livid glare, the elder hid his surprise that this human spoke the elven tongue with utter perfection. “What is the use of this?” he shouted. “Tell me? What is the use? We are still unwanted! We are still abhorrent to our people! No pure woman will ever have me again! No woman will ever take my son and mother a child for him! Our existence has no purpose!”

“Your people are in general the stupidest race the Ylf Lord ever created,” Herfod retorted. “Are you going to prove my opinion by offing yourselves despite my offer?”

“Your offer is useless, you disgusting worm!” Nicky’s son spat. “It does nothing but permit us to die later with our body’s whole!”

“Well! At least you’ll have *that* to comfort you as you get reborn as anything the Earth Goddess pleases the next life!” Herfod shouted at him. “Perhaps she’ll be so pissed with your idiocy that she’ll toss you up in a human body. Better yet! She’ll send you up a half elf and see how you make out as a slave. And if I’m lucky, you’ll come back male and get your parts chopped in any case. What a laugh that would be!” He thumped the earth with a boot, his expression caustic. “Hi now, down there! What will you do, you great bitch? Send him up somewhere prestigious in his opinion, or toss him into the worst situation you can imagine?”

The earth rumbled beneath them, not in answer to his question, but for the insult he’d inserted in his words. The two elves naturally gaped in surprise.

“Is he a sorcerer?” the youngest wondered.

“He doesn’t have the aura,” the other said.

“He must really be a demon, then,” the boy whispered. “He insulted the Earth Mother!”

Herfod heard him quite clearly and sneered. “A demon! Do I have the aura for that?”

“He has very good hearing for a human,” the youth commented. His father said nothing to this, but stared with mounting alarm at the odd human.

“Take my offer!” Herfod shouted at him.

“Why should I?” the elf countered. “I don’t trust you! Why would you wish to help us? Why would you wish us to live?”

“I don’t give a personal shit about you,” Herfod answered truthfully. “But your predicament has made my Nicky unhappy, and for her I’ll fix anything. That’s why I wish you to live.”

“And as I told you, our lives no longer have purpose!” the elf retorted.

“Gods bust it!” Herfod bellowed at him. “Do you think fathering pure-blooded children is what it takes for happiness? The Earth Goddess all but gave you permission to father a race of half bloods, great fool! Nicky has other children hidden away about this world, doing just that! Take advantage of the Ancient Power’s offer!”

“Half bloods are—!”

The elf’s disgusted protest discontinued as his son interrupted.

“Us!” the boy shouted. “Half bloods are us! Our people have made it clear that they consider us tainted! I want to live! I don’t care if it’s with humans!” He attempted to shove his father to the side, but the elder resisted. “I want my testicles back!” the boy shrieked. He charged around his father, only to falter in the deeper snow off the path.

“No!” the elder barked. “No! We will die pure! We—!”

His son ignored him and flailed his way out of the bank. Incensed, his father lifted his glowing sword, intent on ending his only child’s existence. Herfod instantly charged up the trail he stood on. He leapt to the other and slammed the elf into the snow. The boy whirled about belatedly. He lifted his weapon, intending to come to his father’s aid, unaware that Herfod had saved his life. Herfod lifted off the elder elf and backed away, toward the youth that meant to slay him.

“I won’t let you kill him!” he said to the boy’s father.

Behind, the youth’s eyes widened in comprehension. His gaze fixed on his father. The distraught glare on the elder’s face was enough to confirm the human’s allegation.

“Father!” the boy cried in disbelief, lowering his weapon. “We can live! We don’t have to die!”

“We have no honour left to us!” his father exclaimed. “We should never have been born! I should never have dared to sire you!”

He lifted to his feet, crusted snow tumbling off his body. His triangular hat fell from his head and lay in his imprint. He let it lie. He’d had enough. It was time to end this travesty of a life. His son had lost his courage. Embittered by this, balked by his mother’s human, whose unwanted presence had taken away even the comfort of the traditional ceremony for ending an elven life, he raised his glowing sword and stepped forward to strike down the loathed impediment.

“You will die, you sickening nonentity!” he snarled.

Herfod backed off further, bumping into the youth behind him. He stumbled and righted himself hurriedly. He had his poniards with him, but he knew intuitively that the elven blade would only cleave through the fighting knives. Common metal would afford him no protection whatsoever. Loath to kill Nicky’s son outright with a thrown weapon, and realizing he needed a more adequate one for close combat that he might disable his attacker, Herfod turned with lightning speed and grabbed the katana from out of the boy’s hand. He whirled back and narrowly blocked the father’s first blow. He shoved his opponent back with his boot, at the same moment experiencing a very bad presentiment that he might have to kill Nicky’s fanatic son to save her grandson, for the elf was faster than he’d expected. He was forced to block again as the elf pressed his onslaught.