

## Prologue — Night Hunt

Four smallish figures crept from bush to bush in the faint light of the last of the new moon, edging ever closer to a dark cave entrance in a cliff. The closer they came, the better they could see the wavering hint of firelight coming from within.

The ponies were back in a fir copse at a safe distance around a mile away. Hunting trolls was a deadly business and unless everything went perfectly, the hunters would need to be fleet of foot. Archers could run but these four ran like the wind.

Brock and Fitz and Rafe had swords on their belt, two crossbows slung across their shoulders and another in their hands but Elsa, a striking brunette in her teens, had just one crossbow on her back. At her side was a slim, finely wrought dagger with a brace of small rubies on the pommel — but she rarely used it.

A sudden clattering of metal from within the cave and a burst of raucous laughter stilled them immediately. The risks they faced here were ones to which they were well accustomed but anything out of the ordinary, like this sudden laughter, gave good reason to pause.

Few knew how to kill these monsters effectively but Rafe, the head of the party, knew that in most instances, trolls were not good at dealing with the unexpected. For that reason, Elsa would go into the cavern first and play her ludicrously improbable part.

If there were three trolls to keep track of, as there often were, it meant that the attack would have to be well coordinated.

It took two well aimed cross bow shots through the eyes to kill a full-sized troll so that meant getting close enough to give them a good angle of attack — which was why Elsa had to go in first. She would engage and distract them while providing a guide, and cover, for the best possible approach angle.

As soon as she had the trolls' attention, her companions would dart forwards one after the other to take their shots. After each bolt, they would slip back to whip the next crossbow off their backs and into their hands to keep up a constant rate of attack.

If one missed, Elsa would back them up with a more carefully aimed bolt. A band of four was enough to clear out most troll dens so Elsa's younger friend Pip had remained behind to watch the ponies.

Archers were so named because they were dead shots with any kind of bow but it took the extra power of a crossbow to sink far enough in to kill these tough brutes. If they did not die straight away, they would rampage forth, blind or no, to attack wildly in the direction of whatever they had seen or heard.

Elsa played the bait, as she had been happy to many times, and she and her friends crept on to reach the large cavern opening, hoping that the smoke and the smell of cooking meat would cover their scent.

As ever, she steeled herself within for the dangerous business of beguiling the trolls, making them think that she was an innocent young girl lost in the wilds and seeking shelter in a cave.

Given her role, she would not be the one to take the first shot but would be very ready to back up any shot her friends missed. Well before the trolls could react, she would have her bow at the ready and often enough, she was the one to finish the job.

The big folk of Briar hunted trolls as well but their missions generally took them farther away into the north — yet all too often lately, trolls were slipping through their guard, coming dangerously close to Archedain's peaceful towns and hamlets.

The Archers checked their crossbows one last time before plunging in — ten bows in all of a clever design that could be rapidly reloaded, given half a chance. In they went, silent as the evening breeze, seeing ahead clearly now with the increasingly bright light from the fire within the cavern.

Three trolls there were in the well-lit zone, sitting evenly spaced around the fire. Elsa knew that most Archers thought of trolls as roaring and carousing but they rarely were. Silent now in the wake of their recent raucous laughter, they were however not especially watchful.

As it happened, Elsa was able to come to within twenty feet before one saw her and she cried out in a piercingly high voice, mesmerizing them for vital seconds with exaggerated fear and horror.

With a grunt, one of the three facing away from her jumped up and turned, leering greedily at the tiny, frightened figure before him.

Rafe took the first shot at that one standing on the left and Brock came in a moment after him, taking out the second eye of the creature before it could move. By the time Fitzhugh had taken out the first eye of the second troll on the right as it rose, Elsa had the bow off her back and finished it off.

The third troll jumped up then, enraged and roaring loudly but a more difficult target — half facing away and looking down at its fallen companion. For long seconds its eyes remained obscured.

Elsa came through bravely again to deal with the impasse, releasing such a blistering scream that it spurred the lumbering beast into action.

Slow they were at times but at others, quick as lightning. True to form, before it even looked up it was charging towards her. Moving to the right and screaming again loudly, she drew the first one they had blinded stumbling towards her, directly into the path of the charging one.

The two crashed to the ground and in moments four Archers ranged around them, taking easy shots at will.

In no time at all, three trolls lay dead before them — a good result on any night.

Brock's eyes began to rove around to look for their stash. Yet just as he began to move, another horrific roar came from farther back in the cave and three more trolls sprang out of the dark in full charge towards them. With no time to think, the Archers ran, as their training dictated.

Two spears whistled past them from behind and one narrowly missed Rafe, who had stalled a little to let Elsa get on ahead of him. Trolls killed very effectively with their spears but the now moonless dark beyond the fire hindered their aim.

Trolls could also run surprisingly fast and long. The Archers would need a moment to get up onto their mounts and spur them away so it was vital to get as much of a head start as possible.

Brock ran the fastest and his pony, Trickster, was tethered loosely up on the little hill above where Pip sat ready on her mount with the rest. Nipping up a series of small ledges to the top, he was mounted and on the lookout before the others caught up. Fortunate that was because the trolls were not far behind.

From this high angle, he could just see the starlight in the eyes of his friends. Trolls eyes were much bigger. Two more crossbows were in the saddle bags open just behind him. He just had time to reload one that he had with him so he had three at the ready before they came into range.

The first shot was a clear one and the troll skidded to a halt with a groan throwing a great hand up to its eye. Even as it roared out in anger and pain, Pip took her first excellent shot and got the second eye. Brock had the next bow in his hands in moments and took out the first eye of the following troll as quick as blinking.

Rafe had reached his pony and whipped out a spare bow just in time to aim at the shrieking second troll but the moment he let loose his first shot, the third one had sprung up over the rise and was there right before Brock, wielding a great curved blade.

Trickster sprang away and bolted down the hillside in the darkness and Brock had just enough time to think what a beautiful night it was for a wild gallop in the countryside before the unpredictable pony bucked hard and threw him off to the side.

Just as he had been able to see the approaching trolls from the hilltop, so was Fitzhugh able to see the slaving, roaring beast up there. It took but a moment for him to take out one eye and sink another arrow deep into the creature's forehead. Not a kill but by then Pip had reloaded and sent her next bolt up under the soft area behind the chin. That finished it off.

'Any more?' Rafe cried.

'No. That's all. There were six,' Fitzhugh replied.

'Where's Brock?' Elsa asked stepping up onto her stirrup from beside her pony.

'Trickster got him away,' Pip replied calmly. 'I saw him bolt down the far side of the hill away from the copse.'

'Brock!' Elsa called out, not very loud but loud enough.

There was no answer and unlike Pip, she was not calm.

'We've got to go and look for him,' she said. 'Something is wrong. I can feel it.'

It was a strange twist of fate and Brock would never have expected it yet the last thing he remembered later was tearing down a hillside on his crazed and frightened pony before being flung off onto the grass like a great boot had hit him hard in the behind. After that, things became very unclear and he seemed to be lost in a weird dream in some other place like the great city of the Danes far to the south — but he could not say where it was for indeed it would be a long time before he had any clear recollection of it.

In his immediate experience of it, however, he did know that it was all wrong. There were way too many people around and the clothing was outlandish.

All the buildings looked slick and glossy like cold steel and the ground itself was smooth and black. Was it some kind of thoroughfare?

He cast his eyes around and grew more astonished by the second but then his eyes settled upon an even stranger sight.

There were orcs — or creatures very like them and some of them had a beautiful girl cornered at the edge of the way. One lashed out with its fists and the poor girl fell heavily to the ground.

Orcs or trolls, it was all the same to Brock and he raced towards them, some of them now kicking the girl as she lay on the ground.

He saw the girl more clearly as he approached, crumpled on the sidewalk like a broken flower, bleeding and battered. Enraged, he ploughed into the orc pack like a berserker.

Some fell down and the rest scattered, which surprised him no end. It was really a poor showing for orcs in any circumstances and he kicked at the fallen ones until they scrambled away.

Bending down over the girl to tend to her, he thought that they had all run for it but at the last moment one turned back — maybe because he saw Brock kneeling over the girl, wiping the blood from her face. Then, for Brock, there was a sudden explosion of pure white light.

Everything was different when he woke. He could barely see at first and did not know any of the three faces that were looking intently into his by the light of lantern. And the clothes they wore. What the hell? Was this some mediaeval re-enactment?

No, he remembered then that poor girl's bloodied face and the terrified look in her wide green eyes but even that now seemed strange. It was all distorted, like he was caught between two worlds, and not knowing which if any was his.

'He's coming to,' said one of the figures standing over him, a youngish man quite a bit smaller and slighter than himself with dark hair and blue eyes. The words were strange but somehow, he understood them.

'Yes, Odin be praised ... but see his eyes,' said the pretty blond next to the young man. 'I don't think he knows us.'

'Why should I know you?' Brock said, struggling with the words — questioning each of the strange sounds as they came from his mouth.

'Because, we're your friends, Brock, and you've known us all your life. You took a bad blow to the head when you fell down from Trickster. I've never

seen a pony more aptly named. Why you hang onto him has long been a mystery to me.'

Klaus looked around for a pony but could see none.

'That may be the case but my name's not Brock,' he replied.

'Of course it is,' said the girl. 'It's Brock ... what we've always called you.'

'No, my name is Klaus ... and I don't know you.'

Rafe glanced at Elsa and could see the shock in her eyes. They were not out of the woods yet and he would have to manage how things went carefully.

'Easy, Elsa. That'll be a little bit of temporary memory loss ... not too bad ... unlike what could have happened to you when you screamed and dodged to the right in there. What on Midgard made you do that anyway?'

'Didn't you see?' she replied. 'The first one you shot was still on its feet, blundering around blindly and I knew if I screamed, it would come towards me.'

'Just in time to trip up the other one. I have to hand it to you, you do think on your feet.'

Brock started to feel quite anxious with all this talk about screaming and shooting things.

'Take it easy, Brock,' said the third person, the slight little blonde with the cute face. 'You'll be right as rain in no time.'

That was Pip.

The first fellow, who himself could almost have been a boy, had no beard or any sign of one that might have been recently shaved. They were an astonishing group. All of their features, their complexion and their hair were quite beautiful.

Klaus's vision was clearing and he could see that he was lying on a field of soft green turf with many lovely wildflowers under the stars—and off to the left there was a stand of tall fir trees.

Everything was different — the light, the texture of things, the sounds and the smells but also something else intangible. It came to him abruptly that all the scents around him were remarkable — new, heady and, yes, intensely intoxicating.

All of what he perceived now beckoned so powerfully that he had to sit up — but he swooned again even before he had fully lifted his head.

'We might make up a stretcher and carry him back,' said Pip.

'You think so?' said Rafe. 'We're a good three leagues from Archeston.'

‘What... or where is Archeston?’ Klaus asked.

‘Principal town of Archedain, of course, lad, though you might dispute that.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t worry, just rest a bit and we’ll find that damn Trickster.’

Half an hour later Klaus felt a lot better and was able to stand up. The girl, Elsa, helped him and he was surprised that when he managed to stay on his feet, she held him close and kissed him on the lips. The others seemed to be off chasing ponies so he was happy for now to give all his attention to her.

‘What was that for?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she said with coy sort of smile. ‘Just the kind of thing that your girl might do when she thought you were dead and you came back to life.’

‘My girl?’

‘You really don’t remember?’

‘I’m sure it’ll all come back.’

‘I hope so,’ she said anxiously. ‘We were going to head over to Tuckland for your cousin’s wedding tomorrow.’

Klaus could see the anticipation of disappointment in her eyes and that it overlaid a melancholy that seemed to have been inhabiting them for much longer.

‘I’ll be alright. We can go if you like. By the way, what are their names — the other three?’

Tears glistened in her eyes.

‘Pip and Rafe and Fitzhugh.’

‘Rafe?’

With that, she could restrain herself no longer and burst into frantic tears.

‘Your best friend, Brock ... Rafe. You’ve been friends forever.’

‘And Pip? His girl?’

‘Sort of. Not really ... at least not yet. Pip’s father works for him and he looks after her. It’s complicated.’

‘Oh, I ... er ... understand.’

She calmed down a little then and while they talked, Rafe and Pip came back with the ponies, including Trickster.

Rafe grinned and Klaus could see that he was just about to slap him on the back but he cringed and Pip, quick on the uptake, held him back.

The whole thing seemed completely bananas to the fair-haired young German mechanic but it also had him strangely interested. He seemed to be in some sort of dream but the dream had real people with names and life stories — and it felt so real.

Hopefully somebody was looking after him and the girl on the streets of Berlin because there was clearly little chance he would be waking up any time soon.