

Fenris – Short Story

The hunters were after him again.

Truth be told, he'd known for several days. He'd seen it in the eyes of the innkeeper, the way the fat man guiltily glanced away and refused to meet his gaze. He'd seen it in the pitying look of the whore that stood on the corner, and the way she covered it up with a smile. The patrons in that squalid tavern where he went to buy his meals grew quiet when he entered now, and it was not the uncomfortable silence of human townsfolk being confronted with a strange elf covered in strange skin markings and carrying a large sword—rather it was the silence of men who knew trouble had just walked through the door and were now doing their best to pretend it didn't exist. Fenris knew the difference very well.

He'd been lazy. Despite the fact that he'd known, still part of him refused to admit that it was so. He'd hoped against hope that he was wrong, that the signs were simply a fugitive's paranoia. His stay in the last three towns had been longer and longer, his efforts to cover up his distinctive markings almost nonexistent. He told himself that this was a challenge. Let them come. Let them try and take him back, if they dared. Deep down, however, he wondered if he hadn't simply grown weary of the chase.

Now was the time. He'd already cleaned his few meager possessions out of his room at the inn and jumped out the window. It led to a dark alley in the back, with enough ledges below that a quick descent was easily accomplished. That was why Fenris had chosen the room after an inspection that had the innkeeper staring at him in worry. He almost had to wonder how long it would take the fat man before curiosity, or a lack of payment, would lead him to check and find Fenris gone. A week, perhaps less if the innkeeper was the one who'd sold him out.

There was nothing in the alley save for a few lone rats and an elven vagrant asleep against a garbage heap. Fenris paused and stared at the man in disgust. He'd thought to blend in more once he'd escaped the Imperium. In a land where elves were free, certainly one more elf would go unnoticed? He'd been a fool, of course. How was he to know that so many of his people would squander their freedom living like frightened cattle? If his only choices were to either dress as meekly as the local humans expected their elves to be, run off to find the wandering clans that grubbed in the dirt for whatever scraps the human kingdoms threw them, or to fight... then his choice was clear.

The vagrant stirred awake as Fenris drew the greatsword from his back. The elf squealed in sudden terror but Fenris ignored him. There were others coming now, cloaked in the alley's shadows—at least two on either side and... one above? He listened, and heard the faintest scraping on the clay tiles up above. Yes, no doubt a crossbowman. They thought they had him pinned.

Fenris launched himself towards the end of the alley that led away from the main street. Here it led into a maze of twisty courtyards, sewage and lines of hung laundry... but it would be darker there, easier for him to run without stirring the town guard. Why the hunters never tried bribing the guard to help their hunt he couldn't say. Regardless, he'd run amiss of the guard in another town and they'd impeded his efforts to escape as much as they impeded the hunters. It wasn't worth the risk.

The vagrant shouted in fear and drunkenly scrambled to his feet, but Fenris was already past him. Two long figures approached, barely visible but moving fast now as they realized their quarry was aware of the chase. Fenris caught a glimpse of maroon. Tevinter soldiers, then. Good, that would make this easier. Not that he wouldn't have killed mercenaries just as easily, but it was less pleasant than slaughtering dogs like these.

A wide arc of his blade knocked the first hunter aside as he parried. The second rushed forward, hoping to take advantage of an opening—only to meet Fenris's fist. The markings on his skin flashed brightly, the lyrium within them sending magic crawling through his flesh, and his fist phased through the man's helmet and directly into his head. He lurched to a halt, stunned with terror.

So they weren't warned. Fools.

The lyrium markings flashed again as Fenris partially solidified his fist. The hunter jolted back, blood gushing forth from his mouth and his ears. By now the first hunter was already recovered and swinging his blade. Fenris expertly hauled the second around by his head, putting him into the path of the swing. The sword chopped deeply into the man's shoulder, and with a kick he sent both of them flying together into the brick wall. His fist was covered in dark red gore.

He would have stayed to finish them off, but the other hunters were already figuring things out. A crossbow bolt flew by Fenris's head, barely nicking one of his ears, and he could hear the booted feet of more soldiers rushing his way. He ran into the alleyway, leaping over the hunter who struggled to push off his dead comrade, and sped into the maze. Dark doorways flew by as he raced. He cut down clotheslines and tossed over barrels to present obstacles behind him. They were definitely giving chase—he could hear them swearing in Tevinter, and the crossbowman above scrambling to get into position.

The first pair of open shutters he saw and Fenris dived through. He landed in a kitchen filled with the smell of baking bread, and a human woman screamed as he rolled to his feet. No doubt the sight of an elf in skintight armor, carrying a blade almost as large as himself, wasn't a welcome sight. He got to his feet and noticed the surprisingly comely woman, dressed in a nightgown that revealed more of her cleavage than she no doubt expected, pressing against the wall.

He grinned at her, and she screamed again. So he grabbed a freshly-baked loaf off the counter and raced for the front door of the hovel. Already a soldier was climbing through the window, causing the woman to scream once more and faint dead away. The others would be coming around to the front, so he had to get out before...

...he stopped cold. He knew the man who stood at the doorway: maroon cloak and jet-black hair barely covering those soulless eyes. Not to mention a scar on his neck, one that Fenris had put there. Damned healing potions and their foul magic. Why couldn't anyone stay dead?

"*Avanna*, Fenris. Good to see you again." The hunter's voice was a cold purr as he raised his crossbow and pointed the bolt at Fenris's chest. The one on the roof, then. Clever.

"Considering what happened last time, I'm surprised you decided to try again."

"It's not just about the coin any longer, slave."

Oh, how Fenris loved it when they said that. "Not afraid you'll lose your head for good?"

"Not when we have the drop on you. You've become careless. Time to give yourself up." The other hunter had made it through the window, and he could hear others shouting in the street. He supposed that he really had only two choices: give up and hope for a chance to escape later... or take his chances.

It wasn't really a choice. He tightened his grip on the hilt of his blade and smiled at the hunter, slow and deadly. "*Vishante kaffar*," he hissed. And he attacked.