

The Foiling of Gorsfeld

By

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The weaver's apprentices waited in the dining hall for a story while Renna, their master, cradled her café in her hands and dozed before the hearth. The flickering oil lamps added a fishy note to the ambient food smells. The nights after the Dark Solstice were long, and no one wanted to seek their beds so soon after supper. The wind whistled outside, and the hearth fire crackled inside, a perfect night to coax a tale from Renna, if she didn't fall asleep on them.

The master weaver's voice rasped in the silence. "So, what story would you hear tonight?"

A brave apprentice in front prompted his master. "Why do the people living along the river Soleis hate the rest of us in the Marches?"

From across the room, another protested. "Tell a story from the early days before the Half-Elven won their freedom for a change. Everyone knows we won the Rebellion."

Renna drained her cup and, with a wave of her hand, sent it gently sailing across the room, to where the dirty dishes were stacked. "Hummm. Those with long memories might say the Felds of the Soleis had just cause to hate Mariah and our other leaders." The old woman paused. "Would you like to know why?"

Murmurs of assent greeted the question.

The Foiling of Gorsfeld: A Tale of the Half-Elven

Back in the beginning days, deep empty forests filled the valleys and mountains of what we now call the Marches. Proper mates were hard to come by. Imagine the homesteads being few and far between, and hamlets even more sparse. We Half-Elven clung to the rivers then. We needed boats to transport goods and people since many of the family members who fled north with the elf-gotten lacked the elven skills to transfer loads from place to place, though many could work small magics.

The lower Fleeer was one of the few river sheds that sported five homesteads because of the broad valley. The first refugees also preferred to settle along the creeks feeding the river Fleeer near where the elf lord, Teemon, lived with the two sisters and his two sons.

The other main holder in our valley was the renegade, Jonketon, Mariah's foster father. My own grandfather had settled nearer to where the river Fleeer joined the river Soleis, where the Feld clan held sway from the dawn of history.

By the time Linden, Ashton, Mariah, and I were striplings, a wealth of dried apples, grains, and hard cider floated down the Fleeer to the Soleismouth where the Felds controlled the port, then as they do now. Their harbor made the Feld family rich enough to make them think they should rule the rest of us. Only the Felds' elf powers were weak ... so weak their lord thought to ally his son with a family holding strong magic. Mariah's reputation for beauty and power drew them to the hamlet where Jonketon's steading lay.

I was a frequent visitor at Mariah's homestead at that time because her foster mother knew as much about plant dyes as she did healing herbs. She taught me the beginnings of my weaving skills just as she taught Mariah her healing skills. So, I was there, working in the kitchen with Grasilda, when Martonsfeld, the lord of the Soleis family at the time, came calling with a trading crew behind him. The fall was still bright with leaves without a hint of winter. Most of the villagers were out in the fields raking the fruit falls before the pigs came through on their way to market.

"Hallo, the house," called Martonsfeld as he led his men to the open door one late morning.

The sun still warmed the land, but the welcome was cold. Grasilda glared at the Felds' lord even though all holdings were duty-bound to offer hospitality to travelers who came in peace. Custom also said you hailed the house from the landing, not the doorway. Only raiders tried to sneak up on a homestead.

Wiping her hands on the sacking tied around her waist, Grasilda asked, "Aren't you early to trade? We've just begun the harvest and are still sorting."

Martonsfeld waved his hand. "We decided to get an idea about the size of the harvest early this year so we can plan the ships. May we claim hospitality for our stay in the valleys?"

The excuse was flimsy at best, but we didn't know better. Neither of us had ever traveled to the Soleismouth or seen a sailing ship or knew how they operated. I admit I stared like a rube at group of them. I'd never seen such fine clothes as the Felds wore. Delicate lace draped from their sleeves almost to their fingertips, and gold threads created a fascinating pattern in the weave of their coats. Broad-brimmed hats with sweeping feathers obscured their faces. My fingers itched to touch the cloth to see how it was made.

The longer the traders stared into the house, the more nervous I got. The Feld lord felt like spoiled cheese. Grasilda and I were alone, and being human, she had no way to contact Jonketon. My elven abilities were just appearing and too weak to send a mindspeak for help.

"Travelers camp in the lower meadow by the landing." Grasilda pointed to the wooden pier and moved to close the door. "You can talk to my man when he returns."

Sticking his foot on the threshold, Martonsfeld said, "Perhaps your daughter could take my son, Gorsfeld, to see the orchards while we set up camp."

"My daughter's out with the raking crew."

"Then, ... your servant ...?" The boy behind Martonsfeld sneered at me.

"My apprentice has better things to do than entertain ... as do I."

As they glowered at each other, my evil genius spoke. “Mam, perhaps we could take the meal to the harvesters early. It would take care of two chores at once.”

At my words, Martonsfeld pushed the youngest of his crew forward with enough force the boy stumbled over the threshold. Grasilda gave in and waved towards the food sacks we had readied for the harvesters. I gave the boy the two heavy sacks holding the jugs of cider and clay bowls. I draped the straps around our necks so the food sacks fell to our sides.

Gorsfeld jerked the topmost strap over his head. “I’m not a servant.”

“Here, everyone pulls their own weight.” Grasilda scowled at him. “Why should my apprentice, who is the younger, carry more than her share?”

After a glare from his father, the young trader stomped out the side door after me, carrying his share of food sacks.

“See the third pattern on the barn?” I asked. “That’s the mark of Jonketon’s holding. The orchard landing has a red design in the center. You can transfer first if you want.”

“Transfer? Only those with elf-taint move through the air.”

“This is the Marches,” I said.

“Well, I can’t transfer.”

Thinking he was a poor excuse for anything, I shrugged. “So, we’ll walk. It’s not far.”

When we arrived, sweating from the nooning heat, the harvest crew was spread out over the orchard raking the apples into piles for the pigs coming down from the high mountains on their way to market. All had taken off their shirts, even the women, in spite of the wasps flitting around. Gorsfeld’s blue eyes bulged as if he’d never seen breasts before.

Linden, Ashton, and Mariah worked near a rock on the edge of the field, spreading honey on fresh baked bread. The three of them gawked back at the newcomer. I don’t think they’d seen gilded lace and feathered hats, any more than I had. Gorsfeld dropped the jug sacks on the ground by the rock.

“Hey, careful there.” Mariah scolded him, but Gorsfeld stared open mouthed at the sweat trickling between her breasts. “Who are you anyway?”

Hiding my grin, I said, “Sorry. This is Gorsfeld. He’s part of Lord Martonfeld’s trading crew setting up camp by the landing. These are Mariah, Jonketon’s daughter, and Linden and Ashton, the elf lord’s sons.”

Ashton grinned at me as he reached out for my sacks. “You brought the pasties? What kinds?”

“Venison and apple. What else did you think after you brought in a deer yesterday, and the apples just harvested.” I didn’t mention the onions since they were ever present at our meals.

“Ugh,” said Linden as we were still using as many of the damaged apples as possible. “You sure you cut out all the worms?”

While we discussed the food, Gorsfeld sidled next to Mariah. A wasp landed on her shoulder. Mariah ignored it, but the trader boy gave a squeal. He doffed his hat. Swatted at the insect, trapping it between the brim and Mariah’s skin. Obviously, she got stung. Mariah grabbed the hat and crumpled it as the wasp flew away.

“What do you think you’re doing, you dolt?”

Static sparked along her spine, but she stalked over to the water jugs to make a mud poultice. I grabbed one of the venison pies I’d slaved over all morning and pushed on

Gorsfeld's shoulder so he'd notice it. Though tempted to leave him to Mariah's wrath, I figured we'd only get in trouble if something happened to him.

"Our business is finished here, boy," I said. "Time to get back to the steading."

Gorsfeld glanced around at the workers homing in on the food. "But we just got here. I haven't seen the harvest yet."

"The harvest is back at the steading. These are the falls we're raking for the pigs," growled Mariah. "Don't you know anything?"

The next two days spun out like a dance where you tried to avoid an unwanted partner. Gorsfeld kept appearing at the oddest times and places. We did our best to duck out of the way. Mariah even bound her breasts, pulling the laces on her shirt tight ... not like her at all. Still, he'd sidle up to her. Bumping into her. Touching her. The bantam rooster made me glad my women's curves were slow in coming.

On the third day, Gorsfeld cornered us in the byre while I helped with the morning milking. Mariah was dumping milk in the cheese barrel when he pushed her against the wall and tried to kiss her. Eyes closed and lips puckered he didn't see Mariah raise the empty bucket to clobber him. I don't think he saw me in shadows neither, milking the two butter cows, because he tried to wrestle her to the ground in spite of the blow. Mariah turned and kneed him where a man's most sensitive. Gorsfeld ran sniveling to his father, who roared his incoherent displeasure at Jonketon.

The adults were livid at Mariah for breaking the Hospitality Code, no matter her excuse. Somehow, they thought she should have pushed him away and gone back to her work. Or, transferred out of reach. The little slime smirked when the four of us were forbidden to lay a hand on Gorsfeld for as long as the traders camped at the landing.

Did Gorsfeld learn his lesson? Of course not. He continued his sly touches, but never when the adults were near enough to catch him. His you-can't-catch-me game had us boiling with anger, the smug little fart. We didn't know how to get even with him for the trouble he caused until the pigherds arrived to rest and fatten their pigs on the rotten falls before they drove them down to Soleismouth. Mariah and I helped herd a batch of pigs into the fenced cider pear orchard so their dung would improve the soil. Ashton and Linden helped with transferring the spoiled apples to the pen because the cider pears tasted so bitter not even the pigs would eat them.

The night before the Soleis party left, Mariah took the kitchen slops out to the pigs, alone, while I went to meet Ashton and Linden to transfer baskets of apples to feed them. Gorsfeld lay in wait for Mariah and offered her a jeweled necklace gaudy enough to interest a Trestemontan king. The gormless idiot thought Mariah'd be impressed and let him fool around or even take him as her partner, as if we were thinking of such things at the time. ... Well, maybe we'd thought about them, but hadn't put our thoughts into action ... yet. Remember, this was 400 turns ago.

By the time we arrived with the apples, Gorsfeld had backed Mariah into the corner of the fence. His body pressed so close to hers that she couldn't transfer without harming him. Mariah was so angry her power sparked around them as we landed.

Gorsfeld's nose wrinkled. "You lot stink of rotten apples."

Ashton grinned as he approached them. "Those are the best kind. Haven't you seen pigs fight over who gets the greatest share?"

The trader boy sneered as he moved away from Mariah. "It's a wonder you aren't down on the ground fighting with them."

“Here, you forgot something.” When Gorsfeld turned, Mariah tossed him the gorgeous necklace. “It’s a little grand for pig herders.”

“You’re too stupid to appreciate beauty when you see it.”

Gorsfeld began a diatribe about what rubes we were. We could do nothing but clench our fists and listen with expressionless faces since we were in sight of the traders’ camp. When Gorsfeld took a breath, Mariah stooped to pick up a fallen cider pear. Her face gave no clue what she was thinking.

Brushing a pear off on her pants leg, she said, “Maybe we should apologize for not treating you properly according to your proper position as a lord’s son. Here, have a pear since you don’t like apples.”

The silly git grabbed the pear and took a huge bite. His eyes bulged out of his head as he tried to spit it out, but his lips puckered tight together. Cider pears are indeed one of the most terrible things to eat. The more his mouth contorted, the louder he grunted. Gorsfeld had no choice but to chew the pear into small enough pieces to swallow. When his mouth finally emptied, his jaw relaxed. Gorsfeld spat rapidly on the ground.

When he threw the rest of the pear against the fence railing, Mariah asked, wearing that cat’s smile of hers that displayed her sharp front teeth, “Don’t you like it? Most of us like pears better’n apples.”

Ashton leaned forward, his fists clenched. “Maybe our country ways don’t suit you.”

Gorsfeld stomped off without another word. We didn’t laugh at him ... at least within his hearing. But, he must have put ideas in Mariah and Ashton’s heads for they soon shared a bed, with Linden joining them soon after. I can only imagine what Gorsfeld thought when he heard of that.

* * *

Renna grinned, revealing her own sharp front teeth. “We never saw him above the river Soleis again though afterwards we had plenty of opportunities to argue with him and his descendants. ... Mostly to their disadvantage. And, you wonder why the Felds don’t like us. If they could work magic, I’d hate to be in Mariah, Linden or Ashton’s boots.”

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Hope you enjoyed this introduction into the world of the Half-Elven of the Far Isles. Two other stories by M. K. Theodoratus are available on Smashwords:

Taking Vengeance:

[published by WolfSinger Publications]

When their daughter’s family is murdered by Trestemontan raiders, Mariah and Ashton go hunting for vengeance. They discover the killers wield a strange new magic. Now, they must convince Linden, the ruler of the Marches, the Trestemontans endanger the Half-Elven.

Cavern Between Worlds:

All lifeforms have disappeared from an ocean rookery far from shore. Captain Hattenel, of the Half-Elven rangers, joins Voron, a disreputable sea captain, to explore the mystery. The pair is catapulted into the world of dog-headed magic workers, where they become prisoners. They must escape before the world's gravity or the dog-heads kill them.

M. K. Theodoratus also blogs at Lessons from My Reading, <http://kaytheod.blogspot.com>, where she reviews fantasy books and discusses the writing craft in general. Also, visit the Half-Elven website: <http://www.half-elven.com> to learn more about the Mariah's world.