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*The Night of the Wolf-Riders*

## THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF-RIDERS

by

Dag Rossman

The Hill-Giant Eggther roused from his restless sleep atop the grassy mound he called home and crouched up on his haunches. At first he was uncertain what had awakened him, but as Eggther listened to the trees in the nearby Ironwood creak and groan—despite there being no wind to move them—he realized that something was amiss. Even the light of a full moon failed to penetrate the dense mist blanketing that fabled forest, so the giant’s usually keen eyesight was unable to discern the cause of the eerie clamor.

Wide awake now—and thoroughly uneasy—Eggther reached up to retrieve a sleeping rooster from an overhanging limb.

“Best stay close to me this night, Fjalar, old friend. There’s mischief afoot in the Ironwood, I fear, and I pity the poor souls that run afoul of it.”

And Eggther was right. For at that very moment, in a large clearing deep in the heart of the forest, the self-appointed “Queen of the Ironwood,” Angrboda—the sometime mistress of Loki—had gathered together a group of her followers, that band of troll-hags whom fearful humans referred to in hushed tones as the Jarnvidjur. Also on hand was a pack of giant wolves, which served as steeds for the troll-hags when their marauding ways led them beyond the confines of the Ironwood.

“You all know the story of how that miserable mortal who calls himself Dag Ormseeker came to the Ironwood a few years ago and bamboozled me into letting him take a limb from one of our trees. In exchange, he agreed to give me a kiss but—curse the tricky rascal—he kissed my nose instead of my lips and so escaped falling under my spell.”

Groans and mutterings arose from the throats of her listeners.

“Still and all,” Angrboda went on, “he and his big girl friend, the giantess Brekka, didn’t get away entirely unpunished. No, indeed. Shortly after they’d left our forest, I caused an avalanche to sweep over them. The girl was killed, but the Ormseeker survived and was carried off to Asgard by that pesky busybody Heimdall.”

Moans and curses followed mention of the name of that feared and detested Aesir god.

“Even now, the humiliation of that day gnaws at my innards, so I’ve decided to bring an end to it . . . once and for all.” Angrboda paused dramatically as she surveyed the expectant faces of her followers. “Word has come to me from the beak of a wandering *hu-hu*, the kind men call a troll-bird, that the Ormseeker has left Asgard and been spotted both in Alfheim . . .,” the troll queen’s audience groaned yet again, for there is no love lost between trolls and Light Elves, “and in Midgard where he wanders about telling stories. And it is in Midgard where he can be most easily taken by a band of wolf-riders.”

“Taken, your Highness . . . and eaten?” asked one bold troll-hag, licking her lips in anticipation.

“Taken unharmed, my dear . . . and brought back to the Ironwood so I can have my vengeance on him. When I’m finished—*then* we eat him!”

Angrboda grinned a most unpleasant, toothy grin while her followers cheered and hooted their approval.

“And what of his companions—if he has any with him when he is found? Should we bring them back here, too?”

Angrboda shrugged her massive shoulders. “I really don’t care what you do with them . . . just remember the old saying that ‘dead men tell no tales.’ It wouldn’t do for word of your

deed to reach certain ears in Asgard, so leave no living witnesses behind you when you return to the Ironwood. Now, which of you shall I send?"

"Send me."

"No, me."

"Count us in," clamored a three-headed troll.

"Why should you have all the fun?"

"Stop pushing me!"

"Get yer bloody elbow outta me eye, you old . . ."

"Silence!" commanded Angrboda, flinging up both arms menacingly. "You can't all go . . . that's out of the question. Someone has to stay here to protect the Ironwood and your queen from the likes of Thor should he choose this time to pay a visit. Four wolf-riders should be enough to capture one mortal storyteller and drag him back here . . . especially when one them has three heads to spy out the land. That's right, Leikn, Leirvor, and Ljota—you may go—and Bryja, Skrikja, and Ulfrun will ride with you."

The jubilation shown by those Angrboda selected was partially dampened by the dark looks and evil mutterings of the ones who had not been chosen.

"Sisters, hush," bade the troll-queen.

"Those who remain behind—Amma, Angeyja, Blatonn, Geirnefja, and Vargeissa—will also have important tasks to carry out while we wait for our sisters to return, I can promise you that. So please do stop grumbling. You're giving me an awful headache." Angrboda glared at the five from pain-bleared eyes, then snarled: "And you know you don't want to do that . . . you really don't."

Silence ensued. After a time, the berated five slipped away on wolf-back to patrol the borders of the Ironwood, while the chosen four—or was it six?—gathered up their traveling gear and, without a word, departed from the great gray forest into the outer lands, there to track down their intended quarry . . . for however long it would take. Relentless in their pursuit, the wolf-riders had never yet failed on a hunt. May Odin take pity on poor Dag Ormseeker in his time of peril!

\* \* \*

"But you can't go off by yourself, Uncle Formindar," cried the distraught elf-woman Aelas. "I've really been looking forward to having Dag and I take a long trek through Alfheim with you."

"There is no simple reason for my decision, my dear, but go I must. I'm afraid I have put my love of family ahead of my duties as the Guardian for far too long. Now that you and Dag are finally husband and wife—and can look after each other without any help from me—it really is high time I resumed making my annual circuit throughout Alfheim."

"But why couldn't we come with you, Uncle? Surely Dag could tell his tales in Alfheim as easily as in Midgard . . . or in any of the other Nine Worlds." Turning to her husband, she asked: "Couldn't you, my love?"

"More easily and more safely, too, I suspect," Dag replied, "but if I'm to work my way back into Odin's good graces, I think it would be wise for me to resume my storytelling rounds among the peoples he most wanted me to reach—the humans of Midgard. They are the ones most likely to forget the gods' existence—and the threat of Ragnarök—if they don't hear the old stories retold from time to time. So, I'm afraid it is off to Midgard for us, dear one, and we'll just have to look forward to swapping yarns with your uncle when next the three of us share the same tent."

"I guess so!" Aelas sighed. "At least we'll have each other's company . . . and that means a lot to me, and hopefully to you as well."

Dag squeezed his wife's hand and quietly said: "You know it does."

"But what about you, Uncle? Couldn't you find a traveling companion?"

Formindar smiled gently. "You two have been my closest companions in recent years but, of course, my fang-mate, Falan, knows what is in my heart better than any other. Yet it would not be right to ask her to abandon for weeks on end the tent she shares with your father, Skuttar. Her place is with him . . . and all three of us know it. No, I am content with my own company most of the time, so I am never lonely when I travel by myself."

Aelas continued to frown. “But it just seems kind of sad, somehow.”

“Well, my dear, since my happiness seems to be of such a worry to you, I can see I will have to share with you and Dag something that I have told no one else save Falan. Watching the joy you two share in each other has both warmed my heart . . . and reminded me of what has been missing in my own life: the love of a good elf-woman.”

Aelas’s mouth gaped in surprise, but then clapped shut as she recalled a certain day when she and her uncle had encountered a young Merin paddler named Dattulas who had conveyed them by coracle to a village at the edge of the sea. Dattulas had introduced himself as the “son of Tsiwakan” and said that he and his mother lived near the head of the fjord in a village called Siskebu. It was clear at the time that Formindar had visited Siskebu years before—and that he knew Tsiwakan well enough to remember her with considerable admiration. Hesitatingly, Aelas voiced what was on her mind: “Tsiwakan?”

While Dag frowned in puzzlement, Formindar nodded. “Tsiwakan it is, Aelas, and my, what a memory you have! Dag, let me tell you what this is all about. Many years ago, when I had been serving as Guardian for only a very short time, I made my first visit to the Merin people along the Great Fjord and the sea coast extending away from its mouth. While there I made a point of spending at least a few days at each of the villages getting to know the elvish folk, letting them get acquainted with me, and finding out if there were any problems I could help them resolve.

“I started with the coastal villages, then moved inland along the Great Fjord. By the time I reached Siskebu at the head of the fjord, I was bone weary and sick to death of conversation. My *lotkulas* had fled, and I needed nothing more than solitude and rest. Fortunately, the village healer recognized my needs and insisted that the other villagers respect my privacy until I had recovered.

“The village elders set aside a tent for my use in a secluded area a short walk from the main encampment. The only visitors I saw

each day were the healer and his daughter, who had agreed to bring me my meals . . . and to play her harp and sing for me when her father thought that might prove soothing to my spirit. The harpist, of course, was Tsiwakan. Beautiful to behold she was—and quiet in manner and speech. She put me in mind of a tranquil sunlit tarn . . . and when she sang, I could envision a playful mountain breeze rippling across the surface of the water.

“Thrown together as we were in almost total isolation—and under such romantic circumstances—how could I have failed to fall deeply in love with Tsiwakan? Although less demonstrative than I in word, Tsiwakan soon made her feelings clear in deed. Had I remained in Siskebu, I am certain that we would have wed. Alas, ere long, a summons to a Muorra tribal council in Vuobmai arrived, and I had no choice but to leave at once to attend the meeting. My parting from Tsiwakan was a tearful one, and I promised to return for her as soon as my responsibilities as Guardian permitted . . . but I never saw her again.”

“Oh, Uncle Formindar, how could you abandon her?” Aelas cried. “That poor girl, that poor, poor girl!”

Dag said nothing, but he slowly shook his head in disbelief.

Formindar raised a hand in protest. “Now wait just a minute before you two rush to judge me too harshly. You have not heard the whole story. The Muorra tribal council for which I had to return revealed a number of serious problems that required the Guardian’s full and personal attention. Well, with one thing and another, the weeks ran into months and more than a year passed before I was able to wend my way once more into the land of the Merin. Gossip among the Alfar flies faster than Odin’s ravens, and long before I could reach Siskebu for my long-awaited reunion with Tsiwakan, I learned that the healer’s daughter had long since married a young elf of the village . . . and that their ‘happy union’ had already been blessed with the birth of a son!”

“Dattulas!” exclaimed Aelas.

“So it would seem,” remarked Formindar. “Anyway, there I was feeling very badly about

not returning to her much sooner . . . only to learn that she had found a new love shortly after I left. It was difficult to believe that the Tsiwakan I thought I knew could be so fickle, but there was no denying the existence of her husband and child. So, pushing aside my feelings of guilt, anger, and love, I closed off my heart from thoughts of Tsiwakan and turned my feet away from Siskebu.”

“Dear Uncle, I am so sorry to have misjudged you. But I have to ask: if Tsiwakan is married, why do you want to see her now?”

Formindar scratched his head. “Well, it is rather complicated. I really thought I had succeeded in putting her out of my mind for more than twenty years, but meeting Dattulas brought all the good memories flooding back. In all the time we spent with him, he often spoke of his mother but never once mentioned his father. This started me wondering if Tsiwakan might be a widow or, at least, that she and her husband had gone separate ways. So, I decided Siskebu would be the first place to visit . . . then I can see for myself how the land lies. Perhaps nothing will come of it, but I do want to see her lovely face again and hear her sweet voice.”

Aelas threw her arms around her uncle in a warm bear-hug, while Dag gripped one of his shoulders and spoke with heartfelt sincerity: “Our thoughts and prayers will go with you, sworn-brother, and may the outcome of your quest fulfill your fondest dreams.”

“Thank you, my dear ones. With your understanding hearts and good will, I can leave Vuobmai in high spirits. I will take leave of your parents this evening, Aelas. Then Raiko the goshawk and I will depart at first light. Will you be heading out on your storytelling tour of Midgard shortly?”

“Within a week, I should think,” Dag replied, glancing over at Aelas for confirmation and receiving her affirmative nod.

“Well, you are both experienced travelers, so you hardly need any advice from me. There is one magical device I want to send along with you, however, that might prove useful in an emergency. It has already saved Aelas from a

life of slavery and likely death, and that not so long ago.”

“Oh, Uncle Formindar, surely you don’t mean the thunderstone? Why that is your most precious possession!”

“Not nearly so precious to me as the two of you. Here, take it.” The elf wizard handed over a small pouch that contained the vaunted amulet. “Aelas already knows how to use it although, of course, I hope that you do not encounter any situations so dire that you will need to do so. Still, my heart will rest easier knowing that you have it at hand.”

Formindar turned back the tent flap and stepped outside, calling back over his shoulder: “Safe journeys to us all, and may we have some wonderful stories to share when next we meet.”

\* \* \*

The sun had scarcely sunk beneath the western horizon when four strange riders emerged from the mouth of a cave in the rough country of the Alfmark, which separates Alfheim from the rest of Midgard. Heavy-bodied—almost lumpy—they appeared, each wrapped in a huge black cloak whose deep hood concealed most of the facial features of the wearer. Only the tips of their long, thick noses could not be entirely hidden. And had an observer been able to see beneath the hems of their cloaks, rather than riding boots he would have beheld broad, furry feet!

The steeds were almost as unique as their riders. Giant wolves they were, each as high at the shoulder as a bull moose. And well they might be immense, for they were kin of the fabled Fenris . . . and thus at the beck and call of their mother, Angrboda of the Ironwood, who had borne them to giant lovers in later years, after Loki had ceased to come calling. Savage scions of a savage line, these furry brothers would only submit to being ridden by Angrboda’s troll-hags . . . and even those fearsome females could control their steeds only by using vipers for reins.

With a pair of those venomous reptiles clamped onto the corners of their mouths, the wolves had little choice save to obey their riders. A jerk on the rein would cause a viper

to bite down hard, thus releasing a burst of venom into a wolf's tender mouth tissue where it could enter the blood stream. Because the wolves were so large, there was no danger of a bite proving fatal, but the resulting pain was sufficiently unpleasant to insure the wolves' cooperation. Clearly the relationship between the troll-hags and the wolves was not one based on mutual respect and affection.

"The woodcutter we invited into the cave for a little breakfast seemed awfully reluctant to join us," cackled Bryja. "You'd almost think he suspected we intended him to *be* breakfast."

"A real shame how people just don't trust each other any more, ain't it?" "replied Skrikja. "Still, he roasted real nice, din't he, once he stopped wigglin' on the spit and screamin'?" Like to give me a headache there for a little bit."

"Oh, Skrikja, yer jest too soft-hearted," opined Ulfrun. "Music to my ears it were. What do you girls think?" And Ulfrun turned to the three-headed troll astride the wolf at her right.

"A little dinner music is always nice," said Leikn. "I thought he tasted a little stringy," muttered Ljota. "And you're all missing the point," snorted an exasperated Leirvor.

"Which is what, exactly?" queried Bryja.

"Which is that Angrboda expects us to find Dag Ormseeker and haul him back to the Ironwood for her as soon as possible. She didn't send us on a dining tour of Midgard and the Alfmark. The point, sisters, is that this fellow gave us the clue we needed before he became our meal . . . and all you seem to care about is how he tasted and whether or not he screamed in tune."

"Well, if yer so smart, missy," growled Skrikja, "why don't ya remind us jest what this great clue was."

"Leika and Ljota and I talked to the man just before you skewered him with the spit and started to turn him over the fire. He said that a young storyteller had stopped by his village about a week ago, along with an elf-woman and their two dogs. That has to be the one we were sent to find! So if we ride to that village tonight and sniff around carefully, we should

be able to pick up Dag's scent. Then we can put the wolves on his trail no matter what direction he's taken since."

"Wonder what elf tastes like?" muttered Skrikja.

"Oh, Skrikja," huffed Leirvor, "you're impossible! Come on sisters, let's ride." And the four great wolves—bearing their black-cloaked riders—padded off into the darkening night.

\* \* \*

Since learning from Freyja of his kinship to Dag, Faragrim had been walking steadily—but unhurriedly—across Midgard from Oppland to the Alfmark. The goddess had told him that Dag was now in Alfheim, and Faragrim was confident he could find him there once he entered that mysterious realm. The draug had never visited the land of the Light Elves before, and the prospect of doing so added yet another level of excitement to his quest.

Faragrim's musings were interrupted by the shrill "skree, skree" of a stooping falcon, which swooped over his head to alight atop a moss-covered boulder. There—surrounded by a shimmering golden aura—the falcon transformed into a beautiful blonde goddess.

Dropping to one knee, the draug cried out: "Well met, my Lady Freyja . . . but what brings you here in such haste?"

"Bad news, I fear, my hero. Odin has just sent me word by one of his ravens that your kinsman Dag is in great peril! He and his elven bride have left the relative safety of Alfheim and are on their way into Midgard to resume his storytelling rounds on behalf of the All-Father. Odin has learned that four wolf-riding troll-hags have been sent out by Angrboda to capture Dag and carry him back to the Ironwood . . . and last night they picked up his scent."

"That *is* terrible!" exclaimed Faragrim. "I must go to Dag's aid at once. Do you know where he is now . . . and how far behind him the wolf-riders are?"

"One cannot be certain how far Dag and his wife will travel each day since they have no reason to think they are being pursued, but Odin opined that the trolls might catch up with

them two nights hence at the Sjoa gorge, which marks the boundary between the Alfmark and the rest of Midgard.”

“Two nights?” gasped Faragrim. “Even running day and night I could not possibly get there in time.”

“Not unless you call again upon the spirit of your moose friend,” said the goddess. “I am sure he would be more than willing once more to help you defeat his old enemies, the trolls.”

“A wonderful idea, my Lady. I’ll invoke his spirit at once.” And, as he had done once before in the company of Gudmund at the village of Kverndal, Faragrim planted the butt of his rune-staff in the ground, traced a pattern of runes in the air with his free hand, and intoned a runic chant:

*“Once more, old friend, take form  
And move upon this land,  
That we might hasten forth  
To thwart a trollish band.”*

Faragrim’s rune-staff disappeared in a cloud of mist, to be replaced almost at once by the form of a moose-draug. The huge bull had eyes that glowed with the light of flickering bale fires . . . not unlike the eyes concealed within Faragrim’s deep hood.

The moose-draug seemed to sense the need for haste and bent his front knees so Faragrim could more easily mount behind his shoulder hump. The cloaked rider sprang to his seat and, as his mount rose again to its full height, the man called out to the golden goddess.

“Give us your blessing, gentle Freyja, and grant that we arrive in time.”

But the tireless moose-draug was already in full gallop, so it’s not at all certain that Faragrim heard Freyja’s reply before he was carried out of earshot.

\* \* \*

Four hulking wolf-riders drew rein at the crest of a pine-dotted hill that sloped down to the rocky rim of the Sjoa, whose cascading waters had carved out the rugged gorge in ages past. Grim in its aspect—and all but uncrossable save by the narrow wooden span of the Sjoabru that lay but a short distance upstream—the gorge heralded the end of the

Alfmark and the beginning of the rest of Midgard.

“Dag’s scent is very strong now, sisters,” Leirvor declared. “He can’t be very far off, so keep a sharp lookout. Humans and elves don’t see very well in the dark, so Dag and the elf-woman have surely bedded down for the night.”

Indeed, they had, for it was only a few moments later that Bryja called out: “Look, down there in that cluster of boulders near the edge of the woods. Isn’t that a small campfire with someone stretched out beside it? How careless is that? We can ride right up to them, and they won’t even know they have company until we’ve grabbed them!”

“Still, it doesn’t hurt to be a little cautious,” said Leirvor thoughtfully. “Angrboda would never forgive us if we let Dag get away. So, let’s dismount here and surround them with trolls and wolves as we walk down there and slowly draw the circle tighter and tighter. Skryja, you and your wolf approach from the west; Bryja, from the east; Ulfrun, from the north; and Leikn, Ljota, and I will come up from the river side. That way there’ll be nowhere for them to run if they should happen to waken too soon.”

Leirvor’s plan proved to be a good one. For as quiet as they were, Ledgi and Darra were very light sleepers and the hounds soon sensed the presence of approaching danger. With growls and howls, the faithful dogs placed themselves between the now fully awake Dag and Aelas and the rapidly narrowing ring of giant wolves and their even more menacing riders.

Dag stoked the fire with fresh wood and the resulting flare of illumination fully revealed the nature and extent of the peril facing him and his wife. The three-headed troll seemed to be the leader of the wolf-riders, and it was to her (or them) that Dag spoke.

“Good evening to you, ladies. We had no idea there were any trolls living in this neck of the woods, let alone any that had such magnificent steeds as you are riding. We trust this is just a friendly call on a pair of travelers passing through the neighborhood. We don’t



have much food on hand, but we would be happy to share what we have.”

“My, such a polite young man,” opined Leikn. “Too slick-tongued, if you ask me,” growled Ljota. “Angrboda warned us about Dag’s tricks,” Leirvor reminded them. Turning her face back to Dag, she declared: “Your offer of food will be will taken, Ormseeker, even if not in the way you intended. Once we have you trussed up for delivery to Angrboda, we will dine on elf meat . . . and your dogs will feed our wolves!”

Dag was shocked into momentary silence, but Aelas spoke up: “I have absolutely no desire to be your next meal . . . or to have you haul my husband off to Angrboda for her to torture and kill. Are you sure there is nothing we can say or do to persuade you to leave us in peace?”

“Only in pieces, dearie, but never in peace,” smirked Leirvor.

“Well then,” sighed Aelas, “on your heads be it.” The elf-woman drew the thunderstone from her pouch and held it aloft. Striking its golden rim with the tiny iron Thor’s hammer that hung from the rim by a fine chain, Aelas declared: “May the Light take these cruel trolls.”

A huge burst of sunlight lit up the hillside and the wall of the gorge, turning night into day and temporarily blinding the wolves and dogs (Dag and Aelas having closed their eyes). The animals moaned and howled at first—until their eyes were able to adjust to the sudden change—but the trolls, they said nothing at all. Leirvor, Leikn, and Ljota, Bryja, Skrikja, and Ulfrun had all been turned to stone—to match their hard hearts—in that moment of total enlightenment.

The conquest of the trolls did not remove all of the danger menacing Aelas and Dag, however. The four giant wolves remained—all sons of Angrboda and bound to the service of their evil mother. Unable now to bring Dag as a captive to Angrboda, the wolves harbored vengeance in their hearts and they determined to kill him and Aelas on the spot, then carry the torn bodies back to the Ironwood in their

mouths as proof they had been true to the troll-queen’s command.

As the wolves crouched ever lower preparing to charge, Aelas spoke to Dag: “I’m so sorry, my love, that the thunderstone can’t deal with the wolves as it did the trolls. And I’m afraid I can’t shoot more than one of them before the other three are upon us. So little time, and so many regrets. I only wish . . . .”

What Aelas was about to wish was abruptly cut off by Dag’s shout of “Hark, what’s that?” as the sound of hoofbeats thundered across the wooden Sjoabru to the accompaniment of maniacal laughter.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Too late for the trolls, I see, but just in time for the wolves,” shouted Faragrim as he and the moose-draug burst on the scene.

The wolves recovered quickly from their surprise, two of them moving to intercept the newcomers while the other two sprang at Aelas and Dag. Already anticipating the attack, Aelas drew her readied bowstring to her ear and drove a feathered shaft deep into the chest of the oncoming wolf, mortally wounding the great beast whose momentum carried him into Aelas and knocked her off her feet.

Dag’s attacker, seeing what appeared to be an unarmed man and assuming him to be easy prey, leapt upon him with great jaws agape—thinking to dispense with him in one powerful bite. Imagine the wolf’s surprise when his victim, instead of cringing backward, actually stepped toward him and grasped the wolf’s tongue in an iron grip. Startled, the wolf tried to clamp his jaws down on the offending forearm only to discover that it, too, was as hard as iron. Choking, teeth in pain, and beginning to panic, the wolf started to shake his head violently from side to side in a desperate attempt to dislodge Dag’s grip on his tongue. The Ormseeker was shaken so hard he could scarcely tell which end was up, but he persisted through it all . . . and sooner than it seemed, Aelas regained her feet and planted two arrows—the second fatal—in the body of her husband’s adversary.

Meanwhile, the moose-draug had lowered his magnificent antlers and charged head-on

into one of the two wolves coming toward him and Faragrim. The impact bowled over the wolf and, before the furry beast could scramble to its feet, the sharp hooves of the moose-draug were hammering its body—cutting flesh and cracking ribs. The wolf tried to fend off its assailant with its own sharp teeth, but they were of no avail against already dead flesh that could not bleed or feel pain, so the moose-draug continued to trample the wolf until it was dead.

Just before the moment of impact with the first wolf, Faragrim hurled himself from the back of the moose-draug, rolled over on the ground a time or two, and rose to his feet to engage the remaining wolf. It may have appeared an uneven match, but Faragrim had giant ancestry in his bloodline, so his size and strength exceeded those of mortal men. As soon as he began to grapple with the wolf, it realized that it had met its match. Seeing its packmates lying dead or dying, the wolf made one last desperate effort to loose itself from Faragrim's fatal embrace . . . then, freed at last, it rushed off toward the Ironwood, tail between its legs—whimpering, not howling, for it knew there would be none to answer.

Dag and Aelas waited hand-in-hand near their campfire as Faragrim and the moose-draug approached. When Faragrim stopped a few feet away, Dag stepped forward and offered his hand.

"We don't know who you are, sir, but we do thank you—and your moose, of course—for saving our lives."

"I'm just glad we could get here in time to help, though it looks as if the two of you were able to deal with the trolls without any assistance. Sometime you'll have to tell me how you managed to conjure up sunlight in the middle of the night . . . oh, yes, I saw the light flare up from the other side of the river."

"It seems as if you were looking for us," remarked Aelas.

"Oh, I was, indeed I was. Freyja sent me as soon as she learned there was a band of trolls on your trail."

"Freyja sent you?" Dag exclaimed. "Just who *are* you, stranger?"

"Why, I am your brother, Dag. Heh-heh-heh-heh."

Dag's jaw dropped in disbelief. "But my only brother, Vidga, is dead."

"And so I am, kinsman, but now I exist as a draug in Midgard rather than as a spirit-warrior in Valhalla, or as one of those poor hapless souls who dwell with Loki's daughter, Hel, beneath Niflheim. Freyja could not free my spirit from my dead body, but she gave me a calling—as a hunter of trolls. Whenever and wherever trolls menace human communities, I am charged with tracking them down and putting a stop to their foul deeds—peacefully, if I can persuade them to cease and desist, or violently if they will not. Vidga Völundsson I was born, but now most folk call me Faragrim Trollsbane."

Dag was stunned. "This is just too much to take in all at once. I have so many questions."

"Of course, you do," replied Faragrim. "As do I. But if you and your lady have no objections, I would like to travel with you for a time before I have to go back to dealing with trolls. It would give us a chance to get to know each other."

Dag and Aelas readily agreed, then settled down to seek again some much needed sleep. This was more easily done when Faragrim assured them he would keep watch the rest of the night since he never slept. The next morning the couple awoke refreshed to find Faragrim strolling around the campsite. The moose-draug had disappeared while they slept, but Faragrim now carried an ornately carved, antler-headed walking stick . . . a most appropriate accessory for a traveler about to cross the Sjoabru and begin a trek into the heart of Midgard.