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The King of the Forest

THE KING OF THE FOREST

by

Dag Rossman

Firelight flickers in a forest glade. The rhythmic beating of a wooden club on a hollow log echoes throughout the woods. Huge, shaggy figures slowly, silently drift into the glade and seat themselves on large tree stumps encircling the fire. A rare conclave of trolls is gathering, the likes of which no human eye has ever beheld . . . or likely ever shall.

And what a bizarre assembly it is—for no two trolls are alike. All are large, far taller than a man or an elf. Some even rival a giant in size, though all trolls have stooped shoulders, longer noses, and coarser features than their smarter cousins in Jötunheim. But that said, some of these trolls have tails—while others have none—and while most of them have but a single head—including a troll-hag who has hers tucked under one arm—there are a few who have as many as three!

When every stump but one was occupied, the drumming ceased and the drummer hopped up on the last stump, teetering for a moment before fully gaining his balance. Had he fallen, his dignity would have suffered far more than any part of his anatomy.

“You probably want to know why I summoned you here,” declared the speaker when the growing anticipation of the assembled trolls threatened to shatter the silence.

“We sure do, Kraki,” growled a grizzled old troll named Rangbein, “and it’d better be important. I was right in the middle of my mid-night meal when I heard the drum . . . and I’ll bet many of the others were, too. What’s so flaming urgent?”

“*Ja*, Kraki, what’s up?” muttered several of the others while their fellow trolls nodded in agreement.

“Only the greatest threat to trolldom in recent memory!” shouted Kraki. Satisfied that he now had the group’s full attention, the speaker went on to tell of his recent encounter with Faragrim that had cost two trolls their lives.

“That’s right, that’s what he did,” related Kraki, waving his arms excitedly. “A couple waves of that rune-staff Faragrim carries and ‘pouf,’ there went Flegg and Jarngrim right off the cliff and onto the rocks below.”

Gasps and mutterings met this statement . . . and more than one troll glanced nervously over his shoulder. But old Rangbein responded with a query: “And where were you, Kraki, while all this was going on? Couldn’t you have stopped him?”

“Oh, I wanted to, but he . . . well, er, cast a spell on me with his rune-staff so I couldn’t move a muscle. *Ja*, that’s right. Faragrim magicked me like he did Flegg and Jarngrim.”

“Not quite the same way,” opined Rangbein dryly. “For here you stand, hale and hearty, and their corpses lie a-mouldering on the mountainside. How come this Faragrim fellow let you live?”

“I been thinking about that,” said Kraki, “and I guess he wanted me to let the rest of you know what he could do to us . . . figured to scare us into laying off our raids on human farmsteads. But he figured wrong, didn’t he? Us trolls don’t scare easy, do we? There’s only one of him—the other humans are too puny to count—and there are dozens of us. We can do him in . . . and the sooner, the

better, I say!”

This rousing declaration was met with a chorus of cheers and yells of “Death to Faragrim,” but they all fell silent when old Rangbein raised himself up to the full extent his bent frame would allow, cleared his throat, and pointedly inquired: “All well and good, Kraki, all well and good. But there is just one leetle problem, as I see it. What about that rune-staff of his? Seems to me that could more than make up for our advantage in numbers.”

“I’m glad you mentioned that, Rangbein,” declared Kraki, though the glare he cast in the old troll’s direction would have told a different story to a careful observer. “Faragrim caught us by surprise on a narrow trail where only one troll at a time could come at him. Next time *we* surprise him . . . and at a place we choose, where there are no cliffs to fall from and we can attack from all sides at once. It’ll happen so fast he’ll be done for before he can wave his cursed staff.”

There was more applause and cries of “Good idea,” but the ever skeptical Rangbein, more far-seeing than the average troll (there must have been more than a few giants in his ancestry), asked: “And how are we going to get Faragrim to stroll all unsuspecting into this wonderful trap of yours, invite him to a mead-and-cheese party? What kind of a fool do you take him for?”

“Oh, I plan to have better bait for him than that,” growled Kraki. “And it will be an invitation that busybody can’t possibly refuse. If we raid a human steading right after dark—Kverndal, for instance—and carry off some human children alive and squealing like yummy piglets, their parents will go running to their hero Faragrim to save them. You can bet he’ll set off on our trail as fast as he can for fear we’ll kill the little brats before he can catch us. The other humans won’t be able to keep up with him,

so he’ll rush right into our trap all alone. Then we can slaughter him without anyone interfering.”

Rangbein raised one last, feeble objection: “But what if he doesn’t come?”

Kraki peered down his long nose and smirked: “Why then, I guess we’ll have ourselves a leisurely banquet of roast kiddies. Haw, haw, haw!” His crude guffaws were echoed by the roaring approval of his fellow trolls . . . all except old Rangbein, who slowly shook his hoary head.

* * *

Beneath a full moon, Faragrim had been striding across a high meadow on a southern flank of the Troll’s Teeth mountains when the peals of a hunting horn began to reverberate among the cliffs. “Gudmund needs me,” he exclaimed, and bounded downslope toward Kverndal, which seemed to be the source of the call for help.

When the draug drew near the steading, he could see that one of the outbuildings was afire and a cluster of people was hovering by the side of a person lying on the ground. A little to one side, Gudmund stood poised, about to wind the horn yet again.

“What’s the use, Gudmund?” a woman’s voice despaired. “No one is coming. You men need to go after those trolls and bring my babies back before it’s too late!” Choking sobs cut off further speech by the distraught mother.

“Faragrim will come,” asserted Gudmund, “and he can deal with those trolls better than all the rest of us put together!”

“I *have* come,” stated Faragrim quietly as he stepped forward from the shadows into the flickering light cast by the burning building. “Now, someone tell me what has happened here.”

Having already heard Gudmund’s account of his adventures in the company of the draug, his kinsmen didn’t flee from Faragrim’s presence, but they did take a step

or two backward and silently left the explanation of the night's events to Gudmund.

"The first we knew there were trolls about was when the farm animals began to bawl and bleat. Thinking that wolves had gotten into the byre, we men grabbed up our bows and hunting spears and rushed outside to kill them or at least drive them off. And once outside, we saw the roof of the byre afire. After that our full attention was given to getting the animals out and setting up a bucket brigade to throw water on the flames. The women helped, too, but we made the younger children stay back and watch from the open doorway."

Gudmund sighed, then continued: "That's when the trolls struck. The fire had just been a ruse to draw us away from the hall, and when the little ones were unguarded, the trolls snatched two of them, my brother Arne's sweet little Marit and her brother Stein. When the children screamed, we all turned back from the fire, of course, and tried to get them away from the trolls. Since we couldn't use our bows or spears for fear of hurting the little ones, there was little we could do to prevent such powerful monsters from getting away with the children. Odin knows that no one could have tried harder than Arne—he threw himself on the trolls barehanded trying to free Marit and Stein—but there he lies yonder with only a broken crown to show for it. Can you help us, Faragrim?"

"I certainly intend to try my best. But it would help a great deal if you could tell me how many trolls took part in the raid, and what direction they headed when they left."

"I never saw more than four or five of them, but in the flickering light and confusion it was hard to be certain. And they headed west out of Kverndal. Oh, yes, just as they passed out of sight, one of them called back that they took the little ones to avenge the deaths of Flegg and Jarngrim—

whoever they are—and planned to sacrifice the children at midnight."

"Midnight, eh? The nearest stone altar the trolls use for sacrifices lies in Ottidal, the Valley of Fear. That has to be where they are headed. Seeing in the dark as they do, they should arrive there shortly before the hour they named. Even if you had not waited for me, you could not have hoped to be there in time . . . and, of course, you did not know exactly where they were going. I can see at night as well as a troll—if not better—but even running at top speed I fear I could not get to the stone altar by midnight."

A collective groan escaped the group gathered in front of Faragrim. "Then there is no way to save the children?" queried Gudmund desperately.

"I didn't say that, my friend," Faragrim reassured him. "But it *will* take extraordinary means to do so. Everyone stand back."

Driving the antler-capped butt of his staff into the soil, Faragrim traced a pattern of runes in the air with his fingers while intoning this runic chant:

"A forest king thou wert,
A king once more shalt be;
'Tis time to face the trolls,
And set the children free."

A swirling mist began to thicken around the rune-staff, and in what seemed like no time at all, the staff disappeared altogether, replaced by the re-animated body of Faragrim's moose friend, the glow of bale fires gleaming from its dead eyes. Faragrim strode forward to place one hand on the moose-draug's forehead, then speaking mind-to-mind created a visual image of the troll attack and the children's peril. The moose grunted angrily, then bent his front knees so Faragrim could mount up behind his hump.

"Come, Gudmund," Faragrim called out.

“Bring your spear and mount up behind me.”

“Y-you want me to come along?”

“Of course, if you will. Someone needs to look after the children while I deal with the trolls. And the wee ones will feel far safer with their uncle than they would with a draug they didn’t know. Now, hurry!”

Gudmund clambered astride the moose’s broad back and barely had time to throw his free arm around Faragrim’s waist before the moose lurched to its feet and, uttering a hoarse bellow, thundered off into the dark.

After a time the woodland path began to skirt a body of water, and Faragrim called the moose to a halt. Turning his head toward Gudmund, the draug explained: “The trolls made no effort to conceal where they were going—just the opposite. And by setting midnight as the time for the sacrifice they ensured that I would have to come alone—or so they thought. Clearly we are riding into a trap where there are bound to be far more trolls than just the raiders, so I think we need to gather some reinforcements.”

“But where are we going to find any warriors around here?” queried a baffled Gudmund.

“Wait and see, heh-heh-heh,” chuckled Faragrim. “The moose will summon them for us.” And he leaned forward to send a mental picture of his plan to the beast, which nodded its great head in agreement before raising it again to issue a challenging bellow toward the mossy slope leading down to the shore of the tarn.

Shortly a small group of moose, four antlered males led by an old female, came lumbering up from their sleeping place in the woods. They seemed hesitant at first, but once the female had rubbed noses with the moose-draug she excitedly began to talk with the others in a series of grunts and whistles.

“What in the world is going on?” asked a perplexed Gudmund.

“This is the very tarn where our friend was killed, and these are his mate and their

grown-up offspring. Hush a moment and let me mind-speak with them.” Faragrim bent his head in concentration.

Soon the draug raised his head and said: “It’s alright. His mate has lost some of her own calves to the trolls in the past, and she is only too willing to help. The others will go along with what their parents want. Since you are going to look after the children, she has offered to carry you the rest of the way and help protect them. Let me have your spear to fight the trolls. Besides, you’ll need both hands to hold on.”

Once Gudmund had transferred to the back of the old female, the strange cavalcade thundered on toward the lower entrance to Ottidal.

* * *

“It must be nearing midnight,” muttered Kraki impatiently. “That blasted Faragrim should be showing up any moment now.” He turned toward old Rangbein, who had been assigned to stand guard over the two children where they lay trussed together—quivering and quietly sobbing—on a crude stone altar. “Give the kiddies a poke or two so they’ll start screaming in terror. That’ll bring him faster than Say, what’s that noise? Sounds like the roll of thunder, but the sky is clear. Oh, no, it couldn’t be Thor, could it, coming to spoil our game?”

Any further speculation was cut off as the cavalcade of moose swept at full speed into the valley, whose walls rang with the unmistakable, haunting laughter of Faragrim: “Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!”

Kraki’s knees quavered in spite of himself as he frantically screamed: “It’s him, it’s him! Get him, kill him, smash him, squash” The troll chief’s words were cut off as the moose overran the assemblage of waiting trolls, throwing them into the air with their antlers and smashing them with the hooves of their powerful front legs. For his part, Faragrim thrust from side to side with the spear, using both blade and butt to great

effect. Screaming, the cowardly trolls fled in all directions—those that could still stand—for though bullies enjoy inflicting pain, rarely can they tolerate receiving it.

Thwarted in his plans for revenge on Faragrim himself, Kraki ran toward the stone altar determined that he would at least kill the children. But the old female moose intercepted him before he could reach them. As Gudmund flung himself from her back to shield his niece and nephew, she knocked Kraki off his feet. Before he could get back up, her mate struck the troll repeatedly with his hooves, crushing his skull and trampling him to death. Quiet reigned, except for the moans of a few trolls too badly wounded to flee.

Old Rangbein cautiously poked his hoary head around the tree where he had taken shelter when the moose charged onto the scene. “Is all the nasty kicking and stabbing over now?” Assured by Faragrim that it was, he emerged to take stock of the battlefield, then shook his head and muttered: “I never thought Kraki’s plot to trap you was a good idea, but he talked the others into it . . . for all the good it did him, or them. Well, Kraki’s dead now, and you got what you came for, so I hope you’ll go away and leave us to lick our wounds in peace.”

“Only if all you trolls agree to leave these mountains as soon as you can . . . and never, ever return,” Faragrim responded sternly. “Otherwise you’ll be hunted down and killed right to the very last one. Kraki has shown us that trolls just can’t be trusted as neighbors.”

“Harsh words, Faragrim, harsh words—but I can see where you have reason to feel that way. Well, since it seems we have no choice, I’ll tell the others. Then we’ll be on our way as soon as possible, though where we can go is beyond me. Now, I name you

Faragrim Trollsbane . . . and I pray that our paths may never cross again.”

“That will depend on how your people treat humans from now on . . . and you can be sure that I *will* be watching.” Faragrim’s voice took on a kindlier tone. “As for your destination, well, you might want to consider going to Jötunheim, the land of your ancestors. Those mountains have all the caves troll hearts could desire . . . and you should be far more welcome there than you would be anywhere among humankind.”

* * *

Faragrim’s party returned from Ottidal by way of Moose Lake, as the tarn came to be known thereafter, and there the moose-draug took sad leave of his mortal family.

Once back in Kverndal, little Marit and Stein were restored to their anxious parents. Their father, Arne, had regained consciousness, though he remained badly wounded and at risk of being permanently crippled.

When the excitement had settled down a bit, Faragrim laid his hand on the moose-draug’s brow and chanted another runic charm:

“The children are safe now,
And the trolls off to roam;
You are free to go back
To your heavenly home.”

Gudmund and his kin watched in awe as the old fellow’s body gradually faded away right before their eyes. Soon all that was left of him was the rune-staff that had reformed in Faragrim’s hand, and a wispy astral moose-shape that drifted ever higher in the sky on its way back to Freyja’s lake in Asgard.