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Dag Rossman

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Brekka

BREKKA

by

Dag Rossman¹

My first conscious sensation was of my face being gently, but firmly licked by a huge tongue. At the time I was not struck by the incongruity of the experience, but my mind was still numbed by the cold that embraced me. Unable to move my limbs—or any other part of my body—I forced open my eyelids, thus discovering I was encased in a block of ice and that the tongue periodically caressing my head was wielded by a gigantic cow.

I puzzled over my icy casing for a time, then—in an instant—I remembered everything that had brought me to this pass: the terrifying encounter with Nidhögg, the great black dragon of Niflheim; the agonizing death of my uncle and mentor, Ragnar Rune-Wise; and the numbing ice-rune that Ragnar had used to freeze me into a block of ice, thus stopping the spread of the dragon’s venom and deferring my fate. But of the great cow, I had no memory at all.

I opened my mouth to speak, but frozen as I was—and my vocal cords unused for Odin only knows how long—all I could manage was a squeaky little: “H-hello, cow. W-who are you?”

“So you’re alive then?” a warm, deep voice queried. “I’d almost given up on you.”

“I-I didn’t know c-cows could talk,” I

stammered befuddled.

“And so they can’t,” the voice giggled. “The ice must have addled your brains, indeed, if you can’t tell a girl from a cow.”

Then, apparently realizing for the first time that she was seated outside my range of vision, the speaker knelt beside me—and I looked up into the full face and lake-blue eyes of a young giantess. In all my travels with Uncle Ragnar, we had never wandered into Jötunheim, thus I knew of the giantfolk only by repute and was ill-prepared to encounter the reality. And, numbed as my brain still was, I could do no better than burble: “But you’re no girl . . . you’re a giant!”

“Well, I like that,” she retorted and rose to her feet. “First you think I’m a cow, and now you can’t tell a female giant from a male. Are you really trying to insult me, or are you just easily confused?” She frowned down at me, but the teasing tone of her voice and the crinkling at the corner of her eyes led me to believe she wasn’t really angry.

As for my being confused, I may well have been—but if so, it wasn’t about her gender. Though still rather young by giant standards—for they are a long-lived kindred—she was unquestionably, magnificently female. Accustomed as I was to meeting human-sized

¹ “Brekkā” is the chronological sequel to “Dragonseeker” (Mythic Circle #30) and the second of ten stories making up Dag Rossman’s *THE DRAGONSEEKER SAGA: NEW TALES OF THE NINE WORLDS* (Skandisk, Inc., Bloomington, MN), which is hot off the press.

females during my travels with Uncle Ragnar—not to mention seeing the even shorter elf-maids—I was completely awestruck by this giantess. Her face and figure were like those of a human maiden, only writ large—nearly twice as large—but in such a way as to render her more statuesque and regal. There was no coarseness about her features despite her great size, and her fine white-gold hair hung down in two long braids. Is it any wonder that an inexperienced and lonely young man such as I, was smitten by this lovely creature?

I called out: “Wait, please. Don’t go. I didn’t intend any insult. My tongue is still so frozen I can’t talk straight.”

“Oh, I wasn’t planning on leaving,” she said. “I just stood up so you could see me better.” Then, kneeling again by my side, she asked: “How did you ever get frozen in a block of ice to begin with?”

“It’s a long tale,” I sighed. And I proceeded to tell her my life story, or at least as much of it as I could remember. She listened patiently, asking only an occasional question, expressing horror and sympathy when I related my uncle’s death, and being gratifyingly indignant about Nidhögg’s treatment of me.

“Well, he’d just better not show his scaly snout around here . . .,” she muttered.

“I thank you for your concern about me,” I said. “But who are you, who is this remarkable cow that is licking the ice off my body, and where in the Nine Worlds are we?”

“Oh, those are easy questions to answer, Dag.” I had told her my name during the rendering of my tale, but it sounded so pleasant to hear it tumbling from her lips. “I am called Brekka, and I am the daughter of the giantess Skadi and the Vanir god Njörd.”

“But that makes you a goddess!” I blurted.

“Why, I suppose it does, in a way, but my parents parted long before I was born--and because my mother raised me among her people here in Jötunheim, I usually think of myself as a giantess.”

I interrupted: “You said ‘here in Jötunheim,’ Brekka. I thought Giant Home was mountainous.”

“And so it is—in the interior—but there are stretches of rich meadowland along the coast that are ideal for grazing. That’s why we are here, Audumla and I.” Brekka paused, then went on: “And I do so love the sight and sound and smell of the sea. I must have gotten that from my father.”

“Audumla and you? You are talking about this cow, aren’t you?”

Brekka nodded, and watched comprehension dawning on my face.

“By the missing eye of Odin! Do you mean to tell me that this is the Cow, the same Audumla whose milk sustained the First Giant, Ymir, and who licked Odin’s grandfather, Buri, free from a block of ice, way back when the Nine Worlds were created?”

Brekka grinned from ear to ear, and on a giantess that is a huge smile to behold. “The very same cow, and I am her milkmaid.” She went on: “And it won’t be long before Audumla licks you free from the ice, too.”

The prospect of being able to move again—and to find a place where I could get warm—gladdened my heart, and I told Brekka so. But then I had an awful thought: “Uncle Ragnar froze me to keep Nidhögg’s venom from reaching my heart. What’s to stop it from doing just that once Audumla has freed me from the ice?”

Brekka turned to the great cow and lowed inquiringly. Audumla mooed a response, and I’d swear she wrinkled her soft brown nose.

“You needn’t worry about that,” Brekka reassured me. “Audumla says she licked all the nasty-tasting stuff from your arm, so it won’t spread any farther.”

“Oh, thank her for me,” I said, choked with relief. “It will be so good to get back to normal.” While Brekka was translating my words into bovine, I tried to flex my now-freed upper limbs. “Brekka,” I gasped, panic stricken, “something is wrong. My right arm

moves normally, but I can't even feel my left arm below the elbow, let alone move it!"

Brekka and Audumla both looked at me sadly with compassionate eyes—one pair blue, the other brown—as they conversed briefly.

"Audumla says she is terribly sorry about your arm, but she could only stop the spread of the venom, not heal the damage it had already caused."

I stared in disbelief at my gnarled left hand, realized that I would be crippled for life, and wept. How soon the gratitude I should have felt for my life being miraculously spared gave way to despair over the lesser loss that I was forced to suffer. But I was young—and my loss so fresh—that perhaps I can be forgiven for not accepting it more philosophically.

Brekka put a comforting arm around my shoulders as she helped me sit up. Audumla gave my lower limbs a final licking to remove the last remnants of their icy covering, then nudged me gently with her nose. Steadying myself against Brekka, I tried to stand—but I was dizzy from sitting up, and my legs too weak from disuse. Now that I was no longer protected from the sea breeze by the barrier of ice, the wind cut me to the bone . . . and I began to shiver uncontrollably.

"This will never do," Brekka declared and, standing, she swept me up into her strong arms and carried me, as lightly as a mother carries her small child, along a grassy track until we reached her cabin on the headland overlooking the sea.

Despite her illustrious ancestry, the sod-roofed cabin was small—by giant standards—and very simply furnished. But I had little eye for such details at that moment, being more concerned to stop my violent shivering.

Unaccustomed as she must have been to non-bovine company, Brekka seemed to know just what to do for my frozen condition. Setting me down atop the only bed in the cabin, she proceeded to divest me of my clammy clothing, then tumbled me beneath the

covers and—pausing only long enough to slip off her own clothes—wrapped her arms around me and pulled me close against her own warm body.

Not having shared a bed with a woman since my mother weaned me, I found the situation quite awkward and embarrassing—and through my chattering teeth I tried to convey this to Brekka.

"Don't be silly," she hissed. "This is the only way I can warm you up quickly enough to save you. By the time I could build up a big enough fire to be useful, you would have already slipped into the Cold Sleep that ends in death."

That ended my protests. And, as I began to shiver less and less, I had to admit that there were far worse places I could be than nestled snug in Brekka's embrace—for she was soft and warm, oh, so deliciously warm.

* * *

I don't know if Audumla's milk contained magical properties or if there was something special about the ingredients Brekka added to it in preparing the rich porridge that was the staple of our diet, but whatever it was . . . I thrived. Not only did I regain my strength and stamina—which I sorely needed to keep up with Brekka as we wandered through the meadowlands, beachcombed and fished along the seashore, and even explored the foothills of the great mountains that lay inland of Audumla's Lea—I actually gained weight. But, what with the almost unrelenting sea breeze and the cold, glacier-born air flowing down from the mountains, Audumla's Lea remained perpetually chilly, and if Brekka hadn't cut down her spare sheep's hide overtunic to provide me with protective leggings, boots, mittens, and a jacket and cap, I should never have survived in that land.

Brekka remained concerned about my health and, even after I regained my strength, she insisted each night that we share the one

bed so that she could keep me warm. Well, she certainly did that, though whether or not I would have frozen had one of us slept wrapped in a bear skin robe by the firepit is impossible to say—for it was never put to the test. We had come to enjoy each other's companionship so much during our daytime wanderings, that snuggling together as we drifted off to sleep seemed the most natural thing in the Nine Worlds to do.

And so the weeks passed, and I was happy—except for my crippled left arm. There were so many simple things I could no longer do for myself that at times I brooded and felt that I was less than a man. Not that Brekka ever gave any sign that she thought less of me for my limitations. No, she actually seemed to enjoy being able to help me when I had problems—though she wisely always let me try first, then ask for her help. I've often wondered if she were born with her caring nature—and thus was asked to look after Audumla—or if tending to the cow's needs had brought out that nature in Brekka.

One day my moodiness threatened to spoil our outing. Brekka tried to cheer me up but, when I persisted in feeling sorry for myself, she left me to my own devices—which mostly consisted of staring at the sea. She said that she was heading back to milk Audumla, which she did twice each day, and that she would see me at supper. I felt guilty about upsetting her—she who deserved nothing from me but my gratitude and affection—and that just added to my feelings of worthlessness. It was a bad afternoon.

As I approached Brekka's cabin, I was jarred out of my apathy by the sight of a golden-maned horse grazing contentedly in the meadow. Pausing by the door, I could hear the murmur of voices. Brekka's voice didn't sound upset, so the newcomer apparently posed no threat. It did no good to stand outside and wonder, so I pushed open the door and entered the room. Brekka sat by our small wooden table talking with a tall, cloaked man who was

warming himself by the firepit.

Brekka looked up with a smile on her face: "Look, Dag, we have a visitor! And he's come all the way from Asgard especially to see you."

Turning his full attention on me, the man flashed a golden smile, and spoke out: "So you're Dag Ormseeker, the young man who journeyed all the way to Niflheim, and rebuked Nidhögg at the verge of Hvergelmir. That was boldly—if not wisely—done."

Thus was I both praised and chided by the stranger in the same breath. Who was he? From Asgard, Brekka had said, so most likely he was one of the Aesir gods. And which of them has teeth of gold? Heimdall, if the stories tell us true. By the Nine Worlds, this was Heimdall, guardian of the Rainbow Bridge . . . but what could he possibly want with me?

"Has a troll got your tongue?" he teased, then relented. "No, that's all right. Sometimes keeping your own counsel in the presence of a stranger can be the wisest course until you know the direction the current is running . . . though I'm hardly the threat that Nidhögg was."

"But why do you want to see me? How did you even know I existed?"

"Oh, we've been hearing all about you and your exploits from Ragnar Rune-Wise ever since his spirit arrived in Valhalla."

"Uncle Ragnar is in Valhalla? How is he? Is he happy? I wouldn't think he'd like to be spending all his days fighting—he was always a peaceable man at heart."

"He still is," Heimdall assured me. "He entertains the restored warriors each evening with his storytelling, then spends most of his days swapping lore with Odin, Freyja, or me—though from time to time he just likes to explore Asgard on his own."

"That's a great comfort to know," I replied. "I have been carrying a heavy burden of guilt and shame for having led him to his death."

"And now it's time to lay down that burden, my boy. Your uncle has long since

forgiven you for your part in that tragic episode—after all, he knows full well that he also made some flawed choices—so you also need to forgive yourself. Ragnar worries about you still, so it would give him peace of mind, too.”

Brekka knelt beside me, clasped me in her arms, and murmured fervently: “Oh, listen to him, Dag. Listen to him.”

“I’ll try, but that’s all I can promise,” I said simply. “It’s easier said than done.”

“That’s very true, Dag,” responded Heimdall, “but perhaps it will be easier once you’ve dealt with the other problem that has been troubling you so sorely.”

“Do you mean . . . my arm?”

“Exactly,” said Heimdall. “How would you like to have your arm working as good as new . . . or even better?”

I gasped, and Brekka exclaimed: “Can you really do that?”

“I can’t do it myself, but there’s a remarkable smith living in Asgard who repairs damaged weapons and armor each night for the warriors who feast in Valhalla, so they can fight with each other again the next day. He’s heard your story from Ragnar, and he thinks he could fashion a new arm for you from living metal.”

“Living metal?” Brekka and I gasped simultaneously. “Is that possible?”

“Well,” Heimdall replied with another of his blinding smiles. “We know that the dwarves fashioned a new head of hair for Thor’s wife Sif from living gold, so it surely can be done. But the smith—who’s no dwarf, by the way—isn’t planning to use gold. He says it’s too soft for the prolonged hard use a forearm would get.”

“But, by the burning breath of Nidhogg, what other living metal is there?” I demanded.

“Iron, my boy, living iron from one of the trees that grow in the Ironwood. If you can bring him a tree limb from the Ironwood, he seems confident that he can forge a new limb for you.”

“Oh, Dag, how wonderful!” breathed Brekka. “I know how much it would mean to you to have the full use of both arms again.”

Actually, my first thought was how strange—and even a bit scary—it would seem to have an iron hand and wrist. But then, I reflected, it couldn’t have any less feeling than what I had now and it would be a lot more useful.

“Well, it’s bound to be an improvement, that’s for sure,” I conceded, less than graciously. “Just exactly how do I find the Ironwood, Heimdall? It’s somewhere in Jötunheim, isn’t it?”

Brekka clapped her hands gleefully. “Of course it is, silly. And I can guide you right to it.”

“Guide me? But don’t you have to look after Audumla? She’d get awfully uncomfortable if she weren’t milked on schedule.”

“Oh, dear, I’d forgotten all about Audumla, poor thing.” Brekka looked perplexed.

“That should be no problem,” Heimdall assured her. “I’m due to return to Asgard tomorrow, so I’ll see about having one of the valkyries sent down to relieve you of your duties for as long as it takes to help Dag complete his quest. As soon as she arrives, you’ll be free to go.”

Brekka clasped her hands. “Oh, thank you, Heimdall, thank you. I would have felt awful abandoning either Dag or Audumla.”

“I quite understand,” responded Heimdall. “Ragnar and I would have been less than easy at the thought of Dag wandering through Jötunheim without having a giant to vouch for him, and to protect him at need. He’s a fine young fellow, no doubt, but he has shown a certain knack for getting himself into trouble.”

It’s never much fun having your faults pointed out—especially in front of someone you want very much to think well of you—but Heimdall did it so gently that I simply bit my tongue and looked sheepish. Nothing was to

be gained by losing my temper and behaving like a churl.

His message delivered, Heimdall paid his respects to Audumla, mounted his steed, then rode off about his business. But, before departing, he told Brekka and me that, once we had secured a limb of living iron, he would meet us at a certain meadow on the slopes of Fornfjell, a great mountain that lay not many leagues beyond the Ironwood. When I asked how he would know when to meet us, he just laughed and said he would come when we called his name. And before I could say anything further, he galloped off. I had forgotten that the god whose hearing is so keen it was said he could hear grass grow, could surely hear his name being shouted across the Nine Worlds.

* * *

Three mornings later, the valkyrie Hild arrived in dramatic fashion, swooping down on her great horse, who scarcely allowed Hild time to dismount before beginning to graze contentedly on the rich grass of Audumla's Lea. The giantess and valkyrie greeted each other warmly, but, strangers that we were, Hild and I merely exchanged polite and formal greetings. I had the sense that she didn't entirely approve of me and, for my part, I felt rather shy around her. Perhaps it was because of the circumstances under which I last met one of her band, or it may have been because the only time one usually sees a valkyrie is when you are about to die . . . or just after you have done so! An uncomfortable feeling, in any event.

We introduced Hild to Audumla, and bid the great cow our farewells. When we saw tears welling up in Audumla's big brown eyes, we tried to assure her we would return. Shouldering the packs we had kept ready since Heimdall left (and our blanket roll, which Brekka tied across one shoulder), we began our trek to the Ironwood.

Of that journey I remember few details, for it was mostly uneventful. I do remember the stark beauty of the land, and Brekka's sheer pleasure at being able to point out places she knew and describe events that had taken place there. It became increasingly obvious to me that despite the huge size differences that exist between giants and humans, the way they relate to their surroundings—both the physical landscape and the cultural history that permeates it—is the same.

We wandered free from cares and responsibilities—save for needing to reach the Ironwood—and I sometimes found myself wishing that we might never arrive. I feared that once we had the iron branch in hand and carried it to Asgard, our lives would never be quite the same . . . and I was truly immersed in being with my Brekka in the eternal present. How I wish I had heeded my instincts!

Then, one day, we emerged from a mountain pass to see lying before us a vast gray, mist-enshrouded forest, which covered the valley floor and lower foothills. At the foot of the pass, serving almost as a boundary marker between forest and mountain, was a huge burial mound, which Brekka told me was called Eggther's Howe, named for the giant who lives there and guards the forest from intruders.

As we drew closer to Eggther's Howe, Brekka and I began to hear the sound of a harp issuing from the mound. It was quite a lively air, so we were grinning at each other by the time we caught sight of the harper, who had been lying atop the grassy mound, and who rolled over into a sitting position when he became aware of our presence.

"Well, if it isn't a young giantess and her human companion! It's not often I get visitors. No-o," he drawled reflectively and pointed his harp at a red rooster perched on a tree limb overhanging the mound, "usually it's just old Fjalar here to keep me company . . . and me to entertain the both of us. Whatever brings the two of you to Eggther's Howe?"

Brekka introduced us and started to explain our quest, but nothing would do for Eggther save he hear the whole story from me—all the way back to the beginning. As he said, visitors were few and far between, so any new tales were to be savored . . . and stored up in memory against the long period of drought before the next newcomer wandered by.

“So you need a limb from one of the trees in the Ironwood, eh? Well, that shouldn’t prove an impossible feat.” Eggther paused when he saw the expressions of delight on our faces. “But you mustn’t assume it’s as simple as walking into the forest and breaking off the first limb that takes your fancy. Oh my, no. Before you remove anything, you must get permission from the Queen of the Ironwood.”

“What queen is that, Eggther?” asked Brekka. “I had never heard there was a queen in the Ironwood.”

Eggther coughed and looked embarrassed. “Well, most other folk do refer to Angrboda as the Hag of the Ironwood—she is half troll, half giantess, after all—but ever since she paired off with Loki and bore him those three famous children, Angrboda has felt she deserved to be made a queen, even if she had to do it herself. That way, I guess, it makes it much easier for her to lord it over the Jarnvidjur, the band of troll-women who share the Ironwood with her.” Eggther sighed: “At any rate, since she and I are neighbors, so to speak, I long ago decided things would be a lot more peaceful in these parts if I just went along with whatever Angrboda wanted to call herself.” He slowly shook his head and reflected: “That woman really does have a temper!”

“She does sound formidable,” Brekka opined.

“Oh, she is that. But if you remember to bow and scrape and flatter her—and avoid staring at her nose, which is pretty formidable, too—she may well decide to grant your wish. It all depends what kind of mood she’s in.”

“How do we go about finding Angrboda in such a vast forest?” Brekka asked.

“Why you just follow the trail that leads north from my howe until you reach the very center of the Ironwood—don’t take any side tracks—and there she’ll be. If you don’t find her right away, don’t worry—she’ll soon find you. She has a nose for anything or anybody strange or different that enters her forest. She’d be much harder to avoid than to find.” Eggther paused and observed the dimming light. “But the day is rapidly waning, so if you don’t mind sharing my simple fare and are willing to sleep beneath the stars, you’re welcome to spend the night here on my howe. Then you can be fresh and rested when you meet Angrboda, which wouldn’t be such a bad idea. Besides,” he admitted almost sheepishly, “I am enjoying your company so much that I am reluctant to let you go. You said that you are an apprentice storyteller, Dag, so I’m sure we could while away an enjoyable evening swapping tales. Over the years I’ve heard some really strange ones I’ve been wanting to share.”

Eggther’s last comments removed any lingering doubts I might have had about the wisdom of accepting his overnight hospitality. Since Brekka seemed content with the idea, we agreed to stay. As it turned out, we were very glad we did. Eggther was a most genial host, a skilled harpist, and a wonderful storyteller. I learned more that evening about the foibles and farings of kings and commoners throughout Jötunheim than I would have believed possible . . . and thus my store of giant lore expanded many times over.

The next morning after breakfast, we bid farewell to Eggther after promising we would return someday to show him my new arm and tell him “how the story turned out.” Brekka and I walked slowly but steadily along the trail Eggther had pointed out. We had easy going for the most part, since the trail was well-worn from centuries of use by Angrboda and the troll-women. But I think we would not have paid much more attention to a rugged path, so rapt was our focus on the forest itself.

How can I describe the Ironwood in a way that would convey some sense of its strangeness and unearthly beauty? Everything we saw was some shade of gray—not only the ever-present mist, but every limb, every leaf, every flower. At first the unrelenting grayness seemed oppressive—until the first light breeze slid sinuously through the forest, gently shaking every leaf in its path. Then the woodland sang, in a thousand chiming voices. Brekka and I were enchanted by that sound, which haunts my dreams to this very day. The breeze passed and the voices muted—for a time—then a deeper ringing voice sounded from ahead of us, and the leaves took up the song again, resonating to that unknown voice.

Holding hands—both for closeness and to buoy up each other’s courage—Brekka and I advanced upon the source of the deeper voice, which soon led us to a clearing in the forest. At its center was an ill-constructed timbered hall, but we could spare only a glance for the ramshackle dwelling, our attention being caught by the strange creature straddling a bench in front of the hall. In her hand she clutched a padded wooden club, with which she stroked a large bronze gong suspended in a wooden frame, whenever the vibrations from her previous stroke had faded away. She was so focused on using the gong to coax the whole forest to sing, that we had a few moments to observe her, before a gentle breeze carried our odors into the clearing and made her aware of our presence.

I had heard many stories about trolls, but this was my first encounter with one . . . and I can only say that the tales didn’t do them justice. Angrboda was probably taller than Brekka—though slouched on her bench as she was, I couldn’t be sure—but her over-sized head looked to be too heavy for her humped shoulders to support. And Eggther had been right about her nose; broad it was at the base, from which it tapered some three feet to its pole like tip, and it was covered with huge, hairy warts. Her complexion was dusky,

though whether more green or purple I could not say—not even when I beheld her up close. Her lank gray hair was matted and tangled with leaves or moss—and later I even saw a mushroom or two poking up from her scalp. All in all, she was by far the most grotesquely unappetizing-looking woman I had ever seen.

Angrboda wore a shapeless gray robe which, even at that distance, looked as if it hadn’t been washed in years. When we drew closer, the odor emanating from her suggested that she hadn’t bathed herself any more recently than the robe, although the nauseating stench of decaying earth may have been simply the odor that I had been told was characteristic of trolls.

The knowledge that Loki had fathered three of her children filled me with awe of the Trickster—either at the strength of his stomach, or the quirkiness of his taste. There is an old saying: “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” but that day I learned that the believability of old sayings can sometimes be stretched beyond the breaking point.

Angrboda beckoned Brekka and me to approach her and, once we had introduced ourselves, she had us sit on either side of her on the bench. Like Eggther, Angrboda wanted to know why we had come to the Ironwood, and I was required to recite the whole story once again. When I reached the part about the crippling of my left forearm by dragon venom, she insisted that I show her the injured appendage.

Clasping my gnarled hand in hers, Angrboda stroked it with two fingers and exclaimed: “Poor lad, poor lad. Such an awful thing to happen to such a nice young man.”

“I thank your highness for your sympathy and good will,” I replied. “Dare I hope then that you would be willing to let me have a branch from one of your trees, so I can have a new arm made?”

“You would like that, wouldn’t you, to have a new arm? And I do want to please such a handsome young fellow . . . but you know,

we can't just let everyone in the Nine Worlds wander in here and walk off with all our trees and bushes. Oh, my, no. Soon there wouldn't be any Ironwood at all, and then where would I live?

I was at a loss for words, but the disappointment on my face said it all.

"Still, I don't suppose it would hurt to let you have one itty-bitty tree limb . . . for a price," Angrboda looked at me coyly, then squeezed my thigh. "Umm, you look almost good enough to eat, but all things considered, I'm more inclined to pop you into my bed than into my cooking pot. Why don't you give me a little kiss to help me make up my mind?"

"Now you just wait a minute," Brekka snapped indignantly. "Dag isn't for your pot or your bed. He's mine . . . and I won't let you have him." Despite the menacing circumstances I was thrilled to hear Brekka's declaration. I had become increasingly aware of how much this beautiful, warm-hearted giantess meant to me, but—despite our closeness—we had never talked directly of love, so I had not been sure until then of the depth of her feelings for me.

"Well, if that's the way you feel," huffed Angrboda, folding her arms, "you can keep him. But I will have that kiss, at least, if he wants to remove a limb from any of my trees."

"I guess that sounds reasonable," I said, and I was about to screw up my courage for the deed when Brekka intervened.

"No, Dag, don't do it! She's trying to trick you. They say that if your lips ever meet a troll-woman's, you'll be under her spell forever."

"They say, they say," Angrboda mocked Brekka, then turned to me. "Are you going to listen to old wives' tales? Make up your mind, boy, whether you want a branch or not, 'cause I haven't got all day. Well, do I get a kiss or don't I?"

"Let me just be sure I understand our bargain here. If I give you a kiss, we get to take a limb from one of these trees and leave

the Ironwood without any interference . . . from you or any of your subjects. Is that right?"

"Yes, yes," Angrboda agreed impatiently. "Now let's get on with it." And she leaned toward me with closed eyes and puckered lips.

"No, Dag, no!" gasped Brekka, as I stood up and kissed the troll-queen . . . right on the tip of her warty nose.

Angrboda opened one eye, and huffed: "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"I'm not waiting for anything, except my tree limb," I replied. "I just gave you your kiss."

"What!" shrieked the troll-queen. "You call that a kiss? You never touched my lips."

"Our agreement never said where I was to kiss you, just that I would do so. And I have. So I've kept my part of our bargain, and now it's time for you to keep yours."

Behind Angrboda's back, Brekka beamed and blew me a kiss.

"Think you're clever, don't you, sonny? But let me tell you something." Angrboda wagged a menacing forefinger in my face. "There's not many folks enjoying old age who've tried to trick Angrboda. Nossir! Oh, I'll keep our agreement, never fear, but this doesn't finish matters between us. You just wait and see. Now get out of my sight, both of you." And she turned her back on us.

Brekka and I hastened to take the trail on the opposite side of the clearing from our entry point, for that, Eggther had assured us, was the shortest way out of the Ironwood that would lead to our meeting place with Heimdall. Once we had passed out of Angrboda's sight, we paused long enough for Brekka to break off and trim a likely looking limb from a large sapling—a stout branch as long as I was tall. Then we resumed our rapid pace, for we didn't entirely trust Angrboda's promise not to interfere with us. Besides, we didn't want to run into any of the other troll-women who haunted the Ironwood, for they had made no promises.

At last the mist began to thin, and soon we emerged from the forest into afternoon sunlight and caught sight of the great snow-capped mountain Fornfjell, where we were to meet Heimdall. We judged that by evening we might be able to reach the meadow, where we could spend the night before summoning our friend the next morning.

The route we had chosen led us along a long slope on the flank of the mountain just at tree line, and across the base of a steep snow field. Brekka cautioned me to whisper, if I must speak at all, for almost any loud noise could trigger an avalanche in such a place. Alas, her words proved prophetic. We had proceeded most of the way across the snow field when a strange clangorous sound began to build from the direction of the Ironwood. In an instant I recognized the tremor for what it was—Angrboda was striking her great bronze gong harder and harder with each stroke, and the Ironwood was groaning in response.

With a rumble, the crest of the snow field broke loose and began to tumble down the slope, burying everything that the avalanche could not carry along with it. We ran as fast as we could, and perhaps Brekka's longer legs might have carried her to safety, but my shorter ones could not. Ignoring my cries for her to save herself, Brekka turned back, seized me in her powerful arms, and with a last cry of "I love you," she hurled me as far toward the edge of the avalanche as her strength would avail. The last sight I had before I crashed into a clump of gnarled birches, and was knocked unconscious, was of my Brekka being struck down by tumbling boulders and buried beneath a blanket of snow.

When I awoke, all was silent, my vision seemed blurred, and I was totally disoriented. Then, gradually, I recalled where I was, remembered what had happened, and realized that I lay beneath who knew how much snow. Fortunately, the birches that had stopped my flight also had prevented the snow from

settling evenly and smothering me. I had no idea how deep my prison was, but the need to get out and help Brekka, if help was still possible, spurred me to a greater physical effort than I would have thought possible. Forcing myself to my knees, I grasped the trunk of a birch and pulled myself upright. Fortunately, the snow cover was more shallow at the edge of the avalanche's path, and my head and shoulders burst through into sunlight like a ptarmigan exploding from a drift where it had taken refuge.

With considerable difficulty, I managed to drag myself out of my snow cocoon and crawl across the treacherous surface to the last place I had seen Brekka. I shouted her name, scraped away at the snow with my one good arm, then cried out again and again until my voice grew hoarse . . . but all to no avail. My strength gave out at last, and as I lay there sobbing, a new arrival confirmed my worst fears. A mounted valkyrie descended from the sky and pointed her spear at the snow field some yards downslope from where I had been frantically pawing. The tip of her spear began to glow and, in what seemed like almost no time at all, the snow pack at which it was aimed melted away, revealing the broken corpse of my beloved Brekka. The valkyrie dismounted, tenderly lifted Brekka, and lay her across the horse's neck. Remounting, the valkyrie shook her head at me pityingly, sighed, then flew off to Asgard with her precious burden . . . followed by my last feeble cry of "Brekka!"

The sun sank in the west and the dark of evening began to extend its chill grip on the land. And still I lay there, my will and desire to live growing as cold and numb as my skin. For with my Brekka dead, why should I want to go on? Better to return to the ice in which she had found me.

A crunching footstep in the snow and a hand upon my shoulder aroused me. I turned my head to look up into the concerned, kindly face of Heimdall.

"Heimdall," I moaned, "B-Brekka's dead,

she's d-dead. An avalanche k-killed her."

"I was afraid that something horrible had happened when I heard you yelling her name. I got here as fast as Gulltopp could carry me." He looked at the hoofprints and the melted crater in the snow. "I see that a valkyrie has already come for her."

I nodded wordlessly.

"Well, that should provide you at least some consolation. It means that Brekka's spirit will dwell in Asgard for all eternity rather than down in Hel's dank domain . . . and that is certainly something to be thankful for."

"I am happy for her, of course . . . but she's lost to me, Heimdall, lost forever. What is there left to live for!"

"Get hold of yourself, Dag," snapped Heimdall as he lifted me to my feet. "It's all well and good to mourn your loss, but to deny your own life is to dishonor her memory. She loved life as much as anyone I've ever known. And, loving you as she did, she would want you to go on and live your life to the fullest—to live it for both of you."

Still in shock, I responded: "I know

you're right, Heimdall, but going on just seems to require more courage than I've got right now. What am I to do?"

"Do?" he queried. "Why, carry out the quest that you and Brekka began at Audumla's Lea—and for which Brekka gave her life. What finer monument to her memory could you hope to erect? And you won't be alone, Dag. The quest is yours to achieve, but I will stay with you until it is done."

I could feel my mental backbone stiffening in response to the god's encouragement. "Thank you, Heimdall, I begin to feel there is a reason to go on living."

Clapping me on the shoulder, he grinned and said: "Good man! Now pick up the iron branch I see sticking out of the side of the snow crater, and let's be on our way."

Fetching the tree limb that had been bought at such great cost, I mounted behind Heimdall on Gulltopp's broad back and offered a silent vow to Brekka's spirit that I would complete our quest . . . and that I would never stop loving her.

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