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*The Walker in Shadows*

# The Walker in Shadows

by

Dag Rossman

Gudmund paused, panting, beside a moss-covered boulder that partially leaned over the trail up which he had been hastening for what seemed like an eternity. When he left his sod-roofed cabin in the valley that morning, the sky had been clear with just a hint of fall in the crisp air—a perfect day to make the trek up and over the rugged ridge of the Troll’s Teeth to pay a long-delayed visit to his brother Arne in Kverndal.

All had gone well until he stopped to eat the bread and cheese he had in his backpack. Knowing that he was more than half way to his destination, Gudmund decided he could afford to stretch out on a mossy bank and catch a quick nap. After all, his stomach was full and the sun was warm . . . what could possibly be the harm in it?

A man who had survived in this region to become Gudmund’s age—nearly forty—should have known better. The mountains are beautiful, ‘tis true enough, but they are also as changeable as a young maid’s fancies. Gudmund realized this the moment a sudden drop in temperature woke him from a deep slumber and pleasant dreams. The sun was nowhere to be seen, and not only were dark, lowering clouds filling the sky, but a dense mist had begun to spread along the ridge crest and flow down toward the valleys below.

Clearly it was high time for Gudmund to be on his way if he hoped to reach Kverndal before sunset. Moreover, these mountains were no place to be after dark, for many a troll called them home . . . and those fierce creatures loved nothing more than the taste

of human flesh! Gudmund started off at a brisk pace, muttering under his breath at his own carelessness, and praying the mist wouldn’t thicken so much that he couldn’t see the trail. He had traveled this way often enough to know that countless side paths branched off hither and thither, so he needed to be able to see familiar landmarks lest he stray off the right path.

Alas for Gudmund, the mist thickened to the point that all he could see of the trail was the part just a few feet in front of him. He was strongly tempted to hunker down right where he was and spend the night—cold and uncomfortable as that would be—and wait for the morning sun to disperse the mist. But then he heard a sound that chilled his blood and sent him scrambling blindly along what he hoped was still the right trail—it was the deep, hooting cries of trolls a’hunting!

Ordinarily, trolls venture out only at night for they are petrified of being struck by the sun’s rays, which are said to turn trolls to stone. But on days such as this, when the sun’s rays are blocked by mist or rain, some of the more daring trolls are emboldened to risk wandering out and about. Such were the ones that apparently had caught scent of Gudmund and were now on his trail—or so he surmised, for their hoots surely seemed to be drawing closer.

There, looming out of the mist on the trail just behind him, that huge dark shape could only be a troll! Panic seized Gudmund and he lurched ahead with no thought in his head now save to outrun and escape his pursuers. Soon he came to a fork in the trail and,

without hesitation, darted up the right-hand path, praying as he did so that his sinister followers would choose to take the other one—forgetting for the moment that the long-nosed trolls have a keen sense of smell.

The path ascended sharply, then seemed to level out—though where it was headed, Gudmund neither saw nor cared. Suddenly, a powerful hand reached out and grasped his arm in an iron grip while a soft, rasping voice whispered in his ear: “Not another step would I take on this path, my friend, unless you’re Hel-bound to spend this night in the icy embrace of Loki’s daughter. The cliff face is broken off here, and the next solid ground lies three hundred feet below. Come aside, come aside.”

Gudmund stammered his thanks to his rescuer, whom he could not see clearly because of the dense mist and the fact that the man’s face—if a man he was—was hidden by a deep hood. But even at that, Gudmund could almost have sworn that he saw two gleaming points of light deep within the hood where the man’s eyes should be. How could that be possible, thought Gudmund, I must be imagining things.

Any further speculation was cut short by a hissed exclamation from his companion: “It seems we have company. Here come three trolls. Hide yourself beneath the low overhang on the right, and don’t move no matter what happens. I’ll deal with these trolls. Quickly now!”

“He can’t have gone far,” snarled the leading troll, “the man odor is ripe in me nose. We’ll have him soon.”

“That’s quite far enough, Kraki,” rasped the hooded figure. “The man you seek is under my protection now.” So saying, he stepped fully into the trail and held up his staff forbiddingly. Its splayed, three-pronged head—carved and polished from a piece of moose antler—was suggestive of algiz, the rune of protection.

“Curse you for meddling again, Faragrim

... or whatever your real name is,” growled the troll. “Me and the boys picked up his trail first, so he’s our meat. Just because you call yourself the ‘Walker in Shadows’ don’t give you no right to spoil our hunt.”

“You know that I have every right to do so! These mountains are my home now, and I’ve told you before I will not tolerate having my human neighbors harassed or killed by trolls—or anyone else. Heed my warnings and you’ll have no trouble from me. Continue to ignore them and I’ll make you wish you’d never been born.”

“Think yer somethin’, don’t you?” snarled Kraki. “Well, we’re not afraid of you or your silly-looking rune staff. We’re bigger than you and stronger than you, and there are three of us. So the way I figger it, when we get through with you there won’t be enough of you left to feed a rat. Get him, boys!”

Kraki stepped back to let his two followers lead the charge. Faragrim ducked aside from the rush of the first troll, and thrust his staff between the troll’s feet as he past. This caused the troll to lose his balance and stumble so badly that his momentum carried him—arms flailing wildly—over the edge of the cliff and onto the rocks far below.

Not pausing to see what had happened behind him, Faragrim met the second troll with a hard thrust to the gut with the blunt antler butt of his staff, the blow buckling the troll over. Before the troll could recover his breath, Faragrim struck him on the side of the head with a sweeping blow that brought the troll crashing to his knees. Then, reversing his staff, Faragrim jammed the three-pronged head into the troll’s left armpit and shoved so hard that this troll also toppled over the cliff, wailing as he fell.

When Kraki saw how easily Faragrim had disposed of his two henchmen, the troll suddenly decided he had urgent business elsewhere.

“It seems there is more than one reason to

fear a rune staff, eh, Kraki? Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh, heh, heh!" This raspy, chuckling taunt, eerily echoing through the mist, followed the troll down the trail and haunted his dreams for a long time thereafter.

\* \* \*

Lost in the dense mist capping the Troll's Teeth mountains—and still shaken by his narrow escape from a trio of hunting trolls—Gudmund was only too glad to follow his rescuer, the mysterious Faragrim, wherever he chose to lead.

"I could take you to your brother's place in Kverndal, where you said you were heading, but I fear you would find it very slow going because you cannot see well in this mist. We couldn't hope to get there before full dark and, when all the trolls are abroad, that would be tempting fate, indeed. No, I think you had better spend the night with me and complete your journey in the morning."

Gudmund expressed his gratitude for the invitation, and following closely behind the cloaked figure arrived at last at the narrow entrance to a cave high on the mountainside.

"This is where you live?" gasped Gudmund incredulously. "I thought only trolls lived in caves." The thought suddenly crossed his mind that he might just be in the company of an unusually cunning troll that had lured him to the cave for its own purposes; after all, Gudmund had never seen Faragrim unhooded.

Almost as if he could read his guest's mind, Faragrim reassured Gudmund with his raspy chuckle: "Heh, heh, heh, heh. Oh, I'm no troll—nor troll-friend either—as you have good reason to know. A cave is simply the most convenient place to stay for one such as I. Put aside your fears, my friend, and enter. Here you will be safe until the morrow."

Gudmund screwed up what remained of his courage and followed Faragrim into the cave, basically trusting in his rescuer's good

will but troubled nonetheless by his allusion to "one such as I." If one accepted Faragrim's declaration that he was no troll, what kind of being was he? The need for an answer to this question seemed to grow ever more pressing as the evening wore on.

Although Faragrim built a small fire to cook a meal for his guest, he himself did not partake of any food. Gudmund thought this strange but curbed his curiosity . . . for the moment. But, when it came time to bed down for the night, Faragrim insisted that Gudmund take the bear robe he offered and curl up on the only level surface to be seen.

"That's hardly fair," protested Gudmund. "Where will you sleep?"

"Oh, I never sleep," declared Faragrim quietly, "and heat or cold are as one to me. I keep the bear robe for use by guests such as yourself who drop by from time to time."

This was altogether too much for poor Gudmund, who blurted out: "By all the Aesir, Faragrim, what manner of man are you? You must not be human!"

"Oh, I'm a human being, my friend," Faragrim responded, "I'm just not a mortal man. I cannot be killed, for you see I am already dead."

Gudmund's jaw dropped at this statement and his eyes flicked nervously about as if he were seeking the quickest way to dodge past Faragrim and flee from the cave. The only walking dead men he had ever heard about were the draugs, and they were more dangerous than trolls!

Seeing Gudmund's unease, Faragrim sighed unhappily: "Ah, well, I can see I'm going to have to tell you a lot more of my story before you will feel safe spending the night here. You may as well sit down and make yourself comfortable, for the telling may take some time.

"Where should I begin? Well, I was born the heir to a throne in a land far to the south of here, but when I grew to manhood I slew my mother's father, the king, to avenge the

death of my own father, whom the king had cruelly mistreated for a long time and eventually had killed—even before I was born. Knowing that my grandfather’s minions and subjects would not take kindly to my kin-slaying—however justified I felt it to be—I bade farewell to my mother and set my face and feet toward the northlands to seek my future.

“After wending my way though dark, trackless forests, where I encountered countless wild beasts and even wilder men, I emerged into a more open, kindlier-seeming countryside where the people greeted a lone stranger as a friend. I was invited into their homes, given food and a bed, and urged to stay as long as I wished. This kind of hospitality was such a change from the way people had been treated in my home country—or from what I had experienced on my journey through the dark forests—that my heart warmed at once to the good folk of Oppland, which is what they called their part of Midgard.

“Needless to say, I lent a willing hand and a strong back to whatever farm chores were asked of me, but I was more willing than skilled, for as a young man I had been trained as a warrior, not a farmer. Still, my hosts were appreciative of my efforts, such as they were. When they learned more of my history, several of the elders asked if I would be willing to train and lead a small group of their young men to patrol the district with the goal of thwarting the periodic raids from wandering bands of outlaws or the occasional marauding troll. I was delighted at the prospect and agreed without hesitation.

“All went well for a time, and it seemed that an era of unparalleled peace and security had settled over Oppland. Then, disturbing rumors were heard of an especially vicious band of robbers led by a man called Hergrim Half-Troll, who by virtue of his mixed ancestry was bigger, stronger, and more

violent than any of the human flotsam that trailed in his wake. No man, woman, or child was safe when Hergrim and his band were out a-raiding. At each homestead they visited, the bandits seized the livestock and valuables, tortured and murdered the families, and burned the farm buildings to the ground. Oh, but it was wicked work, friend Gudmund, wicked!”

White-faced, Gudmund could only shake his head slowly in disbelief at the grimness of the scene playing out in his imagination.

Faragrim sighed, then resumed his narrative: “Following the trail of burned farms, it wasn’t long before my lads and I caught up with Hergrim’s marauders. We were too few in number and too inexperienced in the arts of war to risk a frontal assault, but we could—and did—harass them with arrows and cut down a few of their stragglers with our swords. When Hergrim sent back a larger body of men to engage us, we simply withdrew farther than the bandits were willing to follow—for they were reluctant to abandon the livestock they had stolen. And so the pursuit continued for several days until we came in sight of the shores of the Strandefjord. Their numbers dwindling from death and desertion, and exhausted from being unable to rest because of our relentless harassment, it was a rag-tag band of villains that followed Hergrim onto the small peninsula where we had harried them. Joined by local farmers whose homes had not yet been attacked, the pursuers now outnumbered the pursued, and of the final outcome there seemed little doubt.

“We made short work of Hergrim’s force, but the leader himself was a different matter. He was a great fighter—wicked fellow though he was—and, after several of our men had been cut down, I knew that I was the only one there who might have any hope of besting him. Just as Hergrim had some trollish ancestry, my father’s father was one of the Hill Giants . . . thus I, too, was bigger

and stronger than the average human. So it was that I called Hergrim out, and we set about trying to destroy each other with our swords. Grievously did we wound each other, and much of our lives' blood mingled on that field of battle ere I was finally able to cut off his head and put an end to his evil deeds . . . and then I collapsed beside him."

"Was that when you died?" asked Gudmund in a hushed tone.

"Not immediately, but before the sun had set that evening my mortal life was sped. Since I had died of battle wounds, my spirit fully expected that—just as in the stories—a beautiful valkyrie would come riding down out of the clouds to fetch me to Valhalla, whether body and spirit together or just my spirit was not clear to me. Anyway, that isn't what happened."

"Wh-what did happen, Faragrim?"

"Well, for some reason, my spirit remained tied to my body even as my corpse grew cold and my skin slowly turned gray and waxy. I wanted to protest, but the dead have no voice for the living . . . and there didn't seem to be anyone about on the spirit plane to whom I could complain. The good folk of Oppland were so filled with gratitude for what they called my 'noble sacrifice' that they hastily constructed an impressive gravhaug or barrow mound and, with all due ceremony, buried my body in a small chamber in its center. I had no idea what—if anything—would happen next, so my spirit withdrew into a meditative state to await developments. It was that or madness, I'm afraid."

"How terrifying," gasped Gudmund, "but something must have happened, for here you are."

"Indeed, yes, my friend, something did happen—and that is the strangest part of my tale. I don't know how much time passed in that trance-like state, but at some point I became aware of a grinding noise, as if rocks were shifting, followed shortly by a beam of

light that lit up the burial chamber. At first I thought it was grave robbers carrying a torch, but it soon became clear that the light was being cast by a full moon, and that my nocturnal visitor was a woman . . . and what a woman! Her long blonde hair shone like molten silver in the moonlight, and her voice was like the tinkling of silver bells. But there was iron in her, too, as events proved out.

"I have come to see what holds you here, Vidga. I sent one of my valkyries to bring you to Folkvang, for the spirit of a hero who has died on behalf of the helpless deserves no less, but she returned to me empty-handed, saying that something—or someone—would not let her touch you."

"I spoke to my Lady of Light, for it was Freyja herself who addressed me, and told the goddess that I had no idea what was wrong . . . but, before I could go on about my plight, another voice was heard in my barrow—another woman's voice: 'He may not know, Lady of the Vanir, but I do. In life he was a kin-slayer, and it is the nature of the *wyrd* which rules us all that such men must descend to Nastrand, to the Hall of Serpents, where they will spend eternity wading in its river of venom along with the other murderers and oath-breakers. Even you cannot defy the power of *wyrd*, Freyja . . . this man's spirit belongs in my realm, not yours.'

"If that were true, Hel, he would already be in your domain—or on his way—and you wouldn't have had to come up to Midgard to claim him,' Freyja responded calmly. 'No, it seems that something is preventing *wyrd* from being enforced in his case. Tell me, Vidga, did you, perchance, vow to avenge your father's slaying?'

"Puzzled, I responded: 'Indeed, Lady Freyja, I did just that as soon as I was old enough to take an oath.'

"Laughing in her silvery voice, Freyja declared: 'Well, there you have it, Hel. Had

Vidga failed to kill his maternal grandfather—his father’s slayer—he would have been an oath-breaker, and condemned to Nastrand. By fulfilling his vow, he became a kin-slayer, and bound to suffer the same fate. Thus Vidga was caught in the unavoidable paradox that he was doomed to fail no matter what choice he made. Such a situation disrupts the fundamental balance that governs the action of *wyrd*, and so it is that Vidga’s spirit cannot be sent down to Nastrand . . . yet neither is it free to ascend to Asgard. It seems that his spirit must remain in Midgard with his body.’

“‘So,’ hissed Hel, extending her right arm to point directly at me, ‘then—from this day forth—a draug he shall be, one of the living dead who lurk in their barrows during the light of day, only to come forth at night to terrorize any mortals they encounter. Faragrim—’Walker in Shadows’—I name him, a name that shall come to be uttered only in fear and trembling.’

“‘A cruel gift you bestow upon him, Hel,’ said Freyja sternly, ‘but while I cannot gainsay it, perhaps I can amend the harm you would wreak. A good man Vidga was in life, and a good man Faragrim shall be in death. The fear and trembling you have decreed will be that of the trolls and other enemies of humankind, for they are the ones upon whom he shall prey.’

“‘Curse your meddling, Freyja,’ snarled Hel. ‘He is mine, I tell you, and I have yet to bestow his naming gift.’ Fending off the Vanir goddess with her left arm, Hel bent over me and planted a kiss full upon my lips. Though oblivious as my body had become to cold, I could swear that Hel’s lips were like

glacial ice that had never felt the touch of the sun. Then her voice rang out: ‘Arise, Faragrim, and go forth as the draug I named you.’ But for me, frozen by her kiss, body and spirit remained asunder . . . and I could not heed her command.

“‘Oh, Hel,’ laughed Freyja, ‘know you not that your kiss can only bring death, not life?’ Then the Lady of Light bent down and gently kissed me, too, just where Hel’s lips had met mine moments before. A warm glow momentarily passed through me as my body and spirit knitted together. Freyja took me by both hands, saying: ‘Arise, my hero, and go forth to help those to whom I have pledged your protection.’ And at once I sat up.

“‘Think you’ve won him, don’t you?’ grumped Hel. ‘But you mark my words, both of you. In the end, Faragrim will come to me.’ And, turning to clamber out of the barrow, Hel took her leave.

“Freyja called after her: ‘That remains to be seen, Hel, for only time can tell. But if he does, it will be only of his own choosing.’ Then giving me a hug, she, too, departed, and I was left alone to begin my new existence and carry out the charge Freyja had laid upon me.”

Gudmund let out the breath he had been holding in. “Well, I guess that means you are safe from Hel’s wrath, doesn’t it? Why in Odin’s name would anyone choose to go to her?”

“I’m sure you are right, my friend,” mused Faragrim thoughtfully, “but I must confess there are times when I wonder, I wonder . . . .”

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