

A Hard Question

When Erik and Sven the Strong returned from Wolf Mountain, they roasted a wild boar which their comrades had caught. During the feast a most curious thing happened.

The wind was howling outside and Ragnar Forkbeard was telling a story, when suddenly there came a loud knocking on the door. Erik and his men looked at one another.

'Who can that be in this deserted land?' they asked.

But the knocking came again only this time even louder.

'Open the door,' said Erik, and one of his men, whose name was Gunnar Longshanks, stood up to do so. But Thorkhild stopped him.

'Wait!' said Thorkhild, 'for I do not believe there can be *anybody* knocking on the door of our cabin in this forsaken land . . . the snow is deep on the ground and it is pitch black night outside.'

Then the knocking came again, only this time it was so loud that all the tables shook, and the swords that hung from the walls rattled.

'I fear it is some evil spirit,' said Thorkhild, 'that wants us to let it in so that it may do some mischief.'

But Erik said, 'Thorkhild! I know you understand such things better than most, and yet this may be a

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visitor who needs our help. We *must* open the door to see.'

And just then the knocking came again, only this time so loud that the whole hut shook, and the swords that hung on the walls crashed to the floor.

Then Thorkhild shook his head, and Gunnar Longshanks opened up the door. The night was black, and the bitter wind blasted into the hall, and there stood a small girl dressed in rags.

'Bring her in!' cried Erik, 'before she dies of cold in the bitter night.'

So they brought the girl into the warm hall and closed the door against the bitter wind. And they gave her a cup of warm milk and a plateful of food and sat her before the fire to warm herself. But the girl did not eat, and she did not drink, and when she felt the warmth of the fire she began to cry.

'Why do you not eat?' asked Erik. 'And why do you not drink? And why do you sit and weep before the warm fire?'

The ragged girl looked round at Erik and his men and then said: 'I do not eat because my father does not eat. I do not drink because my father does not drink. And I weep before the fire because – even now – my father lies out yonder in the cold snow and the bitter night.'

'Then weep no more,' said Erik, 'for we shall fetch him in.' And Ragnar Forkbeard and four others put on their cloaks.

But Thorkhild went up to Erik and said: 'Do not let them go into the darkness, for I fear if you do we may never see them again.'

Erik replied: 'This child's father lies out yonder in

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the snow. We must find him and bring him back.
But Thorkhild shook his head: 'I do not know what it is I fear . . . but I feel something unearthly is amongst us.'

'Thorkhild,' replied Erik, 'I know that you can sense things when others cannot, and yet we must not leave this child's father to die out yonder.' And Erik turned to the ragged girl and said: 'Child, where does your father lie?'

'Out yonder,' said the girl.

'But in which direction?' asked Erik.

'Oh,' said the ragged girl, 'but a stone's throw from your door.' So Ragnar Forkbeard and the other four stepped out into the pitch black night, and the girl threw a stick onto the fire.

Some time passed, and then Sven the Strong leant upon a crutch – his broken leg bound tight in a splint – and said: 'Ragnar Forkbeard and the others have been gone too long. Perhaps they have lost their way. I shall go and search for them.' And he lit a torch and put on his cloak and so did four others.

But Thorkhild went up to him and said: 'Do not go. For I do not know what it is, but I feel something unearthly amongst us, and it is growing stronger.'

Sven the Strong clasped Thorkhild by the shoulders and said: 'Thorkhild! I know you can see things when others cannot, but we must find our comrades.' So Sven the Strong hobbled out into the pitch-black night – and the four others with him – and the ragged girl threw another stick onto the fire.

A long time passed, and still neither Ragnar Forkbeard and his companions, nor Sven the Strong and

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his men returned. So Erik stood up and said: 'Something is wrong. I myself will go and see what has happened to our comrades.'

But Thorkhild jumped to his feet and ran to Erik and put his arms round him and said: 'Erik, for the love that you bear me, do not go into that darkness. For there is something unearthly amongst us and it has grown fearful strong!'

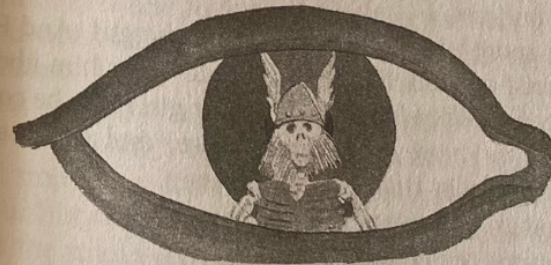
'I cannot leave my comrades to die in the bitter night,' said Erik, 'I must go.'

'No!' cried Thorkhild, 'I will go!'

And before Erik could stop him he had disappeared into the pitch-black night, and the rest of Erik's men followed after him.

Then Erik heard a laugh and he looked round to see the ragged girl throwing a log onto the fire.

'Why do you laugh?' asked Erik, but the girl did not reply. 'Who are you?' asked Erik, and he looked into the girl's eyes and he could see his own reflection in them, by the light of the fire, and his reflection was a skeleton. Then Erik began to believe in his mind what Thorkhild had said . . . that there was something unearthly amongst them.



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For a moment Erik hesitated, then suddenly he drew his knife and pressed it on the throat of the ragged girl, and said: 'What sort of a creature are you?'

And the girl replied: 'Would you kill a child?'

And Erik hesitated again for he did not have it in his heart to do so terrible a deed.

'But where are my men?' he asked.

'They are looking for my poor father,' said the girl, 'they will return with him at any moment.' But as she spoke, Erik could feel magic humming in the air. So he pressed his knife harder to the child's throat and said: 'Where do you come from?'

Then tears welled up in the little girl's eyes and she started to cry, and Erik put down his knife, saying to himself: 'If she were a creature of evil, surely, she could not cry like this,' and he put his arm around the girl and felt ashamed that he had threatened her. But even as he did he could feel the magic humming louder than ever in his ears.

The little girl cried and cried and Erik tried to comfort her. Finally she ceased sobbing and said: 'Fetch me some water,' and Erik ran to fetch her some water. She took the cup of water, but she did not drink it. Instead she poured it all onto the floor. And Erik watched her and wondered.

'Put more sticks on the fire,' said the girl. And Erik wondered to himself that she should order him about, and yet he said to himself, 'The poor girl must be cold,' and he put more sticks on the fire, and the magic hummed louder than ever in his ears.

'What is your name?' asked the girl.

'I cannot remember,' said Erik.

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'Good,' said the girl, 'then you are entirely in my power at last!'

And Erik looked at her pale white face and he knew that he had lost his own will.

'Now take up your knife again,' said the ragged girl.

And Erik thought to himself: 'Would that I had listened to Thorkhild.' But he took up his knife.

'Now,' said the ragged girl, 'put it to your chest,' and Erik found himself obeying.

'Would that I had not sent my men away,' he thought, 'for this child has some unearthly power and I must do whatever she tells me,' and he placed his own knife on his own chest.

'Now,' said the ragged girl, 'cut out your heart and give it to me.'

'I must obey her,' said Erik to himself and he started to plunge the knife into his chest, but, before the blade had so much as pricked his skin, the ragged girl gave a cry, and Erik turned to see the smoke from the fire enveloping her.

At that moment the door burst open, and Thorkhild plunged into the smoke, and there was a scream, and then he reappeared dragging the body not of the little ragged girl but of a troll . . . a wizened creature with starting eyes and its tongue hanging out. And at that moment Erik dropped his knife and now the magic had vanished.

'As soon as I saw her throwing sticks on the fire,' said Thorkhild, 'I knew there was something magic in that smoke – so when I went out I climbed on the roof of our hut and threw my cloak over the smoke hole so that the smoke would not blind me.'

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Then they threw the troll's body into the snow and found Ragnar Forkbeard and his men and Sven the Strong and his men stumbling in the dark, but the smoke that had blinded them was gone too, and when they saw their comrades they embraced, and returned to the feast and vowed they would not let themselves be blinded so easily again.

'And yet,' said Erik, 'what we did was right and just. For what if the troll *had* been a poor ragged child – and what if she *had* had a father dying in the snow?'

And everyone shook their heads and agreed they did not know the answer, nor see how they should have acted otherwise. And I wonder too – what do you think?

How Erik and Thangbrand were Tested

The winter was long and hard. And while the snows lay up against the walls of their hut, Erik and his men had little enough to eat, and they grew thin and sour.

'When shall we ever eat again?' they began to ask each other. 'And what of our ship, Golden Dragon? Can she still be safe, left unattended all this long time?'

Erik heard his men grumbling, one to another, but he said nothing.

Then up stood one of his men who was thinner and sourer than any of the others. His name was Thangbrand. 'Why should we put up with this any longer?' he said. 'Let us leave this place. Let us find Golden Dragon and set sail at once.' And Erik's men looked from one to the other, and then they looked at Erik. But Erik said nothing.

'Come!' said Thangbrand. 'Let us waste no more time, for if we wait any longer we shall be dead from hunger.'

'Thangbrand is right,' said Ulf Sigfusson, and he got up and stood next to Thangbrand. Then up too got Olaf Hamundson and Gunnar Longshanks and they too stood next to Thangbrand and Ulf Sigfusson. And then another got up and joined them, and another and another, until half of Erik's men were standing beside