

The Saga of Erik the Viking

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

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Thangbrand. Then they all looked at Erik and at last Erik spoke.

'You know my mind already. We should stay here until the snows have gone. However if any of you wish to follow Thangbrand I shall not stop you.'

Then some of Erik's men murmured amongst themselves, and some were astonished by Erik's words. And Thangbrand became filled with pride to think that half of Erik's men would follow him.

'But listen,' said Erik. 'We are small enough in numbers as it is. It would be certain death for only half of you to go. Either all of you must follow Thangbrand or none of you.'

Then Erik's men were even more amazed, and Thangbrand swelled even more with pride to think that *all* of Erik's men might follow him.

'And listen!' said Erik. 'You know that I and Ragnar Forkbeard alone have already made the journey between Golden Dragon and here, and we alone know the way and how fraught with danger it is. It would be certain death for you to go without us as well.'

Then great was the amazement amongst Erik's men, and Thangbrand puffed himself up to think that even Erik himself might follow him, and a mighty argument broke out.

At length Erik held up his hand and said: 'Since you must decide between Thangbrand and myself, let us prove which of us is the most worthy to be your leader.'

Everyone agreed to this, so Erik said: 'First let us see which of us has the strongest arm for the bow.' So Thangbrand put an arrow into his bow, and pulled back the string till it was behind his ear. Then he let

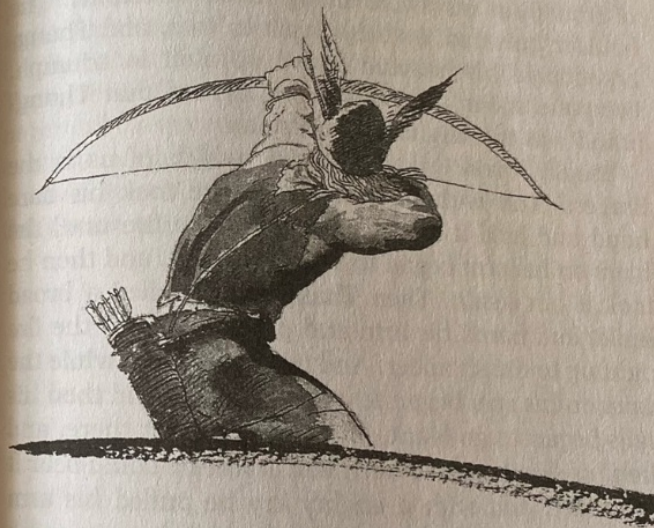
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his arrow fly so fast and hard that it buried itself in the trunk of an oak tree right up to its feathers.

But Erik said: 'My arrow will go straight through that oak tree and come out the other side.'

'That's impossible!' said Thangbrand.

'Not at all,' said Erik, and he pulled back his bowstring no further than his elbow and let his arrow fly straight and true.



But he did not aim at the trunk of the tree, instead he aimed at an oak apple, hanging from a branch, and the arrow split the oak apple in two and came out the other side, and embedded itself in the oak tree behind. 'Thangbrand has the stronger arm for the bow,' said Erik's men, shaking their heads, 'but Erik is the more cunning.'

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Then Erik said: 'Let us see which of us is the mightier swordsman.' And he went to a tree stump and lifted his sword Blueblade high above his head, and smote the tree stump such a mighty blow that it was cleft in two right down to its roots.

Then Thangbrand went to a boulder, and swung his sword high and wild above his head, and brought it down with a crashing blow that sent sparks and flashes of iron from his sword flying in all directions. The boulder quivered, and then split in two, and Thangbrand held his battered sword up aloft in triumph. Everyone shook their heads and agreed that Thangbrand was the mightier swordsman.

'Finally,' said Erik, 'let us see which of us is the braver.' And without more words he took his bare hand and held it in the flame from the fire until the hairs on his arm began to singe and curl, and then he took it out again. Then Thangbrand smiled a broad smile, and bared his arm and plunged it into the fire right up to the shoulder. And he kept it there while the hairs on his arm began to curl and singe, and then his nails began to go black, and still he kept it there, and then his skin began to burn and at last he could bear it no longer, and with a mighty cry he pulled his arm from the flames, but already the fire had done its work and his arm hung limp and useless by his side, and he fell down fainting from the pain.

Everybody shook their heads and agreed that Thangbrand was indeed a brave man. But Erik turned to them and said: 'Yet is it possible that any of you were prepared to follow this man? He has certainly a strong arm for the bow, but he has no cunning. He

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may be a mighty swordsman, but now he has no sword. And what is worst of all his foolish pride has cost him his good fighting arm. How far would you have got following such a man on such a journey none of you knew whither?

'I am not your leader because I have the strongest arm for the bow, or the mightiest sword, or even the bravest heart, but because you have learned to trust my judgement, and know that even when I am wrong I speak for the good of us all and not for pride.'

After that, all the men returned to their places. Thangbrand lay sick on his bed for many days and never fully recovered the use of his right arm and was ever after called Thangbrand One-Hand. And Erik and his men stayed safe in their camp until the snow and the winter were past.

