

Tainted Wells

MAGNUS TREMBATH

Our home was on the western coast of Iceland, where the cliffs met the sea and the sheep outnumbered the people, in the days when longships still left our shores each spring and the men followed the old ways.

A grungy, hairy, lanky man stood on the edge of our well outside our turf-roofed house, trousers around his ankles, relieving himself into our family's drinking water. He took his time. During that time, my sisters and mother gathered our spears and bows while I stood watch, sword in hand, to make sure he did not try to enter. He was still there when they returned. We stepped out together, arrows knocked, and stopped thirty feet away.

"Hello! Didn't think anyone was home," said the man. "I am Angi Pissarisson." He scratched his long, dirty beard with his unkempt nails.

"Are you well?" I asked.

He hadn't bothered to adjust himself. He only gave me a crooked look.

"Is that all? What a cowardly gaggle of chickens you seem to be. I declare this another sacred well desecrated in the name of Loki!" He began to dance, bouncing from leg to leg in a circle along the well's edge.

Mother drew and loosed an arrow at his head, but he slapped it aside without even looking. He stopped dancing, turned slowly toward her, stuck out his tongue—and ran.

My sisters and mother unleashed a hail of arrows. Spears followed, but their points found only dirt as Angi darted side to side and vanished around the stable. By the time we rounded the corner, he was already down the hill and across the stream, striding as though wicked magic had lengthened his legs so he could cover the distance in only nine steps. The last we saw of him that evening was his shrinking backside disappearing into the forest.

Magnus is a Winnipeg author who likes to read and write nothing but fantasy. Outside writing, he loves to climb, bike, practice piano and play with his cat, Rykkúla. Magnus has always felt a strong connection with history and believes there is plenty of inspiration for stories from real history and the myths from those times. His favourite time periods are Ancient Rome, the Viking Age and early medieval Europe, but he hopes one day to expand his knowledge and writing to more cultures in the future.

Mother sighed and rubbed her forehead.

"Momma," one of my sisters asked, "why did that man have his pants down?"

"Inside," Mother said firmly. "It's nearly bedtime."

She let the girls go in, then rested her hand on my shoulder.

"Your father won't return for another month. The men sailed east at the thaw to trade—and to raid. All of them went, except Angi. He's ruined a dozen wells already this year. People thought he'd frozen in the woods last winter, but it seems he survived. This will make things harder."

"I'll go after him," I said.

She squeezed my shoulder. "You are like your father, Haskel—hunting outlaws the first chance you get. But this is only your sixteenth winter. I need you here to tend the sheep. We'll draw water from the stream until we dig a new well."

I nodded, but inside I had already decided. I could not let such disrespect stand—not to my family, nor to our village.

Angi had to be stopped.

The sun dipped over the ocean and painted the waves of tall yellow grass in a warm light. The village below bustled like an anthill. I glanced once more at the green roof of our home, where blue flowers grew among the turf, then turned toward the sea.

The mud along the path squelched beneath the boots my mother had made for me.

The longhouse was loud and smoky. I gathered every lad old enough to hold a sword—or at least throw a stone. We shared watered-down mead while one after another spoke of Angi's mischief. Mine had been only one of nearly two dozen wells. Shame and fear had kept many silent about Angi.

"He nearly fouled ours worse before the dogs chased him off," said Dorri. He was the only one of us who could grow any facial hair, but his thin moustache did little to inspire fear in his enemies. Neither did his inability to stay awake longer than six hours. However, he had thick arms that made us scared of how strong he could be when he was older. "I'll beat the crap out of him."

"He stole three of our chickens before we could stop him, too," said Olaf. Olaf was very tall, taller than most of the adult men, but he was like a twig with how stretched out he was. His long face was furrowed in frustration as he expressively waved his arms. "I can't imagine what has happened to all me old chickens!"

The rest of the boys all shouted and talked over each other like waves rolling over a rowboat. Old lady Loa gave us more watered-down mead and smiled gently, moving table to table, not caring much for all the talk as long as we kept giving her pennies or promised to come help gut fish for her sometime soon.

Thordis Gunnsteinsdottir walked in and all the boys dropped their conversations like a criminal would drop from a gallows. Thordis was the same age as me, with shining blue eyes and an elegantly sewn dress that she had made herself. She carried a small package, wrapped in white cloth. She approached me, a great smile on her face,

oblivious to the silence that surrounded her, and handed me the item.

"I heard you were going out: After an outlaw. I made this for you! For goodluck. I'm afraid I didn't make enough for everyone, though," said Thordis, and glanced around.

I unfurled the wrapping to reveal small cubes of white fishy meat. It was dried fermented shark. I held up a cube and it had a rubbery texture. This food was my life-blood. The smell burnt my nose; It was her family's secret recipe. Just looking at it made me giddy. I looked back to Thordis, her eyes tense with anticipation for a response.

"Thordis, this is wonderful. I will kill this outlaw in your honour," I said. "And, I will eat this shark with the same fierceness that I always do with your cooking."

Thordis gave me a nod, her smile splitting her pretty face even more. "Thank you!" She seemed to sense the dozens of eyes that watched not just her, but the shark meat, like wolves. "Goodluck! Make sure you don't miss a single detail when you tell us later!" With that, she spun, her braid swinging and slapping me in the face, and walked out the door.

I only had a few seconds before my own men mutinied against me and attempted to eat my fermented shark. I fought them off and devoured it all in three bites before any grubby hand could steal even a morsel. Even then, it was amazing; the taste was hard to ruin, even with a swarm of thieves at your heels. The nutty, sweet shark morsels basically melted in my mouth and didn't take long to finish. I dramatically ate the last bite from atop a bench, every boy in the hall watching me, waiting, likely praying for my sudden demise so they could have it from my cold, dead hands.

The old cat that lived here watched the whole crowd with typical cat aloofness. Atop a bench by the fiery hearth, he almost looked like a fluffy piece of grey mold with how his legs were tucked in, if not for his bright green eyes. As the boys dispersed back to their meager mead and basic bread, I gave the cat a chin scratch to show my appreciation for him not betraying me, too.

"Good cat."

After a brief period of digestion, we woke Dorri from his nap and set out to the forest with our supplies and weapons to go find Angi. The sun was below the horizon, but the sky still held a small amount of light. It would be a full moon tonight, so if we didn't have any clouds then visibility shouldn't be an issue. I glanced back at the troop that followed me. Olaf and Dorri were close behind. Most of the boys had spears that were twice as tall as them. They carried swords and axes spotted with rust; spares their fathers had left behind. Helmets from older brothers that were too big and spun around every other step no matter how tight they tied the chin straps. Unpainted shields that weighed them down and clacked when they marched too close to one another. The smallest boys used their shirts to hold rocks and bread and waterskins full of mead. Their unwavering bravery inspired me to keep us marching; until darkness came and brought with it exhaustion.

We made a great fire by the edge of the forest. The youngest boys slept closest to the center. The oldest and I stayed up and boasted of what we'd do to defeat Angi tomorrow. Each boast brought cheers and swigs of mead.

"I'll hit him on the backside with a stick! Leave a great big welt," said Dorri, and then stifled a yawn with the back of his hand.

Olaf stood up after. "I'll wet his beard with eggs. I must avenge my chickens." He revealed a handful of chicken eggs he carried with him.

I hadn't boasted yet. Eventually, they caught on, and every eye still awake looked at me.

I stood up.

"I will cut off his hand with my sword, and from now on my sword shall be named Hand Stealer," I said. I drew the blade from its scabbard with a rasp. The boys all went oooooh and cheered. My blade glinted in the dark.

The full moon shone above as we let the embers burn out. We tried to take shifts as we slept, but Dorri fell asleep on his. Luckily, we all woke up, but something was wrong.

All of our bread was gone, and all of our water skins were full of a different golden liquid now. Dorri's moustache had been shaven off, along with his eyebrows. No one had the heart to tell him, though. Otherwise, they were completely unscathed.

The older boys were fired up and angry, but the younger ones started to wilt like flowers when it snows. The youngest had muttered something about a ghost, and like an ember in a leaf-pile the fear had spread between them. By the time we were ready to continue our quest, we had lost our youngest half of the group to panic. We saw them running back home to the village down the hill.

Further in the woods, towards the mountain, we noticed the smell of smoke. Like a bunch of cats hunting a single, meticulous mouse, we slunk forwards towards the campsite.

The campfire was at the entrance of a cave. A shaggy horse was tied loosely to a rock, and a pack lay beside it on a fallen tree that was dragged over here as a seat. Me, Dorri and Olaf went to investigate while the rest of the boys followed closely behind.

"He must be in there," I said.

"Has to be," said Dorri.

"Did we bring torches? I don't know guys. Seems like a bad idea," said Olaf.

"It is fate that we enter this cave and slay him," I said.

"Can't argue with fate," said Dorri.

"You got a point. My dad tried to do that once. The seer prophesied his doom from a row boat, so he avoided any and every boat he could for a year. But a small rowboat that was getting barnacles scraped off of it came loose and crushed him anyways," said Olaf.

"We all know about the rowboat story, Olaf," said every boy in imperfect unison.

"Ok, but what about torches? We don't have any," said Olaf.

I walked past the horse and pulled a stick from the fire. "These should do," I said. I tossed the burning wood into the dark. The orange lit up the walls and roof of the wide cave to show some mushrooms and moss down there. The boys all came and peaked past me.

A dark shape blurred past the piece of wood and put the cave back into darkness.

Now all the boys raved about trolls and ghosts or just screamed. It took all my strength to hold onto Dorri's and Olaf's hair to keep them from running, but I was helpless as we lost the rest of our trembling troops. Once my two subordinates had regained their composure, I made them huddle in a circle with me around the small fire. "From now on, no more fear. We need each other," I said.

The fire lit our faces from below. Thunder boomed in the distance, out of sight from the other side of the mountain. The horse neighed and danced around its rope slightly from the booms.

Olaf rubbed his running nose.

Dorri scratched his upper lip, not noticing the lack of facial hair or eyebrows yet.

"We need to kill Angi," said Dorri. Olaf agreed with a nod.

"We need to make an oath," I finished.

We all drew a blade and poked a small bit of blood from our pinkies. We balanced the red drops on the tips of the weapons and met them in the middle above the flames. They connected, forming one large droplet, and unsupported in the gap between our three blades, fell into the fire with a quiet sizzle.

"We fight together," I said.

"We die together," said Dorri.

"We will kill you together, Angi!" shouted Olaf, startling the horse behind me.

The horse screamed and broke its rope. My back was to it, and it hit me into the fire, and reflexively I grabbed Olaf and Dorri by the hair and pulled them with me into the cave. We fell forwards and down the mossy stone bumps, flaming wood around us, until we finally came to a rest in the dark. A single piece of wood still burned while embers whirled in the dark from where we came like floating, fiery footsteps. Desperately, we all looked to the entrance, and saw the silhouette of the horse melt into the form of a man. He reached his long arms up to the ceiling of the cave and pulled the stone down like it was cloth, sealing us in there with him with a loud thump.

He let out a deep laugh that filled the darkness. "So, you finally found your way to Angi's home. Angi isn't happy you're here. Angi thinks you should've run home like all the other boys did, tails tucked between their legs," said the voice. The whimsical, insulting voice I remembered from yesterday was almost entirely gone, replaced with a deep sinister grumble, like the sound of sand falling.

Olaf's shirt was soaked with eggs; he had only one left.

I thought Dorri had broken his arm, but I realized that the snap I had heard was his spear-head breaking off, leaving him with a long stick.

Hand Stealer lay under the burning piece of wood. The fire made the metal look like it was made of lava. I picked up the wood with one hand, but when I gripped my sword, it burned me and I dropped it.

“Ouch!” I said.

“Haskel, what do we do?” muttered Dorri. He used his spear to stay standing as he shook.

All of our other weapons were gone.

“Come on, Haskel. I only got an egg. What do we do?” said Olaf.

I could hear Angi’s footsteps in the dark. Each one shook pebbles on the ground. He dragged something heavy behind him. I clenched my teeth and forced my burnt fingers around the heated hilt of my sword once again. Through the pain I held my blade and fire in front of me.

“We fight.”

Angi stomped forwards. He wasn’t human anymore. He was three times our height, his hair made of moss, and his skin made of dense stone. Every movement crackled as bits of rock flaked off his joints. He dragged the fallen tree as a club.

Angi swung and I ducked. I scraped my chin on the stone and scrambled out of the way of his foot, which could have probably crushed my head right through my helmet. He was faster than a giant should have been, but he had to slouch in the cave, which brought his head just close enough. When he swung again, I stepped back and let the tree woosh through the air inches from my face, then I jumped forwards with my blade pointed for his neck.

The blade had the wrong angle and didn’t cut. It made a loud ring and sent vibrations through my skeleton. While I resonated, Angi angrily punched my noggin and sent me tumbling backwards. I dropped my sword and fire and fell into the dark.

Angi stepped to come finish me off, but a loud thwack made him pause. Dorri had smacked his backside with his broken spear. Olaf still stood frozen, dimly lit, egg in hand. His eyes were wide and unresponsive and he trembled.

“Bet your mother treated you worse. Ha ha!” snickered Dorri.

“You little rat!” boomed Angi. He reached for Dorri, but Dorri danced around him and hit him along the backside two more times before Angi finally managed to grab the stick. Dorri held on, and the both wrestled for control over the piece of wood for a moment before it snapped from the pressure and Dorri fell down.

Angi went to squish Dorri, who had raised his hands in fear as if they would do anything. I had only just recollected myself and stood up. I was too far away to reach him in time.

But Olaf wasn’t.

Olaf was hidden behind Angi from me, and I saw him step from the darkness near Dorri and fling the only egg he had left towards the giant's face. It twirled as it flew, and missed his beard; and went directly into Angi's eyeball with a crunchy splat.

Angi stumbled and rubbed his face. His injured eye was closed and unable to open.

"You little sheep-shits. I'll start with your legs and make you squeal," said Angi.

I ran forwards and collected my blade and fire. "Get back!" I shouted to Olaf and Dorri. Olaf dragged Dorri back as far as the cave allowed. I faced Angi alone.

Angi still had his tree-club, and swung it down at me. I jumped to the side and into a roll. As I landed, I chopped his ankle, and my blade finally revealed a cut, the stone splitting like flesh.

"Ouch!" shouted Angi.

He crouched down to grip his ankle with his free hand, but he still gave another swing at me. I jumped over this one and put my blade in the path of his hand. His hand kept moving and my blade went through his wrist, stealing his hand away from him. The club and the hand thudded into the dark. Angi reached for me with his other hand, and I chopped with all my might at his fingers. One by one I cut them off. I had to retreat multiple times as he swung his stumps at me, growling and raging and cursing my existence.

Eventually, I had worn him down enough so that he could no longer fight back. He seemed to have shrunk a little. He displayed numerous nicks on his stony-skin. He grovelled on his knees.

"Please, Haskel. It was only a joke! Only a joke," said Angi.

I stood in front of him, and felt a great deal of pity. Angi the troll looked a lot more like Angi the human now. His chainmail was cracked and ripped in numerous spots. His right hand was missing, and he looked pretty beaten up, but not to the point of death. I no longer felt the battle spirit within me. This felt more like murder than vengeance. His eyes were crying. They were human eyes.

"You have to kill him, Haskel!" cried Dorri.

"Just do it!" said Olaf.

I shook my head. "I can't. I just... can't," I said. I thought of my father, the greatest warrior of them all. He's probably killed hundreds of Englishmen. His son couldn't even kill grovelling Angi, The Outlaw, The Troll. I looked back at my two cowering friends. They were bruised and nicked, but otherwise alright.

"You fool!" screamed Angi and he exploded towards me like an arrow launched from a bow. He landed on top of me and his face hideously filled up my vision. It was frozen in the same sneering scream. Both our eyes moved down to see my blade, Hand Stealer, plunged right through a hole in his mail and out of his back. Our eyes came back to meet, and Angi's final words were, "well, maybe not."

He slumped over me and covered me with blood. I screamed in horror and scrambled out from under the man's lifeless body. Olaf and Dorri helped me to my feet, and the three of us scrambled out of the cave after we collected our lost weapons. We got to the blocked entrance, and found it wasn't a boulder, but a curtain of vines and moss that had fallen down and blocked the light. Outside, we found the ashes of the campfire, damp and smoky from the steady drops of rain that fell from the sky. We let the rain clean the mud and blood from our cloaks and shirts. The rope that had held the horse lay detached, with the animal nowhere in sight, if it had even been real in the first place. We left Angi's cave and stumbled out in the rain completely exhausted. Thor sent a bolt of lightning above our heads in congratulations of a deed well-done.

"Can you share some of your shark next time you have some?" asked Olaf.

"Can I have some, too?" asked Dorri.

"Anything for my blood brothers. You two earned the entirety of the next one that Thordis gives me," I said, although it was gonna be tough living without it for a little while.

"Can you ask her to make some more when we get back? To celebrate?" asked Olaf. I punched him in the shoulder. "Don't push it," I laughed.

Dorri paused. "My eyebrows are gone. When did that happen?" He felt around his face. "My moustache, too." His eyes darted between us in shock, then realization.

Olaf and I looked at each other. Dorri was always a heavy sleeper, and bad at staying awake for longer than a few hours after dark. Angi may have pissed in our waterskins after we all went to sleep, but he didn't shave off Dorri's eyebrows and moustache. That was us.

Olaf and I broke into a sprint down the hill as Dorri shouted after us. It was a good thing we were both better runners than Dorri.