

The Draugr

By Alexander Saxton

Sometimes I forget that my gods have been taken from me. Usually, this happens in winter, when wind howls off the sea of worms, driving snow across our shores until the houses are buried to the eaves. On days like that, it's easy to forget we now kneel before the Christian God, under the scepter of Norway's King. On days like that, it's easy to remember the nights of my childhood, gathered around the longhouse fire, listening to stories that it is now frowned upon to tell.

The stories I loved, though they are now especially frowned on, were always the stories of *Seidhr*, witchcraft. There was the one where Odin journeyed to the borders of death, and summoned the ghost prophetess, to learn the future. There was the one where the dark-elves Fjalar and Galar, murdered a god to brew magic mead out of his blood. And then there was the story of the Draugr Thrainn, who slaughtered over four hundred men, before he was killed by the hero Hromund Gripsson.

This was my favourite. I loved the way it made my skin shiver. Thrainn had been a great killer, a berserk whose powers of witchcraft made him a king, and the richest man on earth.

Then, when he grew old, he loved his wealth so much that he climbed down into his grave with it, and became a *Draugr*: a dead thing that walks again. Rather than sleep in death, he chose a cursed half-life with his gold, monstrous, deformed, alone, and always freezing cold.

I remember even now, holding tight to my brother Thorsten's arm as our grandmother described the Draugr's corpse-blue flesh, his long fingernails, and how he crept away at night to gorge on the blood of children in their cradles.

But as I say, such tales are no longer encouraged. The Christians say we have eternal life, and dislike the suggestion there is something unnatural about wanting to live forever.

Moreover, they say such stories are superstitious. They do not believe a person with an evil enough will can continue to work their evil after death.

Well. Maybe you will not believe me; maybe you will say I am an old man, nostalgic for a way of life that is past, and well rid of. But I say that I know different.

Now the story I'm about to tell you happened just after Olaf Tryggvasson became king in Norway, and decided he would force the people of Iceland to accept his new God.

I was only about twelve, living on my brother Thorsten's farm, as I had since our father died.

Thorsten was much older than I was. I was only just born when he sailed to Vendtland with Jarl Haakon, and I was only a boy when we heard he had gone to serve the Greek Emperor in Miklagardh.

He returned after our father was killed by Eirik Ezursson, and settled the feud by cleaving the heads of Eirik and his three brothers, one after the other, like he was splitting firewood.

After that, nobody bothered us Thorvaldsons until the missionary came.

I first heard about this missionary from my brother, when he returned from the Westfjords that spring.

“Did you hear about the Christian?” he said. We were riding along the downs, and the grass was just beginning to turn from yellow to green. Thorsten was wearing his red tunic, the one that shone with gold threads. “The one that caused all that trouble down in Langedalr?”

I shook my head. At that time, missionaries weren’t unheard of on the island. There were always a handful hanging around in the capital at Skalholt, but everybody ignored them.

“Another Irish monk?” I said.

“No,” said Thorsten. “A Norwegian, and if he’s a monk, he’s a different breed of monk. He threw down Langedalr’s statues of Odin and Frey, and then burned them in front of everyone in the village.”

“And nobody stopped him?”

“Hruet Balvorsson stopped him,” he said.

“Good,” I said.

Hruet Balvorsson had sailed with my brother to Vendtland. He had slain thirteen men in single combat.

“Not good,” said Thorsten. “This Christian, Thangbrand, beat him to death with a crucifix.” My jaw dropped.

“*Hruet Balvorsson?*” I said. He nodded.

“I couldn’t believe it, either,” he said. “Most of the village converted after that. People are saying it proves Thangbrand’s God was stronger than his. I think they’re just afraid of him.”

I met Thangbrand five days later.

I was tending sheep down near the earthquake valley, when I saw smoke over the next hill. When I rode to the top, I found a man sitting at a campfire, eating one of our sheep.

“Do you know whose sheep you are eating?” I called.

He looked up at me, a big man with a black beard, wrapped in a cloak of bluish-black. A big, heavy crucifix of dented iron rested on the log next to him. I thought I could make out bits of hair and crusted blood along one of the arms of the cross.

“Are the owners pagans?” he said.

I said nothing. He grinned and shrugged.

“Then I do not care.”

“You’re the Christian,” I said. “Thangbrand.”

“And what if I am?”

“You are eating Thorsten Thorvaldson’s sheep,” I said. “He was part of the Varangian Guard, at Miklagardh.”

“And you think he’ll stop me if I come knock down your gods,” he said.

“Yes.”

He laughed.

“Your brother’s years of getting fat in Constantinople don’t impress me,” he said. “I’m going to convert this godless island, even if it kills me and everyone who lives here. If Thorsten Thorvaldson has a problem with that, he can come stop me. I’ll baptize him as he’s bleeding out.”

My face turned red. Thangbrand lifted his cross.

“Unless you’d like to convert first,” he said. I wheeled my horse. The killer’s laughter followed me downhill.

When I told my brother, his face darkened. He lifted his sword from the mantelpiece, and threw a blue-black cloak around his shoulders. We rode out together, reaching the pasture by nightfall. Thangbrand was waiting for us.

“The famous Thorsten Thorvaldson,” he said, rising as he wiped mutton-greased fingers on his trousers. “Come to seek Christ?”

“I’ve come to seek your death,” Thorsten said, swinging from the saddle.

Thangbrand laughed, flinging his cloak over his shoulder, and lifting the cross in both hands.

“You’ve found death,” he said. “But maybe not the one you were looking for.”

The fight did not go how I’d imagined. It was over quickly. Thangbrand whirled the cross, and smashed my brother’s sword arm, breaking it. But he didn’t realize my brother could use both hands equally. With the opposite hand, Thorsten caught his falling weapon and slid it through the Christian’s throat. The man in black fell to his knees, and died, still grinning. We left his body out in the cold.

“The ravens will take care of it,” my brother said. “Odin’s ravens.”

The next morning, another one of our sheep was missing.

“Was there anybody with the Christian?” my brother asked. We had bound his broken arm in a sling, but it looked swollen, and was hot to the touch.

“No,” I said. “He was alone.”

We travelled back to the hill. The embers of Thangbrand’s fire still smouldered under a layer of charcoal. But the body was gone.

The blood left my brother’s face.

“Did somebody come and bury him?” I said.

He ignored me. I followed his gaze, and found myself looking at a crack in the floor of the valley. It had been opened during an earthquake some years before. When you climbed down into it, you could see layers of ice glowing blue through the permafrost.

“No,” my brother said at last.

For a moment, as we turned to ride home, I thought I heard Thangbrand’s laughter again, echoing from the guts of the earth.

That night, late, a knock came at our door.

Thorsten started awake, where he dozed by the dying fire. A sheathed sword lay across his knees. Though he had told me to sleep, I had only tossed and turned in my bunk. A cold wind was seeping through the beams of the house, and it played with my hair whenever I tried to close my eyes.

Drawing his sword, Thorsten stepped in front of the door and called out,

“Who’s there?”

No answer came; only the howling of that chill wind. At a jerk of his chin, I crept to the door and pulled it open with a backwards leap. An awful smell blasted in with the wind. I cried out in horror. Thorsten only thinned his lips.

A pile of gore lay heaped on the front step.

It was the body of our missing ram. From atop its pulped innards and ruptured skin, an eyeless, skinless head stared at us from between its spiralling, crimson horns. Something had been eating him, peeling away the skin, and ripping handfuls of meat from the frame. A harsh laugh pealed in the distance. I felt my blood run cold.

"I've heard that laugh before," I said.

"Yes," said Thorsten. "I have, too."

He leaped over the body, and rushed into the night.

For a moment, I hesitated. I was afraid to follow him. I was more afraid to stay there alone, staring into the dead, hollow eyes.

And so I went.

Outside, my brother stood at the end of the track, his cloak swirling in the black surge of wind.

Above him, on the hilltop, a dark figure sat in the moonlight, naked, but for the blue-black cloak that spread like dark wings from his heavy shoulders. Moonlight washed over him, outlining the blue-black crust of blood across his throat. He was eating the head of a lamb like an apple.

It was Thangbrand.

Death and the cold of the chasm had already mottled his skin a purplish blue. Sheep's blood purpled his teeth. He smiled as we approached.

"How is the arm, Thorvald?" he said.

"Strong enough to kill you again, Thangbrand," he said. "How is it that you still live?"

The Dead Christian laughed.

"I don't," he said. "But does not scripture tell us Death is not the end? I swore nothing would stop me from bringing this island under God and King. Not even death. I will never stop, Thorvaldson. Not until you're baptized, and all your ways are buried with me."

"It is the dead who should be buried," said my brother, and he leaped up the hill. Steel flashed in the moonlight. The Draugr's blue, freezing hands were stronger than they had been in life, and my brother's sword shattered from a single blow of that iron cross. But a handspan of jagged steel still shone from the hilt, and my brother stepped in close, driving it up under the dead man's chin, and into his brain.

Thangbrand coughed; black blood sprayed from his dark lips, coating my brother's face and getting into his eyes. Then, for the second time, Thangbrand died.

We buried him this time, at the top of the hill, where spring had already thawed the earth. We raised a mound over his body and trampled it down firm.

But the next morning, the mound had burst, and a trail of blood led from our sheepfold, into the crevasse in the valley.

The next night, late, another knock came at our door.

This time, my brother had not slept. He had grown pale; a trembling had crept into his fingertips. His left eye had become infected from contact with the dead man's blood, and now Thorvald could barely see through the seeping film of pus. His broken arm had swollen to twice its size, and was spreading a fever throughout his whole body.

Yet he stood with purpose, and the broken sword flashed in his hand.

"Door," he said. This time, I opened it slowly. I did not think Thangbrand would charge in at us. First, he would want us to see what he had left for us.

The door creaked as it swung. The cold wind murmured around it, licking my wrists like a dog.

This time, no horns curled from the head. It was no ram's skull that stared at us from red and eyeless sockets.

It took me a moment to realize what I was seeing. Who I was seeing.

His name was Eystein Egilson; he lived further down the valley, and was about my age. He had been beaten with a blunt object until his body was nothing but a torn bag of bone shards and red slush.

That is, what was left of his body. Much, much of him had been eaten.

For a moment, the two of us stood in silence, looking at the body. I had often played with Egill. Thorsten had taught him to shoot a bow.

This time, my brother did not throw on his cloak, but went out into the black and slicing wind protected by nothing but his red tunic, the one that shone with gold threads.

"Have you learned nothing, Thorvald?" said the Draugr, from his hilltop, as my brother reached the end of the track. "I will not stop."

"I have killed you twice," said my brother. "The third time, it will stick."

The Christian laughed, and my brother climbed the hill, stumbling, not leaping as he had done the night before.

By now, death had tightened Thangbrand's skin, so it seemed that his hair had grown long, that his fingernails had lengthened into cracked and yellow claws. My brother hissed as the Draugr slashed open his cheek, but the dead man made no sound as the broken sword carved his arms to the bone. My brother staggered back, and the dead man hurled forward, naked, reckless, howling, and open to attack. My brother planted his feet; the muscles of his arm bunched, and then drove the broken steel forward, crunching through the the permafrost of the dead man's heart.

But it was too late. At the same instant, Thangbrand smashed down with the iron crucifix, two-handed, and crushed my brother's skull.

Blood misted from Thorsten Thorvaldson's last breath, putting a pink veil across the moon. I cried out and ran to my brother's side, but too late, forever too late. On the ground beside him, the Draugr laughed out another life.

"I told you," he said. "I told you both. I will not stop until you're baptized, Thorvaldson, and all your ways are buried with me."

"Just die!" I screamed at him.

"See you tomorrow night," he said, and lay still.

He did not see me the next night, though he rose again, and slaughtered a family in the next valley over. Nor did he see me the several nights after that, though he went from farmhouse to farmhouse, breaking glass in the night, tearing dogs into ribbons, and eating children from the womb.

I spent those nights shivering by the side of the road, expecting to hear the dead man's footstep behind me. I did not feel safe from him until the gates of Skalholt had closed behind me. And even then.

In Skalholt, the monks lived in a hovel next to the cesspit. It stank, and they stank, for they came from countries where it was not the custom to bathe. I hated them for their milky breath, and for their thin arms, and for the way they sprinkled their conversation with phrases from a dead language that nobody spoke.

But even though I wanted nothing to do with Christians, I was not as strong as my brother, and it seemed I did not have a choice.

I arrived home on morning of the seventh day.

My brother's farm lay in ruins. All our sheep were dead: either eaten alive, or torn apart for sport. Our statues of the gods were smashed down to powder. I swept their wreckage away, dampening their dust with my tears.

With a hollow chest, I reopened the grave which I had dug for my brother, and buried their remains with him, and with his broken sword, his red tunic, and his dark blue cloak.

I wept over the open grave until I had no tears left.

As night began to fall, a long quiet came over me.

As the last light went, the quiet went with it. A freezing wind arose, as if hurling from some crevice in the earth. As I began to shiver, a cold giggle echoed down the hills.

“Welcome back,” Thangbrand gurgled, somewhere out in the darkness. “Come to receive the Sacraments?”

“I’ve come to kill you,” I said, and the Draugr laughed.

“Your brother said the same thing,” he said. “And you don’t even have a sword.”

“Wrestle me, then,” I said.

He laughed, and though the laughter seemed to come from all sides, the darkness in front of me thickened, and purpled, and then drew aside, revealing blue flesh, an emaciated body, monstrous, deformed, alone, and always freezing cold.

Grinning with blood-blackened teeth, Thangbrand stepped forward, his yellow toenails carving the earth until he faced me across my brother’s open grave.

“I’ve drunk fresh blood each night for a week,” he said, tossing aside his cross. “I won’t need a weapon to bury you in your brother’s grave.”

Then he unhinged his jaw, and a vile smell rolled from gums that had gone white and writhing with grave-wax and maggots. He sprang at me across the open pit, and his hands tore my arms with their freezing strength. He laughed in my face as I gagged from the smell, and maggots poured like drool from his black lips. I was no match for him; I was flung down into my brother’s grave, and the night flashed white as my head struck the walls of cold, packed earth.

Gibbering, Thangbrand leaped down on top of me, and his weight upon my chest was crushing, and the taloned hands which he wrapped around my throat were the burning cold of dry ice.

As he grinned down into my face, the moon came out.

Its light must have reflected from my face, because the Draugr sat back, narrowing his black and jaundiced eyes.

“Why do you have oil on your forehead?” He said.

“I’ve been baptized,” I said.

And then the Draugr began to laugh, and then, as moonlight poured into the grave, illuminating my brother's body, his fine clothes, his sword and our broken Gods, he began to laugh even harder.

"And now I'm buried with you, Thorvaldson," he said. "And all your ways are buried with me."

"I've tricked you," I said. "You've been beaten."

"Yes," he said. "But ask yourself: have I really?"

And then, still laughing, he died for the last time.

I pushed the bloated corpse off me, and buried it with my brother. I left a cross at the head of the grave.

Since then, I've raised sheep, and gone to church. I never followed in my brother's footsteps, travelling into Vendtland or the Greek East. Ours is a Christian Island now, and I live a quiet life: we all do.

Maybe it is for the best, but I hate it. I was raised for more than this: I wish for the days of high adventure. I miss the old stories; the old way of life. Some nights, I wish I could renounce this new faith, and stand above the grave with a sword and a blue-black cloak, to fight Thangbrand when he rose again.

But I am not my brother. I am no pagan hero to fight monsters and vanquish them.

I have been turned into a christian farmer, and now, that is all I will ever be.

In this lifetime, or the next.