

**GOBLINS & VIKINGS
IN AMERICA**

By Norman Crane

Season 1

Ep. 1

"Fatherland"

Framarr sliced through the thick vines with his sword and passed with a beggar's stoop beneath the cold, yellow growths that fell from the overhanging branches like remnants of hair from an imperfectly scalped skull. He was following the little green man. For weeks he'd been following him, but the green man was perpetually a hundred paces ahead, within sight though never moving, waiting until Framarr got near enough to raise his sword, then disappearing, only to reappear again, another hundred paces ahead and again within sight...

They'd not exchanged a word. Framarr had tried, of course, but the green man had always refused to answer. Perhaps he didn't hear. Perhaps he heard but didn't understand.

Framarr squinted. The fog in the air was making the pursuit, if that's what it was, more difficult than usual. The green man's body was sometimes hard to discern against the milky backdrop of the forest. Thankfully, he was wearing his purple cloak and a matching hat which came to a perfect tip and radiated like a dull beacon. That's why Framarr followed. Men are meant to be guided by beacons. Besides, all the others were dead, and the ship had long ago been lost to the sea on the treacherous coast of this new world. So what else was there to do but eat, sleep and keep pursuing?

The fog clung as drops of water to Framarr's weather beaten face, gathered in his eyebrows, soaked his ragged beard, and flowed, salty, into his eyes and between the lips of his gasping mouth. His clothes, heavy with wet, stuck to his body. He was glad to have shattered his shield in the clearing while killing the ones with long black hair. Afterwards was when the green man in the purple hat had first appeared.

Framarr came within a few paces of him and the green man vanished into the air once more.

Only to materialize farther in the forest, whose trees were thinning and whose ground was becoming mud. Framarr's boots sunk into it. His pace slowed.

If he doesn't wish for me to keep going, Framarr thought, he would hide or make his escape in the night while I'm asleep. If he wanted me dead, he would have led me into a bear's den or within stalking range of one of the wolf packs that howl in the night. Because that hasn't happened, because I am still breathing, he must have a purpose for me. He must want to bring me somewhere.

Perhaps that meant they had communicated after all. "Come," the green man had said, "to the place to which I lead you."

And Framarr willingly obeyed.

He obeyed until the day the sun came up and burned the persistent fog away, turning the trees to shrubs, and their branches to wiry twigs loaded with crimson berries and brambles that scratched his face as he pushed through them, stumbling, crawling toward the green man whom he could no longer see but who he knew was on the other side...

The shrubs ended.

Framarr stepped onto the edge of a great circular plain.

The green man materialized behind his back.

Framarr's knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground, unable to stay upright, breathe or comprehend the brilliance of what now stood so nakedly before him.

The green man placed a small, four-fingered hand on his shoulder.

Framarr's heart pounded within his chest and through tear-stained eyes he saw—

Wisps of smoke escaping upward from the primitive chimney-holes of the nearby longhouses expanded as the ghosts of inverted cones and dissipated into the grey, windless sky that draped the entire length of the rocky flatness, stretching from the hill on which Dvalinn the Riverraider stood all the way to where the silhouettes of mountains guarded passage across the horizon. It was an expanse as empty and rough as it was indescribable, but treated honestly, without laziness, it had also become home. Dvalinn didn't think of it as Iceland anymore. That derisive name belonged to the easterners, coined in retreat by one of them who had arrived, failed and fled. Dvalinn hadn't failed. Dvalinn wasn't an easterner anymore.

He turned toward the west. That way, beyond the stillness of the sea, was Greenland.

"Are you ready, Riverraider?" The voice came from the foot of the hill, where the locals had gathered to help conduct the funeral rites for Dvalinn's wife.

Her shrouded body lay atop the prepared funeral pyre to which Dvalinn was supposedly now adding the gifts that she would take with her into the afterlife. In truth, it was a pitifully small pyre with few possessions: a comb, a dagger, several items of jewellery. He could hardly believe that the small body wrapped in cloth belonged to the same woman he'd loved, for whom he had lain down the sword and sailed here to start a new life. Faceless, she seemed anonymous. Spiritless, she was an anonymous thing. Besides, he reasoned, their life together had been a modest one. They had taken little from the land and brought into it only one son. Why should they take more out? "Ready," he said. His voice was hoarse from too much silence.

Two men emerged from the crowd of locals. They carried a pair of lit torches. Dvalinn closed his eyes, but the flickering flames persisted.

When he opened his eyes, the two men were standing on opposite sides of the pyre, ready to touch their torches to it.

A horseman appeared in the distance below.

The torchbearers knelt, awaiting Dvalinn's instructions. "Riverraider..."

Dvalinn nodded.

The torches touched the pyre.

The horseman sped toward the funeral hill, his horse's hooves beating ever more audibly against the ground.

The pyre began to smoke. The torchbearers backed away.

Dvalinn, unable to watch the kindling take, watched the incoming horseman instead. The smell of burning trickled into his nostrils. The crackling of sticks mixed with the rhythm of riding. At the foot of the hill, the crowd parted and the horseman yanked his horse's reins to come to an abrupt stop. A horse was a marker of wealth, which was an attribute of power. The horseman dismounted, bowed his head and began the hike up the hill.

The torchbearers moved to block his way, but Dvalinn motioned for them stay back. He smoothed the ends of his moustache.

"I come in the name of," the horseman began, even before reaching level ground. He was young and handsome and out of breath. "In the name of Young Chieftain Halfdan, the Revered, son of Chieftain Likvidr." Glancing back, he slid his right hand over the hilt of the sword that hung from a scabbard on his belt. Several in the crowd were petting the horseman's horse. Someone had grabbed the reins.

"Understood," Dvalinn said. "What is your purpose?"

The funeral pyre spat its first orange flames. The horseman noted them nervously. "For the tithe," he said, quickly adding, "sir," as the torchbearers took steps toward him.

"Ain't ever heard of that," one of them said.

"Me, neither," said the other.

"The tithe, Young Chieftain Halfdan says..."

"This is a funeral," Dvalinn said. "What right have you to interrupt it looking to take a tenth?"

The horseman smiled. "Oh, yes, yes. Exactly, yes. A tenth." He was slurring his words. Something in the pyre cracked. "You must pay a tenth. Such is the tithe."

"We believe in the old ways," Dvalinn said.

"Being the traditional and right ways," added the first torchbearer.

"But Young Chieftain Halfdan, he says all must pay the tithe on all religious services, true or pagan, sirs."

"Pagan?" The second torchbearer spat. "We are Norsemen."

The horseman's horse neighed.

The flames travelled up the pyre and begin nipping at the shrouded body lying atop.

The torchbearers' eyes clouded over with the possibility of violence. The horseman's hands shook. Sweat sprouted from the pores on his forehead. "Sirs, the orders of the Chieftain..."

Dvalinn stepped back.

The torchbearers stepped forward.

The horseman unsheathed his sword and did a full rotation, taking in his enemies and their surroundings. He might have been preparing a battle plan, but he was still a boy.

"Stand down," Dvalinn said to the torchbearers.

When they didn't, he repeated the command louder. This time they did as instructed. "Riverraider," one of them whined.

Dvalinn ignored him. "Step forward," he told the horseman, "and do as the Chieftain commands. If he commands you take a tenth, take a tenth. Reach into the fire and retrieve for him what is rightfully his. But, first, tell me what is one tenth of a blunt dagger, an old comb, a few pieces of worthless jewellery and an old woman's dead body?"

The horseman stared at Dvalinn; the torchbearers; and the pyre, which was now almost in full flame.

Dvalinn turned toward the pyre, too. He let its hissing fill his ears and its heat warm his cheeks. He also could reach inside. He could walk into it. He could lie down on it, beside the burning body that last week was still his sickly, beloved wife but that by the morning would be nothing but a mound of ash...

"I... I was," the horseman stammered out.

Then he slid his sword back into his scabbard, backed away several paces and spun, before marching the rest of the way down the hill with his red face forced upward. The grey sky was unmoved. The crowd gave him back the reins to his horse, which he mounted, slapped on the haunches and rode off on, as quickly and unexpectedly as he had appeared. The sound of his horse's beating hooves receded.

"We should have killed him," the first torchbearer said to Dvalinn, who was still staring into the fire. He blinked and kept his eyes shut. Again, the flames persisted.

"He will return," Dvalinn said.

"And if we don't kill him then, he'll keep returning," the second torchbearer said. "So I say we should kill him once and for all."

"His death solves nothing," Dvalinn said. "He is merely a follower. If you kill him, another will come."

"So we kill that one, too."

"And so on, killing after killing for eternity?"

"Until Ragnarok," the torchbearer said.

I do not believe in Ragnarok, Dvalinn thought. "That may be many killings from now," he said.

"So what do you propose, Riverraider?" the first torchbearer asked.

In the distance, the horseman had become a black speck on the grey ground. Closer, the pyre burst into an orb of fire, with tongues that covered Dvalinn's wife's shrouded body and licked like rabid hounds at the surrounding air. "I do not know," Dvalinn said. "But it is no longer my answer to give." Without his son and without his wife, Iceland no longer felt like his home. He sighed. He was still an easterner after all.

"What are you saying?"

Dvalinn didn't answer. He had already turned his back on both the torchbearers and the pyre. Walking down the hill, he looked once more toward the west. That was where his son had sailed. That, Dvalinn decided, was where his future lay. To Hell with Chieftain Likvidr and to Hell with his sadistic son, Halfdan—if Hell is what they now believed in.

At the foot of the hill, the funeral crowd closed around Dvalinn. "Riverraider," people whispered. Young people, old people. Men, women. They offered their condolences and sincerely said trite things that moved Dvalinn nevertheless for being trite. He would return their warmth. He would keep the custom. In seven days, he would give them their feast. Then, on the eighth day, he would sail. "Thank you," he said, nodding and cupping warm, grateful hands, until—

His old knees buckled and he fell to the ground.

He covered his face with the leathery palms of his hands and started to cry.

But his tears were tears of hope, not sadness, for his heart, though hurt, was not empty. Somewhere, he knew, Framarr was still alive. Some day they would find each other. Somewhere, someday...

A pair of strong arms hooked themselves under Dvalinn's armpits and lifted him up.

He was disoriented for a second.

Then he saw the pyre burning brightly on top of the hill and remembered his wife and recognized the plain face of Erlandr, son of Jokell the sheep farmer, staring warmly into his eyes. Erlandr smiled. It was an innocent smile, a labourer's smile. "I must get home. I have matters I must arrange," Dvalinn said.

"Of course, Riverraider," Erlandr said.

Other faces were looking at Dvalinn and smiling, too. All of them were innocent. Even the torchbearers' faces, which had been so eager to kill the horseman yet so ignorant of the consequences of such an act. But worse even than the stew of smiles was their collective expectation. They expected him to lead, to take responsibility. I don't owe you anything, Dvalinn thought. I never agreed to lead. The fate had befallen him gradually and naturally, like rain darkening a stone, drop by drop. Maybe it was because he was from the east. Maybe it was because he brought with him a reputation. Except that his reputation should have elicited fear, not smiles and the expectation that he would do what was best for the community.

When he was out of their reach, on his way back to the small house that now stood empty, he struggled with this sense of duty. He resented it. Even when he reasoned his way out of it, his heart refused to listen. Why, he asked almost aloud, do I feel guilty?

The funeral feast was already under way when Erlandr stepped into the longhouse. Windowless, its exterior had betrayed nothing of the joyous atmosphere inside, where the sweet smells of meat roasting on the meal-fire mixed with the aroma of mead, and the music of bone flutes and horns joined the pounding of palms against leather hand drums as two women sang bawdy drinking songs and laughed. One of them, dressed in more colours than Erlandr had ever seen, hopped onto one of the tables that had been set across the longhouse and started to dance. A man pulled at her dress. She giggled. Another tore off a fistful of fresh bread and tossed it to her. She caught it with both hands—the horn blower blew an off note—took a bite and, with her mouth still full, shouted, "Erlandr! And we all thought you wasn't going to come."

A few silver coins exchanged hands. There'd been betting.

Erlandr nodded a greeting and continued toward the end of the longhouse, where most of the other men had gathered around the Riverraider. Normally, he wouldn't have come. The woman was right to be surprised. He didn't enjoy gatherings. They made him nervous and sometimes the girls made him blush. But today was different. The Riverraider was different. Erlandr felt respect toward the Riverraider and it would have been disrespectful to have snubbed him.

He nodded to several of the merrymakers and took a seat at a table near the wall. Goll, the local mason's apprentice, slid a cup of mead toward him. He downed half of it in one gulp before uttering a thank you, and wiped his mouth with his forearm; just like his father always did, he reminded himself. He didn't know whether to grin or groan. With each passing day, he was turning more into his father.

"Tell us the tale of the eastern expeditions again," someone said to the Riverraider.

Goll raised a brow. "Or the time you bedded the jarl's wife!"

Cups drummed against the tabletop.

The Riverraider glanced around, his gaze lingering first on Goll, then on Erlandr, before he closed his eyes and said, "No tales. Today, I have a thing more important than tales to tell."

The men fell silent.

Erlandr drank the rest of his mead and set his cup aside.

"I have an announcement to give and now that we are all gathered here, I shall give it," the Riverraider said.

"Quiet!" Goll yelled.

The Riverraider stood up from his chair.

The women who'd been singing and dancing stopped dancing and sang, "Shut up yours, you. The Riverraider's got announcing to do!"

Erlandr noted the disquiet on the Riverraider's face. He seldom remembered seeing it before. Even in the face of danger, like seven days ago at the pyre, the Riverraider was calm. Tonight, he appeared lost.

The music ceased.

"I would first like," the Riverraider said, "to thank all of you for this feast of food and drink and for the openness with which you welcomed me and mine when we arrived as strangers at your shores so many years ago."

"Our shores!"

A few people's cheers grew into the entire longhouse cheering. Until, "Shut it," a woman said. "Let the man speak."

The Riverraider continued, "But the time has come for me to leave this land."

It was a short, plainly-spoken sentence but Erlandr felt it like he would have felt a firm punch to the gut. Ever since he'd been a boy, the Riverraider had lived among them. His presence had been a reassuring constant. Lives meandered and fates collided, but the Riverraider was always ready to give advice and solve problems. He was fair, he was wise, and he could not leave because he had always been, and what always is can never end...

Erlandr decided to limit his mead tonight.

"My son is gone. My wife is dead. I am getting old," the Riverraider said. "Tomorrow at dawn, I set sail for Greenland." At the first sign of a question, he lifted his hand to prevent it. "All who wish to sail with me are welcome. My boat is small but seaworthy and in Greenland there is fertile land and free women, or so I am told."

Erlandr noted how the deep creases on the Riverraider's face caught the firelight and transformed his disquiet into a sadness held together by force of will and determination. It made Erlandr uncomfortable. He considered it a bad omen. What if the Riverraider, in all his wisdom, knew something that they didn't—something that had frightened even him?

Goll was the first to speak. "You're leaving us, Riverraider."

"I am leaving my home," the Riverraider said.

Abandoning was the more accurate word, Erlandr thought. He also felt his teeth holding his tongue, preventing him from snapping back at Goll, "He owes us no duty. We swore him no oath."

"If it's a new wife you're looking for, I reckon you'll find one here sure as there," someone said.

"Maybe tonight," another added.

There was no cheering.

"I am not planning to take a second wife." The Riverraider's voice shook. "I have loved one woman and I will love none more."

"So why are you sailing for Greenland?" Goll asked. "Why not sail east? Life, they say, is easier off the islands than on them. There are more opportunities."

What a stupid question to ask someone who'd come from the east, Erlandr thought. Or if not stupid, certainly impolite. If the Riverraider had chosen to sail to Greenland, he had a reason. It wasn't theirs to know, unless told, and to ask was poor manners. All the same, Erlandr craved to know the answer.

"I am going in search of my son," the Riverraider said.

Erlandr felt a knot appear in his throat. The Riverraider's son, a tall, brooding man with long hair and a bleached beard, had sailed for Greenland seven years ago on the advice of Leif Ericson. He had never returned. Every one of the locals knew what the Riverraider still refused to accept: that Framarr was dead. It pained Erlandr, as he was sure it pained everyone gathered in the longhouse, to see the Riverraider still clinging to false hope. False hope mixed with sorrow might lead even the best of men to make an unwise decision.

Nobody made a sound.

"As I have said, I sail tomorrow at sun up. All who meet me near Fox's Prowl are welcome passengers on my boat."

Goll opened his mouth, about to make another comment—when the longhouse door swung open and the fat figure of Young Chieftain Halfdan strode in.

Chain-mail covered his torso and a battle-axe weighed down his hand. "A gathering," he said, feigning surprise. "A feast? A celebration! And to think that nobody had the decency, or gall, to invite me. I am shocked. I am disappointed. No, I am hurt. Deeply and dreadfully hurt."

The Riverraider remained standing where he was. "State your business, Halfdan."

"My business? You want to know my business? Well, let me tell you." He walked by the meal-fire and pulled loose some meat to gnaw on. "First," he said through chewing teeth, "I

am here on behalf of my father, the great and honourable Chieftain Likvidr, to convey his condolences on the event of the passing of your wife, whatever-her-name. My apologies! I have forgotten. Nonetheless, his thoughts are with you and may you meet her again at the end times, Thor willing." Halfdan cleared his throat, grabbed a cup of mead from someone's hand, and took a long drink. "Second, I have come on behalf of myself to collect the tithe you have all so unjustly denied me of."

Erlandr felt like rising from his chair and meeting Halfdan chest to chest. He'd fantasized about it for years. Halfdan had always been an arrogant nuisance. He deserved to be humbled, at least once. If only Erlandr possessed the courage to really do it.

"We did not deny you of anything," the Riverraider said. "Your man was free to take a tenth. That he refused is not our doing."

Halfdan smirked. "Yes, I am aware of his conundrum. A burning body, a few mere riches. How does one divide it up?" He pretended to scratch his chin and think. "I agree it was a difficult situation. Thankfully, there are many more riches here now, and many more woman, all of them living and able." He pointed at each one in the longhouse in turn, counting loudly as he did, finishing at: "Eleven. Alas, indivisible by ten unless we are to start hacking off limbs, but because I am a generous soul I will give you all a discount. I will take less than a tenth. I will take one." He emphasized the word "take".

"You shall take no one," the Riverraider said.

"I shall take whichever bitch I please. After which, I shall eat my fill of your food and drink my share of your mead, and you shall call me nice names and swear your allegiance to my father."

"You shall leave," the Riverraider said.

"Do you propose to make me, old man of the river?"

A murmur rippled through the longhouse, and through Erlandr, too. "You would threaten a man at the funeral feast of his wife?" he said. He'd said it softly, and the sentence was a little awkward, but at least it made sense and it was loud enough to be heard. That was more than could be said for anyone else.

Halfdan slid his gaze from the Riverraider to Erlandr. "And you are?"

Erlandr stood up. His heart was beating fast but his fantasy was coming true. In his fantasy—

"You, who questions a man's decency, interrupts a chieftain whilst he is speaking to one of his subjects," Halfdan said.

"We are not your father's subjects," the Riverraider said. "Leave the boy alone. Your discussion is with me."

Halfdan looked at the Riverraider again. "Yes, with you." He swung his battle-axe lazily with one arm, nearly knocking over a plate of fish and hitting someone's head. "Let's speak more closely, you and I."

The blood in Erlandr's veins boiled. If only everyone were to stand, if they would just show their collective support, perhaps Halfdan would grow afraid. He might be intimidated into retreating. As it was, he came forward unimpeded, no doubt thinking about rape, murder and everything else he could do that his father would let him get away with.

"Suppose I desired to cut off your head, river man. Who here would stop me? And after you were headless, who would raise a hand to avenge your death?"

The Riverraider's eyes refused to look at the men and women around him, to ask for their help. They refused to answer Halfdan's question. It made Erlandr sick to his stomach. He'd already swallowed the knot that had been in his throat and it was expanding in his belly. "I would," he said.

The words took Halfdan by surprise. "Would you, now?" he asked. "Then you shouldn't hide behind an old man. You should step out and face me eye to eye while you threaten my father's rightful power."

Erlandr did, even as he felt the Riverraider's hand pulling him back by the shirt sleeve. "Be calm," the Riverraider whispered.

But Erlandr shook himself free and came forward to meet Halfdan's smirking face. "Your father is the only reason nobody stands against you. Without your father, you would be nothing. You would—"

"And without your father, you would be nothing also," Halfdan said, humping the air. "Or hasn't anyone taught you how that works?" When nobody laughed, he added, "I, at least, thought it was a fairly clever retort."

"Leave," the Riverraider said.

"On an empty stomach and with my balls still full of fluid? It would have been a wasted journey. I demand a fuck, a feast and a tithe."

"Leave before you get hurt," the Riverraider said.

The smirk disappeared off Halfdan's face. "That, river man, is a threat."

"No," the Riverraider said. "A threat is: I will end your life you if you do not leave."

All at once, Halfdan roared and raised his battle-axe; the Riverraider crouched to avoid the incoming blow while readying a counter-strike of his own; and Erlandr, committed to finally acting out his most heroic fantasy, leaped savagely forward, catching Halfdan in the chest with his shoulder before the Young Chieftain could complete his axe swing, and sending both of them crashing to the longhouse floor.

Halfdan's axe fell from his hand.

The sound of its blade hitting the floor was still reverberating in the air as Erlandr punched Halfdan twice in the face. The Chieftain's son may have been big and strong but he was also slow and flabby, and his face was soft.

Halfdan roared.

Erlandr felt his knuckles crunch into his teeth.

The teeth moved—wobbled.

The blurred shape of the Riverraider's body smeared itself across Erlandr's eyes.

But he had no time to think. He was punching. He was maintaining his position on top of Halfdan's vulnerable body and pounding his face. Voices shouted: "More!", "Hurt the bastard real good!", "Kill him."

Erlandr's fantasy was becoming reality.

Until something happened that had never happened in the fantasies.

Halfdan freed one of his arms and punched Erlandr back.

The blow staggered him.

Halfdan's bloody face smiled.

Another thick fist caught Erlandr, this time in the jaw, and when he tried to smash his own fist into Halfdan's forehead, he missed and punched the ground instead. Pain shot up his limb and pooled in his cheeks.

Halfdan wrapped his fingers around Erlandr's throat.

Erlandr couldn't breathe. He reached back, touching the floor, trying to touch the axe that Halfdan had dropped. If only he could find it.

From the crowd, Goll yelled, "Here."

Erlandr felt nothing but emptiness under his palms. He heard no help coming from anywhere. He couldn't see the Riverraider. He didn't want to see anybody else. He felt an object hit his chest and bounce off. He looked down. A knife lay on Halfdan's chest, shining like

flames through a sheet of ice, between the flexed arm that was choking him and the one that had found the axe laying on the floor...

Halfdan snorted, fixing his grip on the axe handle.

"Do it!" someone screamed.

Erlandr pushed one hand against Halfdan's axe-holding arm, pinning it to the floor as best as he could, and picked up the knife with the other. It was a simple hunting knife.

He stabbed Halfdan in the hip with it, just below the chain mail.

Halfdan's grip on Erlandr's throat loosened. Erlandr desperately sucked air into his lungs.

His senses sharpened.

He stabbed Halfdan again, deeper.

The blade tore through flesh. The choking stopped and Halfdan's arm dropped to the side of his body, where blood was beginning to stain his clothes. He tried prying his other arm—the one still clutching the axe—free, but couldn't. Erlandr was overpowering it. Again, he felt heroic. Around him were cheers and drums.

He moved his hand up Halfdan's arm until he was at the wrist and squeezed until the axe handle came free.

He picked up the axe and rose to his feet.

"You're a dead man," Halfdan said from his back. "My father will personally rip your guts out with a hook for this."

"Kill him. Kill the coward," a woman said. The crowd roared. "Make justice."

The axe was heavy, and Erlandr used both hands to lift it to his shoulder. The crowd's drumming was his own heartbeat, emanating from every part of his body. His blood was hot. He tasted the bitterness of bloodlust on his lips and in his mouth. It was a taste he'd never known before. It was the only taste. His chest billowed. He wanted to bring the axe down and split Halfdan's skull in two.

"Put the axe down," the Riverraider said. He wasn't a blur any more. He was solid. He was calm. "He deserves death, but killing him has consequences for those who do not."

"Stop talking!" Erlandr wanted to yell in the Riverraider's face.

"Likvidr will take revenge," the Riverraider said.

Erlandr spread his legs, seeing in his imagination the killing blow that he was about to apply: the force of the axe, its blade driving through bone, the spray of blood and brain...

Halfdan turned his face sideways, hissing, "If you let me live, I'll make sure your family does the same. Kill me and all of them are dead."

"And just who will be the witness of your death?" Erlandr asked.

Several in the crowd nodded in agreement.

"I will." Standing in the open longhouse doorway, sword unsheathed and knees shaking, was the young horseman from the pyre. Fresh, purple bruises covered one half of his face.

"He deserves to die!" someone cried.

Erlandr felt the full weight of the axe pressing into his shoulder.

"So kill him," the Riverraider said. "If all of you wish him dead, all of you kill him."

The horseman didn't take a single step forward. Neither did anyone in the crowd. All fell silent, until the only sound Erlandr could hear was the rasping of his own breath. Everyone wanted Halfdan dead but no one would accept the consequences of doing the act. Silently, they expected him to do it. Passively, they hoped he had the bravery, or the stupidity.

Erlandr lowered the axe.

His imagination was no longer creating images of heroic murder. It was staring into the meal-fire and seeing his family, his father and his siblings, being ripped limb from limb and burned like so many pieces of animal meat. A drop of fat dripped into the fire. It sizzled.

"Leave," the Riverraider said to Halfdan.

Erlandr stepped back.

Halfdan got to his knees, then uneasily to his feet. He clutched at his wounds. Hatred filled his eyes—at which even more hateful eyes stared back: Erlandr's and the crowd's. Reason may have cooled his thirst for blood, but Erlandr still despised the Chieftain and his son. He despised that he couldn't kill them.

Halfdan hobbled to the door. "As a man of honour, I'll keep my word and your family will live," he said, turning to stare down Erlandr. "But you are a dead man. You attacked your better and justice shall be done."

The horseman made way, and the two of them exited the longhouse together.

When the door closed, no one moved. The drumming had stopped and no one said a clear word. But there was murmuring. Hissing, discontented murmuring...

"Come with me," the Riverraider said.

It took Erlandr a few seconds to realize he was the one being spoken to. He still didn't quite believe what had happened. The Riverraider put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him towards the door. "Let us go."

Outside the longhouse the world was quiet and dim. Evening was falling. Neither Halfdan nor the horseman were anywhere to be seen, but Erlandr expected them to appear at any moment, probably with a dozen more riders and a dozen more weapons. They might fall from the grey sky or arise from the rocky ground or: "They—"

"Are gone for now," the Riverraider said.

Erlandr covered his mouth with the back of his hand, which tasted like blood.

"It takes anger to kill. It takes more than anger to think. You saved lives," the Riverraider said.

But Erlandr didn't feel like a hero. In fact, he didn't feel much of anything, except numb. Even his jaw had stopped hurting. It merely felt twice its regular size. "They all wanted me to kill him. I saved the life of someone who didn't deserve to live. I'm a coward," he said.

"You were among cowards."

The numbness became pressure, which became a pain that gripped Erlandr's heart. His nerves started vibrating like plucked harp strings. His teeth chattered. The realization hit him harder than Halfdan's fist. They were gone for now; they would come back. And when they did, they would be coming for him. "But they don't know who I am," he reasoned aloud.

The Riverraider glanced at the longhouse. "They are regular people inside there. One of them will tell your name, from fear or for profit. That is just the way it is."

Erlandr shook his head, and couldn't stop it's shaking. The Riverraider grabbed him. "Listen to me. Your time here is over," he said.

"No."

"You must leave."

"This place is my home. These are my people, my family."

"And they owe you their lives."

Erlandr ripped the Riverraider's hands from his shoulders. "I'm a coward. I should have broken his head with that axe."

"And broken the heads of your own people?"

Erlandr vividly remembered the meat on the fire. He knew the Riverraider was right. Likvidr would have taken brutal revenge for the death of his son. But he wanted to argue, to disagree

with everything, and especially with reality, because it was impossible that in that one moment the only life he'd ever known had ended. "I won't run. A man does not run from his home. He stands and fights."

"A man has no home until he takes a wife," the Riverraider said. "Home is family. However, the choice is yours. The fight is unfair and your people will not fight for you. They will burn your body and they will remember you, but what good is being remembered to a dead man?"

Erlandr's imagination was showing him the interior of the Valholl. Odin was passing him a chalice of wine. He could die a hero in a valiant fight against impossible odds, perhaps taking a few others with him; but they would be men like the horseman, henchmen, lackeys, men perhaps not much different than himself. His belief struck against his will to live like a monstrous sword against a mountainous shield.

It was as if the Riverraider had read his mind. "You are young, Erlandr. There is yet time to die in battle."

"Where would I go?"

"Beyond Likvidr's reach."

Erlandr combed his fingers through his hair. Above, the sky made the world seem infinitely vast. He could go anywhere, in any direction, all the way to the edge of the world. Yet he was anchored. He was stuck in place. He'd been taught that only a coward runs. He had believed it to be true. But here was the Riverraider, a man who was not a coward and who had fled here from the mainland. And here were his own feelings: a greater fear of what lay beyond the known areas of Iceland than of remaining here and dying for it. "I'm afraid, Riverraider," he said.

"Only fools do not fear."

"You said you sail tomorrow?" Erlandr asked.

It was still the dark of early morning when Dvalinn stepped onto Fox's Prowl. He was carrying a sword, a shield and a sack of valuables. He was alone. His boat, the same small but sturdy flat-bottom on which he'd made his initial voyage from the mainland to Iceland, sat on the shore as he'd left it several days ago. It was sea ready and packed. He tossed his shield and sack inside, then sat down to face the sea. He was early. He would wait. He began to gaze over the peaceful waters, toward the horizon line, and ponder...

Two faces preoccupied him. One, his wife's, he couldn't stop seeing. He saw her in the clouds and on the surface of the water, with features that were almost too vivid, too sharp. How could she be dead if he remembered every detail about her? The second face was his son's. The features of this face were fuzzy. Its shape was distant. From his wife's face he wanted to escape. His son's he wanted to catch. But each time he drew close to the latter, it was the former that loomed back at him.

A flock of birds scattered.

Dvalinn noted from where and studied the area, a clump of trees further up the coast.

A man emerged from the trees and neared.

Dvalinn had expected it to be Erlandr, but it wasn't. The man was Goll.

"Good morning," Dvalinn said when Goll was close.

"Is your offer still good?"

"It is."

"Are there still wives to be found on Greenland?"

"I have heard," Dvalinn said. When he saw that Goll was empty handed, he added, "there is still room in the boat for supplies, as well."

"I travel light, Riverraider. I have food for myself and I have this." He slipped the knife with which Erlandr had stabbed Halfdan out of his sleeve and spun it in his fingers. "It's quite the versatile little tool."

Dvalinn was wary of men who preferred knives to swords. "Do you have ale?"

"I have a leather skin full." Goll laughed. "If I need more, it means we're too long out to sea and lost beyond saving."

"I have an extra supply in the boat," Dvalinn said. He believed that a man should never sail without ample ale. Food he could do without, but he needed his drink. Ideally, there should have enough ale to last him a few days after landfall, too. Unknown sources of water were not to be trusted. They could make a man ill.

Goll sat down beside him and picked at the ground with his knife. After a while he said, "Do you suppose Greenland's really out there?"

"I suppose it is."

"And what about beyond? Leif Ericson clinging to the edge of the world?"

Goll laughed. Dvalinn didn't. Despite the younger man's jovial attitude, Dvalinn could see that he was nervous. Nerves led to pointless conversations that did nothing but fill time which could be better spent thinking. More importantly, Dvalinn was still trawling through his memories, trying to find a clearer image of his son's face. It wasn't his place to ask why Goll was leaving Iceland.

Within the hour there was another rustling and Erlandr appeared. A small axe was slung across his back and he carried two bags, one on each end of a stick that he'd placed horizontally on his shoulders, behind his neck. He walked steadily until he was close, then laid down the stick, untied the bags and packed them into the boat.

Dvalinn stood up. "We sail," is all he said.

The first day of the voyage passed without conversation, and Erlandr was glad. He thought he might be intimidated by the solitude of being surrounded by open water, but he wasn't. It was a surreal solitude that matched his surreal state of mind. That he was leaving everything he knew, probably forever, hardly seemed true. Instead, he was dreaming. The sky was the colour of the sea, which was the texture of the sky, and their boat was suspended somewhere in the illusory space between. They were sailing on water but could just as well be sailing on air. Maybe they were. In the middle of a great nothing there are no points of reference.

The Riverraider was equally content to stay silent. Erlandr assumed this was because he'd been on so many sea voyages in his long life that an ordinary one bored him.

Goll perhaps wanted to talk, but the slow, constant rolling of the water, which Erlandr found soothing, turned his face pale and regularly caused him to lean his head out of the boat and vomit into the sea. It wasn't until the third day that his stomach settled, and when the wind had stopped and night fallen, he took a swig of his ale and said, "It's strange, isn't it? The three of us in the middle of a liquid darkness we can't drink and that wants little else but to drown us."

Erlandr huddled tighter under his cloak, chilled by the words and the cold, still air. He didn't reply. Beside him, the Riverraider appeared to be sleeping.

"Doesn't it make you wonder whether we're not making a mistake by leaving our land?" Goll continued. Behind him, the sea was flat as a table top and black as coal. "It's a risk, a gamble. Attempting to evade death might end up being the death of us. I'm not particularly fond of either drowning or dying of hunger. Are you a gambler by nature, Erlandr?"

Erlandr didn't want to answer, but when Goll didn't stop staring at him, he gave in and said, "I'm not making a mistake, but I speak only for myself."

"Of course. Except, you and me, we are both escaping."

"What are you escaping from?"

"We," Goll said, emphasizing the word, "are escaping from the wrath of Chieftain Likvidr." He slid his knife out of his sleeve and tried to catch a trace of starlight on its blade.

"Remember that mine was the knife you stabbed Halfdan with."

The Riverraider stirred. Erlandr was no longer so sure the older man was asleep. He might only be resting, ready to act at the slightest provocation.

"We are partners in crime," Goll said.

Erlandr felt his fingers make fists under his cloak. Goll was no partner of his. He'd been just as cowardly as the rest of the bystanders. He, too, had merely stood and watched. There was no equality between tossing a knife and using it to make a man bleed. Moreover, what Erlandr had done to Halfdan was not a crime. It was justified. He'd stood up to a brute. He was about to put that into words when something hit the deck from below.

Goll slid away from the side of the boat. The Riverraider opened his eyes, looked at both men and said, "It was only a fish."

"It's always only a fish until it's something else. It's a deep and mysterious place under the surface. I've heard stories of creatures that live there, breathing water like we breathe air, that prey on the blood of men who cross their watery territory," Goll said, holding his knife at the ready.

Erlandr didn't know whether he was being serious or fooling, but a chill ran up his spine anyway. "Have you ever heard of a creature like that?" he asked the Riverraider. He felt childish asking such a silly question, but it was nonetheless comforting when the Riverraider answered.

"I have heard," he said, his eyes closed again, "but never seen. The only monsters I have ever known were men as flesh and bone as us."

Nothing more hit the bottom of the boat. In the morning the wind returned.

Erlandr was the first to sight land—or if not sight it, then at least the first to yell, "Look, there!" while pointing with an outstretched finger at a hazy shape looming on the horizon. He felt like an explorer. The Riverraider's expression didn't change. Goll drank the rest of his ale and hid the empty water skin under his shirt.

It was the fifth day of their voyage.

As they sailed nearer, Erlandr made out the shapes of low hills and brown, jagged mountains covered by patches of blindingly white snow. His first impression was one of frozen desolation.

Rather than make landfall, they sailed perpendicular to the coast. It was littered with tiny islands and cut into by inlets and deep fjords.

Around the fjords and on the hills grew patches of trees, strips of vibrant green on what Erlandr knew must be Greenland.

"Look for signs of settlement. Until we find one, we stay in the boat," the Riverraider said.

They looked all afternoon and into the evening but found none. At night, they took turns sleeping and keeping watch. Still there was nothing. Then, in the early hours of the next morning, illuminated by the first rays of the rising sun, they saw it, the backlit outline of a familiar thatched-roof building: a Viking longhouse.

They approached the longhouse after having pulled their boat ashore and retrieved their weapons. It looked ordinary, windowless and indistinguishable from the ones in Iceland, save for its smaller size. Surrounding it was a farm. A few sheep grazed. Barley grew. But even Dvalinn held his breath as they approached, for the ordinary was still a sight to behold if you happened to come across it at the end of the world.

"Stay ten paces back and keep your weapons down," he said. Iceland had taught him that remoteness could make even a good man prone to panic. "I expect hospitality, but if we should be met otherwise we retreat to the boat. No fighting unless we have no choice."

Erlandr and Goll nodded in agreement.

Dvalinn walked the ten remaining paces to the longhouse door and knocked.

The door opened.

A bald, bearded man older than Dvalinn appeared. He had alert, weary eyes that did their best to mask his surprise at seeing three unannounced visitors. "Icelanders?" he asked.

"Yes," Dvalinn said.

He had expected the man to ask their names or for news from the east, but he did neither. "I don't want to know anything about you," he said. "I was raised to give bed and board to travellers and that's what I'll do, but I only have room and food for one, so the others will have to knock on doors that aren't mine. They'll find more farms further up the fjord."

It was a fair and safe decision. Dvalinn wouldn't have let three strangers into his home, either. "Thank you," he said.

He told Erlandr and Goll to continue further inland, toward the other longhouses. Then he bowed and under the watchful gaze of the bald man walked inside this one.

The interior was dark and dry, cozy. By a table, a woman with long red hair was stirring the contents of a pot and humming to herself. She stopped humming when she saw Dvalinn. He bowed. "Greetings."

The bald man cleared his throat. "Prepare an extra seat at the table. We have a guest. If there isn't enough food, Drudge can go without." He turned to Dvalinn. "That's my daughter, Agata. She is without a husband."

The words flushed Agata's cheeks. "Kaspar," was all she managed to say before the bald man cut her off—

"Kaspar is a boy. You are a woman."

"And you are an old lecher."

This time it was the bald man's cheeks that turned ruddy. He opened his mouth, then thought better of it and ground his jaws together before forcing out a smile. "Please excuse our squabbles, stranger. A family is a rocky plot of earth. Are you married, by chance?"

"I am," Dvalinn lied.

Agata laid out three bowls and filled each with stew from her pot. She placed them on the table.

The bald man rubbed his temples. "And the men with you?"

"They are not."

Dvalinn guessed the bald man was ruling out inviting Erlandr or Goll into his home, but it was too late to extend an invitation now. "Perhaps at another time I may meet them," the bald man said. "In the meantime, stranger, eat our stew. You must be hungry after your voyage."

Dvalinn thanked him and took a seat at the table. The bald man and Agata sat, too.

The thick aroma drifting up from the bowl made Dvalinn's mouth water. It reminded him of his wife's cooking. Three bowls on one table reminded him of the family he'd once had. He dug in with his fingers and shovelled the stew greedily into his mouth. When the bowl was empty, the bald man said, "Are you staying permanently? Are you settlers? The soil here is harsh but tameable, and there's ample wood for construction."

"I am looking for someone," Dvalinn said.

"There aren't many of us here, but the ones who are know each other well," Agata said. Her voice was as red as her hair.

The bald man shot her a look to shut her up. "If it's an outlaw you're after, that business is your own," he said to Dvalinn. "Men escape their pasts in Greenland. We believe in second chances."

"I am not hunting a bounty. I am searching for my son," Dvalinn said.

The bald man's expression softened. "A much less despicable pursuit, to be sure, and one with which we'll help in any way we can. What is your son's name and when was he last known to be in Greenland?"

"Framarr," Dvalinn said. "He arrived seven years ago as part of a settlement expedition led by Rikard the Scargiver. That is the last I know of him. Do you remember this expedition?"

Agata looked down. The bald man's voice became grave. "Yes, I remember it. Rikard and his people settled the Birchwood Fjord."

"Is that far from here?" Dvalinn asked. His fingers clutched his empty bowl, lifting it slightly off the table. His hope was rising.

"A day's sailing. But you'll find nothing but ruins there now. The settlement was abandoned."

Dvalinn let the bowl drop. "And what of the people who lived there?"

"Birchwood Fjord was always only temporary. A few of their number stayed, integrating into our other settlements, but most of the men sailed on."

"Sailed on west?" Dvalinn asked.

"West," the bald man said, letting the syllable fill the entire volume of the longhouse.

Dvalinn's hope evaporated. The already pale outline of Framarr's face to which his mind was clinging paled even more. Soon, it would vanish. His son would be gone forever. Then what? A life without purpose was no life at all. "They never returned," Dvalinn said. It was a question posed as a statement.

The bald man filled the entirety of the room with two more syllables:

"Never."

"Drudge would know more," Agata said.

The bald man handed her his bowl. She picked up Dvalinn's and her own and got up from the table.

"I apologize for being unforthcoming, but we common Greenlanders know little about any of this," the bald man said. "Just that the settlement existed and was a shadowy business. The things rumoured to have gone on in Birchwood Fjord should remain unspoken. One mustn't tempt evil. But my daughter is right. If you must know more, speak to my servant, Drudge. He was one of the few in the expedition who stayed. You'll find him in the nearby woods, felling trees. If he refuses to answer your questions, you are free to beat him."

Dvalinn stretched his legs. "Thank you for the good stew," he said.

"You're welcome for supper too, stranger."

A short width of empty shoreline separated the edge of the fjord from the birches sprouting up from the soil on either side of it. The trees were sparse but tall, and loomed overhead like white spears that had been thrown into the ground by the gods. At least that was Erlandr's opinion, which he kept to himself, concentrating instead on staying in the emptiness and reaching the longhouses that the Riverraider had told them were nearby.

Beside him, Goll was being a little less romantic. "It's hardly green here at all. Wouldn't you say the name's a tad deceptive?"

Erlandr wouldn't say it. Although his first impression of the island had been grim, he was warming to it quickly. The sun, the sky, the wilderness. He was already trying to convince himself that this was a place in which he could live. It was certainly no worse than Iceland, and filled with a potential that he felt even without being able to explain it. He would find a pretty woman to be his wife...

Goll kicked at a clump of sod. "The dirt doesn't look the richest, either. To me, it looks like nothing would grow better here than back on our island, but you're the expert on that, so what do you say, Erlandr, son of Jokell the farmer?"

"I say my father raised sheep, not cabbage."

"Raises," Goll corrected him.

If Halfdan keeps his word, Erlandr thought. Even then, he wondered if he would ever see his father again.

As if on cue, a sheep bleated and they caught a flash of movement through the birch trunks. It was a tall movement, human. The opening words of a song followed, accompanied by the sweet, sharp sounds of a stringed instrument. Goll drew his knife. Erlandr put his hand on his axe and shouted out, "Greetings to whoever goes there. We are two travellers in search of hospitality. Do not be alarmed."

The song ended. The sheep bleated again. There was another flash of movement, and the voice that had been singing said without a melody, "Do not be alarmed yourselves, because, you see, travellers are a treat and a rarity." Then, from a different place, it continued, "Alarmed? Neither should you be armed. There's no need for axes and knives." And, from a third place: "I see you without you seeing me. I like it that way. So lower your weapons, walk through the trees, and I'll feed you according to your needs."

Erlandr looked over at Goll, who was staring into the forest. Erlandr stared, too. The trunks were so far apart and the voice had seemed so close at times that it was nearly impossible for them not to have identified its source. But they hadn't.

"Come, come," the voice said.

Goll stepped toward the nearest birch. "Show yourself first."

"Lower your knife first," the voice said.

"Lowered," Goll lied, crouching and getting behind as much cover as possible. In fact, he was nearly hugging the birch tree, when—

An arrow slammed into it!

Goll jumped backward, slipped and fell on his butt.

The voice laughed.

Erlandr took out his axe and laid it on the ground in front of him.

"What are you doing?" Goll asked.

"I'm lowering my weapon."

"Pick it up and walk through the forest," the voice instructed. "It's not a deep forest. When you find yourself on the other side, you'll find you've also found me."

Goll sprang to his feet. As far as Erlandr could tell, his knife had disappeared up his sleeve again. "And what do I do?" he asked.

"Go with him knowing that the next time you break one of my rules, I won't miss," the voice said. Before adding a few seconds later, "Also, if you'd be so kind as to retrieve my arrow..."

Dvalinn watched the bald man's servant from the privacy of a birch grove before approaching him. The servant was muscular, with broad shoulders that came together to form a thick neck holding up a round face made up of exotic, foreign facial features. Looks, however, were often deceiving. More telling was that the servant swung his axe powerfully but without technique. He didn't breathe as much as gasp. When he walked, it was with the subtle limp of a man whose leg had been severely injured in childhood.

The servant applied the last axe blow to the tree he was cutting, and it fell gracefully to the ground.

"Are you the one they call Drudge?" Dvalinn asked.

The servant turned, leaned on his axe and studied Dvalinn for what seemed like a full minute before answering. "Yes." He had an accent Dvalinn couldn't place.

"You came to Greenland as part of the Rikard expedition?"

"Yes," Drudge said.

"From Iceland?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember a man called Framarr?"

"Tall man, young, loud voice," Drudge said. "I remember."

"What happened to him?"

"He left with the others."

"To where?"

"West, across the sea."

"When?"

"Many years ago."

Dvalinn scratched his beard. "He never returned?"

"None of them returned," Drudge said.

"Is he dead?" Dvalinn asked. He had to concentrate to keep his voice from breaking.

"I don't know. I didn't go. I stayed. He could be alive, he could be dead, or he could be worse."

Dvalinn wondered what was worse than death. "Why did you stay?"

Drudge stopped leaning on his axe. Standing upright, he was taller than any man Dvalinn had ever seen. "I was brought to Greenland as Rikard's thrall. I served him until I was sold. Now I serve another. To stay was not my decision."

"One man cannot belong to another."

"In another world."

"In this one," Dvalinn said. "Why did Rikard and the others sail west?"

"They sailed to Vinland. Who is Framarr to you?"

So, Drudge was capable of asking questions as well as answering them. Dvalinn decided there was no reason to lie. "He is my son."

"You are Dvalinn the Riverraider," Drudge said.

"Yes." Dvalinn's heart leaped. Drudge was telling the truth. "What is Vinland?"

Drudge shrugged his massive shoulders. "It is the land that lies to the west of Greenland, just as Greenland lies west of Iceland."

"Nothing lies to the west of Greenland," Dvalinn said. And nothing did—not on any map that he was familiar with.

"You and Rikard disagree about this."

That much Dvalinn knew. He also knew that before the discovery of Iceland, Iceland didn't exist on maps, either. Cartography was a record knowledge. Mapmakers didn't create continents. "Why did Rikard sail to Vinland?"

"For the same reason," Drudge said, "that Dvalinn has sailed to Greenland. He was searching."

"I am searching for my son. Who was Rikard searching for?"

"What," Drudge said.

"He was searching for a thing?"

"He was searching for neither a person nor a thing. Rikard and his followers sailed to Vinland searching for a power."

Men usually sought power amongst themselves. They sought it through learning, politics or violence. Knowledge was power. The laws were power. Fear was power. "What kind of power did they seek?" Dvalinn asked.

"I don't know," Drudge said. "I suppose the kind a man cannot find elsewhere."

"Or at all..."

"Or at all."

There was nothing more to ask. Framarr had set foot here, and he'd sailed on toward a land that doesn't exist with a man who'd likely gone mad. Dvalinn's search would end here. His life would end here. "Was Rikard a foolish man?" he asked, mostly to push away the silence and the infinite blue of the sky of the oppressive sky.

Drudge's lips spread themselves into a giant's smile. "You're asking me if he was touched in the head."

"Yes."

Rikard," Drudge said, "was the sanest man I've ever met."

"Do you like your life?" Dvalinn asked. Actually, the question had asked itself while Dvalinn was still privately sulking. Reason had slipped out from under a blanket of emotion. A sane man would not sail knowingly into an abyss. He would not sail without a justifiable reason. Or was that itself a blanket?

The question seemed to surprise Drudge. "I'm a thrall. I cut trees, I haul, I obey, I—"

"Do you wish for freedom?"

Drudge stretched out his arms and picked up his axe. "In another world, Dvalinn the Riverraider. In this one, I return to my labour."

"Yes," Dvalinn said without a hint of metaphor. "In another world."

Erlandr squinted. With each step, he was sure he'd finally discovered the source of the mysterious voice talking to them through the trees—only to realize that he was looking at: a shadow, a bird, or nothing at all. But whomever the voice belonged to, it had been right. The forest was shallow. The birches ended, and he and Goll stepped onto a field surrounded by a ring of stumps. In between the stumps, sheep grazed, eating tufts of thick grass. There were also cows, a few goats and a wooden house. Unlike the longhouses that Erlandr knew, this house was taller and had several square openings covered by wooden slats on its walls. Piled underneath one of them was a collection of what to Erlandr could only be elephant tusks. Not that he'd ever seen an elephant.

"Stop," the voice said. "Don't move."

Erlandr stopped. Goll grumbled under his nose.

"Now turn yourselves around."

The two men did as they'd been told, until:

Standing about fifty paces in front of them, one of his feet perched atop a stump, they saw an exceedingly tall, amazingly thin boy. He held a strange bow that resembled a miniature harp. He slid an arrow out of his quiver and drew it against one of the bowstrings. "Welcome, travellers," he said. "My name is Kaspar and you will be my guests."

"What is this?" Goll yelled. "You're but a child."

"These are precautions." Kaspar kept the arrow trained on them. "I take them because I have reason to believe certain people are trying to kill me."

"We wish you no harm. We have only just arrived on the shores of your island. There are three of us. One has found shelter for the night, but we two are still searching. I am Erlandr and this is Goll," Erlandr said.

"Where have you come from? Where is your boat?"

"We've sailed from Iceland. Our boat is at the mouth of the fjord."

"Are you traders?"

Erlandr was about to say, "No," when Goll said, "Yes, indeed we are. Have you anything to trade?"

Before the boy could answer:

"Kaspar!" a woman's voice yelled. "Put down that bow."

Erlandr heard a door slam, followed by a series of even footsteps that softened once they presumably hit grass. "Who are these men?" the woman's voice asked.

Several of the sheep looked up. A cow mooed. Kaspar lowered his weapon and dropped his chin to his chest. "They're traders. I swear I was only playing with them, mother."

The body of a stout woman brushed Erlandr's arm as she walked past. She barely paid any attention to him or Goll. All of it was focused on Kaspar. "What have I told you about this nonsense? You're a herder. Your job is to look after our sheep and goats."

"One of them wandered into the forest," Kaspar said.

The woman shook her head and sighed. Then she wiped her hands on her apron—they were covered in blood—and wobbled around to address Erlandr and Goll. "My apologies. The boy is... different," she said. "But he means no harm. I hope you have not taken offence."

"No, ma'am," Erlandr said.

"Good. Now to business. Are you here for the furs or the tusks?" she asked.

"We're not—"

"For the tusks," Goll interrupted. "May we come inside? It has been a trying voyage and most of our food has spoiled."

"It is the least I can do after all this silliness," she said.

Erlandr grabbed Goll by the arm, but Goll shook him off and hurried after the stout woman. He had the look of a fox to him. Erlandr, suspicious of foxes by shepherd's instinct, decided he wouldn't be part of any deception in a place he wanted to make his new home. He stayed outside. Let Goll alone suffer the consequences of Goll's actions.

Kaspar had taken a seat on the stump he'd been posing on and was fiddling with his bow. Erlandr walked toward him. "There's bread and meat inside," Kaspar said without looking up.

"I'm not hungry," Erlandr said. "But if you would fetch me a cup of ale to drink here, under the sun, I would be thankful. I was a herder, too. I feel at home beyond walls."

Erlandr detected the trace of a smile on Kaspar's face—before the boy leaped from his stump and sprinted off. He wasn't a fast runner, long legged and awkward, but he had the natural gift of sudden, incredible movement: an agility one couldn't predict, a swiftness one couldn't teach.

When Kaspar returned, Erlandr thanked him for the ale and sat down on a nearby stump. "You're good with that bow. I've never seen one like it," he said.

"My own invention." Kaspar strummed its strings. "It can melt the heart, or pierce it." He winked. "Twice dangerous."

"How old are you?"

"My parents say I've nineteen years, though I've not verified that myself."

The boy was sharp, for his age or any. Erlandr drank the ale. It tasted strong, not like the dinner ale he was used to drinking in Iceland. "And when you said people were trying to kill you..."

"I was telling the truth. I haven't told a single lie. I said you'd find me through the forest. Here I am. I said travellers are rare. They are. I said I'd give you food and drink, and here you sit, enjoying an ale on a stump in the afternoon air."

Erlandr wondered who could ever want to hurt this boy. Somewhere in his mind, he imagined being the Riverraider of Greenland, a wise stranger accepted into a new community, standing up to its enemies—although, he remembered with a directness he hadn't expected, standing up to his own community's enemy was what had gotten him transported across the sea. "Why would anyone want to kill you? Do you owe a debt?"

Kaspar's face turned grave. "Worse," he said, strumming his harp theatrically. "I have stolen the heart of a woman, and she has stolen mine."

"Has she a husband?"

"She has a father. I have a mother. Mine has forbidden us from seeing one another—though, of course, we meet in secret—and hers has threatened to kill me if ever we are seen together."

"It's important to obey one's parents," Erlandr said. He meant it sincerely, but when Kaspar looked at him with lovesick eyes, he felt as if he'd repeated a hopeless platitude. He tried again. "The gods will act to set right what's wrong." Maybe there was a third piece of advice...

"Kaspar!" the stout woman yelled, interrupting Erlandr's thoughts, and Kaspar jumped obediently to his feet as unpredictably as before. He'd been sitting; he was up. "Help these men load the tusks onto their boat," she instructed.

"Oh, no, ma'am, that won't be necessary," Goll said, walking out of the house with bits of food and other things stuck in his beard. "We can handle that ourselves. You've already been too kind." He showed his teeth much like a snake shows its tongue.

"As you wish. There will be more next season," the woman said. Then she yelled at Kaspar, "As for you, get back to herding, you lazy bones! There are skins to prepare," and disappeared into the house.

Kaspar smiled; and he was gone.

Erlandr strolled over to Goll, who was standing beside the pile of tusks stacked against the house, beaming. "How much did you pay her for these?" Erlandr asked.

Goll lowered his voice. "We didn't pay a thing. We've come to collect what we've already bought. You see, the two of us, we work for a certain regular customer who always leaves his payment in advance."

"But we don't work for anyone," Erlandr said.

"Keep it down. She doesn't know that. We work for who I say we work for. Besides, we aren't cheating this lovely woman out of anything. She's already been paid. We're cheating the trader."

"Who'll collect in other ways when he arrives and finds no elephant tusks for him to take."

Goll slapped Erlandr on the back. "Believe me, my noble farmer, we cannot be responsible for the darkness that may lie in the hearts of other men. And they're not elephant tusks," he said. "They're walrus tusks."

"What's a walrus?"

"It's a snow cow with horns." Goll picked up one of the tusks and weighed it in his hand. "Heavy, but you'll manage."

"Manage what?"

"To haul these back to the boat. That's what thralls do. They haul."

Thrall? Erlandr felt a fury starting to rise like bile in his gut. He was no thrall! He was a free man. He pushed Goll against the tusks and reached for his own axe.

"Careful, or you'll have committed a crime on this island as serious as on the last..."

As much as Erlandr hated it, Goll was right. If Erlandr wanted to make a life here, he could hardly start under the shadow of a crime. Still, he was no thrall and he would not haul any walrus tusks, especially not stolen ones. "Haul them yourself. Sell them yourself. Take the profit for yourself. I'll have nothing to do with this."

Goll straightened himself, fixed his shirt and cleared his throat. He had the fox look again. "I will have the profit, you're right about that. But you will haul them, and you'll do everything else I say, too."

Erlandr turned to walk away.

"Why do you think I left Iceland?" Goll called after him.

"You threw the knife that almost killed Young Chieftain Halfdan," Erlandr said, still walking.

Goll cackled. "Except I didn't throw it to you, you idiot. I threw it to him. He was supposed to stab you with it. I wasn't helping you attack him. I was defending him. If he wasn't such a bloated slob, you'd have a gash across your neck and I'd have a sack full of silver to spend on women and games."

Erlandr stopped dead. Surely, Goll was lying.

"I know you're a farmer and farmers are stupid, but even you must know that power can't sustain itself. It needs support. Likvidr has spies, agents working for him. They live among you. They're your friends, your family. Do you think I was the only one in that longhouse ready to see you dead?"

Erlandr remembered the faces that had been around him, yelling, beating drums, followed by the Riverraider's words that these people were regular people and that regular people can be bought or intimidated into doing bad things to people they otherwise care about.

Goll went on, speaking faster, "You're here because you raised a hand against your better. I'm here because I failed to prevent it. We are both outlaws, Erlandr. The only difference is that my crime is unofficial, my punishment unwritten. Your crime is legal. Your punishment is clear. Your capture is just. By this time, there's a bounty on your head in Iceland because power needs to make examples of people who challenge it. The bounty will be enough to turn Greenlanders against you." Goll drew a breath. "If," he said, "they know it's in their interest. Information can travel slowly. But that's the sword I hold above your neck. In Iceland, you're a dead man. Here, you're my man. Wherever you go, your life is no longer in your hands."

Erlandr felt his ribs turn inward. Just like that, his future in Greenland was gone. Indecision flowed through his bones, which felt empty, a system of delicate tubes ready to snap. If he killed Goll, he'd be a Greenland murderer. If he didn't, he'd have to do as Goll commanded. How easy it would have been to have pushed him over the side of the boat, into the sea along with his streams of vomit. If only Erlandr had known then...

"You have no choice—if you want to live, that is," Goll said.

But there was always a choice. East was a choice. Erlandr would bargain with the Riverraider for ownership of his boat, working off the cost with labour if necessary, or he'd scour Greenland for another boat. If he didn't find one, he'd construct it. He'd learn how. Then he'd sail to the mainland, bypassing Iceland, with its great and horrible past. What's the worst that could happen, an anonymous death on the seas?

In the meantime, he walked silently away.

"You'll come back," Goll said, picking up one of the walrus tusks. "You'll see reason. And when you do, these will be waiting."

Erlandr didn't look back.

Dvalinn opened the sack he'd brought with him from Iceland and spread its contents on the bald man's table. The valuables shone and glittered in the dusky light of the longhouse lamps. They were the last physical remnants of a lifetime of raiding: golden statuettes, ivory combs, gemstone jewellery, an assortment of foreign coins.

The bald man's eyes widened at the sight, bouncing from one object to the next, and his lower jaw fell, exposing small, yellow teeth and the pool of saliva that was gathering in his mouth. He was visibly starved for riches.

Even Agata stopped what she was doing and ogled.

"All of it?" the bald man asked, his voice so hoarse that he cleared his throat and repeated the question.

Dvalinn nodded. These things were of no more use to him. One couldn't eat gold or drink sapphires. "For as much food and supplies as will fit into my boat. Skins, leather, thread, rope, tools."

The saliva dripped from the bald man's mouth. He wiped it off his chin with his hand, with which he then picked up one of the statuettes to look it over. "Certainly," he said. "Oh, yes, certainly, we have a bargain."

"I need it delivered to my boat by morning," Dvalinn said.

"Personally," the bald man said, "on my very own back. Drudge will help as well, and even Agata. We'll all help carry your things to you. How's that for hospitality?" His voice went hoarse again. Again, he cleared his throat. "May I keep these beautiful treasures here tonight?"

"They are yours," Dvalinn said. There was no reason for the bald man to steal the valuables. He was already getting them for nearly nothing. And if he reneged on his promise to hand over the food and supplies, Dvalinn would have no trouble taking what was his. As for Drudge, the bald man was still blissfully ignorant of that particular issue.

"And where is it that you will be sailing?" the bald man asked, rubbing his palms together. Dvalinn had no doubt that he was maintaining conversation to be polite, in case Dvalinn decide against their deal because of some perceived slight.

"East, to the mainland," Dvalinn said.

The bald man put down the statuette and picked up a comb. Dvalinn noted the irony. Agata seemed to note it, too. Her smile was conspiratorial. These are good, simple people, Dvalinn thought. Nevertheless, there was no reason for them to know the truth. They might try to dissuade him, and he wasn't in the mood for an argument. "I have satisfied myself that my son is gone," he added. "It is time for me to return home. If we meet again, it will be in the afterlife."

Erlandr reclined inside the Riverraider's boat, among what was left of their food and drink, and watched the endless sea become the narrow fjord, which itself became, in his eyes, a dagger aimed at the heart of Greenland and his own.

He'd had half a thought to steal the boat and set sail east tonight, by himself, leaving the Riverraider stranded, but even having such an idea shamed him. The Riverraider deserved better. Everyone deserved better. It could not be that the right response to being wronged was to then wrong another, contributing to a sick, never-ending cycle of wrongdoing. That was what separated him from men like Goll and Halfdan.

He lost himself in these knotty problems of morality until interrupted by his grumbling stomach. He'd not had anything to eat since morning. He wrapped his cloak around his body and waited. He refused to touch the food that was in the boat. The Riverraider would return, either tonight or in the morning, and when he did Erlandr would tell him about Goll and ask for his advice. Only then would he eat. Honesty, he decided, was the only true solution. And if it wasn't, he could always steal another boat from somebody else. Greenland was an island, and every island has its boats.

He must have dozed, because when he lifted his eyelids, the sky was darker, and darker still was the shape standing before him: the tall, thin figure of Kaspar.

"I came to see your boat," Kaspar said in his sing-song way, which found poetry even in the most mundane utterances. "I needed to see whether it existed." He reached into a pack hanging from his shoulder and pulled out pieces of bread and meat. He held both out to Erlandr. "I also brought these. I wasn't going to give them to you unless you were telling the truth about the boat, but you were, so here you are."

Erlandr took the food and began eating.

Kaspar handed him a skin, which Erlandr drank from. It was filled with the same kind of strong ale as before. "Where's Goll, the man who came with me?" Erlandr said after washing a chunk of meat down his throat. "Did he follow you?"

"Me? I'm invisible in the forest," Kaspar said proudly. "No one can track me, let alone a drunk in the twilight." He retrieved a bite of food from the pack for himself. "When I left, he was with my mother. Do you mind if I take a closer look at the boat? It's been years since I've seen one."

"Look as much as you like," Erlandr said.

Kaspar walked around it, touching its sides, feeling the grain of its wood. Then he hopped deftly inside, landing close to Erlandr but barely upsetting the stillness of the boat. Erlandr had heard about goats that lived in the mountains, leaping from crag to crag, and that's what the boy reminded him of. He watched, chewing, as Kaspar inspected the boat's sail and the large sheet of cloth that covered their supply of food and drink and Erlandr's own supply sack. "You could fit a fair amount in here," Kaspar said. "I suppose that's useful for a pair of traders."

Erlandr didn't say anything. Why did there always have to be lies? A flash of understanding appeared on Kaspar's face, like moonlight briefly uncovered on a cloudy night, reflected on the surface of the sea.

Then the boy jerked his head to peer inland—

Erlandr aped him.

Four people were approaching.

When Erlandr turned back, Kaspar was gone, leaving behind him only the rush of freshly disturbed air.

Dvalinn led the bald man, Agata and Drudge toward his boat. "Leave the supplies on the ground," he said when they were close enough to see Erlandr. "My men and I will load them."

Erlandr stepped forward.

The bald man laid down his bundle of supplies and bowed. "Good to meet you," he said.

"You as well."

Dvalinn noted the uneasy expression on Erlandr's face. Something was wrong, but there would be time to speak about it later, and if there wasn't, by tomorrow afternoon it would no longer be his concern. He'd done all he could for Erlandr. Eventually, the young Icелander would have to start taking care of himself.

"We'll bring two more loads tonight," the bald man said, "and the last load tomorrow, after breakfast. To which—" The accompanying sweep of his arm took in Dvalinn, Erlandr and about half the world. "—you are all invited. No one should sail with anything less than a full stomach." The evening had turned his yellow teeth grey.

Dvalinn thanked him, waited until all three of the strangers had disappeared, and was about to start arranging the new supplies among the old, when Erlandr caught him by the elbow. The unease on his face was gone. "You're sailing, Riverraider?" he asked.

"Yes."

At which point Erlandr launched into an excited explanation of his situation with Goll. Dvalinn listened with stony patience before saying, with the finality of an executioner's axe cleaving a convict's neck, "I am not sailing east. I am sailing west."

The blood drained from Erlandr's face. "West? But, there's nothing west of here. Greenland is the western edge..."

"My son sailed west. To find him, I must do the same. If indeed there is nothing west of Greenland, we will meet in a silent darkness. But we will meet."

Erlandr dropped to the ground. "I can't stay here," he mumbled.

Dvalinn wanted to ignore him, or strike him in the face, or grab him by the shoulders and shake him till he understood that a free life was a hard life. In Iceland, Erlandr had been ready to kill Halfdan. Here, he was sulking when he should be beating Goll to death, stuffing rocks down his throat and dragging his lifeless body to the bottom of the fjord before anyone else knew of their presence!

"That's why he's ingratiating himself with that stout woman," Erlandr said, mostly to himself. "He's making allies so that if he disappears people will notice. He's probably told her stories about me so that if he should meet his doom, the suspicion will fall on me."

Dvalinn sighed. It was a defect which those who didn't possess it called honour that was and always would be his weakness. It was the reason he hadn't followed Framarr to Greenland. The Icelanders needed his help. It was the reason he'd stayed in Iceland for years afterwards. Someone was always helpless. Now he'd managed to pull yet another helpless Icelander along with him and, despite his anger, he felt responsible for the fool. He exhaled his excess of emotion. He reminded himself that Erlandr wasn't a fool, not in the normal sense. He was a decent but naive lad who'd tried to do what's right and suffered for it. How could he expect a decent person to consider weighing down a corpse with rocks? As rational as that line of thinking was, it was a rationality that belonged to raiders and brigands, bad people: people like him.

On the other hand, his time of selflessness was over. If he hadn't earned back the sins of his youth, he would never do so. So be it. He would help Erlandr if he could, but he wouldn't do it at the expense of his own self-proclaimed mission. "Do you trust me?" he asked.

Erlandr looked up at him with the innocence of a calf. "Yes, Riverraider. You've done so much for my people."

"You said you wished to die in battle. I said you were too young," Dvalinn said.

"I'm afraid to die. That's why I must leave. I refuse to live as a slave, yet I'm too scared to live as a rebel or an outlaw. I don't want to steal. I don't want to kill. It's not in me. For years, I've fantasized about being a hero, performing heroic feats, but now that I've had a taste of it, I despise it more than anything."

"All boys want to be heroes," Dvalinn said. "Most never have the chance. Those who do, do not know what it means until a sword has been run through their backs."

Erlandr pleaded. "You had the chance. You're a hero, Riverraider."

Dvalinn crouched in front of him. "I am not, and I never have been. I was a husband, once, and a father, and I was no good as either. I watched my wife waste away from a disease I brought to her and could not fight. My son, if he is alive, is my one remaining chance of salvation."

When Erlandr tried to interject, Dvalinn silenced him. "But I can offer you this. Sail with me. If I do not find my son, we will return to the mainland, where I will die and you will start your life, richer for the adventure that we have shared." Two men, Dvalinn reasoned, were better than one. With both Drudge and Erlandr, he would have a greater chance of finding Framarr. "Greenland is the edge of the known world. I invite you to the unknown."

Although it was impossible for Dvalinn to know what went on inside Erlandr's head in those next few moments, the outward manifestation was clear. With this decision, the boy had become a man. The calf had matured into a young bull. "I will sail with you," Erlandr said.

"I have one request," Dvalinn said.

"Anything."

"You call me 'The Riverraider' no more. I am Dvalinn."

"Thank you, Dvalinn."

As Erlandr embraced him, Dvalinn hoped to God or gods that Rikard the Scargiver had known where he was sailing.

The morning meal at the bald man's longhouse was simple but hardy, with stew, bread and meat freshly cooked over the meal-fire. Dvalinn ate his portions carefully. Erlandr ate like a berserker. The bald man barely touched his food at all, still excited about the wonderful valuables he'd bought. He asked about the history of each and about how Dvalinn had acquired them, but Dvalinn was in no mood to talk about the past. "I see, I see," the bald man would reply, hinting at some kind of dark secret shared between the two of them, "I won't say a word to anyone. You can count on that." The truth about the valuables was simple. Dvalinn had killed men and taken their belongings. The ones that looked the most valuable, he gathered in a sack that he carried with him. When he left the mainland, he took the sack and used it to pay whomever needed to be paid. The few items that were left he had traded yesterday for a cargo of ostensibly worthless everyday items. The bald man, plying him with food and drink, was delighted.

Drudge ate his meal, which consisted solely of stew, in the corner of the longhouse. He hadn't been included in the conversation.

Agata had left the longhouse after serving them and had never returned. "She's probably cavorting with that Kaspar freak," the bald man said with some derision after catching Dvalinn glancing at the door. "I told that boy that if I ever seem them together, I'll kill him with my bare hands. She's a good woman and it isn't right her being with a youth, especially one as queer as that." Still, it didn't seem to be the foremost thought on this mind.

After they finished eating, they grabbed the last of the supplies that Dvalinn had bought and carried them to the boat. Yesterday's supplies had taken up all the storage space under the large sheet of cloth, so these last bundles Erlandr placed loose on the deck. They handsomely took the place of Goll.

When the supplies were loaded, Erlandr and Dvalinn began pushing the boat onto the fjord.

"What are you standing there for?" the bald man shouted at Drudge. "Go on and help them!" He picked up a stick and threatened to smack the giant across the face with it. Dvalinn, watching out of the corner of his eye, saw the worst form of nobility: newly found, never earned. The bald man smiled from ear to ear.

With Drudge's help, they made the boat float. It was heavy with cargo but the wind was blowing strong. Dvalinn and Erlandr got in. "So long," Dvalinn shouted.

"If ever you find yourselves on this island, you are welcome in my home," the bald man shouted back.

Dvalinn doubted that very much, especially as Drudge lumbered aboard the boat and the bald man's expression melted off his face. "What's the meaning of this?" he screamed. "Get back here!"

Drudge turned to look at the horizon, the back of his head ignoring his former master. Erlandr looked at Dvalinn. "You're stealing a thrall?" he asked. There was a hint of disappointment in his voice.

The bald man was screaming obscenities from the shore.

"A man is not leather boot or a horse, to be stolen," Dvalinn said. "He decides his actions and his allegiances, and he suffers the consequences of both."

"It's unjust. The law—" Erlandr said.

"The law says you are a dead man, Erlandr. It is not just but it is lawful, written by men like Likvidr. Justice is a thing deeper, which you feel in your heart and can defend in your head," Dvalinn said. "Your presence on this boat is no more just than the presence of this man, Drudge."

The bald man became smaller and smaller until he merged with the shore and Dvalinn could no longer see him, and the wind had swallowed up his obscenities.

Soon they were on the sea.

Dvalinn kept the boat within sight of land until they passed the place where Birchwood Fjord had been. Now, only a few piles of unused building materials remained, overgrown and resembling burial mounds. "Rikard destroyed the settlement before he sailed," Drudge said.

"Why?" Erlandr asked.

"I do not know, but he had his reason. Rikard was a thoughtful man. I would have been proud to have sailed with him."

"You sail with us," Dvalinn said.

Drudge let out a laugh that rocked them upon the water. "And of that I am also proud."

They maneuvered the boat until it faced west. The wind filled their sail. Behind them, Greenland vanished, its grey mountains being the last to let go. The sea around them opened and Dvalinn felt the exhilaration of the uncharted, a paradoxical feeling that was much like the intense feeling by which he was sometimes overcome in battle: an indifference to life intertwined with a yearning for living in this, its ever-present and glorious moment.

It was three days since they'd cast off from Greenland and they'd not even sniffed a hint of land. Erlandr's doubts were growing. Dvalinn's quiet confidence and the dispassion of the man called Drudge only made them worse. Had he gravely erred in coming with them? He'd made the decision in haste, and hasty decisions were often wrong. Would life with Goll have been so horrible? He would have carried their possessions, made food, hunted, constructed things with his hands. It would have been work, but did not farmers and herders also work? But too embarrassed to ask Dvalinn, who had done so much for him, and not yet desperate enough to talk to Drudge, Erlandr kept his doubts to himself and the sea. The sea, however, was the epitome of indifference. Its depths said nothing and all its surface suggested was that there was never any choice at all: fate was the same in all directions. It was a cold comfort.

It was colder still at night, when the others were resting or asleep and Erlandr couldn't stop his imagination from crafting his doubts into a waking nightmare in which they sailed forever on a forever sea, finding nothing and unable to turn back. When their ale ran out, they drank seawater. When they had no more food, they caught and ate fish. When the fish disappeared, they decided to die but couldn't. They couldn't drown or starve or freeze, and all the salt they'd ingested began corroding them from the inside, leaving them writhing in the boat like fish pulled out of the water and thrown onto an overheated slab of rock...

A sudden movement ended the nightmare.

Erlandr wasn't sure whether the movement was his, a nervous tick, or somebody else's. He remained still. His immediate emotion was fear: of the monsters that Goll had taken such glee in scaring him with on the voyage to Greenland. He shook that fear out of his head and studied first Dvalinn, then Drudge. Neither of them were moving. Drudge was snoring.

The movement repeated.

It was a gentle bulging of the cloth covering their supplies.

Erlandr rose, unslung his axe and covered the short distance between where he'd been sitting and the cargo. His axe raised, ready to swing, he grabbed the cloth with his other hand, yelled, and pulled it free, exposing a tangle of supplies and:

The startled face of Kaspar, moving desperately to cover with his own body the body of another—

"Agata," Dvalinn said.

The axe in Erlandr's hand shook. It took all of his willpower to prevent it coming down and inserting its blade into Kaspar's head, whose face beseeched him even as his fist brandished a knife pointed at Dvalinn. Goll's knife.

"Please," Agata said, "it will do you no good to kill us." She turned to look at Drudge. "I beg you. I'm not my father. You weren't my slave. I always treated you well and with respect. Repay me my kindness, please."

Erlandr noticed that a third of their supplies were missing, the casualties of two stowaways making space for themselves.

"Let us go when you make landfall in the east," Kaspar said. "That is all we want, all we've ever wanted, to be together in peace. We are—" He wrung as much pathos out of the words as possible. "—in love."

But whereas his words were melodramatic, their body language was painfully sincere. The way she clung to him despite her age and the way he shielded her despite the slenderness of his body, it truly was the two of them against the world, come what may and take no prisoners. That was what made it so heartbreaking to Erlandr when Drudge said, "We are not eastward bound, Agata. We are sailing westward."

"Get up," Dvalinn said.

Kaspar got up first. Agata rose behind him. "Westward?"

Erlandr wondered whether it was vile that it calmed him to no longer be the only distraught passenger on the boat. At least he had agreed to come along, however much he now regretted it. Kaspar and Agata had stolen aboard mistakenly.

"How much of the supplies did you remove?" Dvalinn asked, clear headed as always.

Kaspar stammered out an indistinct answer. "Most of the food," Agata said. "We decided you needed the drink and you might have a use for the other things, but that you didn't need that much food to sail... east. We wanted to be thoughtful."

Dvalinn pulled at one of the ends of his moustache. He directed a question to Drudge. "You know her best. Do you vouch for this woman?"

"I do," Drudge said.

"And I vouch for the boy," Erlandr blurted out a little too quickly, surprising everyone, including himself. "He is good at navigating the forest and accurate with a bow, traits I assume will serve us well in the new land." He felt a kinship with his fellow herder.

Kaspar bowed his head in thank you. "But if there is no new land?"

"There is. I stake my life on it," Drudge said.

"You stake all of ours."

"I did not accept your coming aboard this boat," Dvalinn told Kaspar, before addressing Agata as well. "You are both stowaways. I will not kill you, but we are not heading back to Greenland. This you must understand. You have no say here. When we make landfall you are mine to command. If you disobey or become a burden to this expedition, I will put you to the sword. I have killed men, women and children in my time."

"I'm not a child," Kaspar said, no longer stammering.

"We shall see."

"When do we reach this new land?" Agata asked.

Drudge shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not know," Dvalinn said. After Agata scoffed, he pointed to the moon in the sky. "How far away is that?"

"Too far to go by boat," Kaspar said, probably intending it as a joke—but neither Erlandr nor any of the others reacted, because after having followed Dvalinn's outstretched arm to the sky, the sky is where their attentions had remained. Ahead, Erlandr saw it being ripped alight by flashes of lightning.

The first raindrops splashed against his face.

"Storm," Dvalinn said.

By the next day, the rain had become a downpour and their wet bodies clung to the sides of the boat like drenched remnants of stew to the sides of a bowl. It was not a pleasant feeling, to say nothing of the motion, which victimized even Erlandr's stomach. They ate and drank little. Yet for all their misery, the heart of the storm seemed as distant as before. To Erlandr, it meant they were standing in place, a bobbing, useless piece of scrap upon the sea.

The only positive development belonged to Kaspar, who'd devised a device to catch the rainwater for drinking later. In this weather, water went down, and stayed down, easier than ale.

They took turns huddling under the cloth that covered their supplies, some of which were soaked beyond usefulness, and always Erlandr was envious of Kaspar and Agata, who had each other to huddle with, because when it came his turn, he was alone, and in the relative dryness his imagination hissed into his ear, playing the cruellest tricks on him.

Day ceased to disturb night.

The air around them became so wet it was inseparable from the raging water below.

But when Erlandr, rain pouring off his upper lip, draining into his eyes, suggested to Dvalinn that they turn back, if only for a day, if only until the storm weakened, Dvalinn laughed and shook his head—water shooting out in streaks from the ends of his hair. "Ahead, Erlandr. Always ahead. You pass a storm by going through it."

When Erlandr and the others cowered against the sides of the boat, attempting to escape the growing maelstrom around them, Dvalinn would stand and, holding himself vertical by grabbing the boat's mast, roar into the wind whatever the wind was roaring at him, and let it pummel his face until his beard was flat and his hair wild...

"This is madness!" Erlandr yelled to Kaspar when he could no longer tell one day from the last or how long they had been at sea, six days or sixteen. The storm had drifted closer, and the bolts of lightning pierced the sky above them, but what good was that when they still hadn't sighted land, and were as likely to sail off the edge of the world, which Erlandr pictured as a kind of terrible waterfall, as they were ever to set foot upon dry earth again.

Despite being a few paces apart, they barely heard each another. Kaspar screamed back, "A hideous paralysis, a monstrous vulnerability. Madness, yes! Incredible, isn't it? Like love! To be with your beloved and together, arms around your bodies, be ripped apart by these winds, it would be absolutely divine!"

Erlandr awoke to a roll of thunder. Had he been dreaming?

Kaspar and Agata were hugging each other.

Drudge was a giant ball, arms holding knees, head tucked somewhere between both.

Dvalinn lay prone on the deck. Only his eyes peeked over the edge of the boat, concentrating on—

"I see it!"

Kaspar stirred.

Erlandr crawled forward, closer to where Dvalinn was.

Above, the storm blew through the tattered remains of their sail, which had been torn to shreds. How long ago, Erlandr couldn't guess. Time was an illusion.

"Land," Dvalinn said, louder. "Land ahead!"

Erlandr didn't see it.

Drudge uncurled himself, spread his legs to almost the entire width of the boat and looked, too, from a higher vantage point.

The sky crashed.

The sea rolled and the boat with it.

"It's the truth. It exists. The new land," Drudge yelled, losing his balance and falling, and not caring, but bouncing right back up to look again.

That's when Erlandr saw:

All around them was blackness and grey, but if he squinted and stared long enough, the grey acquired depth and the blackness receded, until parts of the grey were the plumes of rain and the shape of land and the wind was gusting, and the boat was no longer on the surface of the water but flying and everything was blackness until—

The grey—

Rocks.

Dvalinn gasped for air. The fall had knocked the wind out of him. After regaining his breath, he got up and took his bearings.

He was on solid ground, on shore.

Erlandr ran past him toward the water, which was beating and frothing as it surged onto land. Dvalinn rubbed his head, which was beating, too. Or was it his heart that was beating and his mouth that was frothing? He had no time to arrive at the answer because reality provided it for him. He buckled over and vomited a mixture of ale and saltwater.

When he refocused, he saw the boat nearby—or, more precisely, its skeletal remains, which had been discarded by the sea.

He walked forward.

Erlandr was pulling Drudge out of the water. Kaspar and Agata were wading up to their shoulders in it, disappearing and reappearing under the weight of the incoming waves, salvaging whatever supplies they could.

Dvalinn helped Erlandr pull Drudge to safety. When he was on his back they took turns pounding on his chest with their fists until he coughed out the sea and opened his eyes.

Kaspar and Agata gathered around them.

"We grabbed what we could, but there wasn't much left," Agata said.

"Good," Dvalinn said. He probably sounded absent because he was still coming to his senses, but that was hardly surprising. The fall had knocked him hard. It must have been a great gust of wind that had sent them hurtling into the rocks jutting out of the sea. He concentrated on the most important facts. The boat was badly damaged but they were all safe. Most importantly, they had arrived.

"So," Drudge said, sitting up and rubbing his reddened eyes, "this is the new world. This is Vinland."

"I don't see any vines," said Kaspar.

Dvalinn didn't see any vines, either. In fact, his first impression of this land was not something that he'd seen at all but something that he felt. Ever since regaining consciousness on the shore, he'd felt overwhelmed by the immensity of the surroundings he couldn't see but that he knew were there. The new world, as Drudge had called, was big, bigger than Iceland,

bigger than Greenland, and bigger even than the western mainland. Here, even Dvalinn felt small.

But it was something altogether different that kept gnawing at him, something that he *had* seen. Immediately after opening his eyes, he'd craned his neck to the left and—where now was but a scattering of boulders cushioned by the dark, sandy ground—he'd seen a figure: a figure the size of a child, dressed in purple, with green skin. And he would have discounted the sighting as a result of his confused state were it not for Erlandr, whose eyes now met his and in whose retinas he could still see, emblazoned, the same green-skinned little man.

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About the Author

Norman Crane lives in Canada. He writes books. When he's not writing, he reads. He's also a historian, a coffee drinker and a cinephile.

His first novel, [A Paunch Full of Pesos](#), is a spaghetti western.

On the internet, he keeps a [blog](#), has [Facebook](#) and tweets ([@TheNormanCrane](#)).

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