

**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."

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