

THE VIKINGS

Episode 1

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THE VIKINGS. EPISODE 1: RITES OF PASSAGE

TEASER

A young Viking, RAGNAR LOTHBROK is engaged in a fight to the death with two LATVIAN WARRIORS, distinguishable by their eastern-looking clothing. Ragnar has been fighting a long time. His torso is smeared with blood, like his sword, and the bodies of the dead lie scattered around.

The Latvians are bigger and heavier but we quickly appreciate Ragnar's weapon skills and speed of thought, blocking the blows of the axes with sword and shield and weaving out of range. We also see that one of the Latvian's is already badly wounded, with blood streaming from a wound in his head.

Ragnar concentrates on him for a moment, thrusting, turning him, twisting away so the warrior wastes his diminishing energy slicing thin air with his axe and bellowing angrily. Finally he stumbles and Ragnar drives his sword into his chest.

But at the same moment the second Latvian attacks from behind, swinging down his axe for a mighty blow. Ragnar pivots round, his shield taking the full force of the blow, leaving the axe-head embedded in the wood.

Aghast, unable to free his weapon, the Latvian abandons it and starts to run. Very calmly, Ragnar pulls a spear out of the body of one of the dead and hurls it after the running man. Speared clean through the back the warrior falls.

Ragnar, suddenly as weary as death, trudges a few yards up the slope and surveys the rest of the battle field. In the gathering gloom an eery silence has fallen. Scores of bodies, hacked, mutilated and speared lie on the ground. And everywhere flocks of crows and ravens flutter down and feast upon the corpses. And there is not one living human thing moving over that field of death - except a solitary figure. A TALL MAN with a long cloak and a wide-brimmed hat, holding a spear, he moves slowly between the bodies of the Viking dead, seeming to note and inspect each one. He is a spectral figure, strange, disturbing, powerful, with ravens sometimes perching upon his shoulders...and Ragnar watches him like one transfigured, like one who has come face to face with his god.

The tall man pauses by one of the Viking dead and points him out with his spear. At that moment the air around appears to shimmer and two or three almost translucent, almost naked YOUNG FEMALE VALKYRIES appear and gather the slain warrior into their arms. In great brightness the young women lift into the liquid air...and vanish.

Ragnar watches this miracle in silent awe, then looks over again at the tall man. For a brief moment the tall man lifts his head, revealing his face beneath the wide-brimmed hat. The face is indescribable - except for its single eye, which stares back at Ragnar with a pitiless and terrible intensity.

And then he is gone, as if he had never been, leaving Ragnar to survey the darkening, mysterious scene.

END OF TEASER

These words appear on the screen:

NORWAY, LATE 8TH CENTURY.

The wooden and turf house is dark and almost window-less, the rooms lit by tallow candles. From outside comes the dull rumble of summer thunder.

Somewhere in the darkness a WOMAN is breathing heavily and groaning. We hear the sound of other WOMEN'S VOICES, low and sibilant, almost chanting.

A YOUNG MAN - RAGNAR - fretful and anxious, crosses the place where the colored war shields are fixed to the wall like eyes, and looks into the chamber where his wife, LAGERTHA, the shield-maiden lies upon their bed giving birth, surrounded by three or four OLDER WOMEN, one of them ancient.

ANCIENT WOMAN

What do you want?

RAGNAR

Isn't it here yet?

The ancient woman doesn't bother to respond, spits on the floor and places her hands again on Lagertha's swollen stomach and resumes her low, strange chant.

One of the other MID-WIVES speaks more kindly.

MID-WIFE

Not yet, Ragnar. Go away and do something useful.

Outside the storm breaks, the thunder louder and rain hissing on the ground.

RAGNAR moves away, into another chamber, and crouches down beside a small wooden statue set in a niche beside the fire, very crudely carved from a piece of wood: a statue of a nude female figure, wearing just a necklace, with large breasts.

Ragnar picks it up.

RAGNAR

Freya, make everything go well today. Make sure Lagertha lives, and is delivered of a healthy child.

A beat. The thunder cracks again. Then Ragnar shrugs and puts the figure down.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

I know you can't really change anything.

ANCIENT WOMAN V.O.

It's time.

Ragnar hurries back through.

His wife's legs are spread wide open and something is emerging between them: a head, with a halo of bright hair. The ancient woman continues her sing-song chant and the younger women help with the birth, one of them holding the baby's head as the rest of its body slithers out in an abrupt rush of blood and afterbirth...and Ragnar gasps at the wonder of it. Stares at the bloody bundle even as they cut the chord and begin to wash it.

RAGNAR

What is it?

LAGERTHA

(with a laugh)

It's a boy.

RAGNAR

How do you know?

LAGERTHA

What are you talking about? Didn't I promise you a son?

Ragnar looks at the ancient woman.

RAGNAR

Is it a boy?

ANCIENT WOMAN

Look for yourself, Ragnar Lothbrok.

Ragnar looks. Satisfies himself.

LAGERTHA

Give him here. I have enough milk
for a herd of boys.

The baby is lifted to her breast, where it suckles.

EXT. VIKING SETTLEMENT - DAY

Ragnar emerges from his house carrying the baby, wrapped in a blanket. The storm has passed. The wood and turf building is one of several in the small hamlet perched on the edge of a deep fjord. It's a vision of stillness and utter tranquillity. The thickly wooded slopes of the fyord drop down sheer to the water, and above them the bare rocks are still capped with snow. The whole landscape has a strange, magical luminosity - a heightened, almost unnatural beauty.

Ragnar takes his son to the water's edge and holds him out in his arms, like an offering.

RAGNAR

Look Odin. Look, I have a son.
Thank you, lord. Thank you for my
son.

We move in CLOSE on the baby's face - then the camera tilts up towards the sky.

And suddenly the sky begins to darken...

EXT. THE HEAVENS

Darkness - and out of the darkness a noise like no other, of horns and hooves and the shrill cry of birds and the roaring of men and women. And over the dark fields, fringed with fire, high in the darkling sky flies a tumultuous host: thousands of Viking warriors and Valkyries packed together and riding plunging horses, armed with spears and swords, and half-naked shield-maidens with bows and shields, sweeping across the heavens in a wild hunt amidst thick flocks of wheeling ravens.

And in the midst of this vast ghostly army the huge figure of Odin, the god of dead warriors, lord of Valhalla, riding his eight-legged horse Sleipnir, carrying his spear, two ravens perched on his shoulders, his cloak streaming out behind him, his single-eye surveying this great, ecstatic, thundering host of the risen dead.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Winter. The embers of the fire still glow in the centre of the floor. We are close again on the baby's face...as he sleeps in the crook of Ragnar's arm.

Ragnar is awake, staring up into the darkness and the play of shadows across the rafters, a look of profound awe upon his face.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Now everything is in the fierce grip of the deepest winter. Icy winds blast across the fjord, heaping the water into wild, foaming waves, and the mountains above are thick with snow. Even at mid-day the sky is almost dark, like a perpetual twilight.

But through this dark desolation a solitary FIGURE can be seen, a black smudge against the snow, wrapped in furs against the icy winds, struggling towards the hamlet.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Lagertha plays with her two CHILDREN. Her son BJORN is about ten and daughter GYDA about eight years old.

Ragnar appears, gestures to her.

RAGNAR

Come.

Ragnar leads Lagertha into the main room.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

Here is the man I told you of,
Lagertha.

He indicates the figure standing beside the fire: a tall MAN of uncertain age, his craggy face heavily lined, his hair and beard both long and matted, as if his journey has been long and arduous.

LAGERTHA

Welcome, stranger, to our house.

The strange man bows a little. Lagertha pours a drink of sweet, strong mead and hands it to him. The stranger empties the cup.

LAGERTHA (CONT'D)
Sit by the fire, warm yourself.

The stranger nods again, and sits, Ragnar and Lagertha doing likewise.

RAGNAR
This man is a wanderer. He has been
on a boat that travelled to the
west.

This is clearly a shock to Lagertha. She stares at the man.

LAGERTHA
Is it true?

Once more the stranger nods, but does not reply. Lagertha suddenly realizes that he is glancing towards his cup, and she quickly re-fills it.

And once more he empties it, then belches, and wipes his hand over his mouth.

WANDERER
We sailed north up the coast, to
the rock formation which looks like
a skull. And then, when we were out
in the open sea, we turned due
west. And I was frightened.

LAGERTHA
What happened to you? Where did you
get to?

Behind her, we see Bjorn and Gyda peeking into the room, and listening.

WANDERER
After two days and nights we saw
land. Someone said it was a land
called England, for they had been
there before. But I don't know if
it's true. I was only told that in
this land there was great treasure.
We went ashore, found a big house
there, and took some things from
it.

From his bundle of discarded furs he retrieves an object: a small but very beautiful ivory crucifix.

WANDERER (CONT'D)

In England, they worship a strange god called Jesus Christ. They say he died in a tree.

RAGNAR

Like Odin. Only Odin came back to life.

Lagertha examines the glittering prize.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

Tell us how you crossed the open ocean - once you lost sight of land? How did you know you were sailing west, not north or south?

WANDERER

We had a board. It belonged to a Swede.

LAGERTHA

A board? What kind of board...?

WANDERER

A sun-shadow board. Here is one.

Again he reaches into the thick pile of animal furs and this time produces a "solskuggerfol" board. It is a smallish wooden board with a pin or gnomon in the centre (which can be adjusted up or down) and with circles drawn around the pin.

WANDERER (CONT'D)

To show you how it works, I need to float it in a tub of water.

Ragnar goes off to fetch one.

Once more the wanderer looks at his empty cup, and once more Lagertha re-fills it.

And once more he empties the cup in one gulp. Outside the wind blasts against the house and makes the candles inside flutter and almost gutter.

Ragnar returns with the tub of water and the wanderer places the board in the water, where it floats.

Then he takes a candle.

WANDERER (CONT'D)

This candle is the sun.

He holds the candle over the board.

WANDERER (CONT'D)

Each day the sun rises, and climbs
in the sky until noon.

(he arcs the candle across
the board - the shadow
shortens)

See how the shadow shortens. At
noon it will be at its shortest as
the sun is at its zenith.

RAGNAR

But this only tells me how far
south I have travelled -

WANDERER

Now listen. The day before you
sail, mark a circle around the
pointer on the board at the place
where the shadow is shortest at
noon. The next day at sea, place
the board in water again around
noon and watch for the shadow. If
it only touches the circle, your
course remains true. If the shadow
passes outside the circle, like
this, you have drifted and must
steer further south. If the shadow
never reaches the circle you are to
the south and must steer more
north. Keep the noon shadow on the
circle and your course will be
true.

Ragnar and Lagertha stare at the board and the shadow as it
moves across it.

LAGERTHA

Is it really true, wanderer, that
you crossed the ocean using only
this...this children's toy?

WANDERER

Yes, I swear to you. I swear on my
sacred ring. Of course, we also
used ravens to show how far we
might be from land, but the board
took us across the open sea.

LAGERTHA

I cannot believe it.

Ragnar looks at her.

RAGNAR

But if it's true, Lagertha, just imagine! In just two days and nights we can reach the coast of England. We can find out for ourselves if what people have said is there really is there: rich lands, buildings made of stone, places filled with treasures. Don't you want to go and find out? I do.

A long beat.

Lagertha looks at the board, then at the wanderer.

Then she blows out the candle, plunging the board into darkness.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

Why did you do that?

LAGERTHA

Because there is something I want to know. I want to know what happens if there is no sun? How can the board help you then? How can you find your way.

WANDERER

You use this.

He holds something out in his hand, but they can't see what it is. Ragnar brings another candle closer - and it shines upon a piece of semi-translucent rock (actually a form of calcite).

RAGNAR

What's that?

WANDERER

A sunstone.

LAGERTHA

What good is it?

The wanderer smiles.

WANDERER

I'll show you. Come outside.

Ragnar leads them outside.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

They look up at the sky - even now, around noon, it's a leaden grey, with no sign of the sun.

WANDERER

Watch.

He holds up the sunstone. A beat. (The calcite works by polarizing light).

The sunstone glows faintly, and an equally faint beam seems to bounce back from it and illuminate a spot in the sky, behind the thick clouds.

WANDERER (CONT'D)

You see? There is the sun.

It seems like a miracle. Neither Ragnar nor Lagertha can speak as they bear witness to it.

EXT. SETTLEMENT - SPRING - DAY

Time has passed. Watched by her ten-year old daughter GYDA, Lagertha draws water from the well. Despite her reputation as a shield-maiden, Lagertha remains a slim, slight figure, with long braided hair.

It's still cold enough for her breath to steam, but the icy blasts of winter are over and the landscape breathes and greens.

As she carries the bucket back towards the house we see various animals in timbered pens, for this is a working farm. And down by the water, a couple of small wooden boats.

Two large and hairy hunting dogs shamble around the yard.

Lagertha looks over at a neighboring property, where the HOUSEHOLDER is leaving, riding a small, wiry horse up the steep trail behind the houses.

Glances back at her daughter.

LAGERTHA

Gyda, feed the goats.

INT. RAGNAR'S HOUSE - DAY

Lagertha, carrying the bucket inside, finds Ragnar putting a thick woollen coat over the shoulders of his son, BJORN, now twelve years old, and a handsome, strong-looking youth.

Lagertha stops and looks at them.

LAGERTHA

What are you two doing?

RAGNAR

I'm taking Bjorn to the Thing.

LAGERTHA

Not yet. He's not old enough.

RAGNAR

He's twelve years old.

LAGERTHA

Take him next year. Next year is soon enough.

Ragnar smiles at her.

RAGNAR

He'll need a silk ribbon.

INT. HOUSE - EVENING

BJORN "spies" on his mother as Lagertha washes her long blonde hair in the tub of water. The water seems to flow in slow motion from the ends of her hair like mercury as she kneels over the tub.

His eyes are full of love for her.

BJORN

(quietly)

Mother.

Lagertha looks up, flicks back her hair so she can see him, and smiles tenderly.

INT. BEDCHAMBER - HOUSE - NIGHT

Ragnar and Lagertha in bed together, cradled close after love-making. She stares into his eyes.

LAGERTHA

Don't sleep with too many women in Kattegat.

RAGNAR

Are you crazy? I won't sleep with any of them. I don't want to. I can do without it for a few weeks.

LAGERTHA

Is that another way of saying you love me?

She teases him.

RAGNAR

I always dream of you. Last night I dreamt you were feeding me blood pudding.

LAGERTHA

What does that mean?

RAGNAR

It means you were giving me your heart.

And they close in, and kiss passionately.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

I love you so much I could feed you the whole sky.

EXT. YARD - HOUSE - DAY

Father and son are ready to depart on their small, tough horses, both wearing heavy woollen coats, tight leather trousers, cloaks and leather boots.

Lagertha and Gyda bring out some food for the journey, putting it into their saddle-bags.

Bjorn kisses Gyda.

BJORN

Goodbye, little sister.

GYDA

Goodbye, big brother. Don't get drunk.

LAGERTHA

Wait. I have something for both of you.

She takes out two thin strips of colored ribbon, and ties one around Bjorn's head and the other around her husband's.

LAGERTHA (CONT'D)

There. Now everyone will know you are free men on your way to the Thing.

Ragnar kisses her.

RAGNAR

Goodbye my shield-maiden.

LAGERTHA

Look after your son - and when you come back, just tell me the truth. I don't care about anything else.

And then she and her daughter watch Ragnar and Bjorn set off up the rough trail towards the trees, accompanied by one of the hunting dogs, Ragnar armed with a spear, a sword and knife and Bjorn with his hunting knife.

Bjorn looks back once, and raises his arm in farewell, and then they are swallowed up into the trees.

EXT. TRACK - DAY

They ride slowly on together through a landscape of forest, scrub and rock. There is no-one else in sight, no farms or dwellings, for the rocky earth here is clearly unfit for agriculture or ploughing. Is even too barren for sheep.

There are signs of spring everywhere, however, the trees a brighter green, the gorse in flower.

BJORN

What will happen at the Thing?

RAGNAR

Earl Haraldson will deal, as usual, with some criminal offences that have happened since the last meeting. And then everyone will discuss the summer raids.

BJORN

Where will you go?

There's a long beat. Ragnar glances at his son, then away again, with a shrug.

RAGNAR

It's not up to me. Earl Haraldson decides. I wish it was not so...but that is the law.

But Bjorn can see that the question has affected his father's mood.

They splash through a stream.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

All the ice has gone. Spring is here again, thanks to Frey.

EXT. CAMP - NIGHT

They have camped in the open. A fire is burning and they have cooked some small animal over it and eaten it. The dog gnaws at the bones.

BJORN

There's something I want to ask you.

RAGNAR

Then ask me.

BJORN

How did you meet mother?

Ragnar's smiles.

RAGNAR

Hasn't she ever told you?

BJORN

Of course. But I want to know if your story is the same as hers.

A beat.

RAGNAR

Well, it occurred when a Swedish chieftan invaded our part of Norway. I went off to fight him and many of the local women dressed up in men's clothing and joined our camp. Lagertha was amongst them.

(MORE)

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

I was impressed by her courage and courted her from afar.

BJORN

How far is that?

RAGNAR

Hush. Listen. After a while I went to confess my love for her - but when I arrived I was set upon by a bear and an enormous hound who guarded her home. I killed the bear with my spear and managed to strangle the hound with my bare hands.

(beat)

And that's the way I gained her hand in marriage.

(glances at his son)

What did she tell you?

Bjorn smiles, then lies down, pulls the blanket over himself.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

Did she tell you the same story?

A long beat.

BJORN

Just about.

And he closes his eyes, still smiling.

EXT. KATTEGAT - DAY

They ride into Kattegat, a sizeable town and a trading station, set on the bank of a river. It's a busy place with open carts and covered wagons, horses and boats bringing people and goods to the local market, as well as delegates to the Thing, wearing ribbons around their foreheads.

At the market place, TRADERS - several of them of Arabic appearance, and dressed in totally different costumes - are examining the pelts, furs, ropes and bear-skins for sale.

The ARABS are also examining the handful of SLAVES for sale, most of Slavic appearance, checking their teeth, hair and nails, as if they were horses.

There is a lot of good-humored banter and loud haggling.

All of this Bjorn has clearly seen before, and is not fazed by.

But then a large group of YOUNG MEN, clearly drunk, come swaggering through the market place, shouting out insults to the traders and laughing, grabbing at the pelts and furs, creating a disturbance.

The traders reclaim their goods and drive them away, angrily. Ragnar watches the incident with a heavy heart.

BJORN

Who are they?

RAGNAR

Young men with nothing better to do. These days they regard the old ways, of trading and farming, as too tame. They think it's stupid to acquire by sweat and toil what they can easily win by blood.

BJORN

Blood?

RAGNAR

In battle.

(beat)

It's a real problem. There seem to be more and more of them every year. And it's a great waste. Those young men are our future. Someone should harness their strength and their anger.

They move on.

Then a great bear of a man steps out before their horses, grabbing the bridles and laughing.

BEAR MAN

Ragnar Lothbrok!

Ragnar and Bjorn dismount. Ragnar embraces him.

BEAR MAN (CONT'D)

Do my eyes deceive me? Is this your son? How he's grown!

RAGNAR

Bjorn, this is your uncle Rollo. We sail in the same boat.

BJORN

Uncle.

Rollo looks him up and down.

ROLLO
 So you're here for the Thing?
 You're a real man now. Let's have a
 drink.

INT. TAVERN - EVENING

A long gloomy room, with a fire in the centre and benches
 arranged on either side.

The men drink ale from horned cups. Rollo watches Bjorn sip
 from his horn, and laughs.

ROLLO
 You won't get drunk like that.

Bjorn smiles uneasily, then tips back the horn and drinks
 deeply.

ROLLO (CONT'D)
 Are you ready for a woman? There
 are some good-looking women in
 Kattegat. And they're free.

RAGNAR
 Of course he isn't. He can't even
 grow a beard.

Rollo laughs again, empties his horn, and holds it out to be
 refilled by a WOMAN with a jug. He stares at her wolfishly.

ROLLO
 So - where do you think he'll send
 us this year?

RAGNAR
 Probably to the Eastlands again -
 the same as last year. The same as
 always.

ROLLO
 Those bastards up there are as poor
 as we are. What do they have left
 to give us?

RAGNAR
 Only themselves.

A beat. He glances round, lowers his voice.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

We should go west. I've heard such tales, Rollo. Great towns, cities and treasures; hordes of gold and silver. And a new god.

ROLLO

I've heard those stories too. But what does it mean?
We can't sail across an open ocean.

A beat. Ragnar glances carefully at Bjorn, who has fallen asleep on his thigh. Lowers his voice again, despite the loud, drunken voices around him.

RAGNAR

We can. I believe there's a way.

Rollo looks at him.

Then Ragnar picks up his son.

ROLLO

Where are you going?

RAGNAR

To sleep.

ROLLO

I don't understand you, Ragnar Lothbrok, everyone else comes here to get drunk in the company of good friends and to fuck beautiful women.

Ragnar smiles.

RAGNAR

I'll see you in the Great Hall.

He carries his son away.

INT. RAGNAR'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Outside, a cold wind whips across the waters of the fjord. Lagertha settles her daughter to sleep, telling her a story.

LAGERTHA

The giantess opened her rotting cavernous mouth and yawned. "Go away!" She said. "I want to sleep again.

(MORE)

LAGERTHA (CONT'D)

I'm not doing you any more favors."
She gave Freya a withering look.
"My noble goddess," she said, "you
leap around at night like Heidrun
cavorting with a herd of goats."

Gyda, warm beneath a bear skin, smiles sleepily.

A beat.

GYDA

Go on!

LAGERTHA

Freya slowly raised her arms - like
this!

(raises her own arms)

"I will girdle you with flame so
you cannot leave this place without
catching fire." Hyndla laughed.

"You've gone running to Od, who
always loved you; and many another
has wormed his way under your
apron."

She pauses, checks the girl again...whose eyes are now
closed. She is nearly asleep.

LAGERTHA (CONT'D)

(more quietly)

There was fire in Asgard, dancing
in the air. A band of flame, a
quivering halo, surrounded the
giantess. Her limbs tightened; she
pressed her arms against her side."
Flames about me," she cried. "The
earth is on fire, and I must pay
the full price or forfeit my life."

She stops, listens for a moment to the sound of her
daughter's easy breathing. Then leans down, kisses her
forehead, and pulls the bear skin up to her neck.

Lagertha moves through to the other chamber. The fire (in the
centre of the room) is dying down. But its flickering flames
illuminate the war shields hung from hooks on the wall. She
stares at them - and then unhooks one, and holds it to
herself...as if remembering all the times she used it, in the
heat of battle.

Now she stands proud with it, in the empty room, with only
the crackling of the logs and the moaning of the wind.

INT. GREAT HALL - DAY

A large and impressive chamber with a lattice of high beams and some wall coverings. It's crowded. On a raised dais at one end, sat on a carved chair, is EARL HARALDSON, late forties and still a formidable-looking warrior, dressed in wide trousers and fur-trimmed coat. The Earl is flanked by some of his HOUSECARLS - his private, elite bodyguard - by SLAVES and several (mostly male) members of his FAMILY. His striking WIFE wears a sleeveless dress which reaches to the ground, and over it a sleeveless cape which is thrown back, revealing the whiteness of her arms. She is adorned with necklaces and oval brooches.

Filling the rest of the hall, and obliged to stand, are FREEMEN like Ragnar and Rollo.

In the small space between them a rather pathetic FIGURE is standing, shifting from one foot to the other, his eyes downcast. He's almost a figure of fun and everyone is grinning at him.

EARL HARALDSON

Olaf Anwend...

OLAF

Yes, sir.

EARL HARALDSON

You have pleaded guilty to the charge of stealing. Tomorrow you will run a gauntlet of stones and turf as punishment.

OLAF

Yes, lord. Thank you, lord.

EARL HARALDSON

Don't thank me. And let it be known that a fine is to be paid by anyone who fails to throw something.

There's laughter - as Olaf is led away. Bjorn tries his best to peer through the men blocking his view of events.

EARL HARALDSON (CONT'D)

Bring in the next accused.

Bjorn actually catches a glimpse of the YOUNG MAN brought into the hall in chains by the housecarls. The young man has a pleasant expression, keeps his head high and does not avert his eyes.

EARL HARALDSON (CONT'D)
Eric Trygvasson, you are accused of
the murder of Sigvald Strut this
January. How do you plead?

TRYGVASSON
It wasn't murder, lord. I killed
him in self-defence. It was he who
attacked me.

WOMAN
(shouting)
LIAR!

The WOMAN is part of the dead man's family, standing in a
group close to the defendant.

EARL HARALDSON
If it wasn't murder, why did you
not declare your crime to the first
person you met afterwards, as the
law obliges? In fact, you passed by
several houses before you reported
it.

Trygvasson looks over at the woman and the dead man's family.

TRYGVASSON
I...I thought the relatives of the
dead man might be living in them.

EARL HARALDSON
The law allows you to pass two
houses in such circumstances - but
never a third.

FAMILY MEMBER
You felt guilty. You went to his
house and murdered my brother in
cold blood.

Fresh uproar. Bjorn struggles to keep an eye-line on the
accused. Ragnar notices, lifts him up.

TRYGVASSON
It's not true. We argued about some
land. He pulled out a knife...

WOMAN
You're lying! You wanted that land
for yourself. You're a liar and a
coward.

TRYGVASSON

Who says I'm a coward? I'm no
coward.

More people join in the shouting. The Earl bangs his fist on
the table.

EARL HARALDSON

Silence! All of you - show some
respect.

They fall silent. Earl Haraldson looks at Trygvasson.

EARL HARALDSON (CONT'D)

As the normal procedures were not
followed, this killing cannot be
atoned for by compensating the
victim's family.

The family shout their approval, raise their fists
aggressively towards the defendant.

EARL HARALDSON (CONT'D)

Murder is a dishonorable act among
our people, Eric Trygvasson,
committed in secret, unacknowledged
and very likely to set in train a
cycle of revenge killings, which
would also involve your own family.

He looks up at the assembly.

EARL HARALDSON (CONT'D)

I ask all of you how you find the
accused. If you think him guilty,
raise your arms. Your decision must
be unanimous.

Quickly, everyone raises their hands. But the Earl hesitates,
for someone has not. Ragnar realizes who it is and squeezes
Bjorn's thigh. Bjorn raises his hand.

EARL HARALDSON (CONT'D)

Eric Trygvasson, you have been
found guilty of murder. How would
you like to die?

A beat. Trygvasson looks round the room in that same cool
way, as if he was above it all.

TRYGVASSON

By beheading, lord.

EARL HARALDSON

Granted. Your execution will take place tomorrow. And afterwards we shall feast and discuss the summer raids.

EXT. KATTEGAT - DAY

To jeers and shouts, Olaf Anwend runs the gauntlet of stones and turf. He staggers down the line of people, women as well as men, throwing the missiles at him.

Bjorn watches with Ragnar, at first enjoying the comic aspects of the scene - then wincing slightly as Olaf is struck by stone after stone, staggers, and starts to bleed.

Ragnar offers the boy a stone. Bjorn looks uncertain.

RAGNAR

You have to.

A beat. Ragnar turns and throws the stone himself at Anwend, hitting his leg. Anwend struggles on, everyone still enjoying the comedic aspects. With a laugh Rollo throws a large rock at Anwend, which hits his head and makes him cry out with pain.

Bjorn grabs a handful of turf and throws it, missing easily and deliberately.

Bleeding heavily, but alive, Anwend crawls the last few yards to the end of the line, where with renewed hilarity a bucket of cold water is poured over his bleeding head, and he emerges - grinning like a madman.

Then Earl Haraldson and his entourage appear, the housecarls bringing Eric Trygvasson to his execution. Trygvasson's hands, unlike at the trial, are now unbound, and he walks resolutely up to the wooden block on which he will be decapitated.

He smiles at the crowds gathered around him, and acknowledges the dead man's family.

BJORN

Why is he smiling, father?

RAGNAR

He wants to die well, of course, without fear. To atone for his sins.

Bjorn looks puzzled.

ROLLO

Cattle die, kinsfolk die, we
ourselves must die. But one thing I
know will never die - a dead man's
reputation. Remember that, young
Bjorn.

Trygvasson kneels on the grass and puts his head on the
stone. A HOUSECARL with an axe approaches, first lays the
blade of the axe flat on his head, then presents the blade
for him to kiss. Trygvasson kisses the blade eagerly, and
almost tenderly.

Bjorn turns his head away.

RAGNAR

You must watch - for his sake. This
is his only hope of reaching
Valhalla.

Bjorn forces himself to watch.

The axe falls, striking off Trygvasson's head, which rolls
away into the grass.

Earl Haraldson picks up the head and contemptuously tosses it
to the dead man's family.

EARL HARALDSON

Here. Feed it to your pigs. I curse
him. May he never enter Valhalla.

Ragnar looks shocked. He's not the only one.

BJORN

Why did he do that?

RAGNAR

I don't know. He should not have
done. Not according to our law. He
must have wanted that land himself.

And he exchanges a meaningful glance with Rollo.

EXT. BOAT - DAY

The oars of a small boat slice cleanly into the waters of the
fyord. Bjorn stares down silently into the water, but the
reflections on its surface make it seem like the mountains
are in the water.

Ragnar rows, keeping close to the shore, beneath the lee of the overhanging cliffs and slopes of scree which fall sheer to the fyord.

Bjorn drops a smooth round pebble into the water and watches it drop and drop, deeper and deeper into the clear depths.

Bjorn watches his father row.

BJORN

Now where are we going, father?

RAGNAR

To visit a friend.

BJORN

A friend? What's his name?

RAGNAR

His name is Floki.

Bjorn stares at the high, snow-capped hills, the great, almost overwhelming beauty of it.

BJORN

Like Loki, the god?

RAGNAR

Yes, like Loki. Only... different.

BJORN

How is he different?

RAGNAR

Well...

(thinks)

He's not a god.

Bjorn laughs.

BJORN

Why didn't he come to the Thing?

A long beat. Oars slice through the deep still waters. One could well imagine that the gods were here, among these unnaturally beautiful, silent places.

RAGNAR

Because he's...because he's shy.

CUT TO:

EXT. BAY - DAY

They've pulled the boat onto a narrow beach in a hidden bay. There's no sign of habitation.

They walk up a steep path through the trees.

When a FIGURE leaps out at them, wearing a fierce mask, and with a hideous screech.

Bjorn is shocked...but still calm enough to draw out his hunting knife.

Ragnar laughs.

RAGNAR

It's all right. Put your knife away.

(beat)

Floki, meet my son. Bjorn...this is my dear friend Floki.

FLOKI rips off his mask, and grins. He has a strange, mischievous, almost ageless face, ugly but animated, with bright, piercing eyes.

FLOKI

Hello. How are you?

BJORN

Well, thank you...sir.

Floki stares at his face.

FLOKI

Let me see. You have your father's eyes - unfortunately.

RAGNAR

Why unfortunately?

FLOKI

It means he will be like you. And therefore he will want to do better than you. And you will hate him for it.

RAGNAR

He's only twelve years old.

BJORN
How can you tell that by just
looking at my face?

FLOKI
It's the same with trees.

BJORN
With trees?

FLOKI
Yes. I can tell which trees will
make the best planks just by
looking at them. I can look inside
the tree.

RAGNAR
Floki is a boat-builder.

Bjorn stares around at the deeply-forested hill they are on.

BJORN
So - you could tell which of these
trees would make the best planks
for a ship?

Floki grins...then abruptly walks off the path, and into the trees. They follow him.

For their POV - and from ours - all the trees look the same, virtually identical.

But Floki stares at them with a strange, bewitching intensity...touching the trunks of some of them, laying his cheek against the bark, staring up at the uppermost branches.

Whatever amusement Bjorn might derive from seeing a man staring at trees is quickly confounded by the aura of spiritual intensity which surrounds Floki. He's no ordinary mortal. It's not possible to laugh at the way he examines the bark of tress, or caresses them, or simply just looks at them.

Floki is different. Strange but compelling. Authentic.

FLOKI
(suddenly)
This is one.

He indicates a tree - to the others, just like the rest of the trees...and yet. Floki strokes the trunk.

FLOKI (CONT'D)

Inside this tree are two almost perfect planks. They will bend, then curve, like a woman's body, from the thigh to the back. When I split the tree I will find them.

He marks the tree with a couple of blows from his axe.

Bjorn laughs.

BJORN

You can see that?

FLOKI

Do you think I'm joking? I joke about many things, son of Ragnar, but never about ship-building. Our boats are our souls.

Bjorn looks abashed - embarrassed.

RAGNAR

So - how is our boat?

Floki looks back at him. And grins.

FLOKI

Ah...

CUT TO:

INT. BOAT-YARD - DAY

A secret, turf-covered shed close by the edge of the water.

Gloomy - but slightly "religious" in the way the space is lit by tallow candles.

Watched by Ragnar and Bjorn, Floki uncovers the skeleton of a new boat. It's still in a rudimentary shape, its spars naked. Even so, Ragnar is immediately entranced.

FLOKI

What do you think, Ragnar Lothrok?

RAGNAR

It's bigger! The hull's deeper.

FLOKI

Yes, but it will be lighter and faster than before, and carry a much bigger sail. The construction is different. It's built with a strong central plank. The two strakes above it are nailed directly onto the knees of the frames. But the ones below - look! - are cleated and lashed onto the frames, not nailed, so they can move in relation to each other. This means the boat will not butt against the waves like a goat, but move over them like a ripple.

Ragnar continues to study the boat.

Meanwhile, Bjorn studies Floki's tools with all the fascination they exert upon a young boy's mind. Planes, spoon-shaped bores, small axes and rivets. And then, almost with a shock, he sees the small, strange figure hunched in the shadows, wearing a conical hat and grinning. It's a wooden statue of the god Loki and the grin is not pleasant, but wicked and somehow disturbing.

Bjorn moves quickly away.

RAGNAR

Why have you cut the oarports into the sheerstrake?

FLOKI

It makes it easier to row, and the ports can be closed when the boat is at sea.

RAGNAR

You think this boat could handle long sea voyages?

FLOKI

That's why I built it.

RAGNAR

And it will be strong enough?

Floki shrugs.

FLOKI

We won't know that until we try.

Ragnar looks at him.

RAGNAR
When will it be ready?

FLOKI
Ah, as to that...

RAGNAR
What?

FLOKI
We're out of money. We have to pay
for the sail...and then the anchor.
You know what those blacksmiths are
like! Such greedy bastards.

A beat. Ragnar reluctantly brings out a leather pouch.

RAGNAR
This is almost all I have left from
last summer's raids.

Floki takes the pouch, with a grin.

FLOKI
Don't worry, Ragnar Lothbrok. We'll
soon be as rich as dwarves!

And he laughs.

INT. GREAT HALL - EVENING

Great trestles have been set up and the freemen sit around them, drinking and ready to feast. Music is playing. Earl Haraldson, with his wife and family members, sits at high table.

There is much laughter in the hall. Then a horn is sounded - for silence.

EARL HARALDSON
Before we feast, we have an
important ceremony to perform. Two
young men have joined us for the
first time and must receive their
arm-rings. Olaf the son of Ingolf
and Bjorn son of Ragnar Lothbrok.
Both of you come up here.

Bjorn and the other YOUNG MAN approach the high table. The Earl walks round to the front of the dais...and draws his sword.

EARL HARALDSON (CONT'D)

Kneel.

They both kneel. A housecarl slips two ornate bracelets of twisted silver, the clasps fashioned as animal heads, onto the blade. Earl Haraldson holds the blade close to the young men's faces.

EARL HARALDSON (CONT'D)

These rings symbolize your coming of age - and they also bind you in loyalty to me, your chieftan. Any oath you swear upon your ring, you must honor and keep, or else lose your honor. Do you understand and do you swear so?

BOYS

Yes, lord.

EARL HARALDSON

And you freely recognize your fealty to me?

BOYS

Yes, lord.

EARL HARALDSON

Then take your rings.

The boys take their rings from the point of the sword and clasp them around their arms. Ragnar looks on proudly. Then sees that Haraldson is staring at him.

But the moment is lost as the freemen shout out their approval, banging their fists on the tables as the boys return, embarrassed but delighted, to their seats.

RAGNAR

Let me look! Ah - it's a fine ring. Never lose it, my son, or something dreadful will happen to you.

BJORN

I won't father.

EARL HARALDSON

Now let's feast.

Ragnar suddenly stands up.

RAGNAR

My lord...we all want to feast: but we also want to know where we will be raiding this summer.

EARL HARALDSON

Can't it wait?

ROLLO

No, tell us. We're anxious to know. We have a right to know.

A beat. The hall has fallen silent.

EARL HARALDSON

Very well. Then we shall go raiding to the east again, into the Eastlands, into Rus...

RAGNAR

Every year we do the same thing. We raid people who have nothing more than we have. We have a hard life, and they have a hard life - but we take from them even the few things which they have. But, lord, we have an alternative...a choice...another journey...

There is a groundswell of noise...of some disagreement. The Earl is alive to it.

EARL HARALDSON

Oh yes, I too have heard the rumors. I hear that if we sail west, across the open, fathomless ocean, we shall somehow come to lands far richer and more plentiful. Yes, I have heard those stories. But I tell you now that I will not risk my ships or my reputation on wild, speculative and unrealistic visions.

(beat)

I pay for the ships. Therefore they go where I tell them to go, and that is the end of the matter.

(beat)

Now let's feast.

He claps his hands...and the feast is brought in.

Ragnar looks at Rollo, who shrugs.

Then a HOUSECARL approaches their table. The housecarl has a livid scar which runs from the corner of his mouth up his cheek to his eye.

HOUSECARL
Ragnar Lothbrok, Earl Haraldson
wants to speak with you in private.

Ragnar nods, glances reassuringly at Bjorn, follows the housecarl behind the dais, into a small chamber.

INT. CHAMBER - EVENING

Haraldson is flanked by several of his heavily-armed HOUSECARLS. It's an intimidating atmosphere.

EARL HARALDSON
Ragnar Lothbrok...

RAGNAR
Yes, lord.

EARL HARALDSON
Are you hungry?

A beat.

RAGNAR
Yes, lord.

EARL HARALDSON
You want to feast in my hall? You
want to sail in my ship? What else
do you want of me?

RAGNAR
Lord, I -

Haraldson slams his fist onto the table. The housecarls close around him.

EARL HARALDSON
I know you question my rule. I know
you have big ideas. But you should
keep them to yourself, Ragnar
Lothbrok. What are you? You're a
farmer. Remember that. You're just
a lowly farmer. And you owe
obedience and rent to me.

(beat)
I warn you.

(MORE)

EARL HARALDSON (CONT'D)
 If you dare to stick your nose in
 my face, I will kill you.

He stares at Ragnar.

CUT TO:

EXT. KATTEGAT - NIGHT

Ragnar leads his sleepy son by the hand through the dark settlement. Bjorn trips over something, yowls. Dogs bark.

BJORN
 Where are we going now?

RAGNAR
 Just to a place. Just to see
 someone.

BJORN
 What place? To see who?
 (beat)
 I'm so tired.

Ragnar sees a lamp set outside a low door.

RAGNAR
 Here it is. Wake up.

He finds the door open, pushes his son inside, follows.

INT. HOUSE/HUT - NIGHT

A few low tallow candles, otherwise darkness. The shapes of things.

A long beat.

BJORN
 I'm frightened.

Ragnar grasps his wrist. Then there's the sound of a voice, ancient, unsexed.

VOICE
 Why don't you come in? I'm waiting.

Ragnar encourages his son to push aside the curtained wall, and go inside.

The ANCIENT SEER is sitting in the dark. An old man or woman, with withered dugs, sightless, white-eyed. Probably an old woman, it's actually impossible to tell. But there's a strange and powerful aura about the figure which makes Bjorn instinctively recoil. Before her is a bowl of dried brown shrivelled mushrooms. She reaches out gnarled fingers and chews one.

ANCIENT WOMAN

What do you want?

RAGNAR

I want to know what the gods have in store.

ANCIENT WOMAN

For you - or for your son?

RAGNAR

I'm more interested in myself.

The ancient hag chuckles.

ANCIENT WOMAN

The gods desire you to have a great future. I see that. But they can withdraw their goodwill at any time.

RAGNAR

To have this great future, must I challenge the law?

This seems to be the nub of it. There's a pause. The ancient one reaches out and touches his face and her sightless eyes peer into his.

ANCIENT WOMAN

It is always possible for a man to shape his own fate. You must convince the gods to alter the runes, so they work in your favor. But the laws of men are far below the workings and shapings of the gods.

RAGNAR

So I should take the law of men into my own hands?

Silence.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)
You won't answer me!

ANCIENT WOMAN
You already have your answer.

RAGNAR
No I don't. I don't have the real answer.

ANCIENT WOMAN
Then go and ask the gods themselves. What are you afraid of?

Looks at her.

RAGNAR
(quietly)
Who is not afraid of the gods?

The old hag grins. Looks sightlessly at Bjorn.

ANCIENT WOMAN
I say only this to you: beware of your sons.

RAGNAR
My sons? I have only one son.

ANCIENT WOMAN
I see more.

RAGNAR
Why should I beware of them?

The ancient stares at Ragnar again with her white, blind eyes - and will not answer. Turns instead and stares, sightlessly, at Bjorn, who is afraid of her, looks away.

ANCIENT WOMAN
Look at me, child.

Bjorn steels himself to look back at her.

After a few moments, she nods.

ANCIENT WOMAN (CONT'D)
I think your son is ready. Take him up to the temple. Let him also see the gods and, if he wishes, speak to them. That's all I can tell you.

RAGNAR

You haven't helped me at all, old woman.

A long beat.

ANCIENT WOMAN

Perhaps you asked the wrong questions. In any case, sometimes you should not try to foresee your fate, for it is best not to know it.

EXT. LANDSCAPE - DAY

Ragnar and Bjorn ride their small horses inland, up the side of the mountain. It's a hard trek. The landscape is harsh and dramatic with huge rock formations and boulders scattered across it.

BJORN

This looks like a place where the giants might live.

Ragnar smiles.

RAGNAR

You know very well that the giants dwell in Utgard, in the outer place. And between Midgard, where we live, and Utgard there is a great sea.

BJORN

Not our sea?

RAGNAR

A bigger sea than that. And the Midgard serpent encircles it and holds the sea in.

BJORN

Don't the giants ever come here, into our world?

RAGNAR

They try to. They are shapeshifters. They can appear disguised as anything. But the gods look after us.

(MORE)

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

They are forever watching out, in case the giants try to cross the sea and bring their chaos with them.

BJORN

And the dwarves help too?

RAGNAR

Yes, you can't always trust them of course - but they are a help to the gods sometimes. They bind Fenrir the wolf, so he can't escape and swallow the sun.

BJORN

If Fenrir is so big and strong, how do they bind him...?

RAGNAR

With things you can't see or hear: like the breath of a fish; the sound a cat makes when it's walking, and the roots of a mountain.

Bjorn nods, satisfied with the explanation. Takes it in.

BJORN

I'm hungry.

RAGNAR

Then we must catch something.

EXT. RIVER - TWILIGHT

They stand up to their knees in the cold flowing waters, both with spears raised.

They wait, and wait...and then both plunge their spears into the water.

Bjorn extracts a fish on the point of his spear, still flapping. He grins.

EXT. RAGNAR'S FARM - DAY

Lagertha is milking the goats in the milking shed. One of the goat's is giving her trouble. She tries to coax it gently.

Then Gyda comes rushing in, looking frightened.

GYDA

Mother.

She glances over her shoulder. Lagertha understands that something is wrong.

LAGERTHA

(to Gyda)

Stay here.

She walks outside.

EXT. YARD - HOUSE - DAY

Two YOUNG MEN - just like the young men who rain riot through the town, are standing arrogantly in the yard. They are armed.

LAGERTHA

What do you want?

FIRST YOUNG MAN

Where's your husband, woman?

LAGERTHA

He's at the Thing - where you should be. You're old enough.

SECOND YOUNG MAN

Don't taunt us, woman. We know you're alone here. All the men are gone.

LAGERTHA

If you're thirsty I will give you a drink. If you're hungry I will feed you. Otherwise you must go.

FIRST YOUNG MAN

We'll eat and drink after we've satisfied our other needs. Let's go into your house.

By way of a threat, he touches the axe head in his belt.

A beat. Then Lagertha nods.

LAGERTHA

All right.

(looks over her shoulder)

Stay in the shed, Gyda. Do as I say.

She leads the way into the house.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

The young men feel frisky, cocky. They laugh, nudge each other.

SECOND YOUNG MAN
Where's your softest bed?

A beat.

LAGERTHA
In here.

She leads them into the shield room. Springing forward, she snatches a shield from the wall.

They take the axes from their belts.

FIRST YOUNG MAN
We don't want to kill you, woman.

LAGERTHA
You couldn't kill me if you tried
for a hundred years.

She swoops into a secret place, and pulls out a sword.

Now she is a shield-maiden again. Her eyes have hardened. She is changed.

For the first time, the two young men are not so sure.

SECOND YOUNG MAN
Before you try anything, think
about your daughter.

LAGERTHA
I am thinking about my daughter.
Now you will leave my house or I
will gut you like fish and cook
your entrails.

She attacks them with frightening speed. No sooner has the first young man raised his axe than she has sheared off the handle with her blade. She slashes at the second young man - once, ripping his clothes open, and a second time slashing the side of his face.

He screams. His blood splashes on the floor.

Lagertha fixes her attentions on the first, now unarmed young man...who loses his nerve and bolts for it. His companion, bleeding copiously, bolts after him.

Lagertha takes a moment to compose herself - then hurries outside.

INT. SHED - DAY

Gyda is hiding among the goats. Lagertha takes her into her arms.

GYDA
Have they gone?

LAGERTHA
Yes, they've gone.

GYDA
What did they want?

LAGERTHA
They were travellers. They were
thirsty, that's all.
(beat)
Shall we go on milking the goats?

EXT. PLAIN ABOVE KATTEGAT - DAY

They ride up, through the thinning line of trees, to the edge of the plain.

And stop.

A majestic but also strange sight greets them. In the distance is the golden dome of the temple. It's surrounded on three sides by a grove of trees which are remarkable, even at this distance, because there are very few other trees on this high plateau.

But dotted around there are some large earth mounds, clearly man-made; burial mounds, but now covered in grass. And also huge piles of stones. Bjorn knows what they are and doesn't have to ask.

The whole vista is strange, haunting.

RAGNAR
There it is.

EXT. TREES - DAY

They ride towards the temple, between the trees. There's a strange atmosphere here. Hidden bells chime very softly, sweetly like a sighing wind.

RAGNAR

Keep to the path. The grove is sacred. Every nine years, here in the temple, the priests sacrifice nine of everything and hang them in the trees.

BJORN

Nine of everything? Nine sheep and nine hens?

RAGNAR

Yes.

BJORN

And nine horses?

RAGNAR

Of course. We love our horses.

A beat.

BJORN

And nine of us? Nine humans?

Ragnar looks back at his son, but doesn't answer.

Now Bjorn becomes aware of waif-like creatures flitting between the trees, dressed in pale colored robes.

BJORN (CONT'D)

Father, who are they?

RAGNAR

Priests, I expect. Or other things. Who can tell in a place like this? Look, here's the entrance.

EXT. TEMPLE - DAY

They dismount in front of two large wooden doors, studded with iron.

A PRIEST appears, bows, silently opens the doors. He is a tall, thin, homosexual YOUNG MAN, dressed in a flowing robe

And they step inside.

INT. PAGAN TEMPLE - UPPSALLA - DAY

The golden glow from the roof generates a strange, almost unearthly light. There's a water-source somewhere...for the sound of water running and splashing fills the great domed space.

The space is dominated by three huge wooden statues, several metres high, made of highly polished wood. But the priest first takes them over to the stone altar on which there is a sacred Viking ring, a wooden bowl filled with blood and a twig.

Ragnar kneels by the altar and Bjorn follows his example. The priest dips the twig into the blood of a sacrificed animal and shakes it over them, sprinkling them with blood.

PRIEST

(sing-song)

Hail to the Aesir! Hail to the
goddesses! Hail to the mighty,
fecund earth. Wit and wisdom may
you give us, and healing hands
while we live!

They move towards the statues, Ragnar once more sinking to his knees and making his obeisance.

Bjorn looks confused and over-awed. But the priest, with a smile, gently guides him closer.

PRIEST (CONT'D)

My son, you have travelled a long
way, but now at last you are face
to face with our gods.

He draws Bjorn gently towards the first statue: of a massive, muscle-bound, bearded, earthy-looking figure holding aloft his mighty hammer.

PRIEST (CONT'D)

This is Thor. You know him, of
course. You hear him in the
thunder, when he races across the
clouds with his goats. He protects
all of us. And when he goes forth
with his hammer, Mjollni, in his
hand, he is irresistible.

CLOSE ON: Thor's sculpted face, his exaggerated features, peasant-like, wide-mouth, bulbous nose - rather comic-book.

The priest draws Bjorn towards the second statue: a figure with a disproportionately huge and erect phallus.

PRIEST (CONT'D)

You know who this is?

BJORN

(tentative)

Frey?

PRIEST

Of course it's Frey. Who else could it be? The god of sunshine and rain, of fertility, of children and crops. Of harvests. Of everything that grows new...but is cut down again each year. Then grows once more.

(beat)

Come.

He draws Bjorn to the last figure. We have seen this figure before: a tall, thin figure holding a spear, wearing a cloak and a wide-brimmed hat, under which his single eye peeps out. Even carved in wood, there is something magnetic but also something sinister, even terrifying about the image.

PRIEST (CONT'D)

And this...

BJORN

...is Odin.

PRIEST

Odin. god of war, of warriors slain in battle. He lives in his great hall at Valhalla, with all the reborn warriors, feasting and drinking...

Ragnar suddenly cuts in.

RAGNAR

Odin is not only the god of those slain in battle. He is many other things. He is our universal father. He is the god of Skalds; he governs the mystic ecstasy, the great pathos, the passion of the soul.

(MORE)

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

He is the god of thought..of curiosity. He wanted to look into the well of knowledge, guarded by the wise, decapitated Mimi. They told him he would have to lose an eye to gain knowledge...and gladly he did it. You see there, Bjorn? He has but one eye. But with that single-eye he sees everything.

A beat. He takes out two small coins, gives them to the priest.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

Thank you for your time, priest.

The priest is clearly offended, and would like to say something stinging - but manages to restrain himself. He bows, walks out.

A long beat. Bjorn is still staring up at the statue of Odin, as if mesmerized.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

(softly)

Bjorn...there's something you should know. Our family are direct descendants of Odin. Odin was once a man. He fought and made a great name for himself, and when he died he became a god. But he was once a man, with a family and a home. And it is written in the runes that we are directly descended from his family.

BJORN

We are descended from gods? No father. How can it be?

RAGNAR

It is so. Which is why I believe I have inherited the god's curiosity. He loved knowledge. He wanted to find out about things. And so do I. I want to find out what lies to the west of us...what cities and gods are over there. I'm not satisfied with staying here, in this small country, where everyone has to scratch out a living, unless you're an earl. Odin gave his eye to acquire knowledge, but I would give far more.

Bjorn stares up again at the giant statue of the one-eyed god.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)
Go outside and wait for me.

Bjorn nods, and leaves Ragnar alone with his god.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)
(quietly)
Lord, O High One, I have sworn my life to you, and I have come to ask your advice. Is it not true that, in the beginning of everything, you led the revolt of the Aesir against the Vanir? Was it not you, Lord, who burned the body of the witch Gullveig three times? And did you not sit in your high seat in Valhalla sharpening your spear and polishing your shield? And when the gods moved against each other, was it not you who cast the first spear into the host of the Vanir?

(beat)
So I have come to ask, have I your permission to rise in revolt against my earthly lord? Would you give me your blessing, if I cast the first spear? Lord, O High One, if you would forgive or encourage me, I ask only that you give me a sign.

Odin stares back at him with his single eye.

CUT TO:

INT. RAGNAR HOUSE - DAY

Ragnar and Lagertha sit on the bed.

LAGERTHA
How was it?

RAGNAR
Good. Earl Haraldson gave Bjorn his arm-ring. Then I took him up to the temple.

LAGERTHA

So many things at once. My poor son.

RAGNAR

He didn't complain. Then I took him to see the new boat.

LAGERTHA

How is it?

RAGNAR

We won't know until we sail in her, but she looks good.

He reaches out, touches her cheek.

RAGNAR (CONT'D)

I missed you. Did anything happen while we were away?

LAGERTHA

No.

RAGNAR

Did you miss me?

LAGERTHA

I was too busy on the farm to miss you.

RAGNAR

Is that true?

She smiles.

LAGERTHA

No. I ached with love longing. My belly was empty of laughter.

RAGNAR

How can I make you laugh now?

LAGERTHA

I don't want to laugh now.

She pushes him back on the bed, and gets astride him.

LAGERTHA (CONT'D)

I want to ride you, like a bull. Like a wild bull.

She rocks back and forth, her eyes gleaming. Unclasps her hair and leans down to kiss him, her hair falling all around him.

LAGERTHA (CONT'D)

Now bull, now.

He starts to make love to her.

In the other room, by the smouldering fire, Bjorn can hear them. His parents make love loudly, shouting, and the bed shakes.

Untroubled, he saunters outside.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

We are struck, again, by the immense, almost overwhelming beauty of this place. A beauty that seems almost unreal.

A small boat is approaching, cutting through the calm waters, dwarfed by the distant mountains.

It reaches the narrow shingle beach and Rollo climbs out, and fastens it to a post.

BJORN

Hello Rollo.

Rollo ruffles the boy's hair.

ROLLO

Hello, young Bjorn.

ROLLO (CONT'D)

Where are your parents?

Bjorn is matter of fact.

BJORN

They're fucking.

Rollo laughs.

INT. HOUSE - EVENING

Ragnar, Lagertha, Bjorn, Gyda and Rollo eat and drink. Rollo drinks copiously. Looks at Gyda.

ROLLO

So, Gyda, tell me: is your mother teaching you how to use a shield?

GYDA

Yes. I know how to use a shield. I know what it's for.

ROLLO

Your mother was a famous shield-maiden.

LAGERTHA

Not so much of the "was" please, Rollo. "Is" will do.

ROLLO

Is...a famous shield-maiden. We fought in the same shieldwall. Against the Eastlanders. She fought like a Valkyrie.

LAGERTHA

I fought to protect my husband, my brothers and my father. They, too, were in the shieldwall. I would have died, willingly, for any of them.

Ragnar looks at her.

RAGNAR

You nearly did.

(It's something between them)

She rises.

LAGERTHA

Come on children, to bed. We'll leave the men.

BJORN

I'm a man. I have a ring.

LAGERTHA

To bed!

BJORN AND GYDA

Good night.

RAGNAR

Good night, my children.

Kisses them.

They go off. Ragnar pours more mead for them both.

ROLLO

Tell me your news: what about the boat?

RAGNAR

I've seen it. It's a wonderful thing, Rollo. It's almost half-finished.

ROLLO

Do you trust Floki? Isn't he a great joker?

RAGNAR

He's a great boat builder. I trust him to do that.

ROLLO

And the sun board and the sunstone - you believe they can guide you across the sea?

RAGNAR

I do.

(beat)

But I have to ask you this: when the boat is finished, will you sail west with me?

There's a long beat. Rollo drinks, wipes his mouth. Stares at him.

ROLLO

Only if we're all equal. I won't go under your command.

Ragnar slips the ring from his arm. Holds it out to Rollo.

RAGNAR

I swear on my sacred ring, I swear before Odin, that everyone in the boat will be equal, and will share equally what we find.

(beat)

Will you come?

A beat. Then Rollo reaches out, and also takes hold of the ring.

ROLLO
I will come. I swear.

Ragnar grins, embraces him.

But Rollo is still staring at him.

ROLLO (CONT'D)
But we must find a crew. Not many men will go against the wishes of Earl Haraldson. Many of them will be afraid, and if we approach them some may even go to him and betray us.

RAGNAR
Leave that to me. I have a good idea where we will find our crew.

Rollo looks at him quizzically, but doesn't question him.

ROLLO
You're very determined, Ragnar Lothbrok. How do you know we'll be successful?

RAGNAR
I don't know. But what I do know is that our fates are already decided. One way or another, we can't change them.

A beat. Then Lagertha comes back in.

LAGERTHA
They're asleep.

She sits down. Ragnar rises.

RAGNAR
I must go and piss.

He walks outside.

Rollo pours Lagertha some mead.

LAGERTHA
Thank you.

She smiles at him. He tries to hold her gaze.

ROLLO
I've always wanted you. Always.

LAGERTHA

That's too bad.

She smiles again, but he takes it like an insult - reaches out and grabs her wrist. She spills her drink.

ROLLO

Don't insult me, shield-maiden.

Looks at him.

LAGERTHA

No. I would never insult you.
You're too great a warrior.

Eyes tight on each other. Then he releases his grip.

LAGERTHA (CONT'D)

But not so great a man.

EXT. HOUSE - EVENING

Ragnar finishes his piss. The landscape is bathed in moonlight, which gives everything a mysterious look. Ragnar's gaze is somehow drawn across to the edge of the woods...as a wolf emerges.

The wolf walks down the meadow a little way, completely unafraid. Then stops, and seems to look back at Ragnar for a few long moments.

And then it turns, moves away among the shadows.

INT. HOUSE - EVENING

Ragnar comes back in. Is immediately aware that something has happened between Lagertha and Rollo - but chooses to ignore it.

He sits down again.

RAGNAR

I saw a wolf in the meadow.

ROLLO

You must kill it.

Ragnar looks at him.

RAGNAR

No. I mustn't kill it.

ROLLO

Why not?

A beat.

RAGNAR

Because it wasn't a wolf.

INT. BEDCHAMBER - NIGHT

Bjorn lies in his narrow bed, still awake.

He can hear the adult conversations in the next room. His hand still grips the arm-ring he's been given, for he will never let it go.

When he closes his eyes he sees the statue of Odin. Odin is staring at him with his one eye. But the eye is alive. And his gaze is terrible. It bores into you.

EXT. LANDSCAPE - DAY

We are in the fjord. Clouds scud across the sky. The mountains soar into the blue air, and fall into the water below.

The water is full of reflections - of the sky, of the forests.

A waterfall cascades down the side of a mountain, foaming over the rocks, sending up a fine mist of spray.

This is nature, raw and elemental.

We hear Lagertha's voice.

LAGERTHA V.O.

A pyre was built around the body of Balder and his wife Nana, dry faggots that needed nothing more than a spark to leap into their own life and consume the lifeless bodies that lay upon them, releasing their bodies to travel on.

INT. RAGNAR'S HOUSE - EVENING

Lagertha recites the saga to her children, who listen, like frozen things listening.

LAGERTHA

Balder's horse, meanwhile, was galloping along the foreshore and worked into a streaming sweat. Then a servant plunged a short dagger into its throat. It gave a violent jerk and, without a sound, crumpled among the wrack..

EXT. FJORD - DAY

Ragnar is out fishing with his son, Bjorn, in the deep soundless waters of the fjord.

RAGNAR V.O.

Now Odin strode through the shallows and gripped the gunwale. He climbed into the boat and stood over the body of his dead son. For some time he gazed at him..

Ragnar gazes at the very alive, very animated face of his son. Then he speaks aloud:

RAGNAR

Then Odin bent down and put his mouth to Balder's ear. Again he gazed at his son; then he left the boat.

Ragnar looks over at the shore, and points out something to his son.

Someone has kindled a fire on the far shore.

LAGERTHA V.O.

At a sign from Odin a servant stepped forward with a lighted brand. He set fire to the pyre and at once a steady plume of smoke, twisting and spiralling, rose into the calm air.

And as father and son stare at the sight on the far shore, this is exactly what they see.

A boat has been set on fire - and the smoke, twisting and spiralling, rises into the calm air.

INT. RAGNAR'S HOUSE - EVENING

Ragnar goes on with the nighttime saga, as the children hover between wake and sleep.

RAGNAR

Thor raised his hammer. Slowly and solemnly he intoned the magic words to hallow the cremation. Then a dwarf called Lit came running along the water's edge. He passed right in front of Thor, and Thor was so enraged that he put out a foot and tripped him. The dwarf flew threw the air and landed right on the licking and curdling pyre. In this way, he was burned to death beside Balder.

Bjorn bursts out laughing at the thought of the dwarf flying into the fire. He laughs and laughs. And Ragnar smiles, and even his daughter is tickled.

EXT. FJORD - DAY

Father and son watch the boat, now completely alight, drift slowly across the water. It's a fantastic, compelling image, the fire reflected in the water so it seems to spread out right across the fjord.

RAGNAR V.O.

The boat drifted across the water. Sea winds caught at her and tugged her away. First she was more boat than flame, but soon more flame than boat. She was a quivering shape, a farewell on the horizon, moving on under a great cloud of her own making.

And so it is.

And the boat burns on.

INT. RAGNAR'S HOUSE - DAWN

The first brightness in the night sky. A little rill of light.

The moon is still in the sky, pale and diminishing.

The camera travels through the house and its sleeping inhabitants. We see the colored shields, some weapons. The ashes of a fire, a slaughtered beast upon a hook.

The children asleep, like any other children. But Bjorn still clasping his arm-ring in a deathless grip. The small statue of Freya. A sleeping cat.

Ragnar and Lagertha naked and asleep, coiled together.

Then Ragnar opens his eyes.

And the first thing he sees is a horrifying mask. And then he hears laughter, and Floki rips off the mask as he stands over their bed.

Ragnar stares up at him, covering his cock.

FLOKI

It's ready.

EXT. BOATHOUSE - DAY

The finished boat. It is a thing of such indescribable beauty and latent power that Ragnar strokes the burnished planks with his hands and lays his cheek against it, and shivers.

Freshly oiled and painted. Sinuous, sleek, graceful the hull rising shapely, like the contours of a body, like an organic, living thing.

And the prow standing proud, with its ornately carved dragon-head.

Floki stares intently at Ragnar, watching his reactions.

Ragnar looks at him.

RAGNAR

It's...

Floki puts a finger over his mouth.

FLOKI

No need to say. I see it in your eyes.

(beat)

Let's put her on the water.

EXT. BOATHOUSE - DAY

Floki, his assistant, Ragnar and Rollo pull and heave the finished boat, over wooden rollers, the short distance to the water.

The boat glides into the water and the men climb in.

Threading oars through the oarports they row the boat out into the deeper waters of the fyord, where a strong breeze ripples the surface and sends the clouds scudding across the sky.

Floki is like a man possessed, grunting and groaning, sighing, swearing at, then encouraging the boat, listening intently to its creakings, watching for its listing.

Ragnar ships his oar.

RAGNAR

Now the sail, Floki, the sail!

FLOKI

She'll sink. Oh, what have I done?

RAGNAR

No she won't. She won't sink.

FLOKI

I shouldn't have pretended to build such a boat. It's beyond my humble capabilities. I'm a fool.

He looks as if he's about to cry.

RAGNAR

I'll set the sail.

Ragnar unfurls the large black sail. It falls. The others fasten the ropes. Nothing happens for a moment. The sail flaps rather uselessly.

FLOKI

I'm sorry, Ragnar. I've wasted all your money. It was all a joke.

RAGNAR

Shut up, man.

A beat.

ROLLO

Look!

A breeze catches the sail and it swells out proudly. The boat starts to move. As it moves faster, the motion stabilizes, becomes less choppy. It glides on smoothly, still picking up speed.

And now, suddenly, they're flying! The boat, still sitting low in the water, cuts through it so easily that the frame doesn't shudder on impact with the waves. It seems to ride over the waves.

And, after a while, there's an eruption of joy inside the boat, the men shouting, and hugging, and Floki going mad, laughing, leaping about, hugging them, trailing his hands in the water.

FLOKI

Ha! What did I tell you? Now it runs on its cool keel. It's beautiful. Why didn't you believe me?

Then, as they speed on, they calm down. Sober up. Look at the shoreline racing past.

Ragnar doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to, his expression says it all. He can see the future now. He is sitting on the edge of his dream.

EXT. CLIFFS - DAY

A HORSEMAN sits astride his horse, at the edge of the cliffs - and watches the black-sailed ship carving through the waves.

We have seen him before. He has a livid scar that joins his mouth to his eye. He is one of Earl Haraldson's housecarls.

He stares as the boat flies on.

END OF EPISODE 1