

odin's child

A NOVEL

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Blank Slate Press | Saint Louis, MO



Blank Slate Press
Saint Louis, MO 63110

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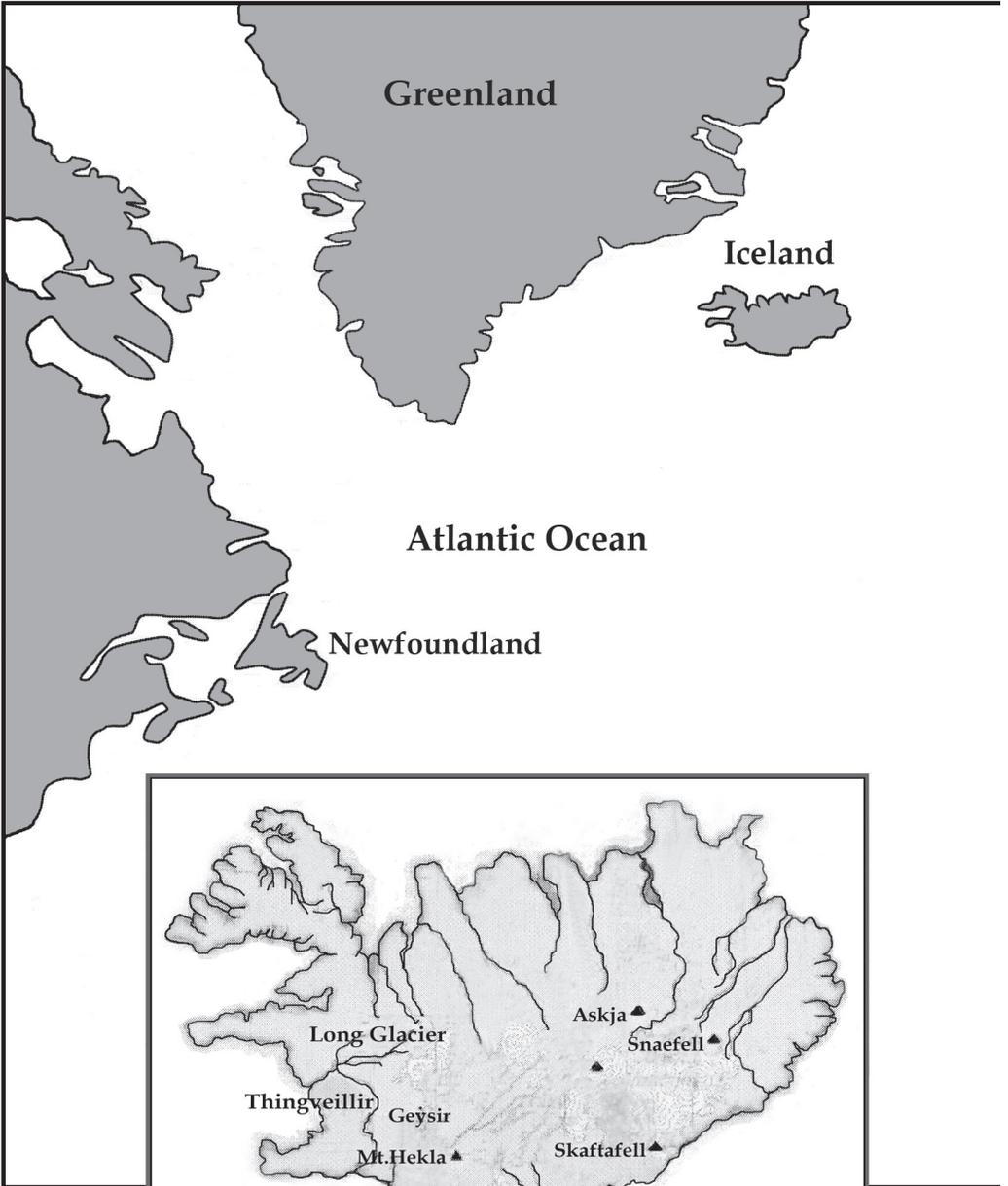
Manufactured in the United States of America
Cover Illustration: Anthony Macbain
Set in Adobe Garamond Pro and First Order
Cover Design by Kristina Blank Makansi

Library of Congress Control Number:

ISBN: 9780991305865

To Carol with love and gratitude

odin's
child



Greenland

Iceland

Atlantic Ocean

Newfoundland



Long Glacier

Thingveillir

Geysir

Mt. Hekla

Askja

Snaefell

Skafafell

ICELAND

The Viking World



icELAND
AD 1029

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THE STALLION FIGHT AT THINGHOLT

On that morning in May, as we rode to the stallion fight at Thingholt, my fate was revealed to me. A raven flew low across the sky into the rising sun, and the moment I saw it I knew Odin had spoken to me and that he would give me the courage to do what I had already secretly made up my mind to do. Only now, half a century later, do I see what a long text was folded into that swift vision.

The spring of my sixteenth year had come early to the South Quarter of Iceland, with days hot and cold, and thunderclouds sweeping up over the mountains. The stallions, smelling the air, trembled and kicked against their stalls. If you staked out a mare where the stallions could smell her, they would fight like berserkers to get at her. The great ones would die before they broke and ran.

Black Grani was such a one. This was his fourth spring and the time had come to take him to the South Quarter Thing and fight him. Thorvald, my father, grumbled and held back, but I gave him no peace, until, at last, he flung up an arm, which meant *yes*.

My brother Gunnar and I set out early from the farm that day, and it was nigh dusk before we came in sight of Thingholt plain and heard the distant shouts of men and the whinnying of horses. We left Grani and our mounts at the horse lines and walked across the sparse heath into the holiday crowd. And as we pushed our way through, there were some who knew us. A few old men came up and in low voices asked to

be remembered to our father. But one red-faced woman, seeing us, cried, "Jesu!" and dragged her little daughter from our path.

Gunnar—six years older than me and as reckless as he was handsome—stopped short, favored her with his wickedest grin and purred, "I've eaten my breakfast today, housewife, or wouldn't I just love a bite of your fat girl! Now, my black-headed brother here, who is greedier than I...."

The woman elbowed herself out of our way. Some, standing near, laughed, though others eyed us coldly and shook their heads.

"I've too sharp a tongue in my head," Gunnar allowed to no one in particular. "It's my single fault."

Ahead of us a crowd gathered for the horse fights. We worked our way to the front until the clearing lay before us, a haze of dust hanging over trampled grass. At the edge, the mares were tethered, while in the center two farmers, stripped to the waist and backed by a knot of shouting friends, shoved and goaded their snorting stallions into battle. It was a good match and we watched, shouting with the rest, until the loser, foam-flecked and streaked with blood, charged into the crowd, scattering spectators to right and left. Winning horse and master both threw back their heads and cried victory.

In the days before the White Christ, the winning horse would have been sacrificed to Frey, whose horse's prick fertilizes the fields, and the meat cut up and sold to the folk to eat. Christian priests put a stop to that, but they were too shrewd to make us give up our sport entirely.

While pieces of silver changed hands and horns of ale went round, Gunnar fingered his yellow beard and looked over the crowd for a likely competitor.

"I will goad Grani." I had waited to speak until the time was right.

"Maybe next year, Tangle-Hair," he answered, not looking at me. "When you've got more size on you. You'll get yourself trampled."

Our younger sister had given me the nickname 'Tangle-Hair', as well as 'Black-Brows' and 'Half-Troll' and several others. Our father resembled a black bull—short, thick, and dark. Not handsome according to the taste of our people. And I was the image of him, black and shaggy-haired from birth. How much did I resemble him beneath the skin? That question gnawed like a worm in my belly.

"Gunnar," I said, "I goad him or no one does."

My skin was cold. What Gunnar could do smiling, I did with teeth

clenched. That was the difference between us.

“That’s not how you put it to Father.”

Not even to my brother could I confess the real reason. I could scarce admit it to myself. We fixed our eyes on each other. I would know today, I swore to myself, whether my father’s blood—the blood that gave me his looks and his temper—had also infected me with his sickness. I would master my fear today or die. I didn’t mind which.

“If it goes badly, you’ll face him by yourself.”

“I know.”

“I oughtn’t to let you.” But then he smiled. “I hope Grani knows what to do because it’s certain as rain and fire you don’t. Just promise me you won’t lose your temper, it’ll only worry the horse.”

While he went back to fetch Grani, I drew a long breath and stepped into the circle to yell my challenge. This was the first time I had put myself forward in a group of strange men. I had a lump like a fist in my throat and hardly recognized my own strangulated voice. In answer there was only a little laughter and scattered shouts of “Brave boy!” Then anger welled up in me and I cried out, “Odd Thorvaldsson does not leave this circle with his horse un-fought!”

For a long moment, nothing. Then a stir in the crowd. “Hold on! Hold on!” Some jumped aside and others turned to look as a man thrust his way through from the rear. He launched himself toward me across the open space.

“Don’t burst your lungs, boy, Hrut Ivarsson still has one good ear left to hear you with!”

There was laughter from the crowd at this joke, which he acknowledged with a wave of his arm.

I knew who he was. Even to our remote farmstead, the story had made its way of how this man Hrut had got his ear torn off in a brawl last Yule Feast. Strife-Hrut, as his neighbors called him, was a bully who couldn’t enter a strange hall without starting a fight and who never paid blood money for his killings, though he was plenty rich enough. He farmed down on the Whitewater, near the coast, and spent a part of each summer over the sea, trading in his own ship.

He thrust his face at me—red and meaty, with small eyes, and a scrappy beard. He grinned, showing broken front teeth, and said, “I’ve a roan stallion, ugly as me and less good-natured, that I’ll match with yours

for the stakes of a silver ounce.” He pulled a bit of hack-silver from his purse and waved it under my nose. “And seeing as you’re only a young’un, my boy Mord, that isn’t much bigger ’n what you are ,will goad him.”

He had two sons, Mord and Brand, who had followed him into the circle and stood behind him now, one to either side. Both of them were closer to Gunnar’s age than to mine and no prettier to look at than their father.

“Mind you,” Hrut tapped my chest with a thick forefinger, “I take up your challenge out of kind regards for Thorvald, for I know whose son you are. He had a shrewd head and a heavy hand once upon a time, and I call it a shame he keeps himself so close nowadays.” It was meant as a sneer and was said loud enough for many to hear.

“He has his reasons,” I said.

“I expect he does.”

With a nod to his sons, Strife-Hrut went off to round up his horse. A moment later, Gunnar appeared at my side, grim-faced.

“Tangle-Hair, these are men who don’t like to lose. They’d sooner kill a horse—or his driver.”

“What would you have me do?”

“In Christ’s name, Odd, let me handle the horse.” Whenever Gunnar swore by Christ it was as if to say, *Our mother would ask this*.

“Give me the goad,” I said.

They were coming back now, leading their scarred animal, the survivor of many a fight, and the crowd gave them room, for the horse was side-stepping and his ears were flat against his head. I laid aside my sword belt and tunic and picked up the iron-pronged club, while Gunnar, with his hands tight on Grani’s halter, brought him to the edge of the clearing. The moment Grani saw the roan, his lips drew back over his teeth and he rolled his eyes like a battle-mad berserker.

“He won’t need the goad,” Gunnar shouted over the noise of the crowd. “Keep close and let him hear your voice. That’s all he wants.”

Round and round the stallions circled each other in the dusty ring, lashing out with their hoofs, thrusting with their necks, snorting with the same sound that the earth makes when it steams and heaves beneath our feet. And I, with the choking dust and the hot reek of horseflesh in my nostrils, danced alongside Grani, shouting his name and rushing in to throw myself against his flank as he charged.

We fought like brothers, he and I, side by side, the same blood, foam, and sweat soaking us both. The battle-joy rose in my throat and swept me up so that I had scarcely a mind left with which to tell myself, *You have conquered fear—the sickness hasn't touched you.*

Hrut's horse was a fierce biter and soon Grani was bleeding from his face and neck. But his strength began to tell against the roan. He drove his foe back on his haunches and, rearing up, lashed him with his forehoofs. Mord used his goad frantically, raking his animal's back until long ribbons of blood ran down its flanks. His brother Brand rushed in, too, to throw his weight against the beast and the two of them shoved and flailed and swore, but the roan had no heart left in him. Wide-eyed with fear, he shied away, tumbling Brand over in the dust.

"One more time, Grani!" I shouted.

Then Mord raised his arm. I saw what he was going to do and I tried to throw myself in his way—too late! The goad went up and came slashing down at Grani's head. My beautiful stallion rose on his hind legs and wheeled round, showing only a red well where his eye had been. In the same motion he struck me on the brow with his fore-hoof, knocking me down, and with a scream of terror and pain plunged through the crowd.

The next thing I remember, Gunnar was holding me up under the arms, wiping the blood from my eyes with a strip of his tunic. Together we stumbled after Grani. A dozen men held him down by his head and legs as he writhed in the dirt. What happened after that comes to my mind now only in sharp splinters of memory: my brother forcing my fingers around the haft of a spear, his mouth working, saying that the horse must not live mutilated, the spear shuddering in my fist, sinking deep, until half its length was buried in Grani's chest, and his hot blood spurting over my hands.

"A good sacrifice," said someone in the crowd who was of the old religion. "Frey is glad of him."

I pressed my face against Grani's neck, letting my blood and his run together, until Gunnar pulled me away. "There is a reckoning," he said.

Followed by the crowd, we walked back to the clearing. There Hrut and his sons with four of their hirelings stood close together, looking truculent and just a little frightened. There was a numbing pain in my forehead over the right eye. My legs barely held me up.

“Stay behind me,” ordered my brother.

He was holding the goad—I suppose he had pried it from my hand—and, without a word, he went straight for Mord. Quick as a cat he swung it, aiming for the eye, and Mord let out a howl and fell to the ground. Instantly, the rest of them had their swords out. We would have died there and then if bystanders hadn’t rushed between us, throwing their cloaks over the blades and pushing us in opposite directions.

Next moment, there came a shout to make way. Hjalti the Strong, big and barrel-chested, shouldered his way into our midst and roared for quiet. He was the godi of Tjorsariverdale, a respected and powerful man.

He stamped his foot and glared around him. Devil skin him, he would stand for no brawling at his Thing. If folk couldn’t enjoy a simple horse-fight without falling to blows, then damn him if he wouldn’t see it all put a stop to!

But Hrut appealed to the crowd to pity his boy that was all bloodied and who knew but what he was blinded for life.

“Hold!” cried Hjalti. “Enough! The harm’s equal for both. Mord’s wound for the horse’s. No blood money owed on either side, nor any more blows to be struck, or you’ll have me to deal with. Agreed?” It wasn’t a question.

He looked to us. Gunnar, after a long moment, let the goad drop from his hand. “Agreed,” he said between his teeth.

Hjalti looked to Strife-Hrut. Hrut said nothing, but he and his men turned their backs and stalked off, dragging Mord behind them.

“Well if he murders you,” confided Hjalti, watching them go, “it’ll be flat against the law.”

Hjalti-godi was renowned for his keen legal mind.

The crowd began to drift away, except for a few who approached us and asked quietly if they might buy a haunch or a side of Grani to take home for their table, the horse having so much strength in him, and bugger the priest that didn’t like it.

I walked apart and let them bargain with Gunnar. I hadn’t the heart for it.

When he came back he threw an arm around my shoulder. “You want to stay a bit?” he asked. “Watch the wrestling, stone-lifting? Listen to the lawsuits?”

I shook my head, no.

“Not anxious to go home and deal with *him*, are you?”

“He must be told, Gunnar. And maybe he’ll see what fate lies ahead of us—the feud, if there is one. He has the gift, you know he does.”

Gunnar spat and ground the spittle into the dirt with his boot. “Much good it does him.”