

[The following is excerpted from Scene I of *Berserkr*, by Brenton Lengel]

Scene 1

Lights up on a VIKING LONGHOUSE in ICELAND. The year is 997. The room is oppressive, cold, and altogether uninviting; furs and weapons line the walls, and there is a large table for feasting which has been turned on its side and pushed to the far wall to make room for the man standing in the center of the longhouse. He is THANGBRAND – bearded and strong, but also stout and shorter than you would expect a man of his size to be. THANGBRAND is dirty; his clothes are a patchwork of leather, fur, and other assorted animal skins; on his neck, face, and hands, numerous crude tattoos are visible, including several prominent crosses. In his left hand he carries a large CROSS, which doubles as a walking stick. It appears heavy and solid, clearly a prized possession. A wicked SWORD hangs from his belt. Opposite THANGBRAND, upon a large wooden chair which is almost a throne, sits ULFR. ULFR is older; his hair and beard have turned white. He wears heavy furs and carries a spear; a well-worn sword and shield sit at his feet. A golden ring is on his right hand. To ULFR'S right stands BROKK, ULFR's second-in-command, and to his left is HAKON. HAKON is extremely large and handsome, and considerably younger than the other men. Off to the side stands THORGEIR, visibly nervous, and behind THANGBRAND (by the door) stand his men GUDLEIF and HJALTI, larger than their leader and similarly tattooed. All of the men are armed and hold wooden mugs of mead, from which they seem reluctant to drink; an aura of tension and violence hangs over the room.

HJALTI

I dare to mock the gods. I believe that Freyja is a bitch, and that Odin is a dog, or maybe it's the other way around.

Silence.

THANGBRAND

(Drinks, then wipes his mouth. His accent is Germanic.)

Thank you, Hjalti.

HJALTI begins to speak; THANGBRAND cuts him off.

THANGBRAND

(To Ulfr)

So that's my offer. You can take it or leave it.

Pause.

BROKK

What offer?

Pause.

THANGBRAND

Are you Norsemen deaf?

Silence.

THANGBRAND

Did you miss something? Should I say it again—?

BROKK

We missed an offer.

THANGBRAND

Excuse me?

BROKK

You haven't offered anything, Saxon—

THANGBRAND

I have—

BROKK

(Overlapping)

We called this *Thing* /because you pled for one—

THANGBRAND

(Overlapping)

/You called this *Thing* because you Icelanders can't /take a piss without one!

BROKK

(Overlapping)

/A *Thing* is court. A *Thing* is negotiation. Negotiation involves an offer. The *Thing* means each party brings something to the table, and they talk until they reach an acceptable middle ground. What have you brought? What do you offer?

THANGBRAND

There's no table in here.

BROKK

What do you offer?

THANGBRAND

You pushed it against the wall.

BROKK

What have you—?

THANGBRAND

(Loudly)

I offer the Gospel! I have brought salvation. Absolution. Forgiveness—

BROKK

Forgiveness for/ what?

THANGBRAND

/Forgiveness for your blasphemies! Absolution for your people's crimes against Christendom! Against God's people. There is no middle ground here, this is good news! This is a time for feasting and celebration, not endless meetings at so late of an hour even the fuckin' foxes are asleep! Christ died for mankind's sins, and I am here to tell you, that includes the Viking! Christ shed his holy blood for Lindisfarne, for Iona, for two hundred years of murder, plunder, and heathenry!

HAKON

Strange that you would charge murder, Thangbrand—

THANGBRAND

Silence that boy.

HAKON

Priest of Olaf—

THANGBRAND

Ulfr, if you know what's—

HAKON

Considering what we have heard of the Poet Vetrlið.

THANGBRAND

Vetrlið blasphemed!

HAKON

And what if he did?

THANGBRAND

(To ULFR)

Is this your idea of hospitality?

HAKON

Word is, you clove him—

THANGBRAND

I clove him in /twain!

HAKON

/From behind in an alehouse.

THANGBRAND

You'll hold your tongue, boy; I am twice your father!

HAKON

And I am twice your stature.

THANGBRAND

Ulfr! I'll cut him where he stands!

HAKON

You've proven you can take a drunken Skald unawares. I wonder how well you would do against a warrior?

THANGBRAND

You motherfucking...

THANGBRAND drops his cup and reaches for his sword; HAKON draws his own weapon. ULFR holds up his hand. The room is silent. ULFR nods to BROKK, who motions for HAKON to sheath his sword. HAKON does.

HAKON

A pity.

BROKK

Be silent, Hakon.

HAKON

But, Brokk—

BROKK

(indicating ULFR)

Your father has made his will clear. Do you intend to defy him?

HAKON steps back. THANGBRAND does not take his hand off his sword.

BROKK

Thorgeir, our guest's cup is empty. Please provide him with another.

THORGEIR pours a second mug of grog and holds it out for THANGBRAND, who takes it from him.

BROKK holds up his own mug to toast.

THANGBRAND waits for him to drink, then throws his own mug on the ground angrily.

THANGBRAND

I don't need your fucking mead! I don't need your hospitality, and I certainly don't need protection from this overgrown mewling pup! I am here as a king's messenger, charged with bringing the gospel to the Norsemen of Iceland! You're all fuckin' saved, congradu-fuckin'-lations! Why is there even a meeting about this? What need is there for civilized men to second-guess their saviors, to second-guess the words of Christ Almighty and Olaf Tryggvasson—?

BROKK

You'll find the king of Norway's words hold little sway here, Saxon, and are as foreign to our ears as those of your White Christ—

THANGBRAND

Foreign?

(indicating GUDLEIF and HJALTI)

Your own people have already—

ULFR

They are not our people!

Silence.

ULFR

Your Olaf. Your Christ. What need have we for either, Saxon? Olaf is in Norway, Norway is not Iceland, and what you say of Christ, these feats, his "miracles," have been spoken of since before we had words to give them names. You say your Christ walked on water and healed the sick? Thor drank the very sea and grappled with Jorgmungandr, the serpent of Midgard. You say your Christ died on the Roman's cross, pierced by a Roman spear, and rose from the dead after three days? T'would truly be a feat, had Odin the All-Father not already hung dead on Yggdrasil for nine, pierced by his OWN spear. You say your Christ offers us "forgiveness of our trespasses" and eternal life in his father's kingdom, but this is already granted to those who enter Valhalla. What need have we for your desert god in the frozen north? What need do the Viking have for a god of Romans, monks, and slaves?

Slight pause.

THANGBRAND

(Choosing his words carefully)

The difference, respectfully, Chief—*Gothi* Ulfr, is that Jesus Christ is REAL. I have felt his power, I have seen it. I carry him in my heart. Through his love for us, Christ descended from his father's kingdom, became flesh, and walked among us, as a man.

THORGEIR

The All-Father walks among us.

THANGBRAND

Really? How is he? You seen him lately?

THORGEIR

Odin is disguised.

THANGBRAND

So you can't see him? How convenient.

HAKON

You carry Christ in your heart.

THANGBRAND

I do.

HAKON

How convenient. /Perhaps we should—

THANGBRAND

/It is not the same!

BROKK

Hakon.

HAKON

Open you up /and take a look for ourselves!

ULFR

SILENCE, BOY!

HAKON quiets himself.

ULFR

Continue.

THANGBRAND

...It is not the same. Christ lived, Christ suffered, Christ died and ascended to heaven, and through his sacrifice, our sins are abolished. What can you say to that? How many of your gods became flesh? How many endured Roman lashes for your sake? How many died so that you can be reborn?

Silence.

HAKON

We don't need gods to die for us; we have plenty of men here to die for each other!

THANGBRAND

You want proof of my words, Norseboy? Simply look around. Two hundred years ago your people were the terror of civilized Europe. Your longboats were worse than the dragons they aped; now your own king bows his head to Christ Almighty, and every village from here to the eastern coast has raised the cross or been razed to ashes and bone. I slew the farmer Thorkell at Stasfafell with naught but this cross. At Kerlingerdale the sorcerer Hiden split the very ground beneath my feet, his dark magic swallowing up my steed, yet Christ held out his hand and pulled me to safety as Gudleif's spear pierced the magician's heart. At Grimsness, Thorvald the Ailing thought to take me unawares, yet Gudleif took his blasphemous hand while I took his life.

(THANGBRAND pauses, about to tip his hand.)

Even the Berserkr Otrygg Bear-Shirt was nothing before the power of the one true God...

Tense, horrified pause.

HAKON

Otrygg?

THANGBRAND

Cold in the ground barely a week.

BROKK

Otrygg Bear-Shirt. You're certain?

THANGBRAND

As certain as the man who killed him can be. Big motherfucker. Bald, ugly, bad teeth. I ran him through the chest with my own sword.

The Vikings relax and the room fills with laughter.
THANGBRAND, HIS MEN, and THORGEIR
remain silent.

BROKK

Your exploits have a frightening sound to them, Saxon, but now we know you exaggerate—

THANGBRAND

I do not.

THORGEIR

Brokk—

BROKK

Otrygg is a Berserkr.

THANGBRAND

He was.

BROKK

And you claim you ran him through?

THORGEIR

Brokk—

THANGBRAND

Split him like a virgin.

BROKK

Then, Saxon, you claim to have done the impossible.

THANGBRAND

Through faith in Christ are all things made possible.

BROKK

While in the Berserkrang, the Men of Odin fear neither fire nor sharpened iron! Otrygg eats COALS, Otrygg blunts weapons with a gaze, Otrygg's very steps shake the ground he walks on. Not two years ago I watched the Berserkr wade into a sea of ten armed Englishmen and return with three heads and nary a scratch, and yet you say you slew him with THAT?

THANGBRAND

Slew him, and more.

BROKK

Then, Saxon, you l—

THORGEIR

It's true.

The room is silent.

THORGEIR

(Horried)

The news came to me this evening. I have not shared it, for I thought—hoped—it an idle rumor. My cousin, Gest, held a feast at Hagi. Thangbrand and his Christian converts were in attendance. Otrygg Fire-Eater came as well. My cousin says that Thangbrand proposed a contest. Three fires were lit: one left unblest, one blessed by a Gythja priestess, and one bearing the cross and blessed by Thangbrand himself. If Otrygg of the bear-shirt could pass all three fires, Thangbrand would leave and cede victory to Thor; if the Berserkr could not...

(Pause.)

Otrygg entered the Berserkr gang. His eyes disappeared and foam flew from his jaws. Bare-footed, he entered the first fire and crossed without quickening and without even a hint of pain, as if the flames couldn't touch him. Otrygg approached the second fire, paused out of respect for the Thunder God, then continued on into the licking inferno with neither a twitch nor a sound. A terrible stench arose from the coals, but Otrygg continued on to the third fire without giving any sign. The Christian flames blazed high before him, and sparks flew through the air, burning holes in Otrygg's bearskin as the Berserkr stepped into the glowing maw, and for a moment it looked as if the giant would plow through the wall of flames as effortlessly as he had the first two.

(A beat.)

In the shadow of Thangbrand's cross, the Fire-eater hesitated, continued forward, then stepped back. He seemed to be overcome with an unseen pain. In his rage, the Berserkr turned from the Christian-blessed fire and drew his sword, ready to strike down Thangbrand, but the blade became lodged in the wooden timbers of Gest's longhouse ceiling. Olaf's priest ran him through with his iron blade, and Gudleif swung an axe, severing the man's head...and so ended Otrygg the Berserkr.

A LONG pause.

THANGBRAND

Well put; maybe you should've been a skald.

(Turning to ULFR)

Now you have heard the Gospel from my lips, and those of your own people, and can either accept the truth—

BROKK

If these words are true...then you have made a good argument, Priest. Let us resume negotiations with—

THANGBRAND

I know your works: you are not cold nor are you hot, so because you are lukewarm I will spew you out of my mouth—Fuck your negotiations!

BROKK

The purpose of this Thing is for us to reach an accord; surely there must be some middle ground on which—

THANGBRAND

For a Christian, there is no middle ground! There is no accord between Heaven and Hell, only a great divorce, Norseman! Choose! Either join with Christ in Heaven, or Otrygg Bear-Shit in worm-eaten Hell! It's not a difficult decision!

BROKK

You ask much, our people, our traditions—

THANGBRAND

I ASK nothing! Your traditions are LIES, your people are drowning in damnation, and you are quibbling over the rope I've thrown! YOU HAVE HEARD THE TRUTH! If you're so eager to go to hell, Viking, I can—

ULFR

Thangbrand!

A pause. Everyone looks at ULFR.

ULFR

Enough of this bloody talk; the hour is late and tempers run hot. We have heard your proposal, Priest of Olaf. We have heard your exploits, and your good news. We will give you our answer on the morrow.

THANGBRAND pauses, then:

THANGBRAND

Very well. You may have the night to think. What's left of it, anyway. Perhaps in the morning your men will be more apt to hear the words of the one true God.

THANGBRAND motions for his men to exit.

THANGBRAND

It's been a fuckin' pleasure.

THANGBRAND walks towards the door.

HAKON

I doubt it, Saxon. Sunrise brings Odin's day, and I doubt that Grimir will let his people yield themselves unto a carpenter then. The dawn after that belongs to Thor. You may be waiting a long time.

Pause.

THANGBRAND

If you'd learn to *listen*, boy, you'd see that by my victories, Thor and your All-Father have already yielded to Christ's glory.

THANGBRAND begins to exit.

HAKON

If that were true, then I would not LISTEN to talk that Odin sent Thor to shatter your Christian ship's mast with his giant-killing hammer and dash your converts' bones upon the rocks.

THANGBRAND

(Very incensed)

Odin lives only at the will of the Christian God! Without my God's permission, he and Thor would be nothing but a pile of dust and ashes!

HAKON

Then where is your longboat? Where is its crew?

THANGBRAND

Continue to press me, and my longboat's crew will be the least of your worries!

BROKK

Hakon, let it be.

HAKON

Impossible, I cannot imagine any of your crew to be less than yourself.

THANGBRAND

You ever heard of David and Goliath?

HAKON

You tell many stories, Saxon. Tell me, have you heard of the outcome when Thor challenged your Christ to single combat?

THANGBRAND

No, I haven't—

HAKON

Of course not: Christ would not accept the challenge. Your wailing Roman pain-slut is too cowardly to ever meet a foe like Thor on the field of battle, and so there is no tale to tell.

Pause. THANGBRAND moves to strike HAKON.

GUDLEIF

(Quickly)

Thangbrand. Dawn approaches.

THANGBRAND

What of it?

GUDLEIF

The sun brings with it the first day of *Lent*.

Slight pause.

THANGBRAND

I had forgotten. You are lucky, pup; as our Lord partook of neither food nor drink for forty days as he wandered the desert, good king Olaf has requested I forsake my lust for ending pagan lives during the high holy days. Wouldn't want to slip up before I've even started.