

## The Tale of Vali

On another branch of the Yggdrasil, the great World Tree, a young elf-lad desired to run away from home. His parents, dour scholars, lived within a Library within the elven citadel, deep in the Draugeryn forest. Life there was perhaps the most focused and regimented place in the free-spirited elven society, but even so the boy could while away the time reading tales of heroism and adventure. Growing up amongst the tomes, Gawalind Racaion was inspired to become not a keeper of lore as his parents had wished but a wanderer. He pleaded with his parents, neglected his studies, and spoke of little except what he heard from books and travelers. They grew weary of his wanderlust and insisted that should he leave home he would do so not as a vagabond but as a ranger.

Twenty years of learning the arts of the elf warrior-errant later, he traveled forth from Alfheim his home to live the stories he had grown to maturity reading. Though he knew the basics of warcraft, survival, arcana, and craftsmanship he was far from ready to take care of himself. Lost and alone in a sea of uncaring humans far from his birth, he gave a heartfelt wish - to be somewhere, anywhere where he might be part of something, rather than a lonely outsider.

That was all the spell needed.

Conjurers are often callous puppetmasters with as little regard for the creatures they command as the illusionists do their mirages or the evokers their flames. The elf-summoner, the one who called Gawalind to Midgard was swiftly driven away by steel and never seen again.

The summoner had left him in a cold land where armies raged and war was a season unending. From his travels, he knew the rudiments of smithing and had some skill at the spear, and he turned his hand to the path of the sellsword. Hiding his ears and taking the human name, 'Vali', after the fashion of the northern warriors he met, he looked for places to use his skills. He wandered south, mingling with the strange folk, trading knowledge. He learned the smithing arts and traded his weapons for sparring tips, desperate to mingle with the warriors that he admired. One day, he drew his blade to train with a wild man, and woke up lost and soaked with blood. Wounded and weak, he lay in the warrior's camp. The scent of blood choked his thoughts. He ran, far into the wilderness, injured and confused.

He was taken in by a fell army of mercenaries clad in black. The army he marched with was strong. Alongside them Vali grew to fight with both technique and ruthlessness. His blood quickened in battle and he learned the feeling of bloodlust. Even as he changed, he collected stories, spoke to peasants and travelers and warriors and nobles, seeking the summoner. Ever as he traveled he could hear the howls in his mind and feel the lust for war grow.

Soon he was two elves. A scholar, learning a hundred stories and songs and filled with the joy of travel, and a warrior who growled at his foes and licked blood from his blades. He became strange and fey. Careless. Wild. He would do anything for attention, provoking fights and slipping into madness. One day, he revealed his elven heritage and was denounced as a

madman by the mercenaries who gave him his home.

And so, Vali left again to wander Midgard, singing and trading in tales for a tent and a meal, still plagued by his mysterious animal side and his isolation from home. His newfound calling as a bard Fate spun that day, and a sense of destiny took Vali to the camp of the northmen he had met those years ago. To the hall of Jomsburg. Taking up the spear, Vali called out to the fierce warriors, but instead of a shout, a howl escaped his lips. The men answered with howls of their own. And steel. Vali was strong, possessed of animal fury and an elf's inhuman speed and grace. His spear's lethal thrusts were batted aside like nothing. In frustration, he drew a gladius gleaned from the battlefield and drove it into a warrior's gut, even as his teeth held the man's shoulder in place. It took the northman so long to die, trying to pull away from the crazed elf, with steel twisting in his belly, that Vali was surrounded again before he could let the body drop.

As a red-bearded man raised a blade behind him, Vali cursed inside. He'd heard so many stories. This didn't seem like the right end. Then the pommel of the blade cut short his rumination.

He awoke with a sore head. This was a good sign, as that meant his head was still attached to his neck. And indeed, he lay in a bed with his spear and sword set against the wall. His head was bandaged. And, unusually amiable for a man who'd watched his comrade be gutted, the red-bearded man asked Vali if he was an elf. A thing few had recognized or understood on Midgard. Vali understood then, this was not the end of the story. It was the first chapter.

"I did this wrong. I meant to ask your mercy. I wanted to join you. Something... took hold of me. I had no desire to slay your man."

The man sat before his bed, an easy confidence in his stance and demeanor. He had turned the chair with the back facing the elf and kept a strange long knife with a red-tinted blade within arm's reach. Somehow the lack of trust that conveyed didn't stop him from being oddly charming.

"You'll get your wish. You'll pay the slain man's blood price, knife-ears. Take his place, and you can pay your debt. It's how we gain many of our recruits." The man seemed too... nice. He'd slain a man. Gone into a fury. He wasn't even human. Vali sunk into the bed, a pall falling over his interpretation of recent events.

He wasn't going to be part of something. Those years as a sellsword had taught him he'd never fit in. He'd be used for a purpose, but never desired as a companion. How would this man offer different? He was a mercenary just as the last were.

The man reached down out of Vali's line of sight and brought forth a small flute - the one from his pack.

"Do you play?"

Vali had bought the flute several villages ago. He'd almost forgotten it was in his bag.

"Not well. I'm a better singer." Vali believed firmly in knowing his limits but wasn't above boasting of his skills.

"We might have a place for you after all," he mused. The Jarl of Jomsburg, Dracon Adun, held his hand out. To Vali, it resembled a rope, hanging out from a chasm. That same sense of destiny swirled around in his spirit. He took the offered hand.